Editorial

URBAN DESIGN International (2012) 17, 1–3. doi:10.1057/udi.2011.23

Among the privileges of editing *URBAN DESIGN International* (*UDI*) is the opportunity to engage with the wide number of subject-area and professional specialisms within urban design that have contributed to making this such a highly dynamic discipline. The emergence of urban design at the centre of a broad interdisciplinary nexus focusing on the ever-more pressing problems that face the contemporary built environment gives the lie to the erroneous (but sadly, not entirely redundant) notion that, as an academic and professional domain, urban design is properly regarded as a derivative of architecture. It is certainly true that embracing a diversity of perspectives raises some difficult questions about the kind of knowledge, skills and aptitudes that might be regarded as constituting the ‘core’ of urban design. The danger of being a broad church, of course, is that the identity of the field suffers through a ‘fuzzy’ definition of its essential body of knowledge. Nevertheless, the prominence of interdisciplinary work in urban design journals suggests that the centre ground is constantly being negotiated in what is still an emerging field of enquiry. It is my belief that this should be regarded as a testimony to its continuing vitality rather than as a cause for concern.

Judging from the range of submissions to *UDI*, it is certainly no longer the case (if, indeed, it ever were) that urban design is regarded primarily as a studio-based discipline where design objects are created in glorious isolation from the ‘messiness’ of the reality they seek to influence. The task of understanding cities is too daunting for any single group of specialists to reasonably lay exclusive claim to, whether design professionals, planners, social scientists or otherwise. By the same token, without studio-based work there can be no design as such. What then is the nature of the relationship between urban design and the built environment disciplines, between the studio and the city?

A recent meeting between colleagues who are involved in teaching a variety of urban design-related programmes – most involving studio-based projects, some not – elicited a variety of interesting views on this question. Some common

themes emerged from the discussion. Among the more predictable was an emphasis on ‘sustainability’ in its numerous guises and the normative aspiration that urban design professionals should play a progressive role in society. Perhaps more surprising was the shared emphasis on the importance of students taking a critical approach to the design process itself, and on the role of ‘experimentation’ in design work. These themes emphasise the importance placed on students reflecting on the nature of the intuitive knowledge that they bring to their studio-work and on the kinds of contextual knowledge they require in order to arrive at durable solutions. ‘Experimentation’ also implies a concern with analytical knowledge and problems of methodology, concerns not always associated with urban designers or architects.

Another theme that arose also serves as an explanation as to why urban design should provide a natural locus for interdisciplinary engagement on built environment topics. It identifies urban design as a discipline that necessarily operates across spatial scales from the highly local and traditionally ‘architectural’ to the urban and regional scales that have traditionally been the domain of planners and traffic engineers. This is not simply a case of positioning urban design between architecture and the planning disciplines, much as one might place a filling in a sandwich. Rather, the suggestion is that working across scales as urban designers must, comprises a distinctive way of thinking and practising design that is less evident in architecture or planning as these are conventionally conceived. It follows that appropriate theories and methods of practice need to be developed to support this multi-scalar perspective.

The challenge of understanding what one might refer to as the ‘interfaces’ between different scales of complexity in the built environment is a key factor defining the nature of urban designers’ interdisciplinary engagement. As a discipline, urban design supports a fertile knowledge domain where architects confront the kinds of strategic issues faced by planners. On the other hand

planners and those from the non-design disciplines learn to see themselves as engaged (whether directly or indirectly) in a design process with real impact on the world around them. It seems almost impossible to conceive of participating in such a process without a critical awareness of the appropriate architectural, geographical, socio-economic, cultural and political contexts. Perhaps this is obvious enough, but creating such knowledge requires the development of theory, methods and skills that are capable of sustaining a dialogue between a design brief and the multiple contexts in which it operates, in order that a given intervention has the best possible chance of improving the quality of urban life.

The five different articles presented in this issue exemplify the diversity of perspectives and methodologies available to academics and practitioners in the field of urban design. They include methodologies drawn from the fields of urban morphology, complexity science, the social sciences, environmental design and design pedagogy. Although the articles mainly address subject matter at the neighbourhood or domestic scales, they are equally concerned to acknowledge the wider urban context in which these are situated and to discuss their findings in these terms. Several contributors emphasise the importance of understanding and adapting the legacy of existing built environments; others are more concerned with possibilities for future development. All lend credence to the claim that built environment research has a valuable contribution to make to improving the quality of urban design.

Birkhamshaw and Whitehand apply Conzenian methods of urban morphology to the English town of Stratford-upon-Avon. This enables them to identify distinctive 'character areas' in the urban tissue that are associated with particular phases of urban growth. The authors compare these morphological descriptions with those used by both urban planners and local residents, drawing on a range of documentary sources and ethnographic research. The empirical investigation leads the authors to conclude that further integration of morphological research into the planning process could help planners to identify and therefore better conserve essential character areas in cities. It is also worth noting that the kind of precise description and representation of built forms provided by Conzenian techniques means that urban designers may be best placed to see the value in such methodological 'integration'.

The article by Wai Man Fung examines the phenomenon of historically accreted infill in Hong Kong's urban grid from the perspective of complexity science. Working in the tradition of the urbanist and mathematician Nikos Salingaros, Fung proposes that these 'untidy' elements in the urban fabric are crucial to the 'scale coherence' of the urban whole, providing the smaller-scale structuring essential for its human intelligibility.¹ By analysing the existing urban form of Hong Kong in terms of its fractal or scalar properties, Fung aims to provide a quantitative basis with which to critique planned interventions in the city's urban fabric. Beyond its immediate relevance to Hong Kong, this article makes a case for the role of fractal geometry and complexity science in urban design as a way of thinking about and measuring the interrelationship of urban scales.

Shelly Duff's article addresses the question of adaptability in neighbourhood design through an examination of housing typologies in Sacramento, California. Duff argues that the inherited housing stock, currently dominated by 'ranch-style' and bungalow dwellings, is becoming an increasing problem in light of changing demographic profiles and socio-economic conditions – not to mention the inherent environmental challenges of low-density residential developments. Duff argues that the best way forward is to approach the existing housing stock as 'part of the solution' rather than as the problem. She advocates densification of the existing housing stock through a programme of Accessory Dwelling Units and proposes a range of design adaptations that could be implemented. Duff's article illustrates how relatively small interventions at the domestic scale have the potential to make a substantive accumulative impact.

The role of housing design in creating sustainable communities is also explored by Miller and Buys. Their study of 'Positive Energy Homes' in Queensland, Australia, evaluates the actual and potential contribution of eco-friendly designs to the environmental sustainability of residential developments. Their research focuses in detail on the energy performance of a single dwelling and then goes on to draw out the wider implications for the deployment of Positive Energy Homes in sustainable urban planning strategies. Given the huge environmental cost of much residential development, this is clearly an important and topical area of research.

Juan Torres' article turns the spotlight on design practices themselves and asks how design education might go further in fostering a reflective awareness of the multi-dimensional problems with which urban designers are confronted professionally. His research is concerned with the value of participatory projects in which the designer learns to view the nature of the design problem differently through a process of collaboration with non-specialists – even when these non-specialists are children. Torres' research shows how participatory approaches to design briefs can not only assist the design student to think creatively and on-the-fly, but also help them to arrive at a better and more critical understanding of design itself. This approach to professional training – in the spirit of Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner*² – suggests how the skill set of the urban designer should aspire to be transferrable across any number of different problem areas by allying design creativity to the ability to engage seriously with different sorts of people in contrasting social and cultural contexts.

Urban design, both as an academic discipline and professional practice, has a special responsibility to find ways of describing, analysing and understanding the highly complex phenomenon of the built environment. Whether approached 'top-down' from the urban region or 'bottom-up' from an individual dwelling, the nature of such a multi-scaled system is that what happens at one scale

affects what happens on other scales – rarely in a manner that can be easily predicted. Such situations of uncertainty call for a high degree of expertise in professional judgement. The new generation of urban designers needs to be sufficiently confident to engage critically with research knowledge contributed from a wide range of built-environment disciplines while remaining sensitive to the specificity of the myriad cultural, political, socio-economic and environmental conditions in which their design skills are urgently required.

Notes

- 1 The term 'scaling coherence' is used by Salingaros and West (1999).
- 2 Schön (1983).

References

- Salingaros, N.A. and West, B.J. (1999) A universal rule for the distribution of sizes. *Environment and Planning B: Planning and Design* 26(6): 909–923.
- Schön, D.A. (1983) *The Reflective Practitioner*. New York: Basic Books.

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