Editorial

Engaging the city plural: urban design and planning in the contemporary context

In a remarkable essay, 'Walking the City', Michel de Certeau (1984) asks why theorists and planners have found 'pleasure [in] seeing the whole of looking down on, totalizing' (p. 92) the city. What intrigues him was the desire, in Medieval and Renaissance times, to create an image of the city, which preceded the means to satisfy that vision. The Medieval city was represented from the point of view of the all-seeing celestial eye; the Renaissance city was envisaged through perspectival and prospectival inventions that represented the city conceptually in ways that no human had actually experienced. These images 'created gods' (p. 92), imaginary totalizations, which rejected the myriad and at times, uncontrollable practices of everyday life in favour of some text/image providing a fiction of a scopic boundedness.

Things, he goes on to argue, have not radically changed. The technical procedures of the modern world attempt to create an 'all-seeing power'. It is that imagined power that allows the urbanist, the city planner, and the urban designer to remain aloof and to delude themselves into believing that their techniques allow for the creation of a controllable conceptual unity defined by what de Certeau calls an 'urbanistic ratio' (p. 94). He concludes, however, by arguing that: 'Linking the city to the concept never makes them identical, but always plays on their progressive symbiosis. To plan a city is both to think the very plurality of the real and to make that way of thinking the plural effective; is to know how to articulate it and be able to do it' (p. 94).

Engaging plurality has not been the norm in planning and urban design. From Serlio to the New Urbanists, all-encompassing, master plans, design manifestos, typologies, design guidelines,

regulations and visual images of a wholly realized place have been the norm rather than the exception. Rather than working with the messy, diverse, even conflicting energy of everyday reality, planners and designers have chosen to fashion an ordered and unifiable whole out of what is often a disordered, spontaneous even intractable multiplicity of places, practices and people. From their view on high, planners and designers – with some important exceptions, e.g. community-based designers and planners – have relied on their technical and professional rationality and training, have talked at rather than listened to those for whom their designs and plans are meant. Planning and design professionals from the developed world are not noted for the training or learning they seek from the builders and residents of squatter communities of people in the developing world about their spatial practices and actual physical designs. Nor are American and European designers and planners noted, again with exceptions, for listening to people in the communities and neighbourhoods of our cities about what their designs and plans should be and how to best achieve them.

The papers that follow in this double issue are all calls to move away from conventional practice. In different ways, they are, directly or indirectly, attempts to think the plural effective or get us to think about the plurality of the real.

John Forester argues that urban designers and planners must learn to listen not only for ethical reasons but to be effective. They must combine pragmatism and vision and to do so need to develop the capacity to use political judgement, which incorporates an appreciation of the views of other people in the decision-making process. This is more than a one-way process. It involves speaking but more critically demands careful listening, and accepting the moral and messy even conflictual entanglements of the complex and uncertain world with which urban designers

should be engaged. Such interdependence also means accepting the participation of others. Participation implies learning to negotiate rather than dictate, understanding the limits and biases of one's own knowledge and finally, allowing oneself to manage deliberative processes that combine both adversarial and collaborative moments. These processes should allow distrustful, angry and fearful parties to speak and together with the planner create out of diversity and dissension real options that the various parties were an active part in crafting.

Planners, Michael Kwartler suggests, need to get over the notion that city building is a bounded and knowable process. If they do not, instruments of public policy will canonize a singular sense of urban order to the exclusion of other possible ordering systems. As-of-right prescriptive land-use regulations make it difficult to deal with what he calls 'the good you can't think of', i.e. the projects that one cannot anticipate today that may make great sense tomorrow. Using places like SoHo in New York City, Kwartler illustrates how traditional zoning approaches made it difficult to allow for the transformation of a nineteenth century industrial neighbourhood into a thoroughly mixed-use district, which is a more appropriate way of dealing with the contemporary organization of work. In place of conventional forms of zoning and land-use regulation, Kwartler proposes a method of just-in-time management, which incorporates goals and choices rather than minimum standards and typological solutions. Using techniques from growth management, Kwartler sets out a method for urban land-use management that accepts that the design of cities involves contradictions, conflicts and mutual exclusivities. These cannot be resolved in advance but are best decided through a process which is neither prescriptive nor absolute but which is existential, and accepts that reason is not preordained formal order but is choice.

Nabeel Hamdi and Reinhardt Goethert call for a rethinking of orthodox urban design and development planning based on their experiences in the developing world. They base their argument on the many failed, or more commonly the many unrealized, plans for development projects in that world. These plans fail or go unrealized because they are not rooted in local issues nor based on what planners learn from the experi-

ences and practices of people living in the squatter settlements and other vibrant neighbourhoods of the cities in the developing world. Rather, orthodox planning is dominated by projects where other planners (from international aid agencies for example) are the clients, and the discussion about development planning takes place almost exclusively among a professional élite – engineers, economists, planners and architects. The paucity of local involvement results in a lack of political will to see the plan through to realization. Thus, Hamdi and Goethert argue it is time that the growing disenchantment with orthodox planning results in new paradigms for planning, new relationships amongst the actors and new notions of professional responsibility. Ironically, the authors do point out that while the literature has begun to offer these new approaches in theory, field professionals still remain loyal to orthodox practices.

My own paper about the New Urbanism suggests something a bit different. While in practice there are a growing number of approaches to the problems of urbanism in America, the discussion is dominated by a single one-dimensional approach to them. The New Urbanism claims to have created the basis for an urban design that will overcome the alienating, and environmentally unsound nature of contemporary urbanism. Their claims resemble the 'emperor's new clothes' – more promise than substance. Looking critically at the New Urbanism reveals that, few if any of their designs meet the criteria they set for a New Urbanism. Even if the New Urbanists were to succeed in building their designs, it is not clear how they would overcome the very sprawl that they contend must be eradicated. Nor is it clear that in building small place-based communities, the political and social conflicts will be overcome as the New Urbanists contend. It is presumptuous to claim, with little evidence, that neighbourhood is intrinsic to community and through building small-placed communities we can solve our most pressing urban problems. Community may not be the unalloyed good the New Urbanists claim. NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) and gates are also a kind of community and many of our most pressing urban problems demand a regional not a community-based solution. What is most disturbing though about the New Urbanism is that, like the modernists they reject, the New Urbanists replace earlier

singular approaches to solving urban problems with a singular and one-dimensional approach of their own.

What designers and planners should learn from their past practices, all the papers imply, is that designers and planners do not have nor hold the key to an exclusive knowledge with which to solve the problems of our cities. Designers and planners should reject the hubris and certainty of a professional élite, and the superiority of their own technical rationality. Instead, they might find it more rewarding to approach the problems of our cities with a modesty and an openness to a range of ideas and approaches to urban problems, which will provide the basis for flexible, creative and appropriate responses to an ever-changing urban condition.

In a summary piece, Hayward draws together an account of an international workshop held in Lima, Peru at the beginning of 1998. The focus of the workshop was the Gamarra district of the municipality of La Victoria. Gamarra is the centre of the multi-million dollar textile manufacture and retailing sector of Lima. In addressing the urban design and management issues of the place, the workshop teams were also confronted with challenges to their own comparatively ethno-centric views of urban life and enterprise.

Andrea Quilici's paper explores an attempt at 'natural' tourism development on the island of

Porto Santo, Portugal. The need to tackle issues of sustainable development is seen to be very much part of the problems with which any urban designer has to grapple. Quilici concludes that both the natural and the architectural history of a town may serve as a resource for education and practice in contemporary urban design.

This double issue concludes with a paper by Hoshier Nooraddin, who identifies the urban design issues of making public and private places along streets in the Islamic cities of the Middle East. He focuses on a case study of two areas of Cairo, Egypt. In reviewing the relevance of Western theorists, he notes that the study of urban design in non-Western contexts requires some reconsideration of their work. Nooraddin concludes that the future challenge to researchers of urban design is to extend the study of the phenomenon of in-between space in urban and rural environments to different cultural settings.

References

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