

# **Ideas and Reflections on Urban Design Education**

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Those of you who read the introduction by Constantin Spiridonidis to this book will have realized that there was no need to bring to your attention the implications of the research on Urban Design education, for they are fully examined in Constantin's text.

Nonetheless, I will therefore try to complement what Constantin has already written, and add something from a different perspective.

Any text is read in the light of one's personal positions. Apart from that, there could only be a critical perception of contents. By the way, in the discussion following this introduction we will have the chance to hear from additional voices expressing even more opinions than those found in the book. So, I believe it is useful to present my comments as broadly as possible, taking inputs from the opinions expressed in these pages, but also in light of my experience as designer and teacher.

The topics I will touch on are:

- urban design and the contemporary city
- fragmentation and unitary design
- autonomy of urban design
- the project as comprehension tool
- urban design and composition attitude
- history and background
- towards a territorial architecture

## **Urban design and the contemporary city**

To interpret the ways in which urban design is taught, I believe it necessary *to consider the meaning of urban design in the contemporary society, economy and culture.*

In reading this book it becomes clear that *there is a correlation between the specificity of European regions and the vision of this educational subject within the Architecture academic curriculum.* It isn't just cultural traditions and development levels to have a reflection on schools; rather, it is two further issues.

The first concerns the role given to urban design, in relationship with the level of understanding achieved as regards to the characteristics of the contemporary city.

The second issue pertains to the perception of the roles that can be played by urban design in relationship with architectural design -the mother of all projects- in offering a contribution to the contemporary society. A society that, now more than ever, seems to be able to self-design its own living environments, creating them from single buildings and spaces more than from a unitary design, starting from the spaces of private comfort rather than from those of public comfort: the collective spaces.

I believe that, beyond single parts and words, the reading of this book leads to a general conclusion: in order to have useful discussions on the 'whats' and 'hows' of teaching urban design, *it is necessary to reflect on its specificity in respect to other types of physical projects. And, even more importantly, what is its utility for the urban society, that is the entirety of the contemporary European society.* Considering the issues that today arise from defining the living environment of this society.

*The same difficulties of the urban project in the contemporary territories encountered in teaching urban design? And, especially, what is the relationship between the two elements, as mediated by us, not only as teachers but also as designers and researchers?*

The Urban Design Course at Portsmouth's School of Architecture emphasizes "the urban condition of contemporary society", affirms that "the city as a recognizable entity becomes harder to define and impose limits on", and highlights themes such as "the nature of the urban and sub-urban landscape, aspects of urban living, urban density and mix."

The Landscape Channel of Manchester School of Architecture defines its field of study and work as: "the contemporary city's peripheral space. This is a space that falls outside culturally understood readings of urban character. Paradoxically it is the space that characterizes large areas of the contemporary city. Terms for its description are usually negative and/or pejorative. We seek to describe the conditions of this space, developing methods of documenting and mapping it."

There are other courses, here, where the need to renew the methods for teaching urban design -as a consequence of the dramatic diversity of the contemporary city as compared to the modern city- is not recognized. Consequently, there is a lack of *understanding of the huge potentials of the projectual, compositional, and linguistic expression contained in the cultural aspects of new urban dimension*. These courses are well-done, comprehensive, and complex. Yet, today, they may lack utility.

It is now necessary to note that by *contemporary city* we should mean *the entire city, as the contemporary aspect is inherent to the way it is utilized, and therefore it lies more on the substance than on the form*. The existing city, that is, the historic and modern parts of European cities, maintains its specific forms, but adapts them to new meanings and applications with a level of intensity never before seen. We face not as much a new physical dimension, but rather a new cultural dimension of the city; thus the project is offered new potentialities.

The Urban Design Course of Portsmouth notes that "... urban is therefore so by way of its cultural characteristics rather than its location..." To which I would add, rather than its physical dimension.

## **Fragmentation and unitary design**

As designers and teachers, we have to deal with a city that is so different as to require a new name: I call it "urban territory". A place that sums up the absolute of the historic city, the unitary continuity of the consolidated city, the diversity per part of modern city projects, and the elementary factor of contemporary dispersion. A place where we witness the wide spread of a similar lifestyle: that which is established by the contemporary side of the city, confirming the importance of the conditions embodied by it.

In 1966, talking about Milan, Aldo Rossi wrote: "... this is one of the most negative ways to interpret the city-region: thinking of simply enlarging the field to solve, in a wider area, the same unsolved problems of a smaller area.... I believe, rather, that the city is a power in and of itself, and that today, more than ever, its greater dimension represents the chance to identify a higher level of quality in urban history, capable of *bringing into a broader dimension the civil progress and the specific quality that are connected to the origin and the development of the urban fact*."

Thus we face a problem which we may later discuss. If urban design accepts its function of being applicable to the various aspects of contemporaneity, it then must be able to present proposals suitable to the renewed cultural dimension of the city. In my view, it essentially translates into this: being able to offer scenarios that can take fragmentation as a primary aspect of the contemporary fact, and see this characteristic as an asset of an all-inclusive dimension, and thus of a unitary design, whose expressive value is coherent with assumptions and needs alike. A design which is both firm and mutable, always dynamic, and able to inspire further new proposals.

The study programs of Barcelona's School of Architecture of the Vallès have the following pedagogical objectives: "The urban project as an immediate response, unique and flexible to the conditions of a site and a program that could change its demands in time.... The necessity of flexibility to respond to the complexity of actual processes of city expansion in which there are many agents and where demands can change rapidly from the initial assumptions."

## **Autonomy of urban design**

I believe the discussion may now more easily delve into the two themes I anticipated at the beginning of my speech. They are the value of urban design for today's European society, and the rela-

tionship with the methods of teaching.

Lacking sufficient awareness of the processes and the forms of construction of the contemporary city, what level of complexity can urban design assimilate -reaching a qualitative synthesis which can only be morphological- to achieve specificity with regard to architectural design? *For the specificity and the utility of urban design reside in the capacity to understand complexity, and use it within the physical proposal.*

According to the School of Architecture of Stockholm "The theme ... is complexity..."

The Department of Architecture of the Middle East Technical University of Ankara states that "In recent years we have particularly focused on techniques that yield to field, ground, mat or surface organizations, or matrices, which render the boundaries between the traditional fields of architecture, urbanism, landscape architecture and infrastructural engineering more flexible..."

The Faculty of Architecture of Belgrade adds that "...we do not consider urban space only as a physical frame."

But let's talk about teaching: how much autonomy does the urban design suppose to obtain from within the disciplines of physical proposals? What originates, *how positively motivated is this claim for autonomy from the teaching of architectural design?*

*I believe the task of urban design today should be that of unveiling, that its duty should essentially be of grasping the greatest potentialities of ongoing processes.*

There is a latent city in the contemporary urban territories, that awaits the right chance to show itself. Only the urban design, with its interlinking interests, may understand this reality and cause it to surface. This is a deeply renewed role compared to other intervention instances. Today it is necessary to recognize the reasons at the root of the processes of growth, in order to build scenarios partly varying from the forms envisioned by society for the affirmation of those processes in the territory.

According to the Landscape Channel of Manchester School "... Issues of revealing and understanding process are fundamental to our work. Through understanding process strategies can be developed that engage with city form at a primary level".

But attention to this role of urban design seems to characterize only part of the academic curricula presented here, while the reality of most European regions seems to call for it.

## **The project as comprehension tool**

And now, we have come to an important point in our discussion.

We are able to appreciate a particular reality only if we think we may intervene in its modification. The tool we use is the physical project. This means that only through a projectual approach to a given problem can we hope to understand the context that surrounds it. *There can not be a separation between interpretation and project.*

All courses presented in the book are positively based on the project. They are projectual workshops. But some programs maintain the moment of analysis as propedeutic to the moment of proposal. Only a small minority theorizes -quite accurately, in my point of view- on the need for the two moments to coincide.

According to Barcelona's School of Architecture, "It is important to insist on the unity of analysis and proposal... *It is only confronted with an incipient idea for a project that the checking of a given reality: site, program, precedents, etc. becomes fully useful for the design process.*"

Furthermore, we know that it is much more difficult to express a projectual vision of the contemporary city, than it was to do so with the modern. Consequently, the contemporary city is much more difficult to comprehend. Vittorio Gregotti spoke about "the aesthetics of ascertainment", a vision limited to the geographic description of mutation processes, without expressing any judgment on the project brought about by society, without our contribution.

*But if we are not able to express a projectual position, we shall equally be unable to understand*

*the needs of that same society.*

Looking beyond the research we are discussing today, it is important to note that there aren't many Architecture schools in Europe whose curricula are in tune with students who see the contemporary city and its entirely innovative characteristics as their own every-day living environment. The best among them travel across borders seeking courses that can talk about that reality, and the ways to approach its understanding through the project. This, of course, applies also to the schools which are represented in this book.

The Urban Design course at Antwerp Higher Institute "starts from the premise that the architecture student shall first become acquainted with the contemporary approach to urban development ... Urban Design is described in the course curriculum as a social discipline that takes as its core subject the spatial development of the site..."

Yet, for some courses, the very projects selected to illustrate in this book the results achieved denounce, through their form, a sharp separation from the contemporary cultural dimension. This draws attention to the theme of projectual capacity in the physical dimension, or in other words, to composition capacity, and how it is learned in the school.

## **Urban design and composition attitude**

A typically educational theme confronted by research is that of placing urban design teaching in the study course. What lies behind this issue is the attention of the faculty towards the projectual and composition skills that students must attain before they are able to approach a course on urban design, usually placed in the third year.

In my view, this is not only a false problem, but it also reveals a lack of enthusiasm in recognizing the role of urban design within the teaching of architecture. Does urban design represent the opportunity of teaching composition?

*Learning composition from the themes of urban design, and thus from the variety of scales, the use of the form at all levels - structural, typological, stylistic - means talking about Architecture in the most correct and useful way. It means taking Architecture back to its role of builder of the city.*

To fully develop its potentials and affirm its uniqueness, and even more to put forward its utility, *courses on urban design must develop composition capacity. Using the form at all scales, focusing particularly on the broad scale characterizing the contemporary city.* Even the choices of expressive language can be perfectly grasped in a wide-area project. To do so, teaching staffs must consist of composition experts aware of the new territorial dimension, researchers with interests in compositional urbanism as well as in territorial architecture. Inside the same person.

Many of the programs in this book reveal a strong interest in the themes of morphology. Few are those who recognize that it is important to help students develop the competence that will make them suitable to understand the themes of morphology from the point of view of design. In other words, the composition competency.

The Department of Architecture at the Modern University of Setubal in Portugal affirms that "...the teaching of Urban Design in association with the study of Urban Architecture must be based on the exercise of Composition on a level of high abstraction..."

The School of Architecture at the Second University of Naples lists "...the composition of the town architecture" as a level of reference for urban design".

Composition attitude is characterized by an in-depth investigation on projectual layers overlapping, and scales intersection. It can thus exploit the absence of hierarchies that dictate the relationship between moments and means, decisions and players of the construction of the contemporary landscape. *This absence of propaedeutics removes from the theme of scales the structural significance that characterized it and separated it from other themes: the relationship between plan and project, between zenithal and three-dimensional vision, between a-spatial decisions and physical choice: Between Urbanism and Architecture.*

## History and background

In the introduction chapter of this book, Spiridonidis notes that urban design constitutes one of the fundamental didactic areas in European architecture schools. In teaching hours, it ranks fourth, right after architectural design, building techniques, history. But Costa adds a much more interesting consideration: this incidence is greater in the bigger (and, I would add, older), public schools than in the independent and often private schools. And it is greater in the south and the east than in the north and west of the continent.

What is the reason for this tendency? I think it is found in the reflection of the reality which is external to the academic world. In a more dynamic and culturally aware socio-economic environment, urban design is absorbed by a reawakening of the classical view of Architecture as builder of the city. Even through distorted means, such as the mediatic success of architectures conceived as monuments, or architecture used as a tool of urban marketing.

The Urban Design Course of Portsmouth "...has sought to characterize aspects of its curriculum with debate concerning the relationship between Architecture and the City."

The School of Architecture of Naples poses as primary themes "...the town as fundamental of the study of architecture."

*In reality, urban design is Architecture's tradition.* Due to this tradition the purpose of Architecture is to build the city, allowing the fulfillment of *the project's supreme objective: allow the inhabitants to renew their capacity to recognize themselves in the urban forms.* Italo Calvino wrote: "happy the cities that continue to offer their form to the wishes of the citizens." In account of this tradition, history and background understanding are the fundamental tools of the project.

Through every projectual age, contemporarity has found a connection with the existing environment, giving it renewed meaning. The transformation deriving from the projectual interpretation, changing in part the characteristics of the physical context, guarantees permanence to its values. Among other things, this is the only correct way to intend conservation.

It has always been so, beyond scales or density figures. How that can be applied to the present day, throughout the contemporary urban territories -where the city has migrated- and also to the years of misuse of urban architecture, is now a key issue. I believe it is just when the architectural project reaffirms today its role of builder of the city, that these very objectives enter an easy, yet misguided path. The result, in opposition to what is claimed, is an architecture essentially parasite of the city. An architecture that demands the legitimating of its value within a context that it does not feel the need to understand, and to which it refuses to contribute.

## Towards a territorial architecture

In this context we can see urban design as the city's architecture, and its teaching as a fundamental phase of learning architecture tout-court.

As the city has turned into urban territory, *urban design is given its real, present task: proposing itself as a territorial architecture.* This role, that of building the territory as an architectural act, cannot be managed by architectural design. This role is inescapably bound to the projectual use of many potentials, whether they be morphological or environmental, country-tied or geographical.

The transformation of the city into urban territory leads us to growth processes where the project has renewed potentials of representation. Yet something is still missing for this to actually come about, and release into the contemporary city's economy the results that come from being comprehensible, recognizable, and able to represent the quality of its constructors.

I believe that what is missing, what is necessary, is *an idea of a city that can be applied jointly with urban materials and context. To plan an all-encompassing landscape, which quality may be shown through parts, sections, modest concentrations, and relationships that can design the continuity of the city.* An aware landscape that may constitute an asset for all to share.

This objective can pertain only to urban design, and our courses must prepare future operators for this task. *This will enable urban design to be conceived as the urban plan which the contemporary city so dramatically needs.* A plan that may stand apart from the traditional master plan as well as from landscape planning, which today is considered as a step forward, beyond Urbanism and Architecture alike.

Re-thinking the construction of the contemporary city from Architecture's point of view means analyzing the relationship between the autonomy of Architecture and reality of urban construction: a partial autonomy, whose boundaries are all the more faded in considering the structural complexity of present-day reality. Yet, this autonomy is originated by the highly specific and strongly recognizable connotation that our field of study has in Society. *The task of Architecture concerns the meanings of the urban fact affirmed through form, and this constitutes an absolute value.*

The spatial dimension of the contemporary city, and the temporal and managerial dimension of its construction have not only stressed the theme of permanence and flexibility -as some courses highlight- but they have also emphasized the ways of the relationship between abstraction and concreteness, between theory and realization.

In the urban territory, the geographic dimension is intertwined, with no degrees or hierarchy, with the buildings' dimension. We must therefore reflect on the meaning of large objects and minute repetitions, and do so through the use of the form. *Architecture's tools are not discarded as they operate through the broad scale, making the use of the form much more complex.*

I believe it is these themes and objectives that urban design, and the teaching thereof, must focus more keenly on, for it is here that urban design's cultural and civil utility can be found.

The programs of the School of Architecture of Barcelona talk about "...total architecture...", and "...architecture of the whole."

It's certainly necessary to be aware that the most interesting projectual attempts, in this field, are today originated from practice, from work opportunities, rather than from academic research.

According to Ankara's Gazi University Department of Architecture, "Urban projects, of which urban design is an integral part, have constituted the most intriguing design products in the world during the last two decades."

These endeavors in return stimulate the cultural value of the profession, and contribute to a renewal of the social recognizability of Architecture. The work proceeds through the awareness that the project and its realization are today much more the result of a combined effort, and that this has been obtained through processes that we can only call positive. They include the remarkable broadening of the ability to affect the configurations of one's own living space, an ability which comes from the cultural and productive mass affirmations achieved in the century we have just left behind.

Some courses self-present themselves through this book clearly affirming this knowledge and level of awareness. Their programs indicate the right way to follow: pay close attention to our clients and show them alternative scenarios. This is today more an ethical than a cultural need.

We may not escape the undertaking of making history again, believing we must and are able to change it, rather than merely harvest, or narrate history. Hence, we feel the need to make new proposals, to move forward, to offer forms that enable us to understand and to change. *Forms that carry on reality.*

