

urban conditions. In the development of urban design in the 1950s in the United States, around the teachings of Sert at Harvard, throughout the thirteen urban design conferences, and after the development of the urban design program at Harvard (driven by the success of the conferences), we are witness to both the playing out of this conviction and also the struggle to define the terms of its engagement with society and the city. And we see many of the issues urban design has always faced revolve around these questions of power and turf.

José Luis Sert was a man of conviction. He became dean of the Graduate School of Design (GSD) at Harvard in fall 1953. Almost immediately he began a search for remedies for the “frightful ills” of contemporary cities. It was from this search that Sert began to develop a notion of a “common ground” in the school. For Sert, this common ground was a space of mediation in which architecture, landscape architecture, and planning would try to heal these ills. The common ground would be the laboratory where the cure could be developed.

At the 1956 conference, Sert and his contemporaries were driven by the idea that the design professions should claim intellectual and practical territory around the problems of urbanism, but they struggled with how to define the terms of that claim. It seems to me that this struggle has never really ended. It was then and is now a feature of urban design and, I would argue, one of its enduring challenges. The design professions have never really come to terms with the arena that they have attempted to claim. Urban design in particular has never really grasped either the complexity of the city or the role of the urban designer in it. Too often this complexity is reduced to simplistic formulas mixed with befuddlement about why the world does not pay more heed. The result is that too often design professionals are the last at the table—and are certainly not treated as the healing doctors they imagine themselves to be.

Urban design should not and cannot be reduced to any simplistic formula. At its best it articulates the physical form and programmatic components of urban situations in a complete, complex, and balanced array. The problem of definition is really a reflection of the complexity of the arena in which urban design operates. As cities become more complicated, urban design becomes more difficult to practice. The challenges posed by urban situations today are far greater than they were in 1956.

Indeed, reading the conference proceedings, I am struck by the