

this term can be found scattered in the discourse generated when urban design practitioners and scholars have gathered to discuss urban design (Goldberg *et al.*, 1962; Pittas & Ferebee, 1982, *Ekistics*, 1988; Kahn & Speck, 1990). In particular, this explanation builds on and recasts—in a more useful way—the ideas of Jonathan Barnett, Robert Shibley, and Richard Lai.

The first section of this paper reviews what has been established in the literature and in practice as the tactics used by contemporary urban designers in the design of urban places. The second section presents the case for why the term *second-order design* is a good explanation for these tactics. The choice of this term rather than any other is explained together with the reasons for such an approach to design given contemporary circumstances.

The descriptive theorizing in this paper is directed more towards making sense of contemporary urban design practice than towards postulating the characteristics of good urban design practice. Hence, this paper attempts to explain rather than define. Second, the term *contemporary* is used to delimit the historic scope of my explanation because words such as *modern* and *postmodern* come with too many distracting associations from architecture and philosophy.

## Describing contemporary urban design

With the 1971 San Francisco urban design plan (City of San Francisco, 1971) came a significant change in the way urban designers seek to shape the built environment in cities. Previously, the future urban fabric, as envisioned by the urban designer, was completely described and specified using drawings the way an architect would describe and specify a building. Based on these drawings, builders would execute the construction of the structures thus specified. The work of Le Corbusier in Chandigarh is illustrative of this kind of an architectonic approach.

Rather than use an architectonic approach, the urban designers of San Francisco—and in other cities such as New York (Barnett, 1982b)—sought to realize their vision of the future by influencing decisions made by the various individuals and organizations intending to alter or add to the built environment. These tactics, collected and expressed in a document using words and pictures, were intended to ensure that decisions made by different decision makers at different points in time would collectively and eventually produce the intended built environment.

In the 25 years since the San Francisco urban design scheme was formulated, such tactics have been used more widely (Ray, 1984, Shirvani, 1990), but they have also evolved somewhat in response to lessons learned from previous applications.

The description of contemporary urban design developed in this section clarifies the aptness of the definitions proffered by Jonathan Barnett, Robert Shibley, and Richard Lai. Urban design is designing cities without designing buildings because the intention is to realize a desired state of the built environment, but without actually designing the components of the environment. Urban designers are not authors of the built environment, rather they create a decision environment that enables others to author the built environment. The invisible web that urban designers spin is the decision environment within which designers make design decisions: urban design involves manipulating and structuring this environment. Each definition is by itself not quite complete, but perhaps together they sufficiently describe contemporary urban design.

## How is urban design different?

Clearly, urban design as described above is an unusual type of design endeavour; it is different from design endeavours such as architecture, landscape architecture, interior design, and product design. One could distinguish between urban design and the other types of design endeavours in terms of the scale of the designed product (Scott Brown, 1982).

A more useful, sufficient, and complete distinction, however, lies in the relationship between the designer and the designed object. All designers, except contemporary urban designers, have a direct relationship with the object that they design, as schematically depicted in Figure 6.1. These designers make the decisions that dictate and directly shape the object. In an intellectual sense, they have ownership over the object. As described in the previous section and depicted in Figure 6.2 however, contemporary urban designers have only an indirect relationship with the designed object. They shape the designed object by influencing decisions made by other designers who then directly shape the object; they design the decision environment within which other designers create the designed object. (In this case, the word *designer* is used to include both professional designers as well as non-designers whose decisions shape the built environment; this is because professional designers are