

The latter is a definition of urban design which is very close to city planning, albeit with a particular interest in the physical fabric and its form. If we compare this with the Royal Town Planning Institute's definition of planning as being involved in the 'management of change in the built and natural environments' (Royal Town Planning Institute, 1991, 1), the similarity becomes evident. On the other side of the spectrum, however, where urban design is seen as designing small urban places, it becomes close to the aesthetic and spatial concerns of art and architecture.

The large and small scales of engagement are rooted in much deeper debates about the nature and concept of space. It was partly reflected in the modernist–postmodernist confrontations. The modernists concentrated on the design of an abstract but integrated space. The postmodern reaction to such abstraction was an attention to smaller scale urban places and their meaning. This shift of attention is reflecting a broad range of shifts and transformations in political, economic, and cultural circumstances of the time. Economically, there has been a reduction in the resources which could be spent on cities as a whole, leading to policies and projects which concentrate on some parts of the city. Culturally, there have been strong reactions to the blanket treatment which the comprehensive planning and large-scale urban development have imposed on individual and group differences. It is in relation to these fundamental changes that macro-urban design has been largely abandoned in areas confronting economic decline. Yet at the same time, where growth pressure has been on the rise, such as in the sunbelt cities of the United States and in the fast developing economies and their rapidly expanding cities, macro-urban design has remained a pressing need.

One solution is to acknowledge this divide and to maintain that there are two different types of urban design: a macro-urban design and a micro-urban design, with different concerns and foci. This division could offer an opportunity to develop specialisms in dealing with urban fabric and would lead to a deeper understanding of the processes and products involved at each level. Yet the two levels have so much in common and are so interrelated that we may see them as belonging to the same process of designing the urban space.

The degree of overlap and commonality between the two scales of urban design, could be convincingly treated within the same definition, to see urban design as 'an interdisciplinary approach to designing our built environment' (Vernez-Moudon, 1992, 331). By adopting a broad definition, we will have

acknowledged the similarities and differences between the shaping of urban space and urban place making as two parts of the same process.

As urban design deals with all scales of urban space, it has caused ambiguity about its role and areas of involvement. Nevertheless, what links these different scales of involvement is the central feature that they all collectively make up the urban space and urban design is the activity which shapes the urban space. In this sense, it might be broken into different arenas in which different designers could concentrate. The timescale and issues involved in master planning for new settlements are inevitably different from those involved in details of street design.

It should be argued that an integrated concept of space is needed, one in which an open interpretation of place is adopted. Following this line of argument, we should stress that, although a degree of specialisation through the separation in scale of engagement can be useful, the nature of both processes should be seen as closely interrelated. Only in this way can we avoid a further divide in the scope of those dealing with urban space. To confront the ambiguity about scale, therefore, we must conclude that urban design deals with urban space at all its scales.

Urban design as visual or as spatial management?

Another source of ambiguity is the perception of urban design as dealing with visual qualities of the urban environment, which contradicts a broader view of urban design as addressing the organisation of urban space. This may be the main source of confusion about, and the main area of criticism against, urban design by its opponents, at least in Britain. To confront this confusion, we need to address two tendencies: one which sees urban design as an exercise in producing 'nice' images, and the other which sees urban design as only attending the aesthetics of the urban environment.

Urban design as nice images

At a recent conference on town centre management, Peter Hall asked for the traditional idea of urban design to be abandoned, 'The concept of urban design should not be taken in its old-fashioned sense—producing nice drawings to pin on the wall' (Hirst, 1995, 6). But why, we may wonder, should urban design be associated only with drawings and not with realities?