

The world is a complex place. Whether or not it is growing increasingly complex and changing more rapidly than before, as we are wont to believe is open to conjecture. Maybe the observation that it is, is our contemporary conceit. The fundamental concerns of urban design have, however, been with us from the time that human settlements were first consciously designed. How do we deal with group interests in relationship to individual in urban development? How do we define the public interest?

While Modernist site designing ideas, if not architectural, still hold considerable sway in the minds of architects across the world, new paradigms have emerged. Most recently it has been the New Urbanist or Smart Growth movement that has been attracting the most international attention. As a basis for designing the future it possesses strong Empiricist tones as it draws heavily on past urban patterns that have worked well. The world, however, is changing.

It would be grossly unfair to claim that the Rationalists amongst urban designers were not centrally concerned with public interest issues, human life and human needs, or motivations. They were. Their concern was, however, based on their own perceptions of what the world should be. These perceptions were based on an analysis of what was wrong with the world rather than observations of what works and what does not. Our understanding of the functions of built form has been considerably broadened in recent years. The definition has been extended from the one that the Modernists used to one that recognizes the purposes served by the symbolic aesthetic qualities of the environment in terms of the self-images of the people who inhabit and use it. The case studies included here clearly show that.

Our understanding of how the world functions and what different patterns of built form afford people will undoubtedly deepen in the future. Maybe the world is no more complex than before but we are being asked to deal with the complexity rather than to develop a simplistic view of how the world works. Too often we redefine the problems of the world in a simpler, manageable way by eliminating many of the variables shown in Figure 1.6 from our domain of concern. We then design for that simpler world. It is the easiest thing to do. This approach can and has created further problems, many of them in terms of the functioning of the biogenic environment.

The greatest shift – in urban design thinking if not practice – during the 1990s has been carried through into the first decade of the twenty-first century. It may well be a major concern of the next generation of urban designers. It is the concern for the natural systems of specific terrestrial locations. The shift has resulted from a much greater understanding of the fragility of the planet Earth and its limited and depleting resources. An interest in the health of the planet by individual city planners goes back a long way (e.g. to Patrick Geddes in the first decades of the twentieth century), but it is only recently that it has become a major issue in discussions of urban design. The case studies included in this study of the field, or discipline, of urban design suggest that it is as yet seldom a major concern in practice. Chapter 11, Learning from the Case Studies: Current Issues