

and Processes, the contents of which at times overlap. The strength of the agenda lies in its concern for the quality of places, as well as promoting creative thinking in dealing with cities. The Group shows continuity in its postmodernist concern for context, as it identifies itself as demonstrating 'practical alternatives to the type of design that pays no regard to context, and decision making which is driven by bureaucracy' (Billingham, 1996, 38). This critical edge, however, is not directed towards the economics of the urban development process, in which the emphasis on 'investment return' threatens the quality of environment. The agenda rightly stresses the need for accessibility, sustainability, and empowerment. As may be expected from a brief compilation, it falls short of spelling out how these ideas can be operationalised in the context of powerful processes which work against them. As such the agenda offers some ideals, which can influence and inspire practice. What needs to be done, however, is to work out the institutional processes which would enable the realisation of these ideals.

One of the components of such institutional processes, which the Urban Design Group also points out, is promoting a collaboration between various disciplines involved in shaping places. It is clear after all that urban design is an interdisciplinary activity. If professionals from different disciplines of the built, natural, and social environments work together in teams, they create an urban design process. Similarly, if urban space is to be shaped and managed by any professional, there will be a need for multi-disciplinary concerns and awareness. The key is to go beyond the narrow boundaries of professions and disciplines and approach urban space from an interdisciplinary, socio-spatial perspective.

A public or private sector activity?

Another area of confusion, which on the surface is in close connection with professional divides, is about the affiliation of urban design with the public or private sector. The question is: Which camp does it belong to? Who performs it? Who does it serve? Is it mainly performed by, or serving, the private developer or the city council? The confusion can therefore extend to urban design's political role, which potentially could be a conflicting duality.

If urban design is seen as visual management of the city centres only to maximise returns on private sector investment, then it is intended to serve a minority interest. Some criticisms of urban regeneration

undertakings in Britain have taken this view and have therefore associated urban design with the interests of private companies. As visual management is then seen as a luxury when more basic needs of health, education, and housing are at stake, urban design has been seen as reactionary or at best irrelevant. If, however, urban design is practised by the public sector, it is held to be at the service of the public at large, contributing to the improvement of the quality of the urban environment. The question is which side do we identify urban design with?

We may confront this ambiguity by stating that as a technical, social, and aesthetic process, urban design can be practised by any agency large enough to initiate or deal with urban development projects. Furthermore, with the increasing role of public-private partnerships in urban development and regeneration, it may be difficult to locate the camp to which urban design belongs. This can be illuminated in a discussion of the relationship between use value and exchange value in urban space production, leading to the notion that urban design is not necessarily bound to the public or private sectors. Each of these sectors may be engaged in urban design and, depending on who performs it, it may have different roles and serve different interests. Performed by whichever camp, urban design is the process which shapes and manages the urban space. Such urban space will inevitably reflect the values and aspirations of those who produced it.

Objective-rational or subjective-irrational?

We have looked at ambiguities about the aspects of the product with which urban design deals. We have come across ambiguities about its role as a professional activity and its association with different sectors of the political economy. We also need to be aware of ambiguities about the nature of the process. We need to know what kind of process urban design is. Is urban design objective and rational, or subjective and even irrational? This is partly referring to the confusions about how we understand space; between visual, spatial or social emphases. For those who see urban design as merely the visual management of the city, it can become mainly an aesthetic-expressive and, therefore, subjective process. On the other hand, for those who see urban design as dealing with spatial transformation and its social significance, urban design finds a more objective emphasis. There are obvious limits to each of these views, as we have