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## An integrative theory of urban design

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Though urban design is the most traditional field of planning, it sorely lacks cohesive theoretical foundations. Much writing takes the form of guidebooks or manuals, which rely on rules of thumb, analytical techniques, and architectural ideas whose theoretical justifications are unclear. At best we have a number of contending approaches, such as Formalism and New Urbanism, which tend to operate in a theoretical vacuum, as if cut off from larger streams of planning thought, and to invite dogmatic adherence. This article examines the works of leading thinkers in urban design, in search of the theoretical foundations that underlie seemingly divergent approaches, to suggest that we could construct a more general theory, one that reflects principles that several of these approaches share.

To be sure, publications on physical planning (of which urban design can be considered a part) do sometimes address the theory of planning, but they are likely to refer to such matters as rationalism, incrementalism, participation, group process, and communication. Such concepts are properly a part of *procedural theory*, which is concerned with how we can know or decide—how intelligence can be exercised on behalf of the community. Practitioners should indeed be aware of these questions of process in planning, but they must also comprehend the substantive features of the object in question—they must be able to inquire into the distinctive principles underlying urban design as compared to those in other fields of planning. They need a complement to procedural theory: a *substantive* planning theory that sheds light on the specific concerns of the

urban designer (for precedent in distinguishing procedural from substantive theory, see Alexander, 1992, pp. 94–98).

What indeed is the urban designer's substantive concern? Especially for those inspired by architectural education, the urban designer's task is the shaping of human settlements' physical features at scales larger than a single building or a single plot of land. He or she does so through manipulation of the concrete elements of distance, material, scale, view, vegetation, land area, water features, road alignment, building style, and numerous other items that make up the natural landscape and the built environment. (For more views on the definition of urban design, see Mandanipour, 1997.) Urban design would therefore seem to be the profession that sets out to shape the spatial or physical environment.

But this definition is problematic, in part because it is too encompassing. Wellhead location and hurricane susceptibility, real estate development and brownfield reclamation, sewer systems and stadium location, land drainage and building codes—in the course of their work, urban designers might well have to become involved in any of these matters. But they would share this involvement with a variety of other practitioners, ranging from civil engineers to horticultural specialists, not to mention the neighboring branches of physical planning, and it would not be especially enlightening to label all their activities as urban design. To encompass all those professional activities that shape the built environment within one label would diminish the