Editorial

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Urban design and planning professionals have good reason to be sceptical of ‘one-size fits all’ solutions that promise to meet all the challenges of a rapidly urbanizing world. Even with an apparently self-evident good such as the drive for ‘sustainable cities’, it is not always clear exactly what this means in practice – or rather it has become apparent that it can mean different things, not all of which are necessarily compatible. For example, can a development that is sustainable in terms of its consumption of natural resources also deliver economic sustainability, or be commercially viable while maintaining social diversity? There are no obvious answers to such questions. The indeterminacy of ‘sustainability’ as a concept inevitably gives rise to involved theoretical discussion regarding the relative merits of different approaches to the subject. What is beyond doubt, however, is that it is the condition of the contemporary city itself that has led to such questions being asked, and it is the city that provides the crucible in which they must ultimately be resolved. For help, we can usefully return to Jane Jacobs’ famous meditation on ‘the kind of problem a city is’, first advanced in 1961. She posed this question in terms defined by the cyberneticist Warren Weaver, describing the city as an example of ‘organized complexity’; an interconnected system in which many apparently disconnected elements combine to create the order of the whole.¹ One implication of this insight is that it is the quotidian aspects of urban life, the ones taking place at the scale of architectural design experienced by a city’s inhabitants, that are the key to realizing successful urban environments.

Urban design professionals clearly have an important contribution to make to all aspects of the planning and development process, not least to encourage ‘joined-up thinking’ about the kinds of environment that can support a diversity of human activity, in recognition of the fact that a city is more than a sum of its parts. Three of the four articles presented in this issue examine a range of professional contexts in which *a priori* principles of design, such as those that may be codified in design guidance, are examined and negotiated. The fourth article takes a recurrent

feature of such guidance – the intention to create more ‘walkable’ environments – and presents a methodology intended help assess the value of these schemes. Together these articles propose that achieving good design guidance for sustainability in urban environments must be a multi-faceted process that entails critical evaluation of the geographical, institutional, commercial and technological contexts in which the guidance is developed and applied. Only through ongoing reflection and research into what works on the ground and why, can design guidance hope be effective in addressing the challenge of creating truly sustainable, liveable cities.

The article by Alias, Ali and Wai examines the apparent popularity of new urbanist design principles among Malaysian property developers keen to market their properties to a lucrative customer base that is reacting against a perceived lack of communality in more typical suburban developments. Their research draws on the experiences of design professionals, planners and property developers to investigate how far the substantive social objectives of the new urbanist movement are compatible with the commercial interests of those involved in constructing new townships; the obvious suspicion being that such an association goes little further than the marketing literature. New urbanist notions of walkability, green space, neighbourliness and centredness clearly have currency at the local scale of development by offering developers competitive advantages in the marketplace. More problematic is the requirement for higher densities that are seen as undesirable by many consumers and the high capital cost, which makes new urbanist influenced developments too expensive for lower income groups. Many of new urbanism’s signature ideas have evidently become common places within Malaysian property development. These offer a potential ‘shared discourse’ of design principles in which more overtly social agendas can be articulated within commercial contexts. However, there is clearly a long way to go in this respect, not least in connecting those relatively marketable, local characteristics of the new urbanist vision to a substantive regional policy for managing the kind

of large scale, integrated public transport infrastructure that is so vital in overcoming suburban sprawl.

Moving from the commercial to the institutional context, Elaine Paterson's article examines the role of Design Review Panels in the United Kingdom. She explains how these have emerged as a dynamic aspect of the UK's urban planning process, providing an essential institutional mechanism through which the concerns of design professionals can be addressed. Drawing on a series of interviews with design panel members, developers and planners, this research gives a rounded assessment of the overall contribution of Design Review to the planning process and makes a range of recommendations as to how its effectiveness could be improved. On the whole, Paterson finds that Design Review Panels have functioned efficiently to improve the quality of design guidance available to planning authorities. However, problems are identified with the indeterminacy of the panels' terms of reference and the nature of their relationship with statutory decision-making agencies. Interestingly, it may be that this lack of a precise institutional definition offers some practical advantages in terms of increased flexibility. One of Paterson's conclusions is that the discretionary nature of the UK's planning system may accommodate Design Review more easily than planning regimes that are more master plan driven. It is worth noting in this context that maintaining the process of Design Review seems to lie behind the UK government's recent decision to merge CABE (The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment) with the Design Council. CABE was instrumental in the creation of the Design Review Panels and in coordinating its supply of design expertise. That the government's original decision to withdraw its funding entirely has now been reconsidered is indicative of the extent to which the Design Review process has become an established part of the British planning system.

The article by Ercoskun and Karasaalan presents a critical investigation into a distinctive range of design guidance that the authors refer to as 'next generation' on the basis of its strong focus on sustainability. The research, drawing on wide consultation with stakeholders in the Turkish town of Godul, allows the authors to propose an 'eco-tech' model of design guidance characterized by the deployment of 'smart' technologies to help achieve desired sustainability outcomes. The premise of the study is that the size and

morphological structure of small towns is most likely to provide a favourable basis for the successful implementation of the eco-tech principles. How generally applicable this model is remains to be seen. While arguing confidently for the broad relevance of eco-tech design guidance, the authors also acknowledge the range of difficulties that can impede its effectiveness in practice and discuss how these may be countered.

The relationship between street connectivity, pedestrian movement and land uses in urban areas is a key problematic in urban design research. It addresses the thorny question of how particular morphological characteristics combine with particular attractors to support or undermine those walking-based activities that are a key aspect of any regulatory regime aimed at the creation of sustainable cities. Responding to this challenge, Ozbil, Peponis and Stone have developed a GIS-based model in which the metric and directional network properties of a street system can be statistically integrated with pedestrian and land use data to provide an enhanced understanding of their interrelation. The authors' case study of Atlanta builds, in many respects, on the theory and methods of space syntax research. Consistent with this theory, their research finds that street morphology is correctly regarded as an independent variable largely responsible for generating differential rates of pedestrian movement internally within the urban grid. However, they also note that land use characteristics are crucial in determining the overall volume of pedestrian activity likely to be present in an urban area at any given time. Another finding of this study is that attractors may be responsible for producing particular short-term distortions in movement patterns, as new land uses take time to embed themselves into optimum urban locations.

If the aspiration of sustainable built environments is to be realized then it is essential that the knowledge and experience of urban designers becomes an integral part of the process through which that environment is planned, developed and regulated. Design 'movements' with high media profiles such as new urbanism can have a powerful impact on the thinking of consumers and developers alike but their meaning in contrasting cultural, geographical and economic contexts is likely to be different. Design guidance regimes clearly provide a useful procedural mechanism for managing the contribution of the design community to the planning process. For these regimes to be successful, however, it is essential

that those agencies involved in the development and governance of urban areas are supportive. Clearly, major challenges still remain in asserting a central role for architects and urban designers within the planning process as this operates in many parts of the world.

The utility and, just as importantly, the credibility of design guidance can only be enhanced by conceiving it as the periodic output of an ongoing process of informed reflection by practitioners into the effectiveness of their design strategies. This process of reflection needs to be underpinned by substantive research aimed at understanding how the built environment functions to organize socio-economic life in contrasting geographical and cultural conditions. Several of the articles presented in this issue highlight the conceptual and practical difficulties that arise from attempts to transfer those popular signatures of 'sustainability' that are more naturally conceived at the local scale – for example 'walkability' – to the strategic scale of the masterplan; more research is needed on this important subject. A more general consideration is the importance of achieving design guidance that is sensitive to the temporal perspective. If sustainability is conceived in terms of those qualities of place that make some urban settlements particularly adept at adapting to different conditions over time then

it surely follows that urban designers are well placed to identify these qualities and bring them to the attention of the relevant planning agencies; again, more research is needed here. Exercising a degree of humility in the face of the diversity and complexity of urban environments is probably the best way to ensure that declared principles of guidance for sustainable urban design maintain their essential dynamism and flexibility. We are well advised by Jane Jacobs, among others, to avoid searching for those elusive 'silver bullets' that, when abstracted from the particular situations that gave rise to them, have the potential to create as many problems as they are able to solve.

Note

- 1 Jacobs (1993 [1961]).

Reference

- Jacobs, J. (1993 [1961]) *The Death and Life of the Great American Cities*. New York: Toronto, Random House, pp. 558–585.

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