

3

Urban environments as visual art or as social settings? A review

R. K. Jarvis
[1980]

The working methods of the urban designer have been described as a mysterious and impenetrable 'black box', where the input (the need for detailed plans, the powers available, the detailed data) and the output (the schemes regularly reported in periodicals) are well and frequently described, but the working methods remain unexplored and undocumented.¹ Whereas architects will often describe the evolution of their designs, the complexities of urban design, which can involve a number of agencies over a long period of time, are rarely made public. In the absence of such information and an accompanying understanding, didactic programmes for urban design can at best provide only clues about the urban designers' concerns and working methods.

With the current emphasis in planning agencies on environmental enhancement and improvement programmes, small area approaches and design guidance, this absence of information is a serious problem. There is a risk that urban design will come to be regarded as nothing more than a stage in the building programme, a specification for architecture, instead of a clearly expressed and understood management of places to make them suitable for everyday use. If this outcome is to be avoided and urban design is to develop to meet current needs, then a better understanding of the 'black box' becomes an imperative.

As an initial step in opening the 'black box' it is suggested that both critical analysis of the products of design and the selection and manipulation of the inputs in the design process (working method) are

closely related to and specified by the underlying philosophies of those involved. Although this review relies on urban design theory and advice rather than case studies of the design process, the results are felt to provide support for this generalisation and to merit further and more comparative study. Two underlying approaches to urban design, each with very different emphases, can be discerned from a review of the relevant literature. Both can be seen in the work of Camillo Sitte. One emphasis is on visible form and is the approach that seems to dominate contemporary design advice; the other is primarily concerned with the public use and experience of urban environments. This latter approach is less developed than the artistic tradition, and it invites not only the application of findings from the rapidly developing field of man-environment relations but also public design participation.

Even the language of the two approaches differs. The visual artistic tradition speaks in aesthetic, abstract terms. Drawing on their personal experience authors often use familiar words in an unfamiliar way to convey effect. At the other end of the spectrum urban design analysis based on social usage may hardly include any reference to the appearance of a place at all; behavioural matters and their congruence or incongruence with the surroundings predominate.² The purpose of this review is not to deny the importance of visual matters in urban design, although it does demonstrate their dominance in urban design philosophy and method to the virtual