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Chapter 1

A Case for Urban Design

A web search for ‘urban design’ today will yield around 6 million pages, a figure that has nearly doubled since 2005 (Madanipour, 2006). This growth may be explained by a variety of reasons, but it primarily indicates the phenomenal growth of the subject in a short period of time. But what do we understand by the term ‘urban design’? Does it mean an extension of planning limited to physical planning or beautification of the urban environment? Or an extension of architecture which undertakes large-scale design? Or an extension of landscape architecture that focuses on open spaces outside buildings? Or does it even have any substantial core beyond these fields? How does it relate to the wider social, economic, political and cultural theories and practices? What do urban designers do and how important is their role in society? Are they the technical arm of vested interests, in charge of placing the icing on the cake of the property industry? Do they fuel the engines of globalization through city marketing? Or do they have a role in response to societal and environmental concerns?

After more than two centuries of industrialization, urbanization and globalization, cities have now become home to the majority of the world’s population. In the next four decades, the world’s population is predicted to grow by 2.3 billion, whereas cities will grow at a higher rate of 2.6 billion, ultimately housing two-thirds of the globe’s inhabitants by 2050 (UN, 2012). On our urban planet, the main problems that face humanity, and the solutions to these problems, are largely to be found in urban areas. Environmental degradation and climate change, globalization and uneven development, the growth and application of information, communication and transport technologies, industrialization and de-industrialization, the rise of the knowledge economy, entrepreneurial politics, changes in urban governance and the decline of public services, the emergence of a culture of consumption, and the increased rate of social stratification, inequality and difference – all these have inevitable consequences for the way urban space is understood, transformed and
used. The built environment becomes the material manifestation of these processes, an integral part of the way these phenomena have emerged, and a chief ingredient in the responses that can be developed to address them. As the socio-spatial process of shaping human settlements, urban design has a central role to play in the future of human society.

Urban design is the purposeful process of shaping the built environment, with all its associated problems and complexities; therefore it has an important role to play and a heavy burden of responsibility to help address these problems, rather than exacerbating them through narrow understanding and inadequate solutions. Urban design ideas and practices cannot solve these major structural problems, but they can be part of the solution, as they are at the core of the way the spatial manifestation of social process take shape, as the social and the spatial dimensions of cities are closely intertwined. By discussing the range of issues that urban design ideas and practices are involved in, this book will make a case for the significant role that urban design can and should play in the future of cities.

Drawing on my previous work on the subject (Madanipour, 1996, 2003b, 2007, 2011a), and using material from practice, research and scholarship, I will work towards developing a theoretical and analytical perspective with which to understand and transform urban design. I will follow two aims: to analyse the nature of urban design and to explore the ways in which it does and can respond to the challenges facing cities today.

**Analysing the nature of urban design**

My first aim of analysing the nature of urban design involves examining contemporary urban design ideas and theories, and developing a critical analysis of its paradigms and roles. What are the ideas that urban designers use in their work, and how should we evaluate these ideas? How do urban design theories relate to the wider social, political, cultural and economic theories about urban life? What are the paradigms and conventions within which these ideas are set? Are they open to inquiry and transformation, or have they turned into orthodoxies that represent rigid frameworks and unquestioning mindsets? Are they responsive to changing urban circumstances or are they variations on traditional themes, unable to bridge the gap between ideas and reality? What alternative theories can we find to overcome the shortcomings of current ideas? I will outline the main
themes of urban design and locate these themes in the changing political, economic and cultural contexts of cities.

A key argument I will make in this book is that urban design is an exercise in power – an attempting to order urban space and society according to a set of diverse reasons – and that this ordering needs to be always open to critical analysis and democratic scrutiny. Urban design is a socio-spatial process, which articulates a tight relationship between social relations and spatial configurations, without reducing this relationship to a deterministic link between social and spatial phenomena. To analyse this socio-spatial process, the conditions of its possibility need to be understood. Therefore critical political economy and cultural perspectives should be combined for a better understanding of urban processes and the contribution that design and development can make to urban change. The forms of ordering, which have been unfolding throughout history, with an emphasis on current urban conditions, will be analysed. In this way, urban design is brought face-to-face with its inherent power, as well as its limitations, opening up new pathways for inquiry and transformation in ideas and practices. Chapters 2 and 3 introduce this theme, which then runs throughout the book.

In Chapter 2 I explore what urban design means, arguing that it would be best understood as part of the production of space, in all its layers and complexities (Lefebvre, 1991). I investigate the nature and role of urban design by conducting six overlapping analyses: a textual analysis to explore what urban design means as a linguistic term; a technical analysis to identify the scope and methods of urban design practitioners; a relational analysis to examine how it relates to other disciplines; a functional analysis to find out the uses of its ideas and practices; a contextual analysis to discover the relationship between urban design and the urban context; and a diagnostic analysis to explore the range of problems that urban design faces. Together they provide a multilayered understanding of urban design, as an action in a context, with the potential to transform that context in different ways. They also show that urban design is itself part of a larger context: the production of space, which is integrated in the production and reproduction of social relations at different levels. They lay the foundation for understanding urban design as a socio-spatial process, which is then developed further in the following chapters.

Urban design is part of a search for a better organized city, a search for order that goes back for centuries (Foucault, 2002). In Chapter 3 I trace four historical episodes which can be identified as
having distinctive urban design characters, each emerging in response to contemporary urban conditions, as well as being critiques of previous ideas, and which accumulate to lay the foundations of current urbanism. The first episode started during the Renaissance in response to what was thought to be the chaotic and disordered medieval city. The second episode was the Victorian response to the perceived chaos of the industrial city. The third episode, the modernist planning and design of the twentieth century, now armed with new technologies and a rationalist mindset, offered more radical solutions to the problems of the capitalist industrial city. The fourth episode is the ongoing response to current global industrialization. The symbolism of contemporary technological paradigms, from mechanical clocks to industrial machines and computer networks, has inspired each episode’s design ideas, each stage developing more complex methods of managing and transforming the city.

Responding to the challenges of urban change

My second aim is to explore the economic, social, political, cultural and environmental challenges facing urban societies and the alternative ideas and responses that urban design does and can offer. Urban design is an integral part of the urban economy, its governance and culture. It addresses the ecological, social, economic, political and cultural dimensions of urban change; hence it is expected to strive towards an inclusive, regenerative, democratic and meaningful urbanism. The desirable features of a good city are thought to include spatial freedom, a vibrant economy, an inclusive society, a democratic politics, an ecological sustainability and a cultural meaningfulness. These features are introduced and critically evaluated to form the main themes of Chapters 4 to 9 and provide a substantive set of criteria around which urban design’s contribution can be assessed and improved.

Faced with socio-spatial complexity, specialization and fragmentation, urban design and planning set out to make connections between people, places and events in a search to generate integrated orders from a multiplicity of phenomena. In Chapter 4 (Connective Urbanism) I critically investigate this connective approach, focusing on the transport and communication technologies that facilitate linkages across space, as an infrastructure for the movement of people and products. I argue that these often necessary connections
may also lead to new forms of disconnection, or the emergence of rigid orders that have a disabling impact on some groups and activities. Urban space, however, is not merely an instrumental space of transition, but also a space of sociability. Rather than reshaping cities to accommodate the motor car or dispersing their spatial fragments through the application of digital technologies, urban design is part of the campaign for pedestrian-friendly urban environments, the taming of cars and support for the development of public transport. As the backbone of urban experience, the street finds a new emphasis in urban regeneration and strategic planning as a stage for the drama of social life and the glue that binds the socio-spatial pieces together.

The role of urban design in economic change is considerable. In Chapter 5 (Regenerative Urbanism) I outline the major forms of economic transformation of recent decades and the way urban design has been involved in this transformation. The process of de-industrialization and globalization has led to the regeneration of industrial cities and a call for the renaissance of cities as the core of global economic transformation, which have brought urban design to the centre of attention. With the rise of new sectors in science and technology, as well as in the arts and cultural activities, as the driving forces of a new knowledge-based economy urban design is employed to foster innovative change, especially in the development of new constellations that would cluster and enhance these activities. Meanwhile, the role of urban design in the management of property investment is significant. How far is urban design at the service of global economic forces and the interests of property investors? How far can it contribute to innovative practices that would revive a local economy? How far can the demands of economic regeneration take precedence over other considerations? The basic argument is that cities belong to their citizens and the primary loyalty of urban design should be to the revival of cities in the interests of those citizens.

Citizens, however, are a widely diverse group, and cities are places of social difference and a functional division of labour, which lead to social stratification and fragmentation, facilitated by technological innovation and institutional consolidation. Land use zoning was an example of how the functional division of labour can fragment urban space, while social stratification along income and ethnicity has had a similar fragmentary effect. Pressures for socio-spatial dispersal and fragmentation are accompanied by the economic forces of clustering and agglomeration. In Chapter 6 (Inclusive Urbanism) I discuss the need for a socially inclusive approach to
spatial transformation, arguing that the long-standing approach of subdividing the city into distinctive zones and neighbourhoods needs to be investigated and questioned. While mixed use is now widely accepted, urban design and planning continue to favour distinctive districts and neighbourhoods. Neighbourhoods may be a response to the alienating conditions of the city, and favoured by large development companies and communitarian politics, but they can also lead to sectarian enclaves and exacerbate social inequality and exclusion, gentrification and displacement. Urban design has a difficult role in the interplay of these forces; but its guiding principle should be inclusive and democratic coexistence.

The relationship between the built and natural environments is a central concern in urban design, a relationship that has been disrupted by the growth of urban areas. A private response has been the idea of living in the countryside, which has been influential in the development of suburbs, resulting in the ruralization of the urban and the urbanization of the rural space. An alternative has been the development of parks and boulevards to establish that linkage inside cities: green spaces have historically been used by urban design in reinstating the interrupted relationships between urban populations and the natural environment. Nevertheless, growing cities have contributed to the degradation of the natural environment by their ever larger footprints. The key argument of Chapter 7 (Ecological Urbanism) is that ecological thinking, in which all the elements of the material world are related to one another, is a necessary feature of an environmentally informed urban design. This invites urban designers to pay serious attention to measures such as compact urban form, green infrastructures and water-sensitive urban design.

In Chapter 8 (Democratic Urbanism) I address public space and urban governance. The theme of public space is a central theme of urban design. The delivery of a common good such as public space coincides and overlaps with the problematic of governance, which revolves around the formation of collective actors in the conditions of fragmentation. The difference of public space from, and its interplay with, the private spaces of homes has been a long-standing subject of discussion, going back in history for centuries. Public space, furthermore, is an essential ingredient of the infrastructure of social relationships, having a strong role in democratic politics, allowing social difference to be played out in the public domain and developing awareness, confidence and action. However, its problems and ambiguities also need to be discussed. Why it is produced and who benefits from it are among the essential questions to be
asked. Is it serving consumerism, elite interests and powerful players? The role of physical public space in making social connections is significant, but it needs to be supported with social and institutional measures. In this chapter I analyse the boundaries between the public and private spheres, both as spaces of separation and communication, and how the articulation of this boundary reflects the character of urbanism.

Urban design also plays a considerable role in the construction of public meaning in the city, which is the subject of Chapter 9 (Meaningful Urbanism). In modern cities, where the older systems of belief and hierarchies of power are no longer accepted, and where urban populations are increasingly atomized and diversified, urban designers face the task of creating places that make sense and are more meaningful than the sum of their parts. Commercial processes of signification are always at work offering instrumental meanings for the urban environment, which may respond to individualized frames of reference. The desire for freedom in large concentrations of people in cities may take the form of social and spatial distance, creating negative space and dispersed cities. In response, urban design emphasizes the making of ‘place’ as a pathway to the construction of publicly understandable meanings and values. How far can this claim be taken seriously? How can urban design create meaningful connections between different people through the use of objects, symbols and relationships? Is a common framework of meaning possible? The argument in this chapter is that urban design has an important role in its potential contribution towards the creation of these common infrastructures of meaning, though the widespread claims about place-making need to be critically assessed.

Urban design uses a series of spatial tools to transform urban space. Spatial features are both the locational distribution of activities and the four-dimensional socio-spatial processes; that is, how activities are organized in urban space and how spaces are made, used and experienced. As a future-oriented enterprise, urban design is and should be hopeful, open-ended and inclusive. As the activity of imagining and shaping the future of cities, the role of urban design is to link together the urban components that are subject to centrifugal forces of fragmentation and the alienating forces of complexity so as to improve the living conditions of urban populations. In this process, various fragments are brought together through the involvement of a large number of stakeholders who face a range of social and environmental challenges. A socio-spatial approach to urban design, it is argued, should address the needs of the weaker
and absent stakeholders in a holistic and yet contextually specific manner. These spatial design tools (i.e. the making of linkages and the creating of constellations) are analysed throughout the book, culminating in Chapter 10 (Socio-spatial Urbanism: Connections and Disconnections), which brings the main themes together and concludes the book.

A socio-spatial approach to urban design

Through my twin aims, therefore, I develop a critical analysis of urban issues and design ideas, challenges and responses. I introduce urban design to scholars and practitioners in the social and spatial fields (urban planners, including geographers and other related disciplines) and provide an analytical panorama of the subject, at the same time developing a critical engagement with the theory and practice of urban design. I explain and demystify the nature and dynamics of urban design for non-designers and locate it in the theory and practice of urban change. I explore the relationship between urban design and the related disciplines of planning and architecture, and relate urban design to social and political theory, environmental concerns, and the changing context of cities.

Cities are places where a large number of people come together, with a diverse range of experiences, needs and aspirations. Urban design, as the process of shaping cities, ought to respond to these needs and aspirations by being inclusive, both in social and spatial terms: it needs to envisage places that are accessible and built through inclusive processes; and it needs to think of the city and society as a whole, ensuring that the city is good in all its parts and not only in some prominent places. The key argument is that cities belong to their citizens and the primary loyalty of urban design should be to the life of cities in the interests of their citizens. A critical socio-spatial approach examines urban design in this light, so as to see whether this essential principle is, and can be, reflected in its ideas and practices, and whether it can address the diversity of perspectives and trajectories that constitute a city.

The approach adopted here is socio-spatial in the sense that it combines the material and the relational, the spatial and the social. It does not replace one for the other, but brings the two together in a single framework for understanding and action. Its emphasis is material in the sense that it addresses the material phenomena that make up the urban environment, from human bodies and all forms
of animate beings to the buildings, roads, open spaces and all the smaller objects that populate human settlements. The emphasis, however, is not limited to singularities, but on the linkages between them and the constellations formed out of their groupings. Its emphasis is, therefore, simultaneously relational in the sense that it analyses the relationship between these different material elements that make up the city. It is relational also in the sense that it addresses the social concepts and institutions that are embedded in human societies.

I argue for an open urbanism in the sense that it is future-oriented and unfolds with time, without searching for fixed arrangements and final destinations. It is non-essentialist in the sense that it does not hold a particular nature and essence for the city, towards which design and planning should be targeted. It is contextual in the sense of being aware of the social and historical contexts in which it takes place (Taylor, 1979; Bourdieu, 2000). It is critical in the sense of being aware of its limits and conditions of possibility (Kant, 1993); being aware of the order it creates and imposes (Foucault, 2002); being watchful of the transformative power that urban design and development processes can exert over people’s lives (Lefebvre, 1991); and in the democratic sense that this power needs always to be open to questioning. The socio-spatial approaches should be seen as democratic, open ended and evolving, rather than fixed and final, leaving spaces for people and places to evolve and change as and when new circumstances arise, exploring the best course of action at each juncture. They leave spaces for innovation and initiative, rather than closing down these avenues in the name of consensus and a conservative fear of experimentation. The social and ecological imperatives encourage us to be inclusive and integrative, rather than selective and exclusive. It is therefore also integrative in the sense that it combines political economic considerations with cultural reflections, aiming at a broad understanding of urban processes and proposals for change.
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