

Attention to the social and economic problems of cities has often sidelined design activities as irrelevant, or at best as unaffordable luxuries. In the middle of economic decline, it was argued there was no need for design, as associated with new developments, at a time when no development was in sight.

For a project to be implemented, there may be several designs and designers involved, each producing drawings to communicate their ideas. These ideas, however, may never be implemented, as the money may run out or the decisions be changed. As they are about cities, and cities take a long time to evolve and change, these designs may be implemented but in a very long period of time, with inevitable changes and adjustments to take account of a changing political and economic context. But the abundance of beautiful images, which are produced without taking into account the mechanisms of implementation and/or which may lead to nowhere, especially at the time of economic difficulty, has a powerful impact on non-designers, who see design as merely images rather than ideas for spatial transformation. Even if they see these as ideas, the element of innovation and 'futurism' inherent in design may convince the viewers of the design's irrelevance to reality and its constraints.

This view of design, as an elitist, artistic enterprise which has no relationship to the real, daily problems of large sections of urban societies, has led to the reduction of urban design to a visual activity. This confusion has been especially strengthened by the way design communicates through visual, rather than verbal, means. Furthermore, designers' understanding of the social and economic issues of cities has not always been their major strong point.

The way out of this confusion is to realise that design is an activity proposing ideas for spatial transformation. If it communicates more through visual rather than verbal means, its content should not be equated with its means. In design, as in other forms of communication, form and content are very closely interrelated. But confusing the form and means of communication with the content of communication is an avoidable mistake. For example, can we mistake urban policy for just nice words?

Urban design as aesthetics of urban environment

This is a more profound problem. To see urban design as dealing with the visual rather than spatial aspects of the environment is a widespread tendency. This can be an understandable mistake, as when we want to understand space our first, and the most important,

encounter is a visual experience. We first see the objects in front of us and then begin to understand how they relate to each other. It is true that vision is the major channel through which we experience space. It is also true, as Porteous (1996, 33) stresses, that other senses make a major contribution to our spatial understanding. If our understanding is limited to a visual understanding, we only concentrate on shapes. If, however, we go beyond appearances, we start a spatial understanding, a three-dimensional experience. We can enter this space, rather than just seeing it. The same applies to the design of spaces. We do not create mere appearances but spaces which we can use for different purposes.

An example of treating urban design as a visual concern is Edward Relph who, following Barnett (1982), sees urban design as attending to the visual qualities of urban environments. For him, urban design focuses on 'the coherence of townscape, including heritage districts, the relationship between buildings both old and new, the forms of spaces, and small-scale improvements to streets' (Relph, 1987, 229). Another example is the policy guidance given to the planners on design in the planning process (Department of the Environment, 1992), which appears to treat design as mainly dealing with the appearance of the built environment.

The longstanding tradition of 'picturesque' in Britain, which pays special attention to the visual qualities of the environment, may be seen as a fundamental drive in this case. Even at the height of modernism, which promoted a more utilitarian aesthetics, picturesque tradition was strong in Britain, as exemplified by the postwar resentment against modernism and the name it was given in Britain, 'brutalism'.

The tendency to equate urban design with townscape management, however, also draws upon another major trend in the past two decades, what Boyer (1990) calls the return of aesthetics to city planning. This process, she argues, is part of the commodification of culture, through which 'eventually even city space and architectural forms become consumer items or packaged environments that support and promote the circulation of goods' (Boyer, 1990, 101). The return of capital to the city centres as the real estate investment is what lies behind the creation of specially designed environments and spectacles, leading to aestheticisation of everyday life.

Visual improvement of the cities has been used to market cities as a whole, as increasingly cities have to compete in the global markets to attract investment. The investment may be made by companies searching for better returns on their investment and