

Urban Design: *Beyond Architecture at Scale*

Urban design is a bridge practice – one that implies flows, is open, plastic, and reconfigures itself depending on the problem and the agents, actors, and constituencies it has to influence. It is plastic enough to even configure and reconfigure itself between built form and the broader ecologies of the natural system in which it is situated, and more critically as the bridge discipline that embraces the autonomy of architecture and the rich terrain of social science that (ideally) informs the discipline of urban planning. Today urban design seems to be understood in complete contradiction to this intent. In fact, democracy with advanced capitalism and neoliberal policy is a fatal combination for the urban form of cities more generally and for urban design as we imagine its practice. Moreover, in this imagining material configuration through architecture and the aspiration of permanence become the default conditions for our cities and by extension for the expectations of society from urban designers. This is particularly limiting given that cities in the world are in such a state of flux on account of both political uncertainty and climate change. So, if anything, urban design should be making this state of flux and the impermanence it implies, as well as the design of transitions in our built environment, the central agenda. In other words, the mission of urban design as a bridge practice could be to straddle and create productive feedback loops between these different conditions that are molding our built environment today.

However, the practice of urban design globally has been limited to create coherence, efficiencies, and stability in ways that urban form is imagined for our cities. This is a non-productive condition because what has resulted from this are boundaries of containment for urban design practitioners, thus depriving cities of this crucial bridge practice that in its original aspirations was to connect different disciplines to make for a more productive and synergic engagement with the construction of the city. Thus the critical questions for the practice of urban design are whether, as a practice, it should only respond to the context of its operation, or should it also engage with the construction of that context itself?

Today that context is of a city in flux and this is a global phenomenon where, in several cities around the world, in the postindustrial scenario, a new system has resulted where living and working have become extremely fragmented. Locations of

jobs and places of living are not interrelated in the predictable fashion when job locations were centralized. In today's networked economies, these patterns are not only fragmented but in flux and constantly reconfiguring. This results in the fragmentation of the structure of the city itself and its form, where the notion of clear zoning or predictable and implementable land use all break down into a much more multifaceted imagination of how the city is used and operates. This is an urbanism created by those outside the elite domains of the formal modernity of the state. It is what Ravi Sundaram refers to as a 'pirate' modernity that slips under the laws of the city to simply survive, without any conscious attempt at constructing a counter-culture. In fact this phenomenon of flux is critical to those cities and nations being connected to the global economy; however, the spaces it creates have been largely excluded from the cultural discourses on globalization, which focus on elite domains of production in the city. It is a space that has been below the radar of most urban designers, who focus on the public realm as we have defined it traditionally, but in this condition the meaning of space itself is in flux and ever changing. It is not only the city of the poor, or the regular models of the formal and informal and other such binaries, but a kinetic space, a space where these models collapse into singular entities and where meanings are ever shifting and blurred. The questions this raises are as follows: Can we design for this space as urban designers and planners? Can we design with a divided mind? Can other forms of organizations be embedded in the discussion about our cities and, if so, how do we recognize and embed this within the formal discourse of urban design? This is not an argument for making our cities temporary but rather one of recognizing the temporal as an integral part of the city and seeing what space exists for this within the possibilities of urban design – all the way from its urban form, public spaces, and governance structures.

So, then, what is the role of urban design in this condition? Most certainly this flux is the new norm and, in addition, the spurts of growth and flux triggered by natural and political uncertainty are going to challenge our reading of the urban condition and the role of urban design. The issues that could be negotiated in this form of urban design practice, then, are as diverse as memory, geography, infrastructure, sanitation, public health governance, ecology, and urban form, albeit in some measure temporary. These parameters could unfold their projective potential, offering alternatives of how to embed softer but perhaps more robust systems in

more permanent cities. Andrea Branzi advises us on how to think of cities of the future. He suggests that we need to learn to implement reversibility, avoiding rigid solutions and definitive decisions. He also suggests approaches which allow space to be adjusted and reprogrammed with new activities not foreseen and not necessarily planned. Thus urban design as a practice must acknowledge the need for re-examining permanent solutions as the only mode for the formulation of urban imaginaries, and instead imagining new protocols that are constantly reformulated, readapted, and re-projected in an iterative search for a temporary equilibrium that reacts to a permanent state of crises.

One could argue that the future of cities depends less on the rearrangement of buildings and infrastructure and more on the ability of urban designers to openly imagine more malleable, technological, material, social, and economic landscapes. That is, to imagine a city form that recognizes and better handles the temporary and elastic nature of the contemporary and emergent built environment with more effective strategies for managing change as an essential element for the construction of the urban environment. The challenge is then learning from these extreme conditions on how to manage and negotiate different layers of the urban while accommodating emergent needs and often largely neglected parts of urban society. Thus the aspiration would then be to imagine a more flexible practice of urban design more aligned with emergent realities, enabling us to deal with more complex scenarios than those of static or stable consolidated situations.

The challenge for urban design today is to transform to become more inclusive, thereby recognizing its dependency on other actors and agencies for implementation and multiple domains for its design. Integral to this new emerging approach are incremental strategies and multifaceted feedback loops making the process of urban design increasingly dynamic. New technologies can help us spatialize big data and find new ways of representing spaces in flux. This then facilitates a more nuanced, fine-grained, and grounded registrar of the reality in which we operate. Perhaps emblematically, urban design today is in a place between an intuitive exploration premised on architecture as perhaps the sole instrument of representation and the instant city premised on temporality. That is, between formalism with its quest for

functionalism and the temporary character of informality – in the space of true transitions.

Then urban design is about how these spatial possibilities play out to influence the quality of lives, of our economy, society, evolving culture, and the broader well-being of the planet. It is the broader view of planetary implications and ecological thinking that will prepare for us questions of equity and humanism in the context of our operations. The presentations will focus on some explorations of what this design for transitions may mean in real terms. That is how could urban design address the issue of the design for transitions rather than think in absolute terms. That is how may we actually avoid designing permanent solutions for perhaps what might be temporary problems.

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