

Preface

This book is about deconstructing urban design in order to give it a new birth and in the process to suggest the structure of knowledge required by an educated urban designer at the onset of a new millennium. As a process, this takes place largely in the immanence of the imagination and only secondarily in the assembly of the material world. It is about hope, love, reflection, monument and myth, desire, death, space, sculpture, ideology, street names, columns and cobbles, memory, architecture and understanding. From these elements, among others, is generated the chemistry from which the ephemerality and transience of urban form comes about. Only then does the design of cities become an object of exchange, of despair or admiration, and of the social production of the urban imaginary. But the urban design of the past century has for too long been the purview of a limited club, and we now seek a common inheritance outside vested interest and professional encroachment.

Understanding Cities concludes a research project begun in 2001. The task was to complete three books or, more accurately, three volumes of the same book, and to explain in my own fashion the essential features of a creative process called urban design. I have been engaged with the discipline for most of my life, both in practice and the academy in Scotland, Greece, the United States, Hong Kong and Australia. The first volume, *Designing Cities* (2003), presented a philosophical position and a framework for urban design knowledge outside the mainstream. It constituted an edited volume of readings, but one with a difference. The intention was not merely to assemble as many readings on urban design as the publishers would allow, letting the readings speak for themselves. In *Designing Cities*, this process was reversed. The articles were chosen in support of a theoretical model whose basic orientation was towards spatial political economy. In so doing, the object was to present a critique of mainstream urban design and to express the need for change. With it came a plea for a deeper and more engaging role for urban design within the social sciences generally and

spatial political economy in particular. The next two volumes attempt to work through the implications, first for theory, then for method.

The second volume, *The Form of Cities* (2006), is a text that covers most of the structural features of the system presented in the first volume and is concerned with the overarching theoretical issues within ten identified components, which represent an inclusive framework for new knowledge. The third volume, *Understanding Cities*, is a book on method or, more accurately, meta-methods. The purpose of all three volumes has been to enhance our understanding of urban design by suggesting an overall framework of knowledge that will permit the discipline a new identity. Hopefully, a new sense of respect will follow, along with greater depth in theory and praxis. In the process, this will automatically place it alongside architecture and urban planning, rather than being subsumed to their interests. It should also finally expunge from our collective memory the inescapable idea, in the former, that a city is merely a larger building and, in the latter, that all we need to do is generate yet another set of design guidelines to move forward. In the process of writing, it will be necessary, as in much of science, to falsify many of the assumptions that have traditionally mystified the subject – ideologies and manifestos that have rendered any legitimation impossible. I maintain that such mystification, deliberate or otherwise, has allowed urban design to be colonised by the associated built-environment disciplines to suit their own purposes. Removing such obfuscation clearly demands that these same disciplines go through a similar process of self-evaluation, having now lost part of their power/knowledge. The same is true of the professions that serve them, and for whom territory denotes existence. This overall process of change is one that is usually met with great resistance, as it signifies a climacteric in the way an entire field may be viewed. Orthodoxy is challenged in theory, practice and education; institutional frameworks are questioned in all three regions, and individual beliefs possibly held for decades are called to account.

Despite such clear resistance, as in science the falsification required by the development of new theory does not imply a lack of respect for the knowledge that has steered us into the present, any more than Einstein's theory of relativity denoted a disrespect for Newton's theory of gravitation. However, it is a simple fact that for any new theory to evolve, prior theory must be falsified and is usually torn down in the process. Nor does such deconstruction suggest that the entire edifice and assumptions of the old paradigm necessarily become redundant. New theory simply clarifies our way of seeing the world. But, unlike science, there is not much in urban design that needs to be demolished, as the existence of substantial theory is singularly absent. So, in tearing apart its history, much of the old theory must be reordered rather than eliminated – despite the idea that the end of history is already with us, or even 'the end of the end of history' (Fukuyama 2006, Kagan 2008). In other words, theory simply has its relations to the present redefined. The same is true in urban design, although, in *The Form of Cities*, I have tried to convey that a generalised incoherence pervades much urban design thinking, as there are several isolated theories in urban design with

rather low levels of refutability, but none of it (Cuthbert 2006). There has been no logic binding the pieces together. Following this basic observation, all three books, including this one, have been focussed on certain guiding propositions:

- 1 The first proposition is that mainstream urban design is self-referential and is neither informed by, nor committed to, any external authority in intellectual terms.
- 2 The second proposition is that urban design must reorient itself to social science as its wellspring, specifically urban sociology, geography and economics.
- 3 The third proposition is that to be scientific, a discipline must have either a real or a theoretical object of enquiry.
- 4 The fourth proposition is that the theoretical object of urban design is civil society, and its real object is the public realm.
- 5 The fifth proposition is that our understanding of the production of design outcomes must change from a modernist, Beaux Arts obsession with form, the Eureka Principle and the cult of master/disciple to one where the organic production of urban forms and spaces are inseparable from economic and social processes.

(Cuthbert 2006)

In considering these propositions in some depth, I came to the conclusion that urban design practice was perilously close to a social technology, without the grounding in social theory that would allow critical self-reflection to flourish. Thus, it is also deprived of a conscience that permits an ethical and moral backbone to exist, and I hasten to add that this is not a reflection on the designers' own commitments. This situation, if accepted, effectively locates urban design as being several realms removed from any substantial theory at all.

In consequence, urban design is littered with a widespread anarchy in its theoretical base, with a false sense of authority left to prevail in practice. Anyone who wishes may call themselves an urban designer and remain unchallenged, if they have been in any way involved in building the city. Hence, architects, planners, engineers, landscape architects, lawyers, surveyors can all call themselves urban designers with impunity. I see this as unsatisfactory, and this situation was a major impetus in writing the above books. I was also aware of a proverbial Gordian knot that in criticising professions for their territorial imperatives and proposing an independent and liberated urban design knowledge, yet another would be created, thus adding to the problem rather than alleviating it. The answer to the conundrum is that, although a new profession may be expendable, new knowledge is not. Anyone claiming to belong to the discipline should be aware of the laws that govern it, the ideologies of control, the explicit content built up over millennia and, most importantly, their place within the overall schema of the subject in which they profess expertise. To allow every individual to decide this for his or herself is to promote the worst kind of anarchy.

This trilogy has been some nine years in the making and, in the process, I have learned a great deal that has modified certain of my opinions and introduced

others. So I plead guilty to certain overall inconsistencies in the texts that owing to my own learning process, I have been unable to eliminate. In this volume, I will make every effort to correct some of these reflections, so that the work retains the capacity to be self-critical of its own content. In conclusion, two items are important. First, I would make no claim that my critique of mainstream urban design could not occur in many different ways, and therefore my work is presented as one possible set of ideas to be discussed and refuted so that we can all move forward on the basis of substantial theory. Indeed, I have been humbled by the writing, as its central accomplishment has been to demonstrate to me the limitations of my own knowledge. Second, to those who would claim that I have at last removed urban design entirely from design issues and design knowledge, I would plead guilty to overstating my case. But I have taught urban design studies for twenty-five years and consider that I am, first and foremost, a designer in the 'designer's' sense of the word. In all things, good design is at the top of my list – but I need to feel that there is more than my own individual talent at stake, that there is much to share in the realm of ideas, and that urban design as a discipline must stand on a bedrock of social and urban theory that must inform and enlighten our design decisions.

Introduction

'Method' is not the name of some 'tool-kit', some series of procedures or protocols to be performed when confronted with a set of objects, it is rather the name that we should give to the way we apprehend and comprehend the objects we attend to . . . How we make contact with the world, how we apprehend it and give it sense, I am going to argue, is not a matter of epistemological absolutes, but it is something that is, or should be, open to scrutiny in terms of ethics, as well as aesthetics and politics. Method falls on the side of form, rather than content. It is what underwrites intellectual production.

(Ben Highmore)

Understanding cities

Having sketched out a theoretical framework in *Designing Cities* and having worked through the detailed implications in *The Form of Cities*, Volume 3, *Understanding Cities*, is the logical extension into epistemology, from 'what should we think about?' to 'how should we think about it?', or – critically – 'how should we think about thinking?'. At the outset, I need to be clear that I am using the same basic principle applied to method as I did with theory in *The Form of Cities*. Here, I have no intention of addressing method *qua* the functional processes of funding, managing and building covered best by the real-estate and construction management disciplines (Klein 2007), techniques and standards in urban design (Gindroz 2003, Eran and Sold 2005), research methods in urban planning (Bracken 1981) or the urban design control mechanisms that implement planning policies in the regulation of projects (Goodchild 1997, Sendich 2006) or, specifically, urban design guidelines. The latter is a favourite topic of urban design theses, a subject almost mined to extinction for content.

Instead, I intend to outline those *meta* methods that organise our thinking, rather than the inherent strategies of getting the job done, processes that Michel de Certeau refers to as *heterology* – ‘a metamethodology which is dedicated to encouraging heterogeneity and allowing alterity to proliferate’ (Highmore 2006: 8). So, as method, this book is not concerned with *what to do* about urban design projects, but *how to think* about what to do. In order to distinguish metamethodologies from methodologies, I feel the need for a clean linguistic break, and will borrow de Certeau’s use of the term *heterology* instead of metamethodology. For some purists, this use of the word will be unsatisfactory, as de Certeau defines it as *a discourse on the other*. In the sense that a metamethodology is a discourse on a discourse, my use may be justified, and my apologies go to the fundamentalists who may for some reason be unhappy with this interpretation. Wherever appropriate, I will retain the word *methods* to cover mainstream design approaches, and *practices* (or technologies) as well as the procedures used by the design professions to organise urban projects. At risk of confusing the issue further, I will, as appropriate, use the word *method* generically, to cover all variations of the term. These distinctions will become clear in use.

My trajectory therefore continues to use the differentiation introduced previously, i.e. to enunciate a theory and heterology of urban design rather than a new theory *in* urban design. In this effort, I will try and stick as closely as possible to the specific content of *The Form of Cities*, using the concepts and ideas deployed there as the points of departure for each chapter to follow. In the process, the reallocated weight of each subject might vary if there is a good reason to do so. In addition, as in the history of capital formation, so theorising urban design is also subject to uneven development. The same will be true in the application of spatial political economy to all aspects of heterology. In other words, a consistent and even surface to the idea of method is both unlikely and unwarranted. As became clear in writing *The Form of Cities*, some regions were saturated with ideas derived from this source, e.g. history, culture, conservation etc., while others, such as aesthetics, were either singularly more difficult to comprehend, or had a much greater resistance to the chosen theoretical framework. This was, of course, anticipated and will likely be no different in the following text. So for those urban designers who are looking for some formulaic typologies or processes that will make their projects better, stop reading now! For those who are prepared to accept a challenge, whereby critical self-reflection is the order of the day, read on.

Chapter summary

The overall guiding principle in the organisation of this book has been that each volume has been structured so it can be read three ways – independently to the others, in series, or in parallel. So this volume not only completes the trilogy, it also derives its structure and focus from the preceding two volumes. Articles presented in *Designing Cities* will be used as prototypical background data from

which various heterologies may be discussed. As in *The Form of Cities*, each article referred to will be coded 'DC' for *Designing Cities*, with a section and page number, e.g. DC8: 275 means Chapter 8 (Aesthetics), page 275. Similarly, the wealth of theoretical issues and debates contained in *The Form of Cities* represents the guiding source from which the various heterologies to be discussed will emanate, although my own learning since the book was begun might, on occasion, modify this relationship. Referencing *The Form of Cities* will therefore adopt a similar notation, e.g. FOC8: 171 means *The Form of Cities*, Chapter 8 (Aesthetics), page 171.

Chapter 1 – Theory – deviates minimally from the overall adopted form, using the heading Theory/Method as several key theoretical issues, previously mentioned but not discussed, lie at the core of the chapter. The reason for this will be transparent to most readers. In this context, *the method of urban design* begins with a paradox – we cannot simply launch into questions of method without reconnecting to the methodological ramifications of particular theories. The most important distinctions are clearly those drawn between the natural and social sciences and the place of urban design in context, or perhaps creatively across boundaries. Here, the writings of Paul Feyerabend, philosopher of science, loom large. His anarchistic views on science appear singularly appropriate, given the current condition of urban design theory. Central to this discussion will be the debates that took place around 1985 as to whether an *urban sociology* is possible, and where knowledge has taken us since that time. We will then take a look at the implications for method and examine core mainstream theory in terms of its incapacity to deal with the larger considerations of heterologies of urban design.

Chapter 2 – History – begins with an overview of the concept of *progress*, which has had an overwhelming impact on the way modern civilisation is conceived and structured. Without it, life would probably be even more dislocated than it is at present. From national economies to family budgets, we are saturated with the idea that we are actually going somewhere, but are we? Second, the idea of *writing* history is addressed, as memory, artefacts and the text constitute our basic resources for heterologies of history. For the sake of simplicity, the concept of *text* will be used to include, for example, art and film as well as written evidence. Third, the method of writing mainstream urban design history will be analysed in order to reveal heterologies that have been deployed by certain of its major proponents in constructing what we currently perceive as urban design history, contrasting these with a seminal example derived from political economy, that of Manfredo Tafuri.

Chapter 3 – Philosophy – advances on the method of historical analysis, including all of the difficulties inherent in trying to separate the two disciplines. Here, heterologies of philosophy encompassed by the various approaches to urban design will be discussed, advancing the methodological orientation implicit to each. Schools of thought that have been particularly influential for both urban studies and urban form, namely Vienna, Frankfurt, Weimar and Chicago, will be referred to, concentrating on the Paris and Los Angeles Schools. Moving from

particular philosophies of urban space rooted in specific geographies, we then investigate those based in semiotics, phenomenology and political economy, all of which are central to any philosophy of urban design. In order to ground these ideas, methodological approaches of the most influential scholars are examined.

In *Chapter 4 – Politics* – the places of political action, civil society and the public realm are considered in terms of their overall methodological implications for urban form. In this task, we begin with a general analysis of the methods through which capital is extracted from space, a process that is central to urban design in all of its forms. The central mechanism through which this is accomplished, that of rent, is then examined. Next, state legitimisation, the key ideology that legitimises the extraction of profit from urban space, is reviewed, to demonstrate its impact on the design of cities. I then move to discuss the actual methods that are available to analyse what we call public space, a concept that is exceedingly difficult to isolate and define.

Chapter 5 – Culture – opens with a general review of the connection between cultural representation and commodity production, prior to analysing its relationship to the methods deployed in tying such concepts together – the promotion of taste and style in relation to signs, symbols and branding. As urban design is the dominant method by which cultural values are erected in space, two key methods are exemplified, namely the monument as *sign* and the New Urbanism as *brand*. The design implications of monumental construction are analysed in relation to a wide-ranging series of examples that reinforce their use as a key design mechanism useful in both the construction and deconstruction of sign systems, which monuments represent. The second method used to illustrate the method of cultural transmission through branding is the New Urbanist agenda, as the predominant design philosophy operating today, adopted by thousands of practices and agencies now on a global basis.

Chapter 6 – Gender – focusses on the general implications of gender for method in urban design. Exemplars in this respect were Henri de Saint Simon, Charles Fourier and Robert Owen. These and other projects had a small but significant impact on the necessary changes to space implied by gender equality, one that lasted well into the twentieth century. From this background context, more recent science has investigated the relationship between nature and nurture, asking whether or not there is such a thing as the female mind, and, hence, the vexed question as to whether or not there can be such a thing as a specifically feminist method of investigation and design. Either way, a ubiquitous heterology of illustrating the concept of gender differences in the urban context (and, hence, for design implications) is that of Baudelaire's *flâneur*. The concept in its various guises is investigated as a useful methodology to encapsulate the subjective experience of urban design and its social significance for gender differences.

In *Chapter 7 – Environment* – the methodological implications for the relationship between nature and urban design will be investigated. The promise of natural capitalism emerges as a highly questionable heterology, given the state of the (un)natural capitalism that currently prevails. I then discuss the approach

of natural ecology and certain fundamentals of the relationship between density and urban form, prior to a detailed examination of the concept within three urban design heterologies, namely vertical architecture, the edible city and the New Urbanism. Several conclusions are drawn from the chapter, which side-steps debates on suburbification versus urban consolidation, and instead challenges our manner of thinking about skyscrapers, suburbs and typologies of urban form.

Chapter 8 – Aesthetics – discusses the overall implications of aesthetics for urban form and culture within the context of globalisation and transnational urban practices. The two major movements in urban design embodying the dominant aesthetic positions of the twentieth century, namely contextualism and rationalism, are mined in order to reveal what might be inferred for process, including the failure of both to generate an aesthetic vocabulary for application to the problems of urbanism in the twentieth century. The dominant emergent heterological implications of symbolic capital, regulation and theming continue the theoretical content of FOC8 as signifying the dominant discourse at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 9 – Typologies – begins with the concept of globalisation as the prevailing form of capitalist enterprise and examines how capitalism as a system of practices affects space in ways different from prior modes of production. Next, the formal production of urban space as a commodified product is described, specifically incorporating professional firms as complicit in this process. Then an overall assessment of development types and spatial structures emerging from globalisation is undertaken, concluding with the spaces of the spectacle as an ikon of capitalist commodity production. The chapter concludes with the other half of the world, which is unable to even enter into the benefits of accumulated wealth manifested in the fixed capital of the built environment – slum, semi-slum and super slum, those whom Fanon refers to as *The Wretched of the Earth* (Fanon 1963) – the burgeoning mass of humanity where urban design adopts inconceivable forms and spaces that challenge all our concepts of urban space and its formation.

Chapter 10 – Pragmatics – concludes this study with a review of the heterologies that have guided design practice in environmental and urban design, concentrating on the twentieth century. Pursuing the idea of heterology as ‘thinking about thinking’, the manifesto represents a dominating concept across the built environmental disciplines. Polemical power is examined, along with the twin concepts of protest and resistance that the manifesto incorporates. The realm of urban development and social change follows, directly investigating and engaging the extensive use of manifestos in art and architecture. The influence of manifestos in the realm of urban design is then exposed, a field not known for its polemical qualities but nonetheless substantially affected by those manifestos that focus on the public realm, ideology and politics.