Guest Editorial

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A reflection on ten years of post-apartheid urban design praxis

This issue and part of the next issue of *Urban Design International* reflects on 10 years of post-apartheid urban design in South Africa.

As with so many other things, the practice of urban design in South Africa has entered a radically new phase after the first democratic elections of 1994. Ideas about what urbanism should mean abound at the southern end of Africa. This happens against a backdrop of more than 40 years of segregatist policy in which anything that may have been considered a public domain amounted to little more than a series of policed, people-starved spaces. The papers contained in these issues suggest that there are many more questions than answers, yet, importantly; there has been opportunity for debate.

International readers will know that apartheid nurtured an oppressive and exclusive socio-political climate. Alongside a range of other draconian measures, urban space was rigorously controlled and opportunities for exercising the democratic ethos of urban design all but denied. Despite these severely limiting conditions, urban design entered the urban development debate in South Africa in the late 1960s via a group of brave pioneers who graduated from the Pennsylvania School. In the early 1970s, a Masters of Urban Design course was introduced at the University of Cape Town. This was followed by a course at the University of the Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, which was active during the 1980s and early 1990s, but has since been discontinued. The Cape Town School has remained active and influential.

During the incipient years, the usually liberal-minded urban design scholars aimed to somehow find patronage for the discipline. They spent much time idealising post-apartheid cities and tested some spatial ideas in semi-public settings such as university campuses and later in limited, foreign-funded pilot projects. Ideas about the creation of dignified urban spaces for use by the majority, mostly black South Africans, however,

remained untested. Limited opportunities for active engagement saw many focus on the empowering capacity of the urban plan. As a result of this, plan-driven and visual analysis methodologies such as David Crane's *capital web* and Kevin Lynch's *The Image of the City* became popular among urban designers.

Whatever the focus or interest, it remained a frustratingly difficult task to establish precedents that would further the cause of a more inclusive type of urban design. During apartheid, the most distinguishable face of urban design was found in large-scale commercial developments, in edge city or in inner city precincts that were anchored by corporate headquarters. For those aiming to build a career around the practice of urban design, its purpose increasingly meant the ability to manipulate the spatial arrangement of such commercial developments. Ultimately, the practice of urban design began to lean heavily towards being an elitist pursuit. As in other parts of the world, the large-scale architecture variant is still being sustained but is gradually being balanced by increased demand for finer grained, more inclusive forms of practice.

During recent interviews conducted as part of my own research, it was found that both private and public sector patronage for urban design has increased significantly and many of the latent ideas dating from the 1960s as well as more recent ideas now find space to be tested in a liberated, post-apartheid South Africa. Alien notions of *good practice*, so often employed by development agencies, are frowned upon in certain quarters and vigorously pursued in others. Alternative approaches are often considered and the purpose of urban design is gradually being redefined, both inside and outside the universities.

The papers presented in this issue aim to provide a window on our evolving world and the potential role of urban design in that world. Many of the views expressed will fit uneasily with those of Western scholars. A British referee for one of the papers noted, '*in no way was I prepared for the world presented here*'. This suggests that greater

international debate about the role of urban design outside America, Europe and Australia is urgently needed. This issue has a dual purpose; apart from providing a window on the South African discourse, it contributes to the elusive and challenging project of defining the purpose of urban design in the developing world.

Practicing, Johannesburg-based urban designer Rod Lloyd's paper illuminates the complex socio-political context in which South African urban designers practice and compares Western and African ideas of space making. The paper provides a useful introduction to the issue and orientates readers who are unfamiliar with the subtle nuances of an African identity.

Barbara Southworth describes how a dedicated group of Cape Town-based urban designers in local government have created a powerful precedent of post-apartheid urban design in underprivileged peripheral areas of the city as well as in the inner city. The work is influenced by the normative approach of David Dewar and the late Roelof Uytenbogaardt of the Cape Town School. Southworth was recently awarded the Ralph Erskine Prize for design that benefits the underprivileged communities through her leading role in the *City of Cape Town's dignified places programme*.

In his paper titled *A case of urbe in rus?* Alan Lipman, celebrated architect, academic and emeritus professor of the University of Wales, considers the delightful small beginnings of African urbanism in rural northern KwaZulu-Natal.

Practicing urban designer and Oxford Brookes University graduate Erik Schaug's paper provides a reflective and grounded account of his experience as an urban designer in the upgrade of townships and squatter settlements in the Western Cape Province. The paper highlights the stalemate that often still arises from political procrastination.

Finally Bakker, Le Roux and Young consider the challenge of finding appropriate ways to introduce urban design to undergraduates of architecture and landscape architecture at the University of Pretoria. Opportunity for engagement during the formulation of a vision for the regeneration of a historic but derelict inner city precinct allowed students the opportunity to work alongside practicing urban designers and local government and allowed tutors the opportunity to reflect on the value of the process.

There has been a keen response by South African urban designers and educators after having been given the opportunity to reflect on their experiences of the past decade. This has resulted in more submissions being received than can be accommodated in one issue. Three more contributions by Nicks, Nomico/Sanders and Low will be featured in the next issue of *Urban Design International*.

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