

The Future of Urban Design: Opportunities of a New Pragmatism and the Disappearance of the Client-Expert

Eric Firley

University of Miami, Coral Gables, Florida

ABSTRACT: In a similar way as for architecture, the client demands for urban design have considerably changed over the last two decades. Since its official founding in the post-war era practiced as a form-oriented design discipline that focused on the medium scale somewhere in between architecture and regional planning, it is now understood as an evidence-based management discipline that steers a gradual process of change and adaptation. This paper elaborates on the thesis that visibility in terms of traceability and accountability will become an increasingly important feature for the profession. The point is made that the urban designer has to convey and prove his knowledge to a decision-taking client that does not necessarily have the technical competence to decide, nor a clear program to follow. Functional considerations and their fulfillment are still key, but are complemented by far more strategic demands that have grown in relevance through the recent emphasis on the urban condition as a main driver of economic competitive capacity.

It should be clarified that the author, due to his origin and research experience, often uses European references and that he focuses on an analysis of the profession in the developed rather than developing world. The content of this paper is predominantly based on the knowledge gathered during the writing of three comparative books about housing typologies, high-rise in the urban context and planning methodologies. This knowledge has been applied to the professional sector following a research consultancy mission in a campus planning agency during the summer of 2012.

KEYWORDS: urban design, profession, process, strategic management, master planning

INTRODUCTION

Main part:

The reasons for the above-mentioned mutation of the urban design profession are manifold. For the sake of simplicity they can be attributed to three major realms: the one relating to questions of supply and demand, the ideological one and the process-oriented one.

1. In terms of demand, we just do not experience the same need for hygienic living space as was the case in the century after 1870, and especially after WWII. Housing shortages are still of preoccupying scale in many urban agglomerations, but due to a lack of political pressure the topic rarely gets on top of the federal government's agenda. This situation stands in contrast to the instability of the late 19th century in several European countries, when the improvement of living conditions became a major argument in order to prevent social unrest. Public agencies, forced to deal with the situation, were willing to implement grand urban interventions which stand at the origin of "urban design" in the narrow sense of the word: in the most extreme case, built under a single ownership and designed by a single hand, large areas were developed in the suburbs of the historic cores, and suggested the birth of a design discipline that could not just be considered as an "accumulation of architectures". Though not at the center of the paper's preoccupation, this differentiation is relevant, and exemplifies how crucial the understanding and possibility of a holistic approach is to the birth of its denomination as a new profession. The actual ingredients of urban design - buildings, the spaces in between or in the middle of buildings, streets and squares - had obviously not changed, but what had changed was the fact that they were planned and implemented on such a large scale, in fairly short time and by small planning teams. This was a historic novelty, especially for working class residential structures that had only on an exceptional, philanthropic and usually paternalistic base been in the planning powers' center of interest. Famous case-studies are Claude-Nicolas Ledoux's Royal Saltworks in Arc-et-Senans (1775), or - less glamorously - Emile Mueller's Cité Ouvrière in Mulhouse (1853). Due to the country's old age and its relative economic and political stability, the urban history of France in general offers an at times almost cliché-like vision of central planning and its consequences. In the post-war

period, it will be difficult to find another democratic country that has implemented as rigorously as France new urban paradigms such as the Grands Ensembles, the archetype of mono-functional housing estates, built between the mid-50s and mid-70s on cheap land on the outskirts of the larger cities. Despite the often bleak outcome, it should not be underestimated, how quickly a very efficient machinery had been set into motion that satisfied social, political and economic demands. The creation of desperately needed residential space was a welcome opportunity for the business community to modernize the whole building sector and to establish a new network of infrastructures. Today, the demand situation is quite different, and in many places, especially Japan and some European countries like Germany and Italy, we even have to cope with decreasing rather than increasing populations. This does not mean that there is no more building activity in the residential sector, at times even in the form of megastructures, but it does mean that there is less need for public control and coordination. Budget cuts hence make large-scale expropriation by the state almost impossible. The result is a far more slivered market, wherein it is difficult to recognize any clear models and parallels, a factor which is however also linked to the lack of historic distance. In ten or twenty years it might be easier to identify the commonalities of projects that are currently ongoing. An atomization and liberalization of the market can be recognized on two levels, the first one being a larger amount of market players, a thesis that - due to the increasing observance of oligopolies - would have to be verified, and the second and more important one, being the fragmentation of land ownership and its consequences on development models and initiatives. A research topic on its own, this latter point marks the major difference between state-urbanism versus private initiative, as much as intervention outside urban cores versus intervention in central location. Another way of expressing this opposition of development philosophies is the confrontation and comparison between a tabula-rasa urbanism on the one hand, best exemplified by Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin for the reconstruction of Central Paris, and infill and retrofit strategies on the other. What this paragraph is trying to convey is the simple assessment that the type of demand has an impact on the work definition of an urban designer, directly, but also indirectly through the legal tools that the public sector is willing to put in place in order to satisfy this demand. The Roppongi Hills development in Tokyo is a recent case-study that perfectly illustrates how difficult the assembly of scattered city-center ownership can be without the use of eminent domain through the state. In order to build the new district, it took even one of the largest and best connected private fortunes in Japan over 17 years to buy up the necessary land. In contrast, for the construction of Stuyvesant Town in Manhattan, the earliest example of post-war urban renewal in the US, the city prepared the ground, displaced over 10.000 inhabitants, and, in late 1945 demolished structures on over 60 acres of inner-city land. All this happened in less than 2 years on the base of a new law (the Hampton-Mitchell Redevelopment Companies Law of 1943).

2. Regarding the question of ideologies, urban design has followed a similar direction as many other societal issues after the 1989 Fall of the Wall. The dissolution of the east-west dichotomy in the aftermath of this event had a fundamental impact in our way to lead political discourse, and it ended a phase during which essentially all decisions were somehow linked to the defense from the Communist threat and the anxiety of a nuclear war. The consequence of this in principle positive development - in which pragmatism has taken the lead over enforced unity - has been a general loss of "cheap utopias" and big ideas. The events after 1989 eventually only emphasized and accelerated a long ongoing process in which the grandeur of the nation-state became gradually replaced by a multi-nodal reality of globalized urban networks. Today, the political discourse about urban questions has not vanished, but a new generation of citizens (and voters) expects more than a "for me or against me" rhetoric that - often in a politically convenient manner - veiled the complexity of the actual problems. The author's German background might overestimate this notion due to the country's geographic location and its unfortunate role in WWII, but periods like the McCarthy era in the US suggest that the - allegedly artificial - simplification of public discourse was not limited to this specific geographic zone. As much as we like to refer to them in desultory efforts of grandiosity, the mindset of the Plan Voisin, Broadacre City, but also Stuyvesant Town and Sarcelles seems to be gone. Overwhelmed by an infinite amount of "smaller" issues, very few professionals or academics are concerned with comprehensive visions of the future, may they refer to spatial questions or mankind as a whole. An excellent, though extreme example of the overlay of urban and political issues can be found in the history of Stalin-Allee (now Karl-Marx-Allee) and the Hansaviertel in Berlin of the late 1950s. The former one came first and was built by the communist regime in East-Berlin in the form of a monumental axis as an architecturally very traditionalist demonstration of power. The latter one, initiated as a purely pragmatic reconstruction measure, eventually grew into an equally ambitious marketing campaign, and received the status of an "Internationale Bauausstellung", just like the famous Weissenhof-Exhibition in 1927. Now considered one of the most important examples of post-war avant-garde urbanism, it showcases masterpieces of residential architecture from influential modernists like Aalto, Niemeyer, Beaudouin, Taut or Eiermann. Also from an urban point of view, the conceptual contrast with the pompous Karl-Marx-Allee could hardly be more pronounced, and the Hansaviertel masterplan in an almost forced manner denies any symmetric order or relation to the street, influenced by Scharoun's ideas of a new "Stadtlandschaft" (urban landscape). Coming back to questions of landownership, it is highly revealing to notice that private

ownership of the Hansaviertel was only reinstated in order to highlight the political refusal of measures that could have appeared similar to the nationalization of land in East Germany. In reality, many western planners were actually in favor of a similar approach, and the resulting plot structure was a redistribution that had little in common with the historic situation. In order to implement the project, all land had temporarily been gathered by a public development company, ignoring and erasing the small-scale plot structure of the former 19th century "Gruenderzeit-viertel", which had almost entirely been destroyed during the war. Though an extreme comparison, this case-study is meant to underline the thesis that urbanism and politics can hardly be separated, and that the relatively recent, but fundamental changes in world politics do have an impact on how we plan the built environment.

As a general remark, one that might help us not to focus too exclusively on political issues, there is a link to be made with the preceding explanations surrounding the question of demand, as it can be assumed that the birth (and death) of urban ideologies is somehow triggered by the demand for a certain product and the media attention that it produces. It seems for example improbable that « Existenzminimum » had become an important notion in the history of architectural modernism, as part of the New Objectivity movement, if there had not been a material need for very modest accommodation. Today, just to mention of the main driver, it is very difficult to imagine progress in the field of urban design without sustainability at the center of attention. Ecological and social needs have forced us to densify existing urban fabrics, rather than to further expand on greenfield territory. The above-mentioned polarization between large- and small-scale development can hence be seen as much as a demand question, as one of ideologies. What came first, becomes essentially a hen-and-egg problem.

Whatever the reasons are, the opportunities for Grand Design are minimized, or exported to new markets in the Middle and Far East. This point, the impact of large-scale planning activity in foreign markets on the self-conception of a whole profession, has in the author's opinion been largely underestimated: in the boom years until 2008, all major design offices have proudly been focusing their efforts on markets that had little in common with the situation in their home-countries, preventing the here presented changes to become more often publicized and discussed. Everybody was fascinated by 3D-renderings of artificial islands and new high-rise districts, the less prominently situated ones being awkwardly reminiscent of the most extreme cases of post-war slab urbanism. Is it by chance that we now, in a humbler economic climate, read more about New York's High-Line as a spectacular example of re-use, than about new city projects in China or Abu Dhabi? In the dense urban context of the western world, the theories of a Sitte, Wagner, Hilberseimer, Geddes, or even Koolhaas and Krier, might still be important and helpful, but the real challenge is to adapt them to a context that now usually inhibits the implementation of a comprehensive masterplan. As a closing comment for this paragraph, it might be useful to re-emphasize that this paper is concerned with the self-understanding and future development of a profession, rather than the reality of what actually is built. The fact that urban sprawl in the form of low-density and car-dependent residential developments is a still ongoing urban disaster, potentially the 20th century's most relevant planning and urban-design phenomenon, does not necessarily mean that it is the question that best defines the profession's major preoccupations. For the good or for the bad, most of us - those working in academia and publishing - do not consider ourselves as being linked to this phenomenon.

3. Last but not least, the process-oriented questions surrounding urbanism and urban design have experienced a major change through the erosion of the client-expert in a postmodern environment that challenges the logocentric paradigms of the Enlightenment Project. Once the built environment is not seen any more as a consequence to a specific problem, but as one of many parameters for the creation of an innovative and very competitive economy, the definition of the program and measure of success surpasses the capacities of the corporate client and his focus on the reaction of the end-user. Emphasized through an ever growing need for flexibility, an evidence and survey-based approach becomes the only way to communicate, and the visibility of this approach a vital need for accountability. The content of this paragraph dwells on the assumption that the form and existence of the city, and built artifacts in general, is not just a consequence of other, "more tangible and important" factors, but a driving force in itself. Today, we – the city administration or private entities – increasingly do not just plan or build factories, because we need work-space, or residential quarters, because we need more dwellings, or sewers, because we are afraid of diseases, but we build museums in order to attract talent, or student centers in order to provide more efficient communication space. In a constant effort for economic optimization, growing competition and hence aggressive marketing, architectural and urban features are becoming subjects, rather than objects. It could rightly be claimed that this phenomenon always existed - think of all major monuments, or, City Beautiful as a whole period -, but it seems as if we had reached another scale, one that has encompassed the private sector. The difficulty of such a non-quantifiable role, in which space allocation loses its dominance over allegedly secondary parameters, is the definition of the program, the selection of the best proposal and the measure of success. With this in the back of the mind, who could be such an omniscient

expert-client, and if there is one, would he like to be accountable for potential failure? These are the circumstances under which the urban designer has to prove his added-value, in giving evidence - visibility - to his suggestions and architectural choices. The technological advances of the last years and the widespread use of social media have drastically altered and improved the opportunities to - almost instantly - identify dysfunctionalities and unsatisfied desires, as much as to test design alternatives and measure reactions to the built result. Through these tools, programming, participation and competition can be revolutionized, a process that is already ongoing through the implementation of digital city government. A radical counter-example to these complex efforts of democratic process-management can be given through an analysis of the structure of many 20th century social housing agencies, the London County Council as an extreme case internally employing hundreds of designers. A lack of differentiation between architecture, landscaping and urban design - allegedly an inherent component of modernist design philosophy - was accompanied by the fusion of the client and service provider roles, a mode of functioning that since has almost completely disappeared.

Another interesting case-study is provided by the university campus. As a small version of an ideal (and almost autarchic) city, it offers an environment that particularly well documents the above-mentioned changes and opportunities. With the rare exception of some major extension projects and new university foundations, the urban design challenge of such entities is not any more primarily one of implementing a specific formal order between architectural artifacts, but the ability to adapt the institution's growth vision to its physical features, potentially even to help define the vision itself. The simple question is how to guide and control a continuously ongoing process of transformations that will raise the university's profile and income. A decision and comparison regarding such proposals has become increasingly doubtful without the delivery of evidence. Taken to the scale of the profession as a whole, a previously internally-led discussion about design principles, often more philosophical than scientific, will hence be externalized with the client as major addressee. A simple example of these changes is the « results-menu » on Sasaki's website (www.sasaki.com), highlighting not building images, but the research outcome and socio-economic impact of their implemented projects. In the middle and long term, it will be very difficult for practices to enter this market without a clearly articulated research strategy, something that is not easy to do for small structures.

CONCLUSION

What does all this mean in more practical terms? There are two ways to evaluate the consequences of these radical, but gradual changes, and the difference between them depends on the reaction of the professionals. The changes can be considered as a threat, if designers do not manage to adapt their toolset to these new demands, but they can also become a new opportunity to finally take the key role that often has been given over to project managers or real-estate consultants. The question therefore is, how education can prepare students for this new situation, and how much design-orientation and -knowledge they need? If too much emphasis is given to urban design in the traditional and heroic sense, dealing with the actual design of new districts or even cities, too little time might be spent on the above-mentioned process-management issues that represent a growing market. The opposite can lead to a situation in which fundamental urban principles are overseen. The evaluation of artistic principles in urban design hence remains a major issue, as much as the question, if these can be conveyed to students without comprehensive studio work. A review of the curriculum of urban design master programs documents this quest, a particularly clear example being the New School's new Master of Design and Urban Ecologies, in which the students are taught to design « processes for urban transformation ».

The main motivation to write this paper was not that much the presentation of new market tendencies, as these have now been ongoing for several years, but rather the wish to ground them in a historic perspective of the urban design profession, and its always problematic delimitation towards the architectural and planning fields. An interesting and somehow surprising byproduct of this research for the author has been an updated view on the differences between 19th century, modern and contemporary urban development, and its main driver for change. In this context it is interesting to note that the assumption of a radical break between « traditional » and « modern » design features, in the sense of a deliberate design decision, eventually steps back in importance compared to the differences in the development set-up. Seen from this perspective, the future of urban planning - at least in terms of organization - might have more in common with Regent's Street (1814-1825) in London or some of Baron Haussmann's (1853-1870) Parisian breakthroughs, very complex in terms of implementation, than with more recent highlights of the 20th century, like the Hufeisensiedlung in Berlin or Stuyvesant Town in New York. What role will the urban designer play in this system? And will his toolset still identify him as a designer?

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