

The Elusiveness of Urban Design: The Perpetual Problem of Definition and Role

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In this essay by Mr. Sert, which is essentially an inquiry into the nature of contemporary cities and a search for remedies for the frightful ills with which these are afflicted, I perceive also, beyond knowledge and beyond compassion, that new faith, which, no less than science, will shape and illumine the cities of tomorrow.

—Joseph Hudnut, from the introduction to
José Luis Sert's *Can Our Cities Survive?*

Joseph Hudnut, dean of the Harvard University Graduate School of Design from 1936 to 1953, hailed a “new faith” in the introduction to José Luis Sert’s *Can Our Cities Survive?*¹ Hudnut’s words are worth reviewing because they describe an aspect of the book and of the very foundation of urban design that warrants attention. His words certainly reward speculation when one is reading the proceedings of the First Urban Design Conference at Harvard in 1956. Hudnut proclaims that he discovered in Sert’s book “that new faith, which, no less than science, will shape and illumine the cities of tomorrow.” That is quite a claim. This was a new evangelism, and while *Can Our Cities Survive?* introduced the teachings of the Congrès Internationaux d’Architecture Moderne (CIAM) to an American audience, it also introduced José Luis Sert as its high priest.

Can Our Cities Survive? An ABC of Urban Problems, Their Analysis, Their Solutions was published in 1942. It represents the bridge between