

Towards an Urban Design Paradigm

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Definitions and paradigms for urban design are studied in Principles of Urban Design, a seminar at the graduate program, and Anne Wyatt observes that good urban designs are like romances: although they can just happen by chance, both of them have to be well nurtured.

Good urban design might be compared to a modern day romance. Unexplainable chemistry, maybe without comprehension or effort, leads to a match. Timing, mood, the moon and the winds come together and allow the romance to happen. At some point, however, more than chemistry and the winds become necessary to sustain the romance. What once worked magically, effortlessly, inexplicably, works no more. Times change. Moods change. The winds change. Some kind of understanding of the relationship dynamics, involving skills and effort, becomes required.

Good designs, like romances, can just happen by chance. At some point, however, what worked once may no longer work. When the hangover or general euphoria or marketing blitz ends one may realize in fact it never even worked to begin with. So the more thought the designer has given to context and interrelationship between design and other realms—social, economic, political, and ongoing management of the designed space -- the better chance the design will have of succeeding in being good design, of serving the people it is meant to serve, and of being maintainable over a long term.

Nasar (1998) refines the environmental perception realm, introducing terms for the gradual process of understanding a place: *preferenda* (which are sensory pre-perception responses), *perception* (which is capturing the information), and *cognition* (which involves some degree of mental processing). Understanding of this process is useful in the process of distinguishing between identity—what places and people are actually like and how they are different from other places— and image which is a place or person's identity plus people's perception of it. It is difficult, in reality, to distinguish between the two, as the identity of a place is always subject to different perceptions of it.

But it is important to look for and understand the distinction, because the reason many urban designs, as well as many

romances, fail is because of the dichotomy between identity and image; what people and places pretend to be and what they are often differ. It may take some time, but eventually the person—and the place-- get found out.

The contemporary paradigm for urban design as we now know it has several design mandates (Madanipour, 1996). It is multi-scale, looking at both the small and large picture; inter-disciplinary, but has a physical result; pertains to both visual qualities and management of the built environment; involves spatial forms and interrelations between spaces and society; is process over product oriented; is both rational and subjective, joining science and art; and is an ongoing collaborative public and private sector activity.

This paradigm has evolved over time, building on and learning from mistakes of past paradigms, including: classical/romantic, order/control/Napoleonic, socialist utopian, and modernism. Le Corbusier, who viewed the house as an utilitarian *machine de vivre*, and the greek planner Doxiadis, whose *ekistics*, or science of settlements, epitomized the modernist rational perspective, glorified the designer and the plan itself, without much regard for the social and cultural contexts—for how local communities and circumstance related them to design and place.

Modernism underpinned the urban renewal efforts of the 1940s and 1950s, which failures were criticized by people such as Jane Jacobs in her landmark book “The Death and Life of Great American Cities” published in 1961. Several decades later, designers seem to realize the necessity of considering the users of their designs but many still struggle to overcome compromising their grand designs, making our urban spaces user-friendly.

By reasserting site and context, post modernism opened the way to contemporary urban design. Presently urban designers recognize and demand a respect for context,

and by focusing on the process as well as the product, the social realm, people and their relationship to spaces, are back into the equation. Carmona et al (2003) note that this is not just an altruistic effort; it can bring many rewards: increased returns on investment; creation of new markets; helping deliver more leasable area by increasing densities; decreasing management, maintenance energy and security costs; increasing contentment of workers; and allowing for a place-marketing dividend (by making place unique and sellable as distinct from other places). Still many people argue that quality design is not necessary, that it is a luxury item, too expensive for everyday development.

Thus, challenges for contemporary designers are formidable and include, to name a few, low awareness, poor information, unpredictable markets, high land costs, fragmented land ownership, uncoordinated development, lack of choice, combative relationships, short-termism, perceptions of cost and negative planning, identity vs. image confusion, placelessness, exchange vs. use value differences, occasional over-emphasis on environmental determinism, and ongoing issues of quantity vs. quality and efficiency vs. equity.

In order to overcome this list of challenges, urban designers must do many things. They must see constraints as challenges; have a passionate concern with achievability; be able and willing to argue convincingly, asking for what they want; have an astute financial awareness; be idealistic but also realistic; be highly imaginative; and be willing and able to involve the public in the process, working toward public/private partnership. Further, successful designers must understand political process and be able to balance collective and individual interests.

Unlike paradigms of the past, the paradigm of the day and into the future must be that urban design be undertaken to provide people with choices, with opportunity, as opposed to denying them these things. This will not be easily accomplished. The path is not and will likely never be clear. Complexities, including fear of change and the reality that not all situations can be win-win ones, will make progress slow. There will be ongoing need to balance collective and individual interests, and to realize that perception is distinct from reality. Also, current realities of people being more mobile, less attached



Figure 1. A glimpse of the central square in Guimarães, Portugal - prelude to an urban design that is easy to fall in love with (photo by: V. del Río)

to places, and the vast difference between exchange and use value demand that good environments will have to be adaptable ones, and the designers who create them and the people that use them may be well advised to see themselves as stewards of rather than masters over such environments.

We might look at and work toward Kevin Lynch's utopian vision, where public participation is encouraged for all, and "everyone is trained to read a place, just as everyone is trained to read a book" (Lynch, 1981: 313). A place where:

"...people are trained to have an understanding of process and to understand underlying interconnections, as effective strategy requires a deep analysis of the present, the construction of an integrated future, and a grasp of the dynamics of some social and environmental change which might connect the two" (Lynch, 1981: 315).

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