



DESIGN AND MEASUREMENT

Francis Duffy, co-founder DEGW London

THE IMPORTANCE OF DESIGN

At this half-way point in the series of Urban Age conferences, it seems appropriate to raise two crucial points. Firstly, to appreciate that design imagination in the widest sense is enormously important for the future of cities; secondly, to recognise that connecting design intentions and social consequences is notoriously difficult. I have been grappling with these issues for several decades and would like to offer some thoughts on how this apparent conflict, which I have experienced acutely within my own highly specialised field of office design, relates even more fundamentally to cities and urban design. A few autobiographical words may be forgiven if they throw some light on a generational attitude to this conflict. I spent the early 1960s at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London; a more design-saturated environment it would be hard to imagine. We did practically nothing else but design for five years. We were told that planning was important but planning seemed to be an abstract, centralised, welfare state, bureaucratic entity. Social issues and design skills did not connect. Although comprehensive redevelopment was already beginning to have a bad name, we did not understand why.

Towards the end of the 1960s, along with several of my contemporaries, I was lucky enough to go the United States as a graduate student, in my case to Berkeley and Princeton. It was a wonderful time – a political awakening: there was the Civil Rights movement and the Vietnam War. There was also the big issue of the regeneration of the inner cities – San Francisco, Baltimore, Boston. Urban design meant active politics, the engagement of architects, planners and designers in real places with real issues and real people. Instead of remote and widely despised plans for ‘comprehensive development’ – it is important to remember that the notorious Pruet Igoe housing development in St Louis was demolished to general applause in 1972 – urban design meant that an active debate had been initiated between City Hall, business and the community about what should be done to make imaginative use of redundant buildings and underused land to reinvigorate the economy of the inner city, to tackle crime and deprivation, to improve education, to help people build

themselves a better way of life. My generation of Harkness Fellows, among many others, brought the idea of activist urban design back to the UK in the early seventies. Hence the eventual revitalisation of Covent Garden, Docklands and somewhat later Glasgow, Birmingham, Manchester. Incidentally I chose to devote my career to office design for exactly the same motive: an appreciation of the value of the close, hot, sometimes dangerous but often beneficial relationship between physical space and the micropolitics of the office. At the scale both of the city and the office building, ‘design’ had become politicised.

RELEASING THE POTENTIAL OF DESIGN

Design to me is the imaginative manipulation of the physical fabric of cities, landscapes, buildings, spaces between buildings, environments, interiors and products to accommodate people and their activities in a positive and sustainable way over time. I prefer to say design, as an active term, rather than buildings or architecture because both buildings and architecture on their own are inert. They can do very little, almost nothing positive, outside the context of an active programme of change – although I have to admit that buildings on their own, in certain circumstances, can diminish, damage, poison, even kill people in a variety of ways. Buildings, while inert in themselves, do have potential which, if properly harnessed in the right circumstances, can do a lot of good. In office design, for example, we distinguish between three levels of the potency of design, the so-called three ‘E’s’: Efficiency: the use of design resources to achieve the most with the least, eg the least circulation, the maximum density, the lowest cost per square metre; Effectiveness: the use of design to add value to organisations, eg to attract and retain the right kind of employees, to facilitate interaction between collaborating groups, to stimulate invention and creativity; Expression: the capacity of the physical working environment to broadcast and reinforce social values. For example, design can be used to reinforce aspirations towards an egalitarian, transparent, accessible, inclusive, consistent society – or the opposite – a default preference for whatever is hierarchical, opaque, labyrinthine, exclusive, confusing. What benefits can cities derive from these three levels of

potential? My own guess is that the potential relationship between the three 'E's and social and economic performance at the urban scale is exponential – ie if efficiency is worth two units of performance, effectiveness is worth four and expression sixteen. It is certainly true that measures of efficiency, which are by far the easiest to measure, are conventionally given far too much attention at every scale of design intervention compared to the more subtle but potentially much more rewarding benefits of effectively and expressively designed relationships between the physical and social realms.

THE IMPORTANCE OF PURPOSE

I am an enemy of generalised virtue – at least in architectural and urbanistic matters. I dislike norms and standards, am suspicious of benchmarks (why not a benchmark Olympics in which the point is not to win but to achieve mediocrity?), and remain nervous about well-intentioned attempts by design watchdogs like the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and professional institutions like the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) to establish Design Quality Indicators (DQIs) – generic measures which can be applied to the performance of different building types. From my perspective it is imperative for clients and designers to take up personal positions before they act – ready-made solutions, silver bullets which claim to solve all problems without individual responsibility, are usually an illusion. Both urban and office design are inherently competitive and hence inevitably subject to change. Consequently three factors must shape any design decision. The first is purpose – what specific benefit is this design initiative intended to achieve? The second is context – what else might influence the desired outcome? The third is timing – is the moment right? Of the three factors the most important is purpose. Purpose is immensely liberating in methodological terms: if clients can be helped to articulate what their design objectives are, then it becomes possible to measure whether or not they have been achieved. A genuine feedback loop can be established. Insisting on purpose forces clients – and urbanists, architects and designers – to prioritise: critical matters must be dealt with first, lesser objectives later. Prioritisation, like purpose, makes measurement and feedback much easier. An even more fundamental point has to be made. Purpose provides the essential condition for relating buildings, and hence design imagination, to society. Because the perspective of the social sciences is so huge and all encompassing, ranging from anthropology and economics through sociology and social and political history to psychology and

psychoanalysis, it is impossible to say anything meaningful about architecture or urbanism without taking some aspect of social purpose into account. The challenge of the Urban Age, it seems to me, is to help identify the purpose of urban projects so that we can better evaluate their social success or failure. This simple equation was completely lacking in the fascinating presentations of four large scale projects in the London Urban Age conference; a symptom of the greater crisis in design that I have sought to identify rather than a criticism of the particular designers and developers involved. Far too often briefing has been assumed to be a passive activity – the architect or urban planner 'taking' the brief from the all knowing client. Such attitudes were commonplace in the modern movement. More recently many designers have despaired of clients' indecisiveness and have allowed themselves to become emotionally disengaged, keeping from involving themselves too deeply in briefing. Given my position, it should be already clear that I believe that briefing should be catalytic, ie deeply committed, intensely engaged, a means of developing, testing and crystallising clients' and users' aspirations in the context of action.

CONDITIONS FOR SUCCESS

Four conditions are necessary for achieving such catalytic effects: – Sustained, articulate and responsible client leadership; – A systemic approach to design, linking three parallel and inter-related design programmes – the design of Information Technology, of the Social System and of the Physical Fabric; – Data, at least as good as used in any other area of organisational design so that results can be measured against priorities and purpose ensuring ongoing feedback; – Democratic involvement – continuing communication between leaders, designers and users on all important issues. When we reviewed the four London projects at the Urban Age conference – White City, Elephant & Castle, King's Cross, Stratford City and the Lower Lea Valley – all of which have revitalisation as their common goal, we might have explored the extent to which the conditions listed above were in place. We could then have evaluated the projects not in terms of barely articulated and highly generalised architectural and urbanistic values but against such urgent contemporary criteria as success in the knowledge economy, social inclusion, sustainability, success in engendering small businesses. The designers and owners of each project would have been able to demonstrate their different, and essentially competitive, purposes, priorities, hypotheses, approaches. Legitimate differences would certainly have emerged. Different

trajectories of development could have been compared. Different value systems would have become apparent. A common framework of comparison between the four projects could have been built upon strategically different purposes and priorities. Urban designers in a time of turbulent social and technological change can and indeed must be prepared to use design to accelerate cultural and organisational change, using persuasion as well as imagination to bridge the social and the physical. Urban design can be strengthened and its relevance ratified, only by its being part of a wider process of cultural, operational and economic revitalisation, a condition that is even more relevant at the urban scale than in individual buildings. Nicki Gavron, the Deputy Mayor of London, asked during the conference what are the differences and what are the relationships between city planning, urban design, landscaping, architecture, interior design. To me all these activities are subsets of design. I should like to conclude by saying that design itself is simply a subset of politics.

URBAN AGE

*a worldwide series of conferences
investigating the future of cities*

*organised by the Cities Programme
at the London School of Economics and
Political Science and the Alfred Herrhausen Society,
the International Forum of Deutsche Bank*

more information on www.urban-age.net