



# Streetsweeper

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Alexander Cuthbert's 'Urban design: requiem for an era – review and critique of the last fifty years' (Vol. 12, No. 4, 2007) is provocative. Sweeping the street, I don't have the space for the consideration a long and well-crafted piece deserves; but from the street, it has to provoke some quick reactions.

It seems to me that the author – an academic – is for the professionalisation of urban design. This at a time when more than ever urban design practitioners and their educators need to maintain – undoubtedly more consciously – the ability to work well, with or against the prevailing dictates of social/political control and opportunistic capital. In this, I would suggest, values are more important than theories, together with analytical skills and a bag of tools for intervention, that draw on the widest multidisciplinary theories and practices.

I would assert that the outcomes of the practice of urban design are no more chaotic than those of the highly theorised practices of regional and local planning or those of the statutorily regulated (in the UK) practice of architecture. Whatever your view of the profligacy of the 'mother of the arts', in more than one culture the 'professional' silo that houses the registered, is more: a hallowed bastion protected by the state and at the same time, protecting the public from malpractice and incompetence. But I digress, a little.

The problem as stated, that: 'Traditional Urban Design (sic) "theory" is anarchistic and insubstantial', begs, at the very least, the questions: Whose tradition? What urban design? Which theory? In Cuthbert's view the necessity of defining what 'it' (urban design) is, should make us wary, I would suggest, of who 'we' (doing the definition) may be. There is, of course, also a major problem inherent in anthropomorphising a discipline that is ill and variously defined. Under these circumstances it is also problematic to generalise about practices and their underpinning constructs, while largely ignoring *urban designers* in a contested and unregulated field. The propositions put forward by Cuthbert are self-referential

and rely on a curiously narrow frame of reference selected without any acceptable justification by the author: an 'in-crowd' for a very limited and culturally narrow *Weltanschauung*. This may be appropriate in the salons of North West Australia, or a large part of the (North) 'Western hemisphere', but not on the street or on the rest of the globe.

'Proposition 1' could only have merit, if there was a consensus as to what urban design is, how urban designers should be prepared for practice and the codification of the field of practice by different societies/nations. Feyerabend (1975) may have much good to offer. However, most practitioners recognise that they practice from some rag-bag collection of values and a similarly imperfect set of analyses, which permit them to provide rationales for intervention that can be debated and refined by exposure to the widest range of (I'm sorry) 'stakeholders'; all this within the confines of their relative (minimal) power. Thus, the lucky urban designer will engage with clients, local interest and power groups (politicians, planners, engineers, etc), and will use knowledge of place, form, economics and society to propose and refine the proposal – negotiated with the 'virtual city of interest' available to her. Planners, usually politically, socially and explicitly charged with the job of managing these processes *pro bono publico* seldom do this effectively; and seldom understand the range of conflicts to be resolved practically by urban designers.

'Proposition 2' for the 'white knight' urban designer is like motherhood and apple pie, but these 'wellspring'(s?) are of no use in a fast changing world without the knowledge and expertise required to manipulate private and public space and building forms – to maximise opportunity and maintain a healthy public realm. The urban design of many town centre environments that effectively manipulate retail behaviour, or restrict the scope of democratic space through the private appropriation of what should

be public space, also requires 'wellsprings' for designers – but different outcomes follow different values rather than different theories and skills: we need only think of the recent sub-prime crisis and related unravelling to appreciate this.

'Propositions 3 and 4' are artfully elided. But here and elsewhere in the paper, the need to be 'scientific' is argued within a narrow and often inappropriate way: more an appeal to authority than an identification of the differing types and levels of theories that practitioners need to draw on. We, and here I mean those with some engagement in practice and education, or practice alone, need not only *knowledge of the world* (standards 'external' to practice, hypotheses and research) but vitally, *knowledge in the world* (advanced reflective practice).

'Proposition 5' is a lot of non-designer humbug. 'Beaux Arts' do appear to be alive and well in parts of the antipodes, and I would admit, even in pockets in the northern hemisphere and beyond, but this for architecture, not urban design (unless high-jacked by architects). Bad money, in this, need not drive out the good. Much of the irregular 'science' of urban design has been developed over the 50-year life of urban design that Cuthbert asserts (why not 100, or 40?), and is based on the natural sciences. Morphological and typological theories and analyses relate not only to taxonomic studies in the natural sciences but also in the manner in which they may relate context (in the widest sense: social, economic, political, cultural and spatial) and process (particularly in terms of the ability to accommodate change over time) and yield patterns potentially similar to those achieved for life-forms through DNA barcoding.

These bodies of knowledge – with major recent contributions like the work of Bill Hillier (and his team – and worldwide associates) are a vital antidote to the somewhat outdated concern for or against 'the eureka principle'. Although of course, we should remember that the great scientist and philosopher Michael Polanyi described the problem solver: '...shifting his confidence from intuition to computation and back again from computation to intuition, while never releasing his hold on either of the two...' which, he says '...represents in miniature the whole range of operations by which articulation disciplines and expands the reasoning powers of man' (1973, p. 131)

So, we can generalise something diverse, define it self-referentially, randomly compile a list of 'key texts' and self-fulfillingly dismiss them as a coherent body of theoretical knowledge. At the same time, we can admit that perhaps urban design needs to draw on wider disciplines, but then criticise those involved for not building their own silo, supported by their own body of knowledge. I am reminded of the occasion when I worked in London in the public sector as a professional advisor on aspects of development, and needed to consult material in the library of a 'sister' built environment profession; I 'phoned politely with my request for access, and was effectively told that this library was the repository of the body of knowledge of the profession and as I was not a member, I could not have access'.

Alexander Cuthbert's thought-provoking and highly wrought paper deserves more and better debate than provided by my cursory response here. Let's hope that the readers of *URBAN DESIGN International* will oblige.

## References

- Feyerabend, A. (1975) *Against Method*. London: Verso (quoted by Cuthbert).  
Polanyi, M. (1973) *Personal Knowledge: Towards a Post-Critical Philosophy*. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul.

