

This further isolated the subfield not just from planning but also from the emerging literature in geography and the social sciences that was trying to make theoretical and practical sense of the new urbanization processes.

The great exception to these developments would appear to be the extraordinary flowering of the professional cult and culture of New Urbanism and its less ambitiously named but perhaps more aptly descriptive British version, Neotraditional Town Planning. To the outsider and probably to many insiders as well, New Urbanism has been the most successful attempt to recapture, or at least simulate, the ecumenical spirit and far-reaching vision of urban design emanating from the Harvard conference. Moreover, it has proven to be remarkably successful in its applications, bringing widespread attention and lucrative projects to its practitioners and their paradoxical “neotraditional” (new-old?) concept of urban design.

New Urbanism cannot be ignored in any discussion of what has been happening to urban design over the past fifty years. For all its faults, and there are many, New Urbanism has almost certainly produced better-designed projects than would have occurred had normal market practices prevailed. The main argument I wish to make here, however, is that New Urbanism, for all its successes and failures, has had little effect on the isolation and detachment of urban design from a more comprehensive multidisciplinary understanding of contemporary urbanism. Stated somewhat differently, what has been defined as New Urbanism (as well as urban design more generally) has contributed very little to understanding the actual new urbanism that has been taking shape since the crisis-torn 1960s.

Encountering Urban Design: A Personal View

My first encounter with urban design and urban designers took place in 1972, when I began teaching in what was then the School of Architecture and Urban Planning at UCLA. All my degrees and my intellectual identity were in geography, so the disciplinary shift was unsettling and required a significant period of adjustment. Urban Planning at the time was officially part of a single department with Architecture and Urban Design, but it functioned quite independently and with a strong sense of collective identity. As my planning colleagues informed me early on, urban design was something architects do. Planners study the “built environment,” paying much more attention