
The politics of urban design

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Introduction

This paper seeks to emphasise and demonstrate that urban design is essentially a political matter—it involves us directly in making political choices through the representation and mediation of values and interests in the activity of design. The recognition of this role brings us immediately to a crucial problem in the practice of urban design, or rather a multi-layered series of problems. First, it is not part of the culture of the environmental professions to be explicit about values. Rather, the reverse is true—that values become an implicit part of the ideological baggage acquired in the course of professional training. This obfuscation of values is of particular concern where the very act of drawing ‘town’ and the built environment that results creates a political system in its own right. It allows certain things to happen for some people and constrains others. We would argue, therefore, that a clear statement of values and objectives would seem to be a precondition of advancing the legitimacy of environmental professions in general, and urban design in particular. The first section of this paper argues that all design exercises should start with the articulation of values by all participants, and offers an updated set of ‘responsive’ (Bentley *et al.*, 1985) qualities as a basis for urban designers’ part of this exercise.

Second, and a direct consequence of the first problem identified, it is not part of the culture of the design professions to see themselves as being part of a wider political process. We will argue in the second section of this paper that it is essential to realize where the urban designer is located in the power structure of actors or stakeholders who have an interest in the realization of design and urban development, and

whose interests the design is serving. Third, and perhaps even more fundamental, is the problem that, even if we can achieve greater clarity in the expression of our social and political values, there seems to be very little real understanding or knowledge of the relationship between values, design objectives and the design intentions derived from them, and the translation of these intentions into actual physical product. In the absence of a stronger theoretical development of urban design, there must be a radical change in the means by which design proposals are evaluated.

Some values for ‘good’ urban design

‘Good’ design can only exist relative to a set of values held by an individual, group or society in general. That is self-evident when one considers the arguments about what is ‘good’ in the products of the built environment professions. But how often are these differences expressed in terms of their overt connection to a set of values held by the various groups involved in the production of the built environment? What further complicates the issue, or perhaps gives the clearest demonstration of the problem, is the acknowledgement that the built environment is a political system *in its own right*. Try walking through a wall and you will notice that it is the physical fabric as well as the way that it is managed that sets constraints on what you can or cannot do (Bentley *et al.*, 1985). In urban design we talk often and glibly about ‘democratic’ town form. Again it seems self-evident that a good deal of democratic town form (to be defined shortly) has been produced