

THE NATURE OF URBAN DESIGN AND URBAN DESIGNING

PART 1

Today the term ‘urban design’ is used to describe almost any design that takes place in any city setting. ‘It seems that every person and their dog is an urban designer; it’s sexy and it’s chic’ (Tennant, 2004). Legally any person can call himself or herself an urban designer. Many people in the design fields without experience or formal training or any observable interest in dealing with urban design concerns automatically tag the title on to their basic qualification in order to better market their services. Designers are, after all, generally small business operators.

Many architects believe anybody who can design a building well is capable of designing a good city. Many architects and fewer, but notable, landscape architects have designed (or rather led the designing of) fine urban environments for people (and, sometimes, other animate species). Sadly, although being well intentioned, they have also created some less than desirable worlds. The design process is indeed similar in all decision-making fields but the problems addressed are very different. The objective of the first part of this book is to identify the different ways in which the design process is carried out in dealing with urban phenomena and the types of products to which the label ‘urban design’ has been applied. The story presented in this book begins, in ‘Chapter 1: The public realm of cities and urban design’, with a discussion of the concerns of urban design and the nature of the public realm of cities and societies.

Many fields are concerned with the quality of the public realm of cities and other human settlements. It is an interest shared by city planners and often landscape architects. Architects, working as architects, are in contrast primarily concerned with the design of buildings for specific clients. They become strong advocates for their clients’ interests and for their own rights as artists. Urban design, however, is seen as an integrative design field addressing the traditional and overlapping concerns of city planning, landscape architecture, civil engineering (now often called environmental engineering) and architecture. It is concerned with the design of specific products: new towns, new suburbs, new precincts of cities and suburbs, urban renewal, and urban squares and streets. The list is almost endless. Broadly speaking, however, there is a single concern: the design of the public, urban realm at a city and precinct level.