Book Review

Urban design reclaimed: Tools, techniques, and strategies for planners

Emily Talen

American Planning Association, Planners Press, Chicago, 2009, paperback, 1pp., \$74.95, ISBN: 978-1-932364-63-7

URBAN DESIGN International (2010) 15, 239. doi:10.1057/udi.2010.12

The field of urban planning in North America was dominated by professionals trained in architecture and engineering until their spatial models, and by extension the whole social project that underlay them, came into serious question not least within the profession itself, at the end of the 1960s. Graduate planning schools turned from plan making to the planning process, from physical outcomes to management. Planning schools began to draw most of their students from the social sciences, with a corresponding drop in enrolment by civil engineers, architects and landscape architects, among other design professionals. The prevailing system of professional training at the Master's level in North America means that the students, who for the most part do not have design background, also do not receive intensive design education at the Master's level. But, as every practising planner knows, the physical environment remains central to many a planner's work. When planners can't handle the design problem, consulting design professionals are called in, more often trained in architecture than in urban planning. The specialisation and outsourcing of design work, so common at the municipal level, has definite outcomes that do not please everyone.

Emily Talen's book of 10 quick studies is a practical response to a real need for planners to regain a place in urban design, but also a realistic response to a training crunch. The tools are intended to engage planners to work with the designers on the main characteristics of the physical interventions, thus leaving the elaboration of the design to a design team. But important physical parameters presumably get addressed by ensuring that part of the design process is coupled with the dedicated designers.

The methods proposed are an avowed continuity of the seminal approaches of Ian McHarg (*Design with Nature*), who proposed a layering of spatial data for the purposes of deriving higher order understanding of the environment. Geographical Information System (GIS), allows us to do just that.

The software link between GIS, the 3D modelling software Google SketchUp, and vector- and raster-based graphics software provides the support for such a multivariate approach to problems of urban design. Before this manageable suite of tools, non-planning specialists had to handle the analytical parts and the graphic presentations at the end, squeezing the role of the planner in the whole.

The analysis proposed in the book addresses patterns of movement and activity at the scale of an urban district – in this case Portage Park, Chicago, with about 65 000 population. Disparities in level-of-service are identified, networks developed and centres reinvigorated or founded. What is understood here, although not explicitly so, is the value of linkage, of defining purposes, and levels of importance in major pathways and in general, promoting sociability in the urban fabric. Whether or not these are the interventions to be advocated, the analytical tools could lend themselves to a variety of questions. As Professor Talen points out, urban design as one-of-a-piece physical intervention at one end and broad-brush zoning at the other, has left the better part of the environment largely ignored in urban design terms. The planner's concern is typically with this larger community.

To a substantial extent, the reason for using these tools is their usefulness in visual communication. As planners typically have multiple-member audiences, they need this kind of suite of instruments to communicate on basic design issues. But there remain important gaps in our knowledge of local spatial behaviour and needs, upon which such urban design depends. The boundaries and sheds that are so clearly visualisable in high definition graphics do need additional research to be meaningful.

John Zacharias
Department of Geography, Planning and
Environment, Montreal, Quebec, Canada