Editorial

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The key contributions of urban designers, architects and planners to creating, adapting and regulating the spaces in which everyday life takes place testifies to the capacity of these professions to influence the quality of the contemporary urban environment, both positively and otherwise. It is therefore unsurprising that the importance of understanding the effects that their interventions have on shaping the social and economic life of cities is widely acknowledged by practitioners – although the practical means through which such understanding is to be achieved are often rather less clear. What is perhaps less expected is the increasing prominence of the design- and planning-based built environment disciplines in defining a distinctive, multidisciplinary domain focused on the research and analysis of the built environment, in which both academic researchers and practitioners are engaged in a productive dialogue.

The irony of this development is that it has occurred over a period dating from the 1970s when some traditional academic subjects – most notably human geography and sociology – became increasingly nervous about addressing the relationship between the materiality of the built environment and social behaviour for fear of appearing to endorse a crude environmental determinism. For this reason the attention of many scholars in these fields turned to exploring how the built environment is produced and represented in culture rather than risk assigning any generative agency to the built environment as a distinctive variable in its own right. Their caution is justified so long as it is still possible to find advocates for a design intervention or regulatory regime developed in isolation from a considered analysis of the broader urban and social conditions in which it will be implemented. However, such myopia seems to be increasingly against the grain in contemporary built environment studies. At the recent *International Seminar on Urban Form* in Montréal, for example, an event one could be forgiven for thinking (admittedly somewhat superficially) might be dominated by academic geographers, the large number of delegates with a background in architecture, urban design or planning was clearly evident, particularly those speaking to the conference theme of the post-carbon city.¹

At a time when much academic work has been distracted from consideration of the materiality of the built environment, not least by Lefebvre's powerful theorization of the production and representation of space in terms of abstract socio-economic forces – it is worth mentioning a recent study that considers Lefebvre's early empirical work examining what he terms as the 'concrete environment' in which everyday life takes place (Stanek, 2011). A key proposition of this study is that this long-standing interest in the practical and material issues of environment, design and planning conceived as distinctive *social* phenomena, informed much of Lefebvre's later theoretical work.

Practitioners might feel uncomfortable referring to built environment research in terms of a nascent 'sociological architecture' – as one scholar and architect has recently done (de Holanda, 2010) – however, it is surely not controversial to note how rapid global urbanization, the sustainability agenda and an increasing concern with the conservation and adaptation of historic cities, among numerous other issues, are creating dynamic areas of study that naturally cluster around those with expertise in the research and design of the built environment. Consistent with this tendency, the four articles in this edition of *URBAN DESIGN International* are informed by, and actively seek to inform, live issues in the design, development and improvement of various aspects of the contemporary built environment in which people live work and travel. Each article provides an example of how a different mode of research can contribute to the knowledge base of urban design.

The article by John Zacharias and his co-authors examines the redevelopment of Tokyo Station in the context of the distinctive role played by transit-orientated development in Japanese urban life. The principal focus of the article is on the redevelopment of the station as a multifunctional centre of commercial activity – 'Tokyo Station City' – contributing to the wider improvement of the urban realm. The authors explain how this major infrastructural project provided both an attractive investment opportunity and distinctive visitor experience. They also note how the multilevel concentration of

land uses included areas in the vicinity of the station. This helped to prevent the railway from becoming an urban barrier, as in so many European Cities, that facilitates against the successful regeneration of the inner city area 'on the wrong side of the tracks'. This article represents an important contribution to the literature on the adaptation of railway stations as contemporary urban places; not simply hubs for accessing and receiving intra-urban transit but urban destinations in their own right.

High-rise buildings have an ambivalent status as iconic symbols of both dynamic contemporary urbanism and social deprivation. How such buildings are represented has much to do with the diverse historical experience of high-rise developments in different parts of the world. Whereas the European experience has been, at best mixed, particularly with regard to social housing, in China high-rise residential blocks are regarded as aspirational and are increasingly the norm. Even so, regardless of where they are located or whether they are intended primarily for residential or commercial use, high-rise buildings unquestionably raise difficult problems for traditional ideas of urban 'placemaking', which have a strong (and quite understandable) normative tendency to idealize the human scale of the historic city. The article by Kheir Al-Kodmany addresses this issue from a Lynchian-based perspective of urban imageability. It assembles a wide range of literature and illustrative examples in order to identify those factors with the most potential to enhance the placemaking potential of what the author refers to as 'tall buildings'. This article draws attention to a research topic of the utmost importance given the dominance of high-rise development in much of the most rapidly urbanizing areas of the world.

The private ownership of 'public' spaces in cities is a highly politicized area of debate but one, not unlike the similarly controversial phenomenon of gated communities, that reflects the reality on the ground in many cities – the effects of which are neither uniform in character nor well understood in terms of their overall effect on the urban fabric. The article by Schmidt and Nemeth presents the results of extensive research into the sociability potential of a sample of over one hundred privately owned public spaces in New York. These spaces were created both before and after the introduction of regulatory reform in the 1970s that required commercial developers to

construct good quality public spaces or *urban plazas* on privately owned land in return for permission to develop the maximum amount of commercial floorspace. The authors compare a wide range of factors pertaining to ease of public accessibility and sociability across the sample. Their analysis reveals little difference in the indices between spaces constructed before and after the regulatory reforms were introduced, highlighting both the limitations of the regulatory regime in creating successful privately owned public spaces and raising important questions for its future role.

Also in a North American context, the article by Stangl and Guinn notes that while the sociability agenda of New Urbanism means that it has become a commonplace to acknowledge the importance of connectivity in the design of urban neighbourhoods, it is far from clear exactly how 'connectivity' should be measured and assessed. Their article offers a critique of the LEED-ND method endorsed by the Congress for the New Urbanism and currently in widespread use by planning authorities in America. The authors present a 'typology of obstruction' that shows how the LEED-ND criteria for connectivity, based on density of road intersections, can be adequately satisfied by neighbourhood designs that restrict pedestrian movement while enhanced accessibility for vehicles is maintained. As a corrective they offer an alternative measure of 'route directness' in which multidirectional pedestrian accessibility through a neighbourhood is prioritized in the model.

Together, these four articles provide a varied selection of the research perspectives which built environment specialists, able to bring to their diverse subject matter across different geographical locations and cultural contexts. They demonstrate a concern to critically engage with established theoretical traditions in urbanism and adapt them to address contemporary issues in urban design, a concern for empirical rigour in evaluating the success of established design schemes and methodological innovation in the use of modelling techniques to interrogate the performance of urban structures and scrutinize existing regulatory practices. The editors of *URBAN DESIGN International* encourage submission of substantive research articles in these modes so that this publication can continue to play an active role in sustaining the exchange of expertise, not only between the different built environment disciplines but crucially between academic researchers and professional

practitioners. This ongoing dialogue is essential in helping to consolidate the 'built environment' as a distinctive and dynamic nexus for the creation and application of useful design knowledge.

Note

- 1 *The Eighteenth International Seminar on Urban Form – Urban Morphology and the Post-Carbon City*, Montréal, Canada, 26–29 August 2011.

References

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