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## A procedural explanation for contemporary urban design

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### **A crisis of identity?**

The task of designing urban places—where the designer is primarily concerned with the sensual, but particularly visual, qualities of these places—has traditionally been termed *urban design*. Long associated with architecture and urban planning, urban design in the US began to acquire a distinct but weaker identity in academia as each of these two disciplines lost interest in the issues that engage urban designers (Dagenhart & Sawicki, 1992). Despite this weak academic identity, urban design continues to remain alive in several ways. First, urban places continue to be designed in cities across the US. This is true even if, as Kreditor (1990b, p. 67) points out, there is not an ‘urban design practice carried out by professional urban designers.’ Second, issues of concern to urban designers continue to be discussed at meetings and conferences of planners and architects, when they meet together and separately.

Despite the apparent impossibility of a commonly agreed definition of urban design, it could be argued that a meaningful explanation for contemporary urban design is vital, and that it is worth trying to arrive at one. This paper will attempt to make the case for this point of view and for the belief that a meaningful explanation of urban design is crucial to training a new generation of effective urban designers and for inspiring research that can inform the future practice of urban design. There is support for this belief (Symes, 1982; Colman, 1988), and it is not hard to see why: can a teacher tell her

or his students, ‘I will not tell you exactly what urban design is (or, I will only give you a vague description), but I will teach you urban design?’ What will guide researchers in identifying research questions—other than the obvious questions about the sensual qualities of urban places—the answers to which will help urban designers do their job better?

In the author’s experience of teaching urban design over several years to different groups of sceptical students, it has been necessary to articulate and refine a procedural explanation for urban design that is both sufficiently general and specific at the same time. It is procedural in that it focuses more on the means that contemporary urban designers use to create urban places. It is general in the sense that it is applicable across different situations, and that it is not overly restrictive in what it subsumes. It is specific in the sense that it provides a reason for engaging in specific analytic and synthetic tasks.

This paper presents the author’s procedural explanation: essentially, it is argued that contemporary urban design is a *second-order design endeavour*; that is, the urban designer is only indirectly responsible for producing built forms and the spaces in between them. Unlike other design professionals, today’s urban designers rarely design built artefacts; rather, they are mostly engaged in designing the decision environment within which others (sometimes these are other design professionals) make decisions to alter or add to the built environment. While the term *second-order design* is new, many of the arguments and ideas used to support the use of