Urban Ethic

Design in the contemporary city

Eamonn Canniffe

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Contemporary urban design practice has many sources to draw on but these often lack a flexible approach to today's complex urban situations. This book addresses the current debate surrounding urban regeneration and the contradictions of contemporary urban life. The author proposes manageable strategies for the creation of sustainable cities, focusing on the spatial character of the city and looking beyond the style obsession of urban makeovers to the fundamental elements of city-making.

The book is divided into two parts: Part I presents a survey and analysis of the history of urban development; from the ancient city through to the industrial age and the post-industrial age. Part II proposes a methodology for the design of contemporary urban space through a series of case studies, concentrating on the relationship of four elements: patterns, narratives, monuments and spaces. The harmony between built forms (patterns and monuments) and speculative forms of interpretation and inhabitation (narratives and spaces) allow individual expression to exist within a general system, thus creating an ethical city.

Eamonn Canniffe teaches Design, Architectural History and Urban Design at the University of Sheffield School of Architecture. His research into the history and practice of urban design extends to the spatial development of the Italian piazza, the urban impact of twentieth century architecture and the implementation of contemporary British urban design projects.

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For my family

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This book has its origins in various experiences, educational, social and professional, in which my view of the city was formed. Foremost among these is the decline and regeneration of Manchester, my native city. Whatever reservations one might have about specific decisions taken and designs realized, the city's vibrancy and energy are evidence of a confidence in urban life, and its influence deserves acknowledging. However, my untutored perceptions of the city – the skyline of chimneys and shed roofs, the robustness of the public buildings – required forming if I was to make sense of them. The veil over my view of the city was lifted by Peter Carl at Cambridge University School of Architecture. His teaching bombarded the student with images and thoughts about the thorny relationship between architecture and urbanism. He also introduced me to Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's *Collage City,* the first book on urban design I ever read and the first in a long bibliography from Peter which I am still trying to finish, and for which I would like to thank him.

The presence in Cambridge of Dalibor Vesely, embodying the culture of the European city, placed my own urban environment in some form of context, where meaning could be excavated from beneath the apparently utilitarian surface. It appeared to me when I returned to Manchester after university that the British city suffered in comparison to its continental counterparts but that aesthetic differences were superficial. I therefore explored the lesson of Camillo Sitte in a bid to look at the processes which formed successful urban places. This research on the Italian square awaits a future book but also helped form the academic background to the present volume and should be acknowledged, most of all the experience of Rome.

It was during this period of increasing realization of the political nature of the piazza over the aesthetic value that an event occurred which refocused my studies closer to home. That event was the damage to Manchester city centre caused by an IRA bomb and the resulting transformation in the city's appearance. My dismay with some of the confused products of that experience, emulated in other urban regeneration projects throughout Britain, has led to the writing of this book.

Numerous colleagues and students at Manchester and Sheffield Universities have helped to form my thinking but I want to thank David Britch, Prue Chiles and Dominic Roberts for reading particular chapters and helping me clarify my often unarticulated ideas. Finally, I am very grateful to Peter Lathey for his patient help in compiling the images.

Introduction

In the past quarter century, the physical and social regeneration of British cities has ascended the political agenda to a status it has not held since the long aftermath of the Second World War. Issues of deindustrialization, unemployment, depopulation and the decay of physical infrastructure have become the grounds on which successive policies and programmes have been developed. The aim has been to reverse this decline and the sprawl which results and revive the status of cities as desirable places for homes, workplaces and entertainment. The role of urban design in this process has shifted also, from having a negative reputation (a product of unsuccessful comprehensive redevelopment projects) to being seen as the discipline through which social aspirations can be realized physically. Yet few examples of urban regeneration display any consistent quality in urban design. Most consist of discontinuous fragments of rival commercial developments cheek by jowl with the decayed remnants of previous visions for the city. In a broader perspective, the radical changes to cities introduced in the twentieth century are phenomena which still affect the urban psyche throughout the world. However, it is possible to assert that these changes are themselves only stages in a process which began with the industrialization of the city in the late eighteenth century. It will be tantalizing to observe in the new century what urban manifestations recent ideological transformations will have. Foremost among them are the collapse of Communism, the accelerated globalization of manufacturing and service industries, and the growing awareness of environmental consequences. It may become apparent that the commercial and technological determinism of capitalist societies are too powerful to be seriously modified by any notion of design.

This analysis may appear unduly pessimistic, but arises from the difficulty of discerning a generally positive picture emerging from a series of apparently beneficial individual developments. The vision of the contemporary city appears to me to be somewhat impaired, blinkered by short-term values of commerciality or fashion. However, as he observes in *The Ethical Function of Architecture*, one must acknowledge with Karsten Harries that, in the developed world at least, social advances have taken root:

> Although countless problems still await a technological solution, who could deny that technology has helped us lift at least some of the burdens of life? There is an obvious sense in which we are less limited by our body and by the accident of its location in space and time than were our predecessors. It would be irresponsible not to affirm the liberating potential of objectifying reason.
>
> But such affirmation may not mean the absolutism of pure reason. For its other side is the often-lamented rootlessness of modern dwelling. No doubt, science and technology have brought us greater freedom; both literally and figuratively, we have become more mobile. Such mobility has made us less willing to accept what happens to be the place assigned to us by nature or history, more ready to experiment. Beyond what is, the self-elevation of the spirit has opened up infinite realms of what might be.
>
> (Harries 1997: 66–68)

Despite recent evidence suggesting that social mobility in Britain has gone into reverse, it is in this area of potentiality that a positive focus can be nurtured. In a culture dominated demographically by city dwellers, the response to their needs is an important impetus for any design discipline. However, design is a Janus-like term, facing in two different directions but connected to the same motive power. Those ostensibly opposed directions are function and aesthetics, while their connection is the intellectual capacity to hold those ideas in balance. Initially it might be proposed that the balance between function and aesthetics shifts depending on the scale at which design is operating. So, the design of objects intimately related to the scale of the human body can easily be seen to be conditioned by forms of manufacture and the need to perform their function, aesthetics being less significant as a factor. However, a landscape, notwithstanding the ecological implications of the use of organic materials, might serve less precise functions and respond far more to the aesthetic desires of its creators and audience.

Between these two poles, what is design in relation to cities? It shares the characteristic of scale which one associates with landscape, be that designed or natural. But its functional necessities are equally significant, an accumulation of individual and collective functions which might be proposed to be subject to aesthetic control. It is the ethical accommodation of these different systems of particular order that establishes the need for a theory of urban design. As Diana Agrest writes:

> The city has always occupied a privileged place in the architectural dream – it is the place where all orders are possible. It is the mythical place where myriad different orders are projected, an unlimited repository. But the city is also the concrete place of the accumulation of these orders, which are superimposed upon, annihilate or support each other. The space of the myth is simultaneously the record of the myth, a presence and an absence, a reality and an abstraction. It is this struggle between the city's position as

> actual accumulation of conflicting orders – its orderlessness – and its desire for order that has characterized the development of theories about the city and architecture.
>
> (Agnest 1991: 109)

The issue of order, how that order is to be represented and what that order represents is not a universally accepted factor in urban design, split as it is into different disciplinary fields. There seem to me to be three aspects to the present situation, which manifest themselves in three different areas, the professional and academic, the technical, and what might be called the social and educational. My emphasis in this book will be on the first of those categories (although the other two also receive some consideration), where the current debate on the appropriate natures for architecture and the city has taken an increasingly polarized guise. Partly this is the result of an overemphatic polemic being allowed to obscure objective analysis: whereas most examples of successful urban complexes are historic and therefore traditional in character, it is clear to different theorists that a definitive choice should be made between either a return to traditional forms (perhaps best represented by the American phenomenon of New Urbanism), or an acceptance of globalizing processes (as advocated by adherents of what I shall refer to as Neo-Modernism).

In the second area, because Modernism had failed to produce an urbanism which was not overtly technocratic, a sceptical attitude arose with the cold realization that it created as many environmental problems as it solved, especially in relation to the wasteful use of resources. Material failure, coupled with hostile experiences in major developments, was to deflate the public perception of the professional groups involved, and fuel the nostalgia for the historic urban environment. Whatever its socially liberating intentions, Modernism's profligacy with resources was to become a particular burden following the Oil Crisis of the mid-1970s. Presently, issues such as ecological impact still only play a marginal role in most design processes. This is especially true in those societies which have followed monetarist economic principles since roughly the same date. Environmental and health damage caused by car dependency, for example, is ignored unless the impact is directly felt.

And, finally, there is the marginalization of design as a factor in the creation of urban environments because of short-term economic pressure and the failure of designs to communicate effectively with communities. Similar insistence on an aesthetic position characterized the Modernist city of the mid-twentieth century, initially in project form and latterly in the extensive environments put at the protagonists' disposal through post-war reconstruction. Despite the alienating results, in recent years the subjective appreciation of the city as a shared space has given way in the minds of the public, as well as the developers, into a desire to understand the success of an urban environment solely through its financial value. The consequent corrosive effect on the aesthetic language through which an urban environment might be judged is more than outstripped by the narrowing of the range of society for whom such environments are deemed welcoming.

History has taught us to be cautious of any moral proposal for an urban solution, but these issues present an ethical problem for the urban designer. With the perceived atomization of society into distinct groups with few common values other than the protection of personal property and privacy, where does that leave the public arena? Social exclusion is a phenomenon which is very evident in our supposedly transparent contemporary urban environments, and its effects are often exaggerated under the guise of urban regeneration. Marginal groups such as immigrants or the homeless are often the occupiers of city sites which local authorities and developers identify as failing to yield a suitable profit. In the privatization of the public realm these groups are removed in favour of a new population with high disposable income who can support retail developments or have the ability to invest in expensive residential space. Aesthetics plays its role in the creation of a lifestyle image which ensures the new occupiers that they have the best or at least the latest desirable consumer item. The strand of society which this scenario serves is that which is already well able to provide for itself, the minority of the moneyed, while those excluded include typical households on average incomes as well as those more usually identified as the underprivileged. Many of the flagship developments of British urban regeneration are restricted to commercial and residential developments with no provision of schools or social facilities where social bonds might be forged. In this situation, the public realm is that zone where these mutually exclusive groups rub up against each other, and is manifested either as a border, a zone of conflict or a no man's land.

Disappointed with the abundant fruits of urban regeneration, I should state that my intention in this book is to outline a proposition in favour of the evolution of cities, and explain a distrust of radical solutions. At present, technologically advanced societies have the wealth which allows them to achieve great changes in their urban environments, but it is a luxury of choice which has led to increasing discontinuities. To return to the first of the three aspects I raised earlier, the polarized debate around the issue of style has distracted attention from a deeper consideration of how urban life might benefit city dwellers. On the one hand, by far the most provocative vision of the city for the twenty-first century is that proposed by the *Charter for the New Urbanism* (Duany *et al.* 2000: 256–261), less for the vehemence with which it is pursued than for the selective amnesia which erases from consciousness the technology that supports well-upholstered American society. This is countered by a Neo-Modernism which has cast off the reformist guise of pioneering Modernism in favour of subservience to the demands of the market as presented in the *Harvard Design School Guide to Shopping* (Chung *et al.* 2001). Both options seem to me to be amoral: New Urbanism for its self-righteous restrictions on how urban populations might live, and Neo-Modernism for its reluctance to address the human cost of the creation of global cities. The redundancy of this stylistic and economically driven debate therefore necessitates the outlining of an 'urban ethic'.

Notwithstanding these reservations regarding the superficialities of style, the form of urban space is a representation of the ethics of a society, and it is

therefore necessary to explore how its mechanism operates if we are to create more positive models for the city. This book will propose a methodology for the analysis and design of urban environments intended to put in place an ethos of shared purpose explicitly opposed to individual rivalries, and to encourage the diversity which is recognized as a socially beneficial effect of urban life. Part I (Chapters 1–4) will present an analysis of the present urban situation tracing the strands of urban development in historic, industrial and post-industrial environments. Part II (Chapters 5–10) will discuss the elements of the proposed methodology and their synthesis in communicative and representational urban environments. While what is to follow is to a limited sense compartmentalized into specific categories, that separation is only a necessary part of the analytic process. Although the sequence of the early chapters (Part I) follows chronological order, Part II also refers to historic exemplars within the particular forms of patterns, narratives, monuments and spaces. This should be understood as a demonstration of my belief, not in the model of historical progress, but in a less determinate historical milieu in which we are situated. It is intended that this balance between analysis and creative manifestations will ensure an interpretative framework which is adept at dealing with both the concrete and the speculative.

Part I

Processes of Urban Development