

Urban and Landscape Perspectives

Volume 12

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Aims and Scope

Urban and Landscape Perspectives is a series which aims at nurturing theoretic reflection on the city and the territory and working out and applying methods and techniques for improving our physical and social landscapes.

The main issue in the series is developed around the projectual dimension, with the objective of visualising both the city and the territory from a particular viewpoint, which singles out the territorial dimension as the city's space of communication and negotiation.

The series will face emerging problems that characterise the dynamics of city development, like the new, fresh relations between urban societies and physical space, the right to the city, urban equity, the project for the physical city as a means to reveal civitas, signs of new social cohesiveness, the sense of contemporary public space and the sustainability of urban development.

Concerned with advancing theories on the city, the series resolves to welcome articles that feature a pluralism of disciplinary contributions studying formal and informal practices on the project for the city and seeking conceptual and operative categories capable of understanding and facing the problems inherent in the profound transformations of contemporary urban landscapes.

Claudia Basta • Stefano Moroni
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Ethics, Design and Planning of the Built Environment

 Springer

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Contents

Part I Rising Problems

- 1 Values in Planning and Design: A Process Perspective on Ethics in Forming the Built Environment** 3
Ernest R. Alexander
- 2 A Conversation About Who’s In? Who’s Out? And Who Answers Those Questions When Planning for and Designing the Downtown** 23
Carol D. Barrett
- 3 The Relevance of Public Space: Rethinking Its Material and Political Aspects**..... 45
Stefano Moroni and Francesco Chiodelli
- 4 Architects on Value: Reducing Ethics to Aesthetics?** 57
Stefan Koller

Part II Evolving Paradigms

- 5 Architecture as an Object of Research: Incorporating Ethical Questions in Design Thinking**..... 79
Lara Schrijver
- 6 Aesthetics as a Risk Factor in Designing Architecture**..... 93
Sabine Roeser
- 7 Cost-Benefit Analysis and Evaluating Transport Safety Effects: A Discussion from the Perspective of Ethics**..... 107
Bert van Wee and Piet Rietveld
- 8 Urban In/Justice**..... 125
Emily Talen

Part III Emerging Perspectives

9 Architecture and Value-Sensitive Design 135
Jeroen van den Hoven

10 Designing for Meaning: The Designer’s Ethical Responsibility 143
Stanley M. Stein and Thomas L. Harper

11 Risk, Space, and Distributive Justice 167
Claudia Basta

**12 City Planning and Animals: Expanding Our Urban
Compassion Footprint** 185
Timothy Beatley and Marc Bekoff

Afterword: Ethical Problems of Contemporary Cities 197
Stefano Moroni

Author Index..... 213

Subject Index..... 219

Preface: Shared Spaces. Shared Values?

Claudia Basta

Nothing can have as its destination anything other than its origin

(Simone Weil, 1942)

This collection of contributions on the ethics, design and planning of the built environment is the fruit of an initially less ambitious plan. In June 2010, we brought together members of the faculties of philosophy and architecture of the Delft University of Technology in a seminar whose scope was to identify and discuss shared areas of investigation. Little did we suspect that this plan would produce so many varied and significant contributions. This was quite beyond our expectations. Given the interfaculty character of our seminar, the discussions raised clearly injected many thought-provoking ideas into the debate on the ethics of the built environment. Consequently, we decided to invite some of the most prominent international authors in the field to join in with our inquiry. What gradually emerged was an organic set of contributions that revealed consistent trajectories of ethical investigation. By publishing this volume, we hope that such lines of inquiry will strike a chord in the reader and spark a genuine interest to explore further.

From the very outset, there was wide consensus at interdisciplinary level on the urgency of incorporating ethical considerations into architecture and spatial design and planning. Throughout history, *shared spaces* have always entailed, or at least always called for, *shared values*. What makes the current moment in time particularly delicate is that the city as an entity is in transition toward a multicultural reality, and it struggles to balance historical heritage and environmental patrimony with urban and rural models receptive to the challenge of sustainable development. From the perspectives of the disciplinary outlooks involved in this volume, what makes the current moment in time even more complex is the lasting polarization of entrenched dichotomies such as the “analytical vs. the normative,” the “quantitative vs. the qualitative,” and – perhaps most significantly – the “neutral vs. the values-driven.” To our mind, it is precisely these polarities which offer the most fertile terrain on which to implant and develop our discourse.

The Ideal City as a Convoy of Reference Values

As in other areas of public life, current debates in architectural, urban, and environmental planning gravitate around the matter of balancing tradition with cultural and technological innovation. In itself, “innovation” is often perceived to clash with the very meaning of “harmony”. Our increasingly multicultural societies and multifaceted spatial settings have progressively lost the classic connotation of “according to the rules of nature” and evolved toward that of “mirroring the reality of complexity.” This is something that the architect and the planner (or simply the “designer”) are called upon to consider in their theoretical as well as practical elaborations. Such complexity does not only refer to the interconnection among tangible elements of the built environment, but also to the increased relevance of their “intangible” interconnection: indeed, it is perhaps *the real vs. the virtual* that emerges as the most prominent distinction of our time. A steadily growing portion of individuals “act” and “move” daily in virtual spaces, often limiting interaction within their material spaces as result. By doing so, they prompt inevitable changes in both private and collective spatial settings. The capacity to connect with and remotely activate other people and artifacts, without actually covering material distances, has entailed a series of era-defining transformations: the home workstation has made the office redundant; the computer screen has become a high-speed freeway; downloads substitute visiting the local library; idem the doctor’s surgery. Inexorably, this expanding immateriality is “devouring” materiality, or at least reducing it to a realm equated with functions performed by earlier generations. For some, this is a welcome product of technological innovation, which, like any other form of innovation, redefines the boundaries between the “individual space” and the “shared space” in which the “I” encounters the “Other.”

Throughout history, the complexity of this zone of shared interaction has preoccupied thinkers of all disciplines, and not least those involved in actually designing such spaces. Faced with today’s growing complexity and technological innovation, along with the challenge of sustainability in increasingly multicultural societies, we cannot avoid seriously pondering how the ideal built environment of tomorrow *could* and *should* be. This is a wholly legitimate and urgent question that all interested parties must pose themselves. Our preliminary reply is that the approach to the built environment of tomorrow requires abandoning the ambition of a generally valid spatial model in favor of generally valid ethical approaches to its conception. In essence, we believe that the disciplinary transition to activate is not outward – but somehow, inward; the answer lies in how the designer conceives the material world as *shared space*, a physical arena in which the individual encounters the Other, and in which all of society’s diversities may find a common ground for construction.

One might argue that this has always been the challenge. The search for ideality in architectural and urban design has plagued intellectuals since Plato’s first speculations on what constituted the “ideal city” and on how to transpose the immaterial nature of an ideal society onto a material, manmade space. Since then, it has become

natural to reflect on the relation between *desired society* and *designed reality*. Two valid examples are the ideal city of the Renaissance, which celebrated the emerging civic order born from the new shift toward rationality, and the utopian cities dear to twentieth-century intellectuals, such as Le Corbusier's *Cité Radieuse*. In the case of the first, the ideal city physically embodied the new balance between the religious and political powers by establishing the urban space as the new center of daily life, fostering the "civic" identity; this shift was organic to the times and had no single author as such. Conversely, the *Cité Radieuse* was effectively the outcome of a single intellectual proposing innovation upon the society of his time; however, it also reflected a new form of centrality, namely, the role of industry and the "working man" within the city, affirming his status of "equality" and the standardization this entailed.

These two examples are like the extremes of a swinging pendulum. At the one extreme, we find an intellectual consensus consistent with the spirit of the time, by which the ideal city was fashioned by the pillars of political and temporal powers; at the other extreme, we have a thinker whose notion of ideality related to the form given to space by the driving factors of modernity, that is, the new standardized productive capacity and the social class emerging through it. In this sense, the former approach envisioned the ideal space as the static setting within which societal dynamics ought to occur and within which the resulting design must be confined; conversely, the latter approach envisioned the ideal space as the dynamic arena resulting from the new and disruptive societal relations. As such, the former city idealized differences and put the citizen in a submitted hierarchy, on top of which the designer could be interpreted as the *longa manu* of ruling powers; the latter city instead turned the new societal differences into an opportunity for highlighting the growing needs of an emerging class, which was incorporated symbolically through explicit attention to its "industrial condition." Intrinsically, the first reflects an outward, top-down urban design imposed on society and its common spaces; the second is an expression of inward tensions from below influencing the design of the shared environment.

Notwithstanding their vastly different points of departure, both "ideal spaces" respectively embody then uncontroversial reference values of harmony and rationality, classicism and functionality, and inequality and equality. It is such values that provided the grid on which the conceptions of the ideal space were drawn, in accord with their historic moment. These reference values had not only an aesthetic or functional relevance, but they were also *normative points of reference*. They expressed what the "good" space, and the "good" man acting within it, ought to be. The ideal city of the Renaissance stigmatized the new enlightened centrality of the "urban man" in history; five centuries later, by moving "the center" from cities to industrial poles, the *Cité Radieuse* emphasized the centrality of the "working man" within it.

Notably, what the two ideal cities have in common is that both expressed the values they referred to with equal strength and precision. Furthermore, they remain enduring points of reference in the handbooks of history of design, and ultimately both conceptions have influenced concrete spatial interventions ever since.

The Ideal Space in a Complex Reality

One of the crucial questions we must ask is whether it is possible to translate clear and uncontroversial reference values into architectural and spatial design in our time. And if so, is it actually desirable to “design the values of our time” and hence construct the built environment accordingly?

To approach this fascinating question, we should first take a look at certain distinctions. First of all, the work of the architect and urban planner entails rather different albeit complementary ethical implications. Put very simply, the architect deals primarily with the matter of balancing the requirements for safety, accessibility, and functionality in his artifacts with his personal aesthetic inclinations. Somehow, any architectural artifact should reflect the integration of a design “*of the I*” with a design “*for the Other*.” Differently, the planner deals with the matter of formulating the policy, regulatory, and spatial frameworks within which such artifacts can be located, constructed, and accessed. While the former is therefore responsible for the more tangible and “discrete” elements of the built environment, the latter is called upon to take responsibility for its more intangible, but equally determinant, rationale.

Notwithstanding these differences, both professions have fundamental responsibilities toward the society in which they operate, and that is, primarily, a *moral* responsibility. Anti-aesthetic and functionally questionable interventions (typical of low-income residential districts, degraded historical areas, or disused industrial sites) can affect the lives of citizens to the point of provoking a sense of stigma and marginalization. Land-use plans that favor the interests of a privileged few at the expense of the rights of the many merely aggravate existing forms of inequality and make them increasingly difficult to eradicate.

So what happens when both professional figures ignore, underestimate, or disregard the implications of their work and the responsibility toward the Other that their work entails? Put simply, their infringement of fundamental moral values is given form and matter in the living environment they help to create. Sadly, this does not only relate to the complex European architectural and urban heritage; examples of urban ghettoization, architectural monstrosities, and controversial siting of impacting technologies are continually documented all around the world in both scientific and professional literature.

To come back to the opening question of this Introduction, the current challenge of architecture and planning is hence no longer that of identifying the ideal space of tomorrow but rather that of ensuring that the ethical considerations that safeguard the shared values of today are embedded in the conception of the built environment and recognizable during all processes of its realization.

While this is not the place to elaborate on the specifics of the values that *ought to be* embedded into the practice of conception of our shared spaces, the issue indisputably concerns the nonnegotiable values that liberal democracies have conquered over time. The growing interest among designers and ethicists in the “values-in-design” goes beyond the classic “form vs. function” distinction; it supersedes the mere aesthetics debate in architecture and the long-lasting debate on individual *vs.*

collective interests in spatial planning. The matter of values in design is far broader and far more fundamental and concerns the moral implications of artifacts and spatial plans on citizens and the responsibilities of the designer toward them. It involves the way the interventions of the designer enable the public to share experiences in the shared space. Nowadays, there is wide consensus that urban space must mirror values such as freedom, equality and participation, and more generally the value of intra- and intergenerational justice.

Rather than be a mere exercise for a few scholars, such values should be intrinsic to professional activities. To some extent, one might argue that any artifact or form of spatial organization tends to pivot on some guiding moral principles. The problem is the significant variance in awareness of the designer or planner regarding the clarity through which he or she translates such guiding principles into their work. Take, for example, a national monument. To contemporary eyes, the moral significance of a national monument no longer has the connotation it once held for the populations of the European cities under the architectural dictatorships of the first half of the past century. However, in their contexts, such national monuments were intended as celebrations of what was considered the *good* and *just* society at the time. Nowadays, their original moral significance is often merely commemorative, at times proudly symbolic, and sometimes highly controversial. Nevertheless, for better or for worse, the values that they once represented were and still are clearly recognizable today, together with the privileged role of the built environment in conveying them.

The more controversial translation into design and planning of the values of today lies in the greater freedom we now have in assuming even strongly conflicting perspectives. After all, true democracy entails the freedom of diversity. But while this might suggest that an ethical debate within the design and planning field is less pressing than before, the evidence is that it has never been so urgent. Never before was it so important to press the designer to strive for greater clarity and consistency when making choices which may impinge on the values of others; and it is precisely because those choices are open to misinterpretation that their significance and import requires uncontroversial identification and transparency.

As noted above, the first step in this direction does not consist of arguing over the specifics of such values, but rather of reflecting with ethical rigor on the consistency between the (intentional or otherwise) objectives of architects and planners on the one hand and the perceptions and experiences of the “users” of their interventions on the other. In this sense, our view is that any ethical discussion should foster an open dialogue between designers and this “Other,” in order to *explicitly* demonstrate what the built environment often conveys and expresses *implicitly*. The ethical debate must involve designers and planners in shaping value-sensitive design processes. Furthermore, the active participation of architects and planners in this interdisciplinary exchange is a priceless opportunity for steering the ethical inquiry toward the most needed directions.

A concerted interactive exchange among disciplinary domains and practices is the core idea of the contributions collected in this volume, which have preserved the spirit of the original seminar. The contributions that follow hinge on three main areas of investigation, namely,

1. The identification of the often *implicit* values informing the process of design of the built environment and converting them into *explicit* objects of design and planning from the early stages of conception
2. The identification of the legitimate boundary between the designer's aesthetical choices and the requirements of artifacts in relation to values such as privacy, accessibility, safety, and equality
3. Assigning clearly identifiable responsibilities to the actors involved in the conception, construction, use and interpretation of the built environment, a process that involves all interested parties, from the designers and planners to citizens

Reinforcing the dialogue among the ethics, design, and planning of the built environment and charting the trajectory toward the new shared spaces and shared values between them is the ultimate scope of these lines of inquiry. Hence, more than providing any definitive replies, this volume hopes to lead to the identification of future, and equally shared, questions.

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