

Urban Design

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The End(s) of Urban Design

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Urban design has reached a dead end. Estranged both from substantial theoretical debate and from the living reality of the exponential and transformative growth of the world's cities, it finds itself pinioned between nostalgia and inevitabilism, increasingly unable to inventively confront the morphological, functional, and human needs of cities and citizens. While the task grows in urgency and complexity, the disciplinary mainstreaming of urban design has transformed it from a potentially broad and hopeful conceptual category into an increasingly rigid, restrictive, and boring set of orthodoxies.

In many ways, the enterprise was misbegotten from the get-go. The much marked conference at Harvard's Graduate School of Design (GSD) in April 1956 both is a useful origin point for the discipline and reveals the embedded conflicts and contradictions that have brought urban design to its current state of intellectual and imaginative inertia. For José Luis Sert—dean of the GSD, convener of the gathering, and president of CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) since 1947—the conference was surely part of a last gasp at recuperating the increasingly schismatic CIAM project, which finally collapsed at the CIAM 10 meeting in Dubrovnik the following year, largely because of the growing dissent of the younger Team 10 group, one of whose mainstays, Aldo van Eyck, had grouched that since CIAM 8 in 1951 the organization had been “virtually ‘governed’ from Harvard.”

Sert's project was both a strategy for including U.S. cities in the expat ambit of the Euro-Modernist urban fantasies of the Charter of Athens and a bid to recover the lost influence of architecture—erstwhile mother of the arts—from its dissolution in an urban field dominated by planners. In his introductory remarks, Sert observed, “Our American cities, after a period of rapid growth and suburban sprawl, have come of age and acquired responsibilities that the boom towns of the past never knew.” This trope of maturity, suggesting that American cities were reaching a point where their undisciplined native morphologies needed to be brought under the umbrella of some greater idea of order, has proved durable (as has the repeated appropriation of the Harvard imprimatur for the personal ideological projects of imported celebrities from Sert to Gropius to Koolhaas).

Sert identified two hostile forces at which urban design was to be directed. The first was the “superficial” City Beautiful approach, which, he argued, ignored the “roots of the problems and attempted only window-dressing effects,” presumably both by failing to observe the “functional city” strictures of the Athens Charter and through its nostalgic forms of expression. The second hemming discourse was that of city planning itself, which, Sert suggested, had evolved to a point where the “scientific phase has been more emphasized than the artistic one.” Urban design, by contrast, was to be “that part of city planning which deals with the physical part of the city, . . . the most creative phase of city planning and that in which imagination and artistic capacities can play a more important part.”

The delicacy of this criticism surely reflected the dilemma of Modernist urbanism, with its growing conflict between a proclaimed social mission and a dogmatic formalism less and less able to make the connection. Nonetheless, Sert's contention that academic planning had become preoccupied with economic, social, policy, and other “non-architectural” issues was certainly true, and fifty years of subsequent experience—marked by intramural indifference and open hostility—only reinforced the conceptual estrangement. The other pole, the assault on the Beaux Arts formalism of the City Beautiful movement—a weirdly anachronistic straw man in 1956—was to prove more contradictory, if unexpectedly prescient. Sert, after all, was arguing that it was necessary to create a discipline that would restore an artistic sense to urban architecture, but he clearly had issues of taste with the City Beautiful, whatever his affinities might have been for its scale of operation, its protofunctionalist zoning, and its foregrounded for-

malism. The charge of superficiality, however, was not simply an orthodox Modernist riposte to historicist architecture; it was meant to resonate with the social program embedded in CIAM's discourse—the sputtering effort to globalize European styles of rationality in its putative project of amelioration—and to concretely realize insights shared with planners who lacked the inclination and the means to produce architectural responses.

This constellation of arguments—that cities were important to civilization, that abandoning centers for sprawling suburbs was no answer, that design could reify, for better or worse, social arrangements, and that “correct” and deep architectural projects that commanded all the physical components of city building could solve their problems—has dominated the field of urbanism from the early nineteenth century to the present. And the critique of this discourse has also had a consistent focus: we must be wary of all totalizing schemes, especially those that propose universal formal solutions to complex social and environmental problems, that obliterate human, cultural, and natural differences, and that usurp individual rights through top-down, command application.

Many of those gathered at the conference clearly felt some disquiet not simply at the 1950s America of conspicuous consumption and sprawl but also at the America of urban renewal, then in the years of its raging glory. Strikingly, the nondesigners in attendance—including Charles Abrams, Jane Jacobs, Lewis Mumford, and Lloyd Rodwin—were those to voice the claims of the intricate social city, to decry the racist agendas of urban renewal, to argue for the importance of small-scale commerce, and to denounce the “tyranny” of large-scale, market-driven solutions. Indeed, the presence of this group—none of whom was a member of either the architect-dominated CIAM or Team 10—represented the seeds of doom for the constricted urbanism promoted by CIAM, the inescapably contaminating *other* that continues to haunt the narrow project of urban design.

This critique of the CIAM project was scarcely news. In his indispensable volume on CIAM, Eric Mumford quotes a letter from Lewis Mumford that sets out his reasons for declining Sert's invitation in 1940 to write an introduction to what was eventually published as the remarkably flakey *Can Our Cities Survive?* in 1942. As with the demurral of the nonarchitect conferees of 1956, Mumford's disagreement was with a reading of the city that seemed to exclude politics and culture, to reduce the urban function to the schema of housing,

recreation, transportation, and industry. “The organs of political and cultural association,” wrote Mumford about an especially conspicuous lacuna in Sert’s polemic, “are the *distinguishing* marks of the city: without them, there is only an urban mass.”

In 1961—a year after Harvard formally established its degree program in urban design—Jane Jacobs published *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, still the definitive critique of functionalist urbanism. As the 1960s progressed, this attack on the forms and assumptions that comprised the pedigree of virtually every aspect of contemporary urbanism came hot and heavy from various quarters. The civil rights movement exposed the racist agenda behind much urban renewal and highway construction. The women’s movement revealed the sexist assumptions underlying the organization of suburban and other forms of domestic space. The environmental and consumer movements showed the toxic inefficiencies of the automotive system and the selfish, world-dooming wastefulness of U.S. hyper-consumption. The counterculture protested the anemic expressive styles of Modernist architecture and the homogeneous spatial pattern of American conformity. Preservationism celebrated the value of historic urban textures, structures, and relationships. Advocacy planning and the close investigation of indigenous “self-help” solutions to building for the poor espoused user empowerment, democratic decision making, low-tech, and private expressive variety. And the assault on functionalist orthodoxy fomented by both rebellious visionaries and liberated historicists within the architectural profession made the CIAM writ seem both sinister and ridiculous.

All of this called into question the form the new urban design would take as well as what urban ideology it would defend—its response to the complex of social, political, and environmental crises everywhere exposed and exploding. New York City was to be the most visible battleground, and 1961 opened the decade with a clarifying statement of thesis and antithesis: the simultaneous publication of *Death and Life* and the passage of a revised bulk-zoning law that overturned the pioneering regulations of 1916—with their codification of street walls and setbacks—in favor of the paradigm of the slab in the plaza, the official enshrinement, at last, of the *Ville Radieuse*. This was controversial from the outset—such planning had already dominated public housing construction and urban renewal for years—and the atmosphere in the city was roiling. The tide

was turning against Robert Moses—Le Corbusier’s most idiomatic legate—who, thanks to Jacobs among others, was soon to suffer his Waterloo downtown with the defeat of a planned urban renewal massacre for Greenwich Village and of the outrageous Lower Manhattan Expressway, intended to wipe out what is now SoHo to speed traffic across the island.

This triumphant resistance—galvanized too by the contemporaneous loss of Penn Station—helped both to create an enduring culture of opposition and to revalue the fine grain of the city’s historic textures and mores, asserting the rights of citizens to remain in their homes and neighborhoods. Jacobs’s nuanced conflation of neighborhood form and human ecology was—and continues to be—precisely the right theoretical construct to animate the practice of urban design. Unfortunately, although her example continues to be tonic for neighborhood organization and defense, her legacy has been deracinated by its selective uptake by the far narrower, formally fixated concerns of preservationism, by an ongoing strain of behaviorist crime fighters (from Oscar Newman to the Giuliani “zero tolerance” crowd), and by the spreading mine field of institutionalized urban design, narrowly attached to its Disney version of urbanity and its fierce suppression of accident and mess, the wellsprings of public participation and the core of Jacobs’s argument about urban vitality. And Jacobs’s focus on a circumscribed set of U.S. environments and disdain for the idea of new towns unfortunately helped retard the investigation of how her unarguable ideas about the good city might inform other realizations.

Nineteen sixty-one was an urbanistic *annus mirabilis*, bringing publication not only of Jacobs’s text but also of Jean Gottman’s *Megalopolis* and Lewis Mumford’s *The City in History*. This astonishing trifecta—to which I would add Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* of 1963 and Ian McHarg’s *Design with Nature* of 1969—are the headwaters of a critique that urban design shares with virtually all thoughtful students of the city. Together they reinstated the conceptual centrality of ecology—first systematically introduced by the Chicago School decades earlier—in the production of urban models. But ecology is not a fixed construct and is comprehensible only in its specific inflections. On the one hand, an ecological understanding of urban dynamics can promote stewardship, community, and responsibility. On the other, it can support a fish-gotta-swim determinism that implies

