Editorial

URBAN DESIGN *International* (2004) 9, 173–174. doi:10.1057/palgrave.udi.9000131

This special edition of *Urban Design International* explores recent developments in urban design education arising from globalisation and digital technologies. Although education in urban design has traditionally been characterised by an international curriculum and the international reach of its students, the last decade has presented it with significant new challenges and opportunities. Students now learn (and staff teach) in a global domain, working as teams across continents in ways made possible by digital technologies, international travel and the expectation that much practice is and will be international. Digital technologies shape education and practice not only by changing modes of formal representation, but in other ways as well.

This section was formulated to find out more about how these changes operate and what they mean for the future of education and practice in urban design. Do they demand that we educate differently? To address these questions, the papers describe some cutting-edge activities in teaching and research and discuss the resulting challenges and dilemmas, analysing their implications. The papers suggest that not only are these educational developments responding to the changes in the operating context that, after all, affect all working environments, they also suggest that they will specifically shape future practice.

The internationalisation of education is often posed as a counter response to the perceived negative effects of globalisation and in the design disciplines, the 'global' or 'international' studio is where such activity is usually focused. It is then assumed that by learning about other places and peoples there, greater understanding of and respect for difference will result.

In his paper, Darko Radovich confronts this assumption from the viewpoint of the teacher, asking the question 'are our Western methods

appropriate to the teaching of Eastern cultures?'. His concern is that through a lack of reflection, teachers may be unaware of their own biased positions when teaching students from other cultures who will, after all, be practicing principally in those cultures on their graduation. By exploring theories of difference and the way that Eastern and Western cultures think about and value space, social relationships and the role of the city, he argues for recognition of the value of *the other* by teachers and students alike, asking them to celebrate difference and use it. He cites numerous examples from his own practice in the design studio to support his argument.

By contrast, Claire Parin explores notions of difference through empirical observations of the way that students from different cultures think about and conceptualise space and place, specifically in France and Thailand. Her paper investigates the responses of cross-cultural studio groups studying in both countries and the way each group structured their analysis of and responses to sites, demonstrating the differing values placed on form, activity, space and time. She presents a diagrammatic model to explain the different ways the cultures apprehend and value urban place, arguing that the expanded experience of students from different cultures working together improves design outcome by expanding the range of phenomena addressed and provides students (and staff) invaluable insights into the way that different cultures conceptualise place. Such insights, it is suggested, simply would not be available without an educational environment where difference is valued and articulated.

Both papers support the potential for design education, particularly the cross-cultural studio to counter the normalising effects of standardised methods of teaching and increasing use of digital technologies for data processing, analysis and representation. While describing different experiences in cross-cultural teaching, these two contributors are now

working together on the BMB program,¹ a cross-cultural and cross-disciplinary design teaching program between their institutions and the Faculty of Architecture at Kasetsart University in Bangkok.

The papers on developments in digital technologies and design argue from different perspectives, that we have moved beyond use of digital media merely to represent the *outcomes* of internalized, individual design decisions (considered by the authors as characterising a 'first phase' of digital applications). They argue that we are moving into a second phase of application, where a new generation of modelling tools will be integrated *within* the design process, enabling designers to involve multiple parties by making criteria, alternatives and outcomes explicit and accessible earlier. Such possibilities have particular importance for urban design, which is characterised by complex negotiations, review and decision-making processes over time.

Agus Batara, Ian Bishop and Bharat Dave describe a tool, REX (Representation Exchange), developed and tested by students, graduates and experienced designers at the University of Melbourne. REX enables the normally separate domains of graphic, textual and charted information relating to building form, use and economic feasibility to be manipulated simultaneously during design so that correlations can be related on a single screen and the impacts of decisions in one variable domain more rapidly tested against the other variables and domains. This contrasts with the usual linear processes of testing and correlating. They describe the technology, its testing and its potential uses, also shedding light on the way in which designers use different types of information in ways that are more or less available to design teams, communities and clients.

Murray Fraser and Halli Bjornsson also argue about the value of more transparent relationships between criteria, decisions and outcomes during the early stages of design. They describe the testing and use of Cadai, a program developed to enable early-stage real-time modelling of three-dimensional environments, on urban projects and by students at Oxford Brookes University and the University of Westminster. The particular value to the urban design of this program is that it enables users other than designers

to select their own routes through digital representations at the conceptual stage in contrast to the choreographed fly-throughs of completed designs that characterise current applications. The particular technology and qualities of Cadai encourage the playful exploration of formal qualities by whole design teams rather than individual designers alone. Again, the emphasis is on making design explorations available to more people earlier.

While it could be said that these papers deal with distinct and discrete topics, there are common threads that can be observed from them. Firstly, the universities where these projects occur are looking outwards – to other cultures, to other institutions and to industry – to gain new insights and new ways of thinking about design. They are engaged in the broader debates of our era, those relating to globalization and the digital revolution. They locate the discipline of urban design, with its focus on the way that urban environments happen and what they mean, in those debates. Secondly, there is a commitment to reflective practice and a questioning, as urban designers, of the way we think, what we assume, and especially, the *way* we design. There is an underlying sense that existing methods of urban design practice and the attitudes that underpin them are under interrogation and are up for review in the face of the substantial cultural and technological changes that now confront us all.

Educational programs in urban design play an important part in this process by asking questions, by experimenting, by encouraging reflective practice amongs students as future practitioners – about design methods, about values, perceptions and presumptions and about the way to design in each situation. Teaching and practising in the global domain demands not only sensitivity to cultural difference, but knowledge of a variety of possible approaches and their value. Increasingly, it seems that digital technologies will challenge us to externalise and share, at an earlier stage, those previously internalised even private moments of design with an increasing array of contributors and collaborators. In such an environment, dexterity will be the key and providing graduates with that dexterity in cultural and technological domains will be the educational challenge.

Catherin Bull

Elisabeth Murdoch

Professor of Landscape Architecture,
Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning,
University of Melbourne

¹BMB stands for Bangkok–Melbourne–Bordeaux and is the name of the cooperative design teaching and research program between these institutions, the first phase of which culminates in an International Symposium in Bordeaux from 7th to 9th April 2005, title 'Identity and globalisation: design for the city' (www.bordeaux.arch.fr/bmb/).