8 Aesthetics

Art is a revolt against fate.

(André Malraux)

Introduction: issues in aesthetic judgement

The question central to the consciousness of every urban designer is surely the question, what makes a city beautiful? This automatically leads to greater specificity – how should we approach the design of beautiful urban spaces? What should we be thinking about *before* we initiate design strategies, i.e. the technologies that will implement our ideas? How should we deal with the evolution of the city in terms of aesthetic judgement (Porteous 1996, Bosselman 1998, Cinar and Bender 2002, Light and Smith 2005, Berleant 2007a, 2007b, Delafons 1998)? Although aesthetic experience is, in the last resort, a matter of individual discrimination and personal choice, it is also a conditioned event (Rappoport 1977, Wolff 1981, Weber 1995, Orr 2002). Travelling from one's own country to the one next door will immediately demonstrate that the aesthetic experience and how it is valued vary greatly from one place to another and from one generation to the next. Despite such difference, it is tempting to assume that some fundamentals remain that people hold in common. However, the idea that any generic or universal values exist must be seriously challenged (Graham 1997). For example, what could the term *aesthetic* possibly mean when applied to the original aboriginal inhabitants of Australia, who possessed neither settlements nor buildings? Was their aesthetic experience reducible to nature and the realm of the senses, or did an abstract concept of beauty in fact exist?

However, in today's commodity-producing society, the aesthetic experience is significantly integrated with, and conditioned through, the mass media, on the basis of commodity circulation on a global basis. Everybody across the planet can wear Levi jeans and find them aesthetically satisfying. We are continuously

flooded with images, and indoctrinated on a moment-to-moment basis as to how beauty is constituted. Desire is cultivated, and aesthetic values are manipulated, so that mass markets in skin creams, perfume, clothes, automobiles, food, architecture and other commodities can prevail – this year's new car is always better looking (more desirable) than the last. So are there any universals that can inform our judgement of beauty in the realm of urban aesthetics, or are all values, like commodities, social products? More importantly, what methods of thinking about aesthetics have been used in the past, and are these same processes relevant for the present? As urban designers, which heterologies should inform our judgements about the aesthetics of space and form, beyond our own personal or collective 'intuition' about colour, dimensions, movement, form, purpose and the juxtaposition of objects in urban space?

Aesthetic values are progressively modified through modes of production, perception, history and individuation. Hence, each civilisation has provided many of its own answers, variously rooted in the development of biology, mathematics, philosophy, psychology, culture and other factors, and the search has been progressing, both individually and collectively, over millennia (Pickford 1972, Scruton 1974, 1979, Cosgrove 1984, Olsen 1986). In consequence, we must accept the fact that it is a search without any possible resolution, for the simple reason that culture, development, urbanism and the human imagination are dynamic processes, and so aesthetic values are always in a continuous state of flux. They evolve in step with society, as well as in relation to individual perception and experience, and, despite all of our best efforts, *the aesthetic* remains undefinable and evanescent. Although much of this might appear nihilistic (why bother with questions that have no resolution), it is clear that it is the unanswered and most intractable problems that lie at the centre of our existence and accord it value. Hence, the effort to resolve them – or at least to remain in a continuous state of awareness – remains crucial to the evolution of our humanity. Concepts of aesthetics are therefore rooted in philosophical debate, and questions fundamental to our aesthetic engagement with the world, such as 'What is beauty?', 'What is truth?', 'What is the nature of human experience?', also remain unanswered, despite John Keats' famous line in *Ode on a Grecian Urn* (1819): 'beauty is truth, truth beauty. That is all ye know on earth and all ye need to know'.

In *The Form of Cities* (FOC8), I suggested that three major building blocks were central to our understanding of aesthetics and the city. Collectively, they constitute a powerful and interacting conceptual system, within which the dynamics of aesthetic investigation may be played out. All three have an extensive theoretical grounding, and each constitutes a method of thinking about design issues. The first of these is *semiotics*, or the science of meaning. Given that meaning imbues our entire existence as a species, the methods by which meanings are either designed into spaces and places, or are accorded to them through human action, are critical to the designer's understanding and vocabulary (Harvey 1979, Krampen 1979, FOC3: 65–9). Second, *phenomenology* attempts to grapple with the realm of the senses, the direct experience we all undertake

as we interact with the environment around us, where buildings and spaces constitute the governing dimension of urban life, and within which all experience occurs and coexists (FOC3: 69–72). Third, *political economy* allows us insight into how the apparent randomness of individuals, objects and processes is socially and spatially constituted in structuring the urban (FOC: 72–8). Clearly these three positions interact in complex ways, and capitalist production over the last five centuries has had massive effects on consciousness. The nature of human experience has also shifted, as technology, labour, production and culture morph into increasingly diverse relationships. Meanings attached to these processes also result in new signs, associations, behavioural norms and aesthetic values, all of which affect the way we experience the city and, to a large extent, modify its construction. Importantly for urban designers, the built environment, as the major signifier of production, is simultaneously an aesthetic product by the mere fact of its dominant role in our daily life. So what is aesthetic?

Three main aesthetic determinants exist, related to environment, experience and communication. First, our external environment, created from the relationship between nature and human action, is the context within which the carnival of human experience takes place. This environment is subject to design in the broadest sense of the word, i.e. organised by human action. This would include everything, from slums to cathedral precincts or royal palaces. Second, at the level of individuation, we know that our aesthetic experience is conditioned, on the one hand, through the five senses – sight, hearing, touch, taste, smell – and, on the other, by our environment. In many cultures, what we refer to as 'a sixth sense', unrelated to these other five, is also claimed, an unconscious understanding or anticipation of events that evades our rational minds. Third, the aesthetic experience is fundamentally a form of communication between media, individuals and environments. Art, in all of its forms, is a method of transmitting information in a highly specialised manner, as it depends on individual participation and interpretation. In regard to individuation, I have also suggested that we need to add a seventh sense in order fully to appreciate the urban aesthetic, that of kinaesthesia, or the feeling of movement (FOC6: 13). Without the joy of movement, a universal experience of great beauty is removed, as well as several important methods of understanding urban form. The *flâneur*, for example, symbolises the seventh sense in the urban realm, where perambulation through space and the experience of openness and enclosure, vista, landscape and architecture constitute the essence of *flânerie*.

An elementary problem with terminology, however, is that 'aesthetic' usually relates to perceived beauty, art, pleasure and sensuality. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* defines *aesthetic* in various different senses, all of which are concerned with the appreciation of beauty, with an aesthete denoted as 'a person who is appreciative of or sensitive to art and beauty'. Indeed, the Greek verb *aesthesthai* only means 'to perceive', from the root *aestheta*, meaning 'perceptible things' (Pearsall 2001: 28). Therefore, there was nothing in the original meaning that related to beauty, an attribution that was imported from German into English usage at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Hence,

the connection between aesthetics and beauty is a recent construct, unrelated to its origins. This begs the question as to whether the aesthetics of urban form massively exaggerate the visual aspect of cities (predominantly owing to architectural education) and downplay the experiential. Given a definition of aesthetic that relates predominantly to the senses, as in phenomenology, there is nothing to indicate that aesthetic experience should not also be uncomfortable, insulting, dominating, ugly, painful, sinful or terrifying. Consequently, there is no necessary homology between art and aesthetics, despite the fact that there is a homology between aesthetics and beauty. Clearly, much art is designed to shock, and there need not be anything beautiful about it. Aesthetics can also be seen as a set of principles that guide or otherwise influence artistic production, raising the problematic as to whether aesthetic principles and creative processes are transferable from one art form to another.

This idea leads us inevitably into the question of aesthetics and form – music, sculpture, painting, literature, the theatre, poetry, film, architecture and the inevitable cross-fertilisation between them. Each form adds additional vectors to the problematic of aesthetics as a whole, for example 'a vast number of clichés and commonplaces, nurtured by centuries of theatre, have unfortunately also found a resting place in the cinema' (Tarkofsky 1986: 24). Even within any chosen art form, the process of arriving at a final aesthetic statement varies immensely, depending on a host of other factors embedded within the creative process. Johann Wolfgang Von Goethe famously described architecture as 'frozen music', posing the question, 'so what does the building sound like?'. The great American painter Mark Rothko also gave his own answer to the production of art in an address at the Pratt Institute in 1958. He offered what he considered to be the essential formula for a work of art (note that he did not say 'painting'):

- There must be a clear preoccupation with death – intimations of mortality . . . Tragic art, romantic art etc., deals with the knowledge of death.
- Sensuality. Our basis of being concrete about the world. It is a lustful relationship to things that exist.
- Tension. Either conflict or curbed desire.
- Irony. This is a modern ingredient – the self-effacement and examination by which a man for an instant can go on to something else.
- Wit and play . . . for the human element.
- The ephemeral and chance . . . for the human element.
- Hope. Ten per cent, to make the tragic concept more endurable.

Rothko's statements are not unique in their reflections on darkness and hope, and his sentiments parallel those in the conclusion to *Sculpting in Time*, the great Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky's flaying of himself, where he discusses the aesthetics of film:

> What is art/is it good or evil? From God or from the devil? From man's strength or from his weakness? Could it be a pledge of fellowship, an image

> of social harmony, Might that be its function? Like a declaration of love: the consciousness of our dependence on each other. A confession. An unconscious act that none the less reflects the true meaning of life – love and sacrifice.
>
> (Tarkovsky 1986: 239)

It is interesting, given these two examples of the aesthetic content of art and aesthetics, with regard to their direct application to the aesthetics of cities, whether or not in the urban designer's toolkit such questions ever arise. Whether these ideas are relevant to designing cities I leave to others to judge, but even a preliminary glance at Rothko's seven elements raises significant questions as to the aesthetics of urban design. In order to ground the form of the city and the city beautiful as heterology, much of this chapter will focus on what was in the designer's mind as he/she considered the aesthetics of urban form. This will be continued in the final chapter, where the manifestos of various influential movements in art and architecture suggested what the city meant and how it should be formed.

Aesthetic production, art and the city

So, how do we understand the methods used by designers in generating the aesthetics of urban form? Given the designer's need to create beauty, what insights do we have available that can inform the designer's actions? Roger Scruton, in his classic text *The Aesthetics of Architecture* (1979), suggested three central heterologies from which architectural and urban space come about. These derive from Freud, Saussure and Marx and have had a wide range of application. The governing heterology common to all three was, of course, the methods of structuralist thought that pervaded the twentieth century (see also his chapter on the aesthetic attitude in *Art and Imagination* (1974)).

Freud

Sigmund Freud, arguably the seminal psychologist of the twentieth century, has been eulogised and despised with equal fervour. Famous for inventing the method of psychoanalysis, Freud had an immense impact, not only on social science in its entirety, but also on literature and the arts. His investigation into the structure of the human psyche is unparalleled in the modern world, with the possible exception of Carl Gustav Jung, who was his student. The structure of the mind (id, ego and superego), the development of sexuality (anal, oral and genital), archetypal forms such as the Oedipus and Electra complexes, and even the term *psychology*, all owe their origins to Freud. The concept of critical theory originating in the Frankfurt School pays as much homage to Freud as it does to Marx, given that its central focus was to generate an encompassing formulation

of civilisation and its discontents through a marriage of psyche and economy. If aesthetics is indeed embedded in the realm of the senses, then it is clear that Freud's influence had few boundaries. A central theme of Freud's psychology was the repressive principle in society, and his great contribution was in developing a sociology of the unconscious mind, maintaining that society's institutions and personal neuroses were interlinked. There was no point in unravelling individual neurosis and returning a healthy person to a society whose institutions were fundamentally sick. In this context, Robert Bocock says:

> The social institutions of traditionalism, such as religion and ideology, can also be seen as deformed, pathological modes of communication.

He goes on to quote directly from Freud:

> Knowledge of the neurotic afflictions of individuals has well served the understanding of the major social institutions, for neuroses ultimately reveal themselves as attempts to solve, on an individual basis, the problems of wish compensation that ought to be solved socially by institutions.
> (Bocock 1976: 31)

Central to Freud's method was the analysis of neurosis by way of deconstructing the meanings embedded in dreams. Neurotic behaviour, fundamentally a conflict between thoughts and feelings, could be understood and treated by revealing its sources. In this process, the relationship between fantasy and reality, repression and sublimation, the real and the surreal, and the nature of longing and desire, are all suspended in a dynamic balance (frequently imbalance) – between instinct, awareness and sacrifice. Probably the best and most direct example of Freud's effect on aesthetics is in the surrealist and Dada movements of modern art, exemplified in the paintings of artists such as Salvador Dalí, Joan Miró, René Magritte, Max Ernst and a host of others. However, this reduces the scale of Freud's influence to one particular form of expression. The overall impact of Freud's method on aesthetics is the manner in which his basic conceptual system is used in analysis or design in the execution of aesthetic judgement, in architecture and urban design as in other dimensions of human endeavour – in literature, painting, poetry, film, music and other art forms.

Roger Scruton's book *The Aesthetics of Architecture* was groundbreaking when it was published in 1979, and Chapters 6 and 7 are instructive. The psychoanalyst Hannah Segal and the poet/painter Adrian Stokes had already suggested the connection between psychoanalysis and aesthetics, but Scruton was among the first to connect architectural aesthetics directly to theories central to social theory: psychology, language and historical materialism, reflecting his belief that 'the cultivation of aesthetic experience, without corresponding adoption of a critical point of view is nothing more than self-deception' (Scruton 1979: 137). He goes on to state that Freud himself was critical of a psychoanalytic aesthetics, considering that, while psychoanalysis might have much to say about creativity,

it was unable to say much about the results. This opinion was not shared by one of Freud's acolytes, Melanie Klein, and the architectural critic Adrian Stokes. Scruton notes that great architecture is capable of generating profound emotion in individuals, and that the sources of such emotion are to be found in the psychoanalytical depth of individual consciousness: 'to describe those sentiments psychoanalytically is at the same time to describe their value. We are therefore one step on the way to an account of success in architecture' (Scruton 1979: 146).

Of all repressed desires, sexuality probably takes pride of place in any hierarchy. Sexualising buildings and spaces therefore constitutes a prime mode of operation, and the relation between Freud and sexuality is universally recognised. The Freudian approach considers the ego/personality to be a mask, with the real impetus driving individual action coming from the (repressed) unconscious mind. Therefore, unless designers are extremely aware of their own hidden repressions and desires (almost never), then clearly urban form becomes a major outlet for the subconscious to assert itself in the built environment. Architecture and urban form therefore represent a potentially fertile canvas for designers to express their favourite neurosis (conflict) or psychosis (fantasy), and I can only begin to mention here a few of the most obvious Freudian traits that appear in three-dimensional form. Dominant among these is fetishism, a fetish being defined as any object that substitutes for perceived castration, real or otherwise: 'Fetishism is a refusal of loss: the fetish object blocks or displaces this traumatic discovery of loss. By nature a fetish is also preoccupied with surface appearances that conceal a deeper anxiety, a more profound sense of loss' (Pouler 1994: 182). Pouler goes on to suggest that the resultant insecurity encourages a retreat to the imaginary world of the past, where the facts of the present are substituted in a surreal return to the happy certainties of yesterday. History then becomes a method of counteracting the insecurity of the present. He maintains that a fetishistic mentality is the method of postmodern architecture, where:

> historical styles are revived against the realities of the contemporary; style is inherently concealed with an image, in the surface quality of the architecture, in facades, masks, and decorated sheds (what is seen dominates what is known); and buildings and plazas – that is, form and space – substitute for a legitimate phenomenology of place that once provided for the ontological needs of individuals and groups.
>
> (Pouler 1994: 182)

While we can interpret postmodern history as fetishistic, fetishism has more direct and obvious effects. The most obvious expression here is in high-rise development, where phallic symbolism and penis-fixation have been held responsible for the ongoing obsession with skyscraper architecture. Beginning most notably with architect Frank Lloyd Wright's visionary Mile High Skyscraper of 1956 (which was never built), half a century later the endless

competition by urban authorities for tallest building in the world still continues. The corollary that women's subconscious expression of their own sexuality would reflect womb-like spaces, all curves, nurturing, cloistered and close to the earth, is the parallel. Likewise, the association of women with elaborate decoration and chintzy ornament was an aesthetic stigma that placed them in contravention with the modernist project and its architecture. Overall, such interpretations do nothing for gender equality. They are crudely symbolic and deny the complexity of gender differences, which have more to do with politics than skyscrapers. It assumes that the male fixation with erections, architectural or otherwise, is so absolute that all central business districts, from Manhattan to Hong Kong, owe their existence to the idea. This is clearly ridiculous, ignoring, as it does, such things as urban politics, market forces, urban densities and planning action, and the fact that many famous cities, such as Haussmann's Paris, did not have any buildings over five storeys in height. Freud's famous dictum that 'sometimes a cigar is just a cigar' appears to have been overlooked, though some writers still cling to phallic symbolism:

> Female urban form means the end of 'the phallus' as architect of all those oppositions and hierarchies – male over female, youth over age, beauty over ugliness, all those oppositions and hierarchies upon which Classical value and meaning depend. Female urban form means the death of architecture as phallic differentiation.
>
> (Bergren 1998: 89)

Saussure

The important theoretical aspects of semiology and semiotics were covered in FOC 3: 65–9. The discipline had a curious beginning, with the simultaneous framing of the science of meaning first in the United States in the work of Charles Sanders Pierce, who used the term *semiotics*, and in Europe in the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, who named his own philosophy *semiology*. Strictly speaking, the terminology should be applied discriminately. Here, the term semiotics will be applied heterologically to encompass the general methodology of analysing or integrating meanings in built forms. I have also included two articles that describe the semiotic method in Mark Gottdiener's article, *Recapturing the Centre: A Semiotic Analysis of Shopping Malls* (DC3), and Sarah Chapin's *Heterotopia Deserta*; (DC9: 26), which analyses Las Vegas and other places. Semiotics considered as heterological to design is a method whereby meanings incorporated into built form and space may be deconstructed (and therefore understood) or, alternatively, consciously designed. Around 1980, when postmodernism had gained a firm footing, three seminal works appeared on semiotic method – Krampen's book *Meaning in the Urban Environment* (1979) and two books by Preziosi, *The Semiotics of the Built Environment* (1979a) and *Architecture Language and Meaning* (1979b). These were updated

by Gottdiener in *Postmodern Semiotics* (1995). Each is a seminal study in the method of urban semiosis, deriving formal meanings from linguistic interpretations and using the vocabulary of semiotic analysis – pragmatic, syntactic, semantic, sign, image, symbol, langue and parole. The overall process constitutes an attempt to clarify the way 'in which architectural objects are processed cognitively, if not as signs of communication, at least as meaningful instruments, in order for the urban environment to become viable for human beings' (Krampen 1979: 1).

The importance of semiotics for architecture and urban design cannot be overestimated, as it constitutes a major factor in distinguishing between modernism and postmodernism. To be pragmatic for a moment, modernism as structural functionalism used the method of eliminating meanings incorporated into architectural form and detailing as a way of expressing beauty. By this means, it was thought that the true function/beauty of a building could be accessed and fully expressed, as exemplified in the work of the great modernists such as Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Walter Gropius etc. (Figure 8.1). However, the idea that the complexity of buildings such as hospitals, schools and city halls

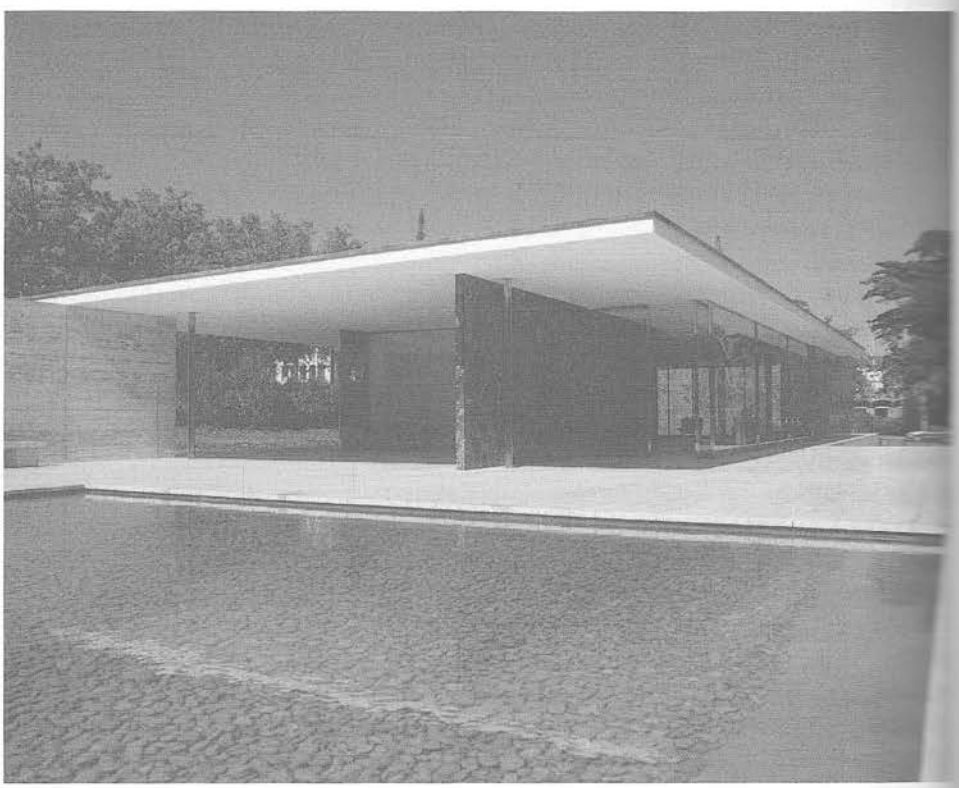


Figure 8.1 The Barcelona Pavilion by Mies van der Rohe
Source: © age fotostock/SuperStock

could be reduced to a single apparent function was absurd. Most buildings had multiple functions to perform, which made the idea of functionalism as an appropriate form of expression somewhat tenuous, unless the concept was wholly limited to technology. Postmodernism, on the other hand, reversed this process, by deliberately incorporating referents from other contexts, meanings, places, histories etc. It argued that buildings, monuments, spaces and other urban elements had multiple functions to perform over the mechanical, witness Charles Moore's Piazza D'Italia in New Orleans (Figure 8.2). Indeed, the more referents a building incorporated, the richer it seemed to become. The adopted method was that of the text. The built environment could be viewed as a multiplicity of texts that could then be constructed or deconstructed in accordance with reference to the methods of linguistic analysis. As texts are, by definition, cultural products, the built environment had the capacity, not only to reveal hidden meanings, but also, more importantly, to consciously link architecture and culture. Despite the fact that Pierce and Saussure were the progenitors of structuralist semiotic method, it was up to others to advance methods of deconstruction within postmodernism. The linguistic theory referred to was that of the structuralists (Piaget, Chomsky and Helmsjev) but also of its extension into poststructuralist semiotics – Gottdiener, Barthes, Kristeva and others. What we can say, however, is that the aesthetic process set in place by modernist

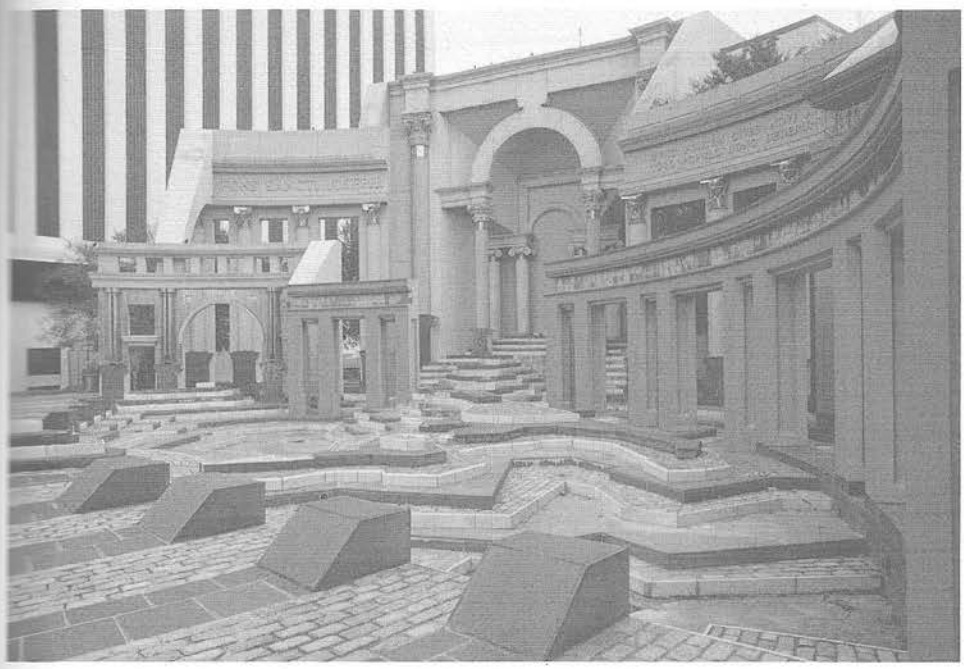


Figure 8.2 The Piazza D'Italia in New Orleans, by Charles Moore. A supreme example of the use of semiotics in postmodern urbanism

Source: © Robert Holmes/Corbis

urbanism was one where beauty was conflated with function. In postmodernism, we can say speculate that beauty is based in communication, and how much of the text is stored, revealed, transformed or hidden.

Needless to say, there is no one method of analysis or design, and there are a multiplicity of methods from which to choose. Many of these are difficult to follow, and only a flavour of what is involved may be given here. Krampen, for example, follows the heterology of Saussurian method, whereby meanings are revealed in the relationship between the signifier and signified. He demonstrates the experiential aspect of what is signified, for example, in relation to his study of various types of building facade (Figure 8.3) and illustrates, in a multiplicity of ways, the semiotic structure of architectural connotation that lies behind the aesthetic experience of individuals in relation to various aspects of architectural and urban form (Figure 8.4). Aesthetic values are not determined by abstract ideas of beauty and are seldom mentioned. The inference is that aesthetic value is based on the relationship between individual perception and the satisfaction

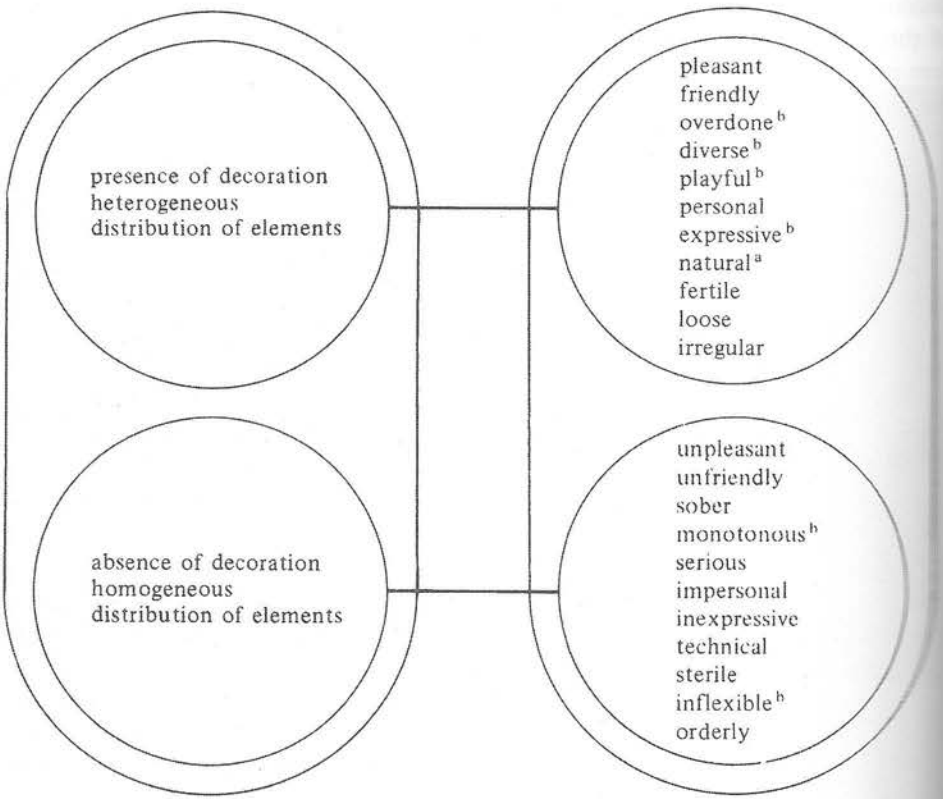


Figure 8.3 The semiotic structure of architectural connotation. In this structure, the universe of the signified is coordinated with the universe of the signifier, in which two kinds of facade are opposed

Source: M.K. Krampen, *Meaning in the Urban Environment*. London: Pion, 1973, p. 299, Fig. 5.2

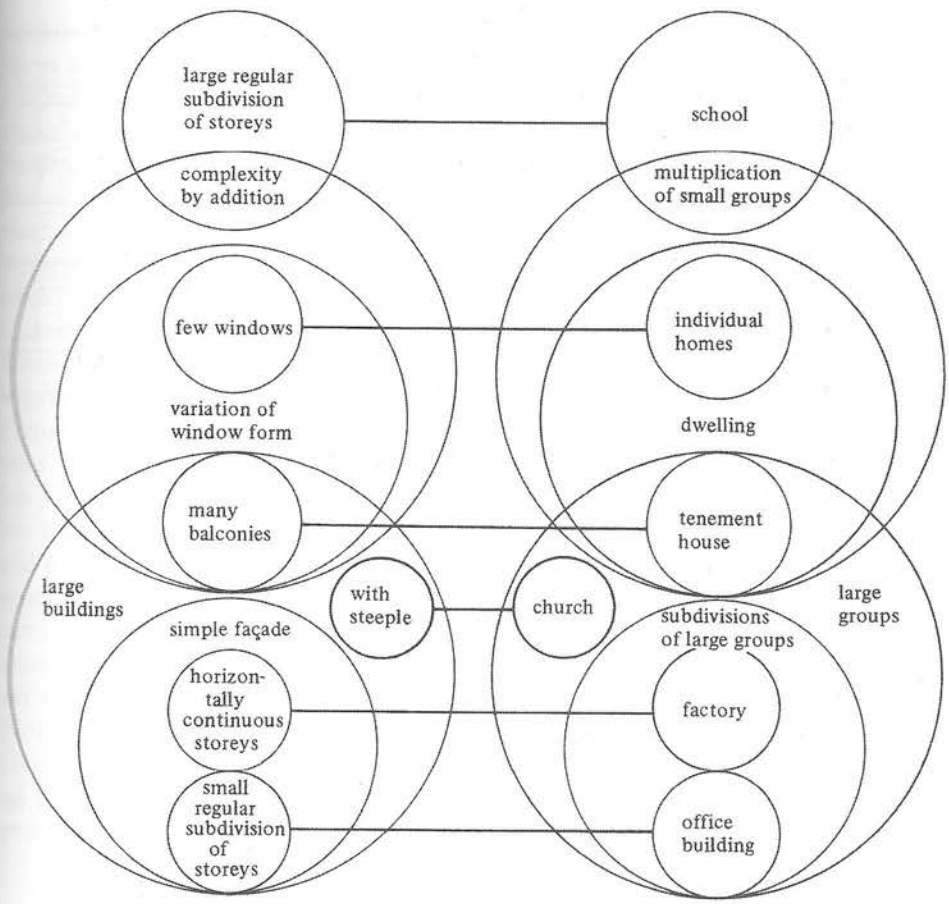


Figure 8.4 The hypothetical semiotic structure between the level of the signified, namely small-group and large-group activities defining the social functions of buildings (on the right), and the level of the signifier, namely building design features (on the left)

Source: M.K. Krampen, *Meaning in the Urban Environment*. London: Pion, 1973, p. 177, Fig. 4.63

that results from the sign formation of buildings. Figure 8.5 illustrates the method of layering in an architectural facade that results from a correlation between individual satisfaction and semiotic content.

Marx

While it might seem a stretch of the imagination to conjoin Marx and aesthetics, there is a significant body of literature that explores Marx's philosophy of aesthetic production, albeit mostly embedded in more general texts on social theory, art or ideology. The subject is more directly tackled in Vazquez (1973),

Figure 8.5 Five successive stages in 'supersign' formation of an architectural facade
Source: M.K. Krampen, *Meaning in the Urban Environment*. London: Pion, 1979, p. 249, Fig. 5.18

Zis (1977) and Marcuse (1968). Raphael (1981), Johnson (1984), Eagleton (1990), Graham (1997) and I have also covered Marxist economic theory and political economy in relation to politics, ideology and urban planning at length in FOC3: 72–81 and FOC4: 85–9. In contradistinction to other theories of art, the clue to Marxist and neo-Marxist aesthetics lies in understanding the mechanisms that structure aesthetic production as part of economic production as a whole. Therefore, the most obvious relation of Marxism to aesthetic method is in the capacity of works of art to resist or otherwise comment on those forces that Marx identified as being oppressive, or, alternatively, in their capacity to critically appraise and portray methods of resistance against class oppression. To this extent, Marxist aesthetics are revolutionary in spirit and operate within a moral compass that considers art in the context of ideology and history. As a prime objective, art should focus on the amelioration of society by resisting oppression in all of its forms, commenting on social injustice and providing a radical critique of bourgeois society. In other words, true art should not constitute yet another bourgeois method of storing capital. However, within capitalism, artistic production is tied into the market mechanism, and the artist (read architect or urban designer) is in turn affected by the historical circumstances

within which his/her work is produced. Art then becomes a highly specialised form of surplus value within the overall labour process.

Overall, Adolfo Sanchez Vazquez's essays on Marxist aesthetics remain the most comprehensive treatment of the subject. His analysis is complex and fragmented, owing to the construction of the book from twenty-four essays, but a few key features of his argument need to be elaborated. Vazquez notes that, although Marx did not write a definitive treatise on aesthetics, nonetheless he was keenly interested in all aspects of the subject, and it was left to others such as Kautsky, Lafargue and Plekhanov, and later to Althusser, Lukacs, Gramsci, Benjamin, Jameson and Eagleton, to elucidate the Marxian method. Unfortunately, capitalist ideology has demonised Marx's name as a primeval version of 'the great Satan' (in Indonesia, for example, his three volumes of *Capital* were only removed from censorship in 2008, a century and a half after they were written). Hence, there is a somewhat universal tendency to associate his views on aesthetics with all things socialist and communist, forgetting that his lifetime's work was a critique of capitalism, not socialism, about which he did not have much to say. However, the association sticks, and there is a similar tendency to view Marxist aesthetics as *method*, coming to fruition in the realist art of socialist societies (see Figure 8.6). Marxist aesthetics then becomes associated with that of the Soviet Union in the mid 1930s or, by extension, the art of all so-called socialist societies and the social realist art of China, Cuba, North Vietnam and Albania etc. in the course of the twentieth century. Nothing could be further from the truth. This is, indeed, an extremely crude interpretation of Marx's conception of aesthetics and the relationship between aesthetic production, material production, ideology and moral values.

> However, the favourable conditions created in the Soviet Union in the early thirties, in which a thorough and creative study of Marx's aesthetic ideas might have provided the foundation for a scientific, open minded, non-normative Marxist aesthetic, were seriously undermined when the Stalinist regime began to give rise to increasingly dogmatic, sectarian and class subjectivist methods in aesthetic theory and artistic practice.
>
> (Vazquez 1973: 19)

In that context, literature, painting, graphic design, sculpture and architecture were concentrated exclusively in the service of the state, glorifying its accomplishments, celebrating labour and censoring non-conformity to these ideals with great vengeance. Nonetheless, and despite these overpowering limitations, iconic art and indeed entire genres (constructivism, futurism etc.) still managed to emerge, producing artists such as Popov, Rodchenko, Tatlin, El Lissitsky, Leonidov, Krinsky, Miljutin, Malevitch, Tarkovsky etc. The art of the Soviets in the mid 1930s would likely constitute the high point of the genre:

> But in the same way that capitalism, being hostile to art, has known great works of art, socialism does not by itself guarantee an art superior to that

Figure 8.6
Example of Soviet socialist realist art: poster
Source: IAM/AKG Images

> created under capitalism; numerous factors, both objective and subjective, have a bearing on this matter. In short the law of the uneven development of art and society, from a qualitative point of view, always presents a constant need for art to transcend its limits, thus preventing artists from completely settling down under the accomplishments of the society as a whole.
>
> (Vazquez 1973: 103)

Hence, there is no necessary relation between the methods used in artistic production, the political form of the state and the historical processes of capital accumulation. There are several reasons for this, the most fundamental being that all modern societies, communist, socialist or capitalist, are hostile to the production of works of art, simply because of their inherent capacity for resistance to social and political inequality, whatever system prevails. One could also argue that there has been a greater reflection of the spirit of Marxian aesthetics within capitalism than there has been in any so-called socialist states

during the twentieth century, owing to a greater relative autonomy of art and therefore of the artistic freedom that Marx supported. On the other hand, as material production alienates the worker from his/her object, so the process of artistic production as a means of subsistence within capitalism automatically undermines the objective capacity of artistic production – the artist has to survive within the market and is affected by the logic of commodity production as a whole, and this clearly applies to architecture and urban design. Whereas Freud's method concentrated on the incarceration of individual aesthetics within the psychological body, Marx's concern was with those methods by which capitalism turns the human body into an object in the process of producing commodities, and how the same body becomes alienated from the work process by becoming commodified itself. Or, as Terry Eagleton puts it:

> Marx is most profoundly 'aesthetic' in his belief that the exercise of human senses, powers, and capacities is an absolute end in itself, without the need of utilitarian justification; but the unfolding of this sensuous richness for its own sake can be achieved, paradoxically, only through the rigorously instrumental practice of overthrowing bourgeois social relations. Only when the bodily drives have been released from the despotism of abstract need, and the object has been similarly restored from functional abstraction to sensuously particular use value will it be possible to live aesthetically.
>
> (Eagleton 1990: 202)

In other words, the human body is atomised within capitalism and both legally and existentially reduced to an item of property. Like others, the artist is caught within this frame of reference. Only by escaping from this context can Freud's pleasure principle be realised, thus liberating the capacity for true aesthetic experience unsullied by oppressive mechanisms that are devoid of moral content.

The contextualist method and aesthetic production

The two great design traditions of the twentieth century were those of contextualism and rationalism (FOC: 179–86). Risking oversimplification, we can say that contextualism is an appeal to the heart, to emotion, to the senses and to experience, and is closely related to phenomenology (particularly that of Norberg-Schulz). Needless to say, both movements are themselves rooted in historical antecedents stretching back over millennia, having clear methodological principles that continue to affect the design of cities today. The contextualist tradition as a conscious design idiom stems more recently from Gian Battista Nolli's plan for Rome (1768) and Camillo Sitte's classic *The Art of Building Cities* (1945 (orig. 1889)). The movement was given renewed impetus in Britain when the ravages of the industrial revolution, combined with the blitzkrieg of the Second World War, created outrage in the general population. This general

feeling was first expressed publicly in two issues of *The Architectural Review*, aptly called 'Outrage' and 'Counter attack' (Nairn 1955, 1956). These were followed by *The Concise Townscape*, arguably the seminal publication that dealt directly with the aesthetic qualities of towns and cities in England, with strategies for their improvement, concentrating on the principle of serial vision (Cullen 1961; see Figures 8.7 and 8.8). Thereafter, the methods of creating good 'townscapes' became embedded as a strategic method both for analysing and promoting good urban design. A plethora of other 'townscape' publications followed, such as *British Townscapes* (Johns 1965), *Townscapes* (Burke 1976), *The Aesthetic Townscape* (Asihara 1983), *How to Design the Aesthetics of Townscape* (Goakes 1987) and *Making Townscape* (Tugnutt and Robertson 1987). Other classics of the period (1955–85), not using the term *townscape* in the title, must also include *The Image of the City* (Lynch 1960), *Man-made America: Chaos or Control?* (Tunnard 1963), *God's Own Junkyard* (Blake 1964), *Place and Placelessness* (Relph 1976) and *Great Planning Disasters* (Hall 1982). More generally, others have echoed the same sentiment up to the present time (Bacon 1965, Jellicoe and Jellicoe 1987, Gindroz 2003).

Despite their impact, few of the preceding texts actually prescribe a method of approach to the question of contextualism in practice, choosing to lead by example rather than any specific methodology, and many appealing to sentiment as much as to logic, i.e. think how lovely the world would be if we could all live in a wonderful English/American village or small town. In addition, it is also notable how many texts are stuck in the question of scale at the level of the village or town, and it is an open question as to whether or not the inherent principles of the townscape tradition are relevant for today's Internet-driven, neocorporate global cities. To put things in perspective before looking at *Townscape* (1961), and given that the book took several years to produce, Cullen was separated from Camillo Sitte (1889) by a distance comparable with that between himself and today's designers.

Hence, *Townscape* now possesses an aura of antiquity, somewhat exaggerated by the edition, which is cramped, disorganised, archaic in its language, overflowing with subjectivity and somewhat unreadable. Nonetheless, it stands as a masterful piece of intuition that clearly exposes a particular vision of the essential features of beautiful towns and cities. It fits neatly into the three design strategies traditionally used by architects, namely the inertia, scientific or intuitive methods. Smith notes that elements of each approach are inherent in the other two, so that the methods are not shrink-wrapped within their own logic. The inertia method is ubiquitous, reflecting the status quo almost everywhere, a process encouraged by standardisation in order to reduce design and construction costs. The scientific method utilises the laws of reason and logic, an approach significantly reflected in the structural functionalism of the modernist period. The intuitive method 'allows unconscious information processing to dictate a conscious solution' (Smith 1974: 228). It is this latter method that characterises the townscape tradition, and Cullen's *Townscape* is a case in point.

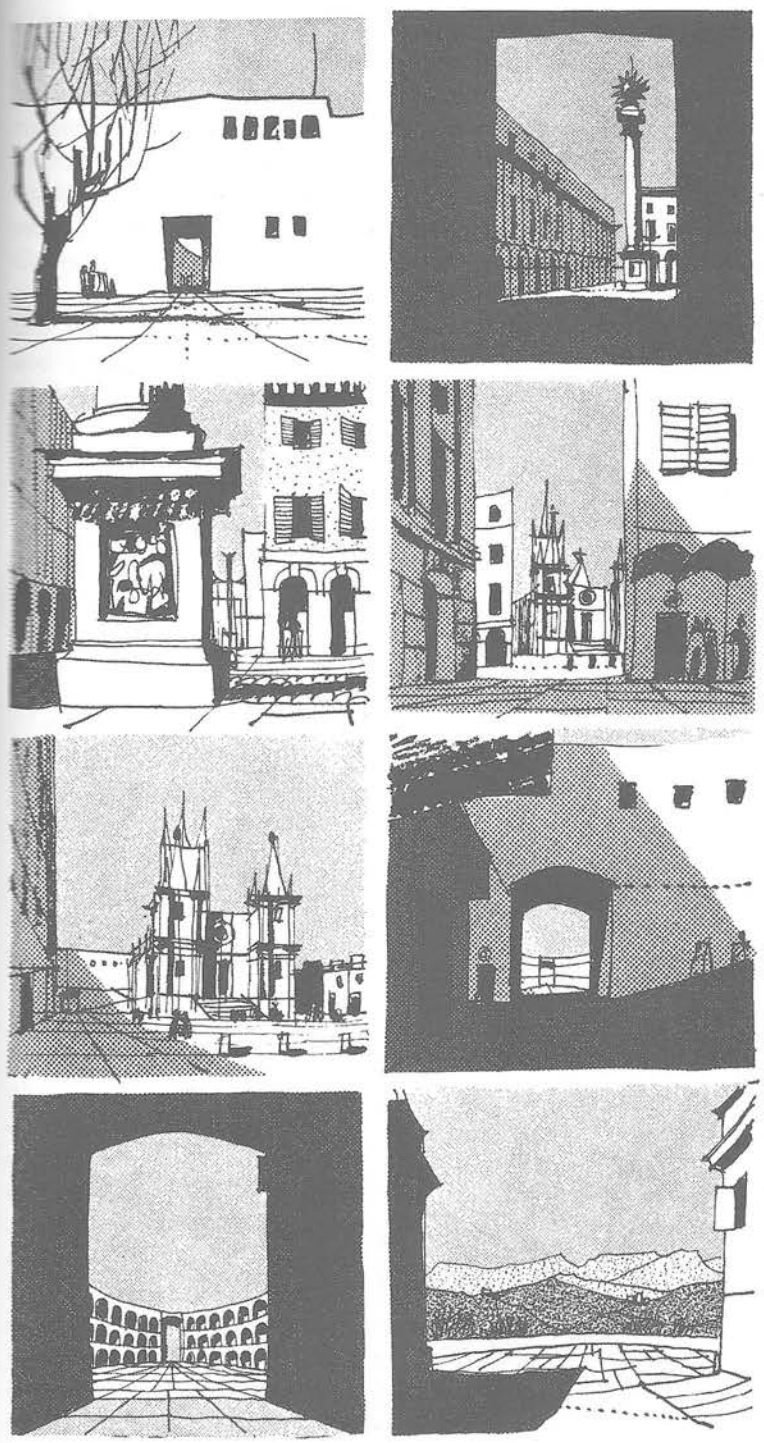
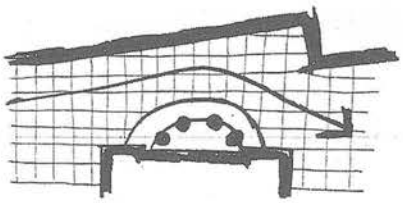
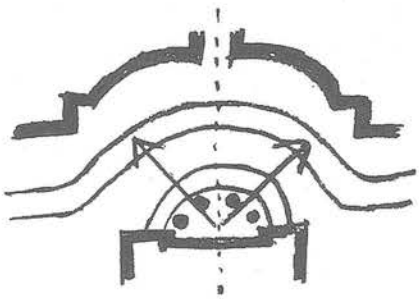


Figure 8.7 Example of the principles of serial vision
Source: G. Cullen, *The Concise Townscape*. London: The Architectural Press, 1961, p. 6

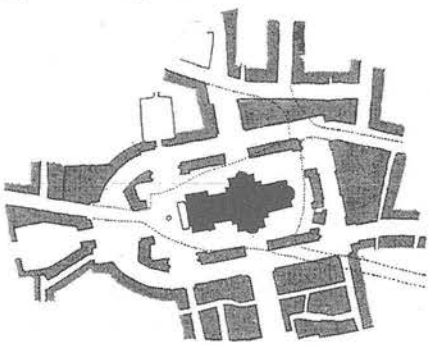


14 Wren's plan at the north portico of St Paul's.



15 The Beaux Arts solution.

16 Royal Academy scheme.



17 *Architectural Review* scheme.

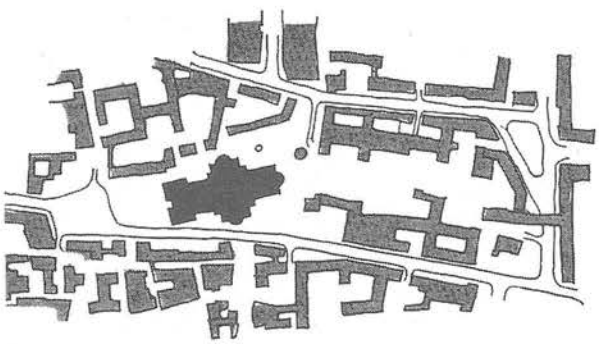


Figure 8.8 Four schemes for St Paul's Cathedral precinct, London

Source: G. Cullen, *The Concise Townscape*. London: The Architectural Press, 1961, p. 296, Figs 14–17

His book is divided into four parts. The first provides a casebook of studies, where three specific elements are highlighted, namely serial vision, place and content, along with what he calls 'the functional tradition', which has little bearing on modernism. His entire analytical method in the book is based almost exclusively on these three dimensions. Second, he undertakes a series of general studies of elements of townscape in England. Third, eight town studies are provided of, for example, Ludlow, Shrewsbury and Shepton Mallet. Finally, Cullen brings his prior considerations to bear on proposals for a variety of urban contexts, including cathedral precincts, urban redevelopment areas, new towns and other projects. His method of analysis (and implied method of aesthetics and design) is based almost exclusively on serial vision, place and content. Cullen's adopted method is unabashedly nationalistic (English), relative, highly subjective and personal. Aesthetic experience is reduced almost exclusively to what is seen, and, in this regard, science is rejected as a method of generating visual interest:

> Firstly we have to rid ourselves of the thought that the excitement and drama that we seek can be born automatically out of the scientific research and solutions arrived at by the technical man (or the technical half of the brain). We naturally accept these solutions but are not entirely bound by them . . . this means that we can get no further help from the scientific attitude, and that we must turn to other values and other standards . . . We turn to the faculty of sight, for it is almost entirely through vision that the environment is apprehended.
>
> (Cullen 1961: 10)

Having rejected science as insufficiently accommodating, Cullen then focusses almost exclusively on optics and the visual dimension, specifically the method implied in what he terms *serial vision*. By this, he refers to the shifting complexity of the visual experience that is present in many organic towns and cities, i.e. those that have largely resisted any form of planning. Clearly, this does not necessarily exclude other forms of planned development, such as Haussmann's plan for Paris, but most of Cullen's extensive examples would suggest that this is a rare occurrence. The overall implication is that urban design must be organised in such a manner that the citizen's movement through space provides a constantly shifting kaleidoscope of visual interest, an objective few would disagree with. Also implied is the idea that such complexity enriches human experience, stimulates the memory and imparts emotional content. Hence, from moment to moment, we may be enthralled, pacified, stimulated, amazed, seduced, challenged or filled with wonder by the environment around us. Such effects are historically generated through the organisation of space and materials that collectively form the built environment. Moreover, the basic argument is that, through understanding of the emotional effects of buildings and spaces, they may be reproduced to create complex and interesting environments rather than the sterile wastelands that constitute many cities worldwide.

After serial vision, Cullen then deals with *place* in terms of kinaesthetics and the positioning of the body in space. Important to this idea are the experiences of exposure and enclosure, which in their extreme forms result in agoraphobia or claustrophobia. Although these experiences can be generated in all of us through extreme enclosure in space, being in a cave, a tunnel, a tiny room or a small passage between two buildings, or through exposure, as in hill towns in Greece, Italy or Spain, where dwellings can be built on the top of cliffs that drop off several hundred metres, most urban spaces do not offer such extremes. Nonetheless,

> If we design our towns and cities from the point of view of the moving person, (pedestrian or car-borne) it is easy to see how the city becomes a plastic experience, a journey through pressures and vacuums, a sequence of exposures and enclosures, of constraint and relief.
>
> (Cullen 1961: 12)

This method of approach was amplified specifically in regard to the automobile in *The View from the Road* (Appleyard *et al.* 1964), *Freeways* (Halprin 1966) and *Road Form and Townscape* (McCluskey 1979), and, for the *flâneur*, Macauley (2000). The possession of place in the mind of the observer is fundamental to Cullen's consideration, frequently echoing the writing of Norberg-Schulz's phenomenology when he says, 'he is in IT or entering IT or leaving IT, we discover that no sooner do we postulate a HERE than automatically we must create a THERE, for you cannot have one without the other' (Cullen 1961: 12). Perhaps the idea was expressed most succinctly in Gertrude Stein's famous remark about her own home in Oakland, California, that, 'there is no there, there.'

The final element in Cullen's method is what he calls 'content'. By this, he means traditional referents familiar to all architects, namely colour, texture, scale, style, character, personality and uniqueness, the palette from which designers draw inspiration. Serial vision, place and content embrace the basic elements that, collectively, underwrite the methods intuitively adopted by urban designers. Despite the fact that Cullen leaves little to the imagination, he also abandons the designer to a completely blank canvas when it comes to a stated set of elements or processes that designers can reference. Notably, Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* was published one year before *Townscape* (1960) and is significantly more useful in guiding designers after their intuition has been exhausted (see Bannerjee and Southworth (1990) for a full account of Lynch's work). Lynch later refined his theoretical work in the *Image of the City* with regard to the actual planning of the site (Lynch 1971) and to a more encompassing urban process in Lynch (1981). Lynch's five elements of good urban form – paths, edges, districts, nodes and landmarks – are known to all architects as the key method to bring about a legible built environment. In turn, methods of classifying each have been studied, and typologies have been suggested. For example, a typological method for districts or tourist precincts is given in Hayllar *et al.* (2008: 41, 54), as follows:

- recreation or tourism business districts
- tourist shopping villages
- historic or heritage quarters
- ethnic precincts or quarters
- cultural precincts or quarters
- entertainment precincts
- red-light districts or bohemian quarters
- waterfront precincts
- festival marketplaces.

An exemplary methodology for urban precinct development is also given in Ritchie (2008), which shows the extent to which the concept of urban image is embedded within the development process (Ritchie 2008: 168; Figure 8.9). In addition, he also suggests a functional typology of precincts in terms of use and character:

- meeting places
- places of orientation
- comfort zones
- places of respite or refuge
- play spaces
- encounter zones
- zones of intimacy
- zones of authenticity
- zones of distinctiveness and contrast.

This typological approach to method has its origins in the work of Cullen and Lynch half a century ago. Cullen and Lynch's seminal contribution to contextualist methodology was also given further legitimation in Peter Smith's groundbreaking texts, *The Dynamics of Urbanism* (1974) and *The Syntax of Cities* (1976), two texts on the methodology of aesthetic appreciation in urban design that have yet to be bettered. Smith added an entirely new dimension to contextualist thought by applying the principles of environmental psychology to the townscape tradition. The examples used in *The Dynamics of Urbanism* are drawn almost exclusively from the traditions noted by Cullen, where he dissects the urban schema on the basis of forms of learning, subliminal perception, symbols and archetypes, in order to establish value systems and an agenda for design methods (Smith 1976: 225–47). Curiously, what Smith basically does is apply the scientific method to Cullen's ideas, a process that Cullen himself had rejected as invalid. However, taken together, Gordon Cullen's *Townscape* and Kevin Lynch's *Image of the City* formed a powerful critique and set of strategies to guide urban designers until the present time. The latter work is mentioned by Norberg-Schulz as emblematic of the urban design process, despite the fact that at least one critic saw Norberg-Schulz's own contribution as a 'classic failure', owing to its dependence on structural rules. From about

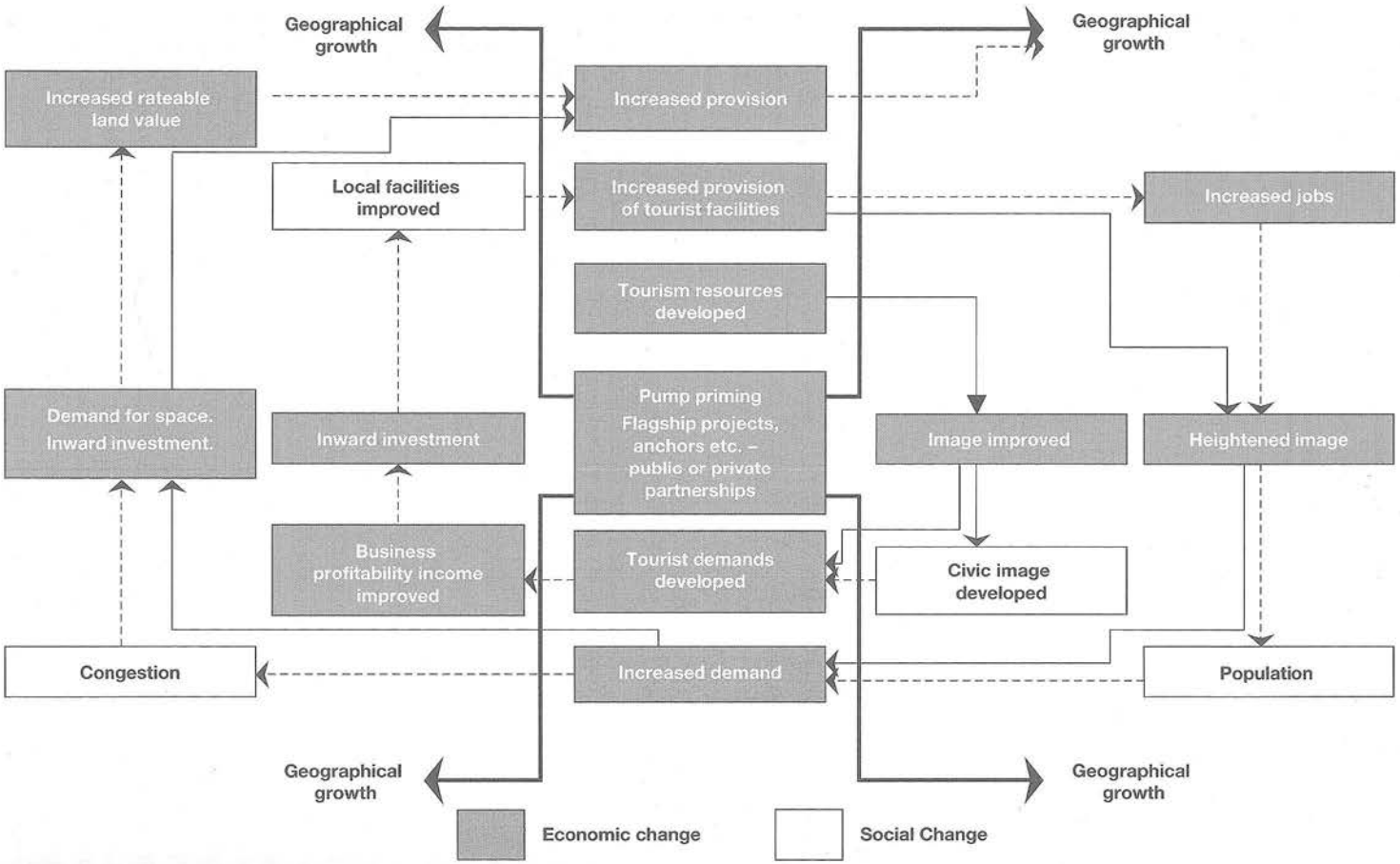


Figure 8.9 A suggested strategy for urban precinct tourist development

Source: Redrawn by G.A.M. Suartika from B. Hayllar, T. Griffin and D. Edwards (eds), *City Spaces, Tourist Places: Urban Tourism Precincts*. Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 2008, p. 168, Fig. 8.3

1980, neo-traditionalism in Britain and New Urbanist design methods originating in the United States owe much to the cultural world-view emanating from the townscape tradition, recently brought up to date in Frers and Meier (2007), Watson and Bentley (2007), Hayllar *et al.* (2008) and Marshall (2009). Even greater levels of detail have been plumbed in *Urban Design: Ornament and Decoration* (Moughtin *et al.* 1995), where the embellishment of buildings and spaces is theorised and recounted in a series of layers, from skylines to the city floor. Here, the basic method used is to outline the physical variables of decoration, which are given as unity, proportion, scale, harmony, balance and symmetry, rhythm and contrast, principles that apply across the range of urban spaces and places.

The rationalist method and aesthetic production

The rationalist school of thought in urban design is welded to the concept of structuralist-functionalism, a philosophy that was to dominate, not only the social sciences throughout much of the twentieth century, but also the environmental disciplines. In politics, it manifested itself as National Socialism, a political movement not only limited to the right-wing working class of the Weimar Republic. In anthropology, it was expressed in Levi Strauss's method of structural anthropology, which demonstrated the universality of mythic structures in human societies, and in the structural linguistics of Jean Piaget. In contrast to the contextualist appeal to the heart, rationalism as method makes its appeal in the first instance to the head, to logic, deductive thinking, calculation and science. The clash between rationalism and contextualism in urban design, personified as a conflict between Camillo Sitte (an architect) and Otto Wagner (an engineer), began at the *fin de siècle*, around 1900, and has continued over the last 100 years (FOC: 55–6, 184–6). Over much of this time, the relationship between architectural design and urban design was so embedded that little distinction was drawn between them, and indeed this remains true in many circles today. Even town planning (as it was then called) was largely the domain of architects, and it was not until the mid 1960s that a surge of social scientists and geographers demonstrated that much planning and urban design might have superior stewardship somewhere else.

Culture envelops aesthetic production, and, as in most ideological processes, the environmental disciplines contribute without necessarily understanding the role they are playing in the overall scheme of things. Ideologies constitute lived systems of values that seldom embed themselves in our conscious minds. For example, we all obey the law, without having much comprehension of its practices and black-letter regulation. The same is true of aesthetic production. Rationalism, as part of this event, is no different. Although the rationalists produced many manifestos throughout the twentieth century (see Chapter 9), individual architects did not necessarily conform to any specific 'rationalist code

of practice', despite the fact that the concept pervaded their ethos. So, what did the practice of rationalism entail as a method of approach to aesthetics? Which heterologies were deployed, consciously or otherwise, in the creation of aesthetics in architectural and urban design? The interdependence of rationalism and scientific enquiry has a history that goes back millennia and was most clearly exemplified by the ancient Greeks. Rationalist architecture has evolved over the subsequent 2,500 years, copying its original details and principles in numerous ways, and arguably reaching its zenith during the Renaissance period, centuries before modernism. Systems of mathematics and proportion structured the design of buildings, along with principles derived from optics, perspective and other devices (Figure 8.10). The scientific principles of observation, experimentation, deduction and the formation of hypotheses across the field helped to impact rationalism as a design method. In architecture, Gottfried Semper had allocated functionalism as a fundamental premise of architecture as early as the middle of the nineteenth century:

> Semper clearly attempted to make the process of design analogous to the resolution of algebraic equations. The 'variables' represented the manifold aspects of reality that architecture had to take into account: The solution was simply a 'function' of these variables. This reductionist strategy has since become the fundamental framework of architectural theory.
>
> (Perez-Gomez 2000: 469)

For rationalist methodology, therefore, function was the vector directly connecting method to form, and the aesthetic projection of beauty depended on how well this process was accomplished.

Although a rationalist ideology pervaded the twentieth century, it accelerated as a design strategy in the 1960s. Until that time, there existed what we might call *intuitive* rationalism, that is, rational thinking without any generalised research that would integrate architectural theory on the basis of scientific investigation. All that was required as a methodology was a regression to a few happy homilies, best exemplified at the *fin de siècle* in the great Louis Sullivan's famous dictum 'that form ever follows function'. Somewhat later, the most influential design school of all time, namely the Bauhaus, adopted the principles of *form follows function* and *ornament is a crime* as its basic mandates. On this basis, some of the most ghastly urban design projects ever to grace the face of the earth were proposed by architects such as Le Corbusier, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Mies van der Rohe and others. Here, new levels of abstraction and standardisation were plumbed in the pursuit of a rational architecture. Intuitive rationalism *qua* method also produced massively inefficient architecture in terms of today's sustainable building practices. Intuitive rationalism advanced as a glacial disaster zone over the next half a century, until pseudo science was finally revoked as legitimising design.

While Charles Jencks has fixed the beginning of postmodernism as 15 July 1972, on the basis of the dynamiting of the modernist Pruitt-Igoe housing

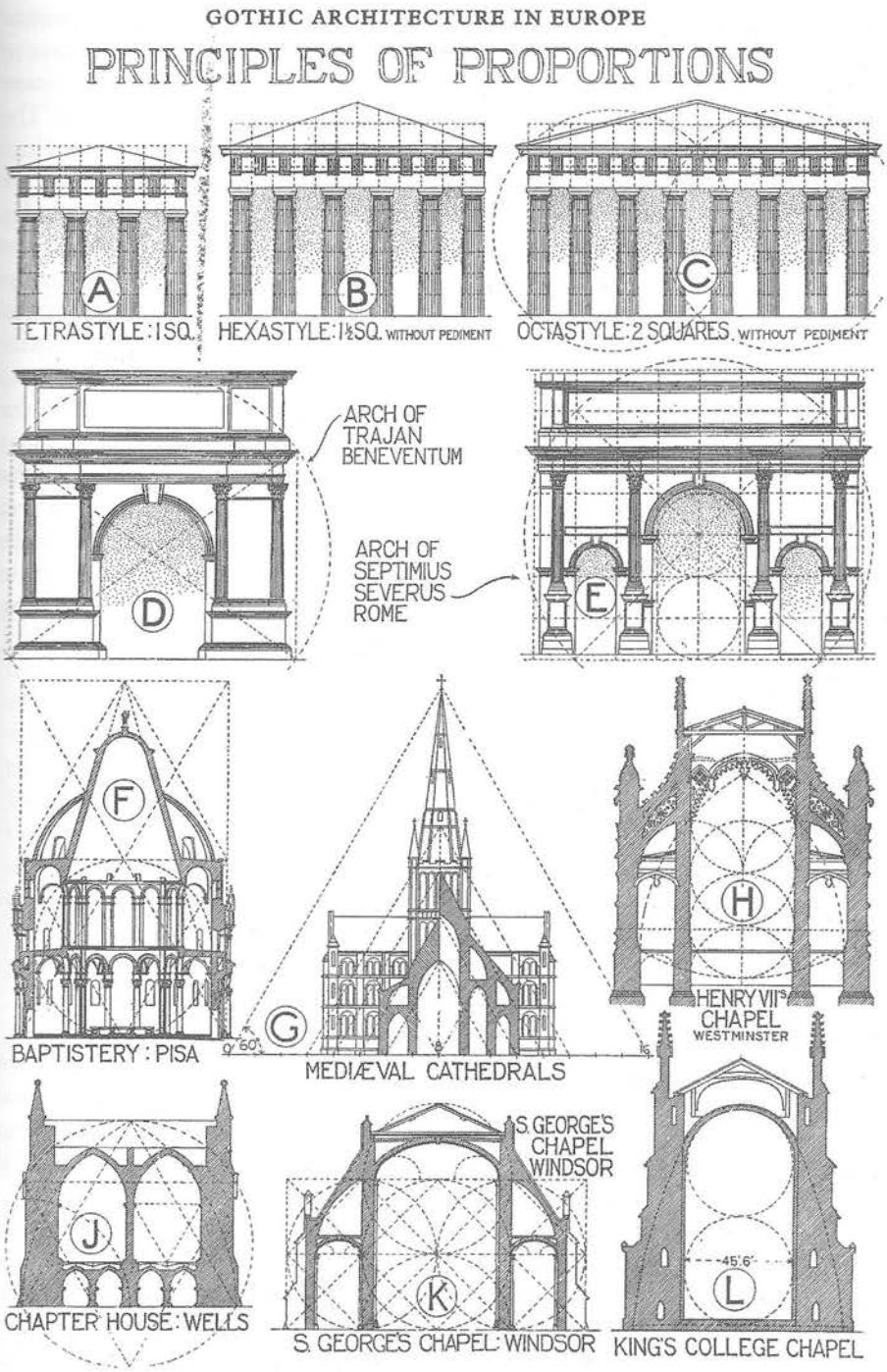


Figure 8.10 Proportional systems used in historic forms of architectural design: classical Greek and Gothic periods

Source: Sir B. Fletcher, *A History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*. The Royal Institute of British Architects and the University of London: The Athlone Press, 1961, p. 377

project in St Louis, it is also tempting to denote as the beginning of a *logical* rationalism a classic in architectural thought, namely *Notes on a Synthesis of Form*, Christopher Alexander's groundbreaking work that came as a revelation to architects in 1964. Indeed Alexander's introduction is explicitly titled 'The need for rationality'. In this book, one that became a legend in architectural circles, Alexander reduces design to complex mathematical formulae. In the appendix, the social structure of an Indian village is expressed through calculus as his chosen design method (Alexander 1964: 136–91). Alexander's persistent use of hierarchy theory also underlines one of the fundamental rules of rationalist methodologies, namely the capacity to decompose complex structures, both social and physical, into systems and hierarchies of various types (lattice, semi-lattice etc.). In this process, the intuitive approach of the contextualist is given over to the method of science and mathematics, system and hierarchy theory, and the synthesis of design elements from logical processes. Paradoxically, and at the same time, Alexander's text constitutes a eulogy for what he calls the 'unselfconscious process', a combination of inherited traditions, intuition and experience. By this, he means the time-honoured practices of creating buildings and spaces (this did not include modernism). So, while he supports intuition in design, the support is offered on the basis of logic, not emotion, thus bridging the gap separating intuitive and scientific rationalism:

> The use of logical structures to represent design problems has an important consequence. It brings with it the loss of innocence. A logical picture is easier to criticise than a vague picture since the assumptions it is based upon are brought out into the open. Its increased precision gives us the chance to sharpen our conception of what the design process involves. But once what we do intuitively can be described and compared with non-intuitive ways of doing the same things, we cannot go on accepting the intuitive method innocently. Whether we decide to stand for or against pure intuition as a method, we must do so for reasons that can be discussed.
>
> (Alexander 1964: 8)

Whether Alexander falls into the category of rationalist or contextualist is a moot point, possibly not worth debating in the context of forty years of professional output. However, it is clear from the statement above that, in promoting intuition and the timeless way of building, Alexander remains committed to a rational method that allows logic to prevail over intuition.

Another iconic text from the same period, also adopted by architects and reflected in their design ideologies, was Herbert Simon's *The Sciences of the Artificial* (1969), where Simon laid out the rules of artificial systems (i.e. architecture) in a clear and unambiguous manner. He claimed that all systems obeyed universal laws of whatever origin – social, political economic, mechanical etc. Each possessed five irreducible properties – structure, environment, resources, objectives and behaviour. From that point onwards, the idea of *design methods* became fashionable, and the literature was swamped by the jargon of science –

input–output, black boxes, system theory, hierarchic structures, rule systems, synectics, data logging, problem structure etc. – all became part of the prevailing vocabulary in architecture and urban design. As Peter Smith has remarked:

> Urban design is increasingly becoming the province of rational sciences. Because in the past, architects have tended to be regarded as unscientific, economists, geographers, surveyors etc, are now entering the lists in order to redress the balance. The life force of the town and city is being cleverly analysed so that its essence may be extracted, encapsulated in order to distribute it to all urban designers. The sphere of planning is being monopolised by scientific people who honestly believe good design can emerge from atomistic analysis of the many factors which compose the urban environment.
>
> (Smith 1974: 227)

Nonetheless, the blame for an accelerating rationalism could not be placed on the 'other'. The above quotation ignores the fact that the rational–functional approach to architecture, planning and urban design had been swallowed wholeheartedly by much of the architectural profession, and that many architects, e.g. Christopher Alexander, Bill Hillier, Christopher Jones and others, were leading the field in the pursuit of logical and rational approaches to design aesthetics. Like Alexander, Christopher Jones's book, *Design Methods*, was the first solid text to pursue rationality in design (1970), followed by a revised version twenty-two years later in 1992 (see also Cross 1984, Oxman 1987, Albin 2003, Laurel 2003). The extent to which rationalism in design has evolved is evident in the journal *Design Methods*, which had its inception in 1976 and is still in circulation. On the other hand, we could also argue that '*plus c'est la même chose*', exemplified in the following two quotations separated by nearly thirty years:

> The city has almost no characteristic geometry. It is not like an atom, an orange, or a table, or an animal. It is more like the pattern of pieces on a chess board, half way through a game of chess.
>
> (Alexander and Poyner 1967: 6)

> A city is like a game of chess, in that the location of each piece is the product of a rational decision, but the overall effect may look chaotic, and is unpredictable in advance. A city plan – like the plan of a chess game in progress – is a snapshot of a continuously changing process.
>
> (Marshall 2009: 186)

While the use of analogy as a design method remains undiminished, neither statement comes to any real conclusion, and the following probably has more generic significance to urban design, reinforcing the relationship between rationality and identity in the organisation of meaning, and therefore the aesthetic content of urban form:

> Thus one can say that the units of the game of chess have no material identity; there are no physical properties necessary to a king etc. Identity is wholly a function of differences within a system.
>
> (Culler 1976: 28)

The idea of language and syntax begun by Peter Smith (1976) was taken to new levels in the work of Hillier and Leaman (1976) and Hillier and Hanson (1984) and has been restated in S. Marshall (2009). The idea that the aesthetics of the urban order emerge from mathematics is still deeply rooted in the psyche of most architects and urban designers, and Alexander's concept that the city is not a tree continues to be abused in the planning lexicon. Although design methods in architecture have been addressed for nearly half a century, the question of language, or more accurately languages, still remains. A seldom-addressed question is whether not the vocabularies of architecture and town planning are adequate to convey urban design concepts and ideas, a problem that has only been addressed by a few designers and one that will be expanded upon below.

Regulation and design control

There can be no more thorny issue in the aesthetic governance of the built environment than the concept of design guidelines as the accepted method of controlling form, function and taste (Scheer and Preiser 1994, Parfect and Power 1997). It is a region of urban administration totally riddled with confusion, where power, ideologies, culture and professional endeavour all collide. Superficially, all that is required is a mechanism to guarantee the city beautiful. Yet so many vested interests exist that it is questionable whether design guidelines have any capacity whatsoever to control aesthetics or to set standards of design that are democratic and free of vested interests. Beyond the limitations of method, larger questions arise, such as whose city is it anyway? What is to be aestheticised? Whose version of aesthetics should be sanctioned? What should be the objects of aesthetic consideration? Whose design interests or standards should be adopted? What methods are most appropriate under which circumstances?

The aesthetic control of cities is not a new idea and has been evolving for centuries. Louis XIV adopted a code of practice for the redevelopment of Paris; New York had to adopt a basic set of rules for skyscrapers in 1916; and the first New York Zoning Ordinance was set in place in 1961. In Britain, however, the first 'Design Guide' as such was published by Essex County Council in 1973 and remains the seminal document on the subject. A year later, a groundbreaking work emerged that suggested a new method of approach to design guidelines, namely *Urban Design as Public Policy* (Barnett 1974). Up to date, the American Planning Association recently published a 700-page tome called *Planning and Urban Design Standards*, which leaves little to the imagination as to how aesthetics should be governed (Sendich 2006). Despite this seeming control, such

an immense variety of design guidelines exists for cities across the developed world that there is little congruence as to method, and the aesthetic dimension is impossible to separate from functionality, speculation, cost-effectiveness and other criteria. Guidelines exist at different urban scales (national, regional, local, project-based); they also reflect a varying pallet of objectives (to promote public safety, enhancement of community, historical preservation, sustainability, amenity, neighbourhood character etc.). They use a diversity of statutory and non-statutory controls to achieve objectives (zoning, development control, design guides, design review panels, competitions, fine arts commissions etc.). Then there is the omnipresent 'public interest' to be considered. Despite such complexity, John Delafons makes the point that:

> In Britain, the index to Butterworth's 760 page *Planning Law Handbook* contains no references to 'design', 'aesthetic control', or external appearance. Nor does the index to the 728 pages of Professor Malcolm Grant's standard work *Urban Planning Law*. This is very odd because the British Town and Country Planning Acts have contained (at least since the Planning Act of 1932) explicit provisions enabling the local planning authority to control the height, design, and external appearance of buildings.
>
> (Delafons 1994: 13)

One reason for the absence of aesthetic criteria is the fact that, in the UK, design guidelines are not codified into law. They are non-statutory, and local authorities have a wide range of discretion as to how they are interpreted and applied. Delafons goes on to comment that traditional zoning powers, which are used to implement aesthetic controls for a variety of purposes, all end up reflecting one major consideration – the preservation of property values. He notes that, in the United States, aesthetic controls are exercised through a variety of methods and suggests a possible typology as follows:

- the regulatory mode
- the stylistic imperative
- the proprietorial injunction
- the authoritative intervention
- the competitive alternative
- the design guidelines.

Briefly stated, the regulatory mode refers to traditional zoning ordinances, which apparently serve an aesthetic function but do not incorporate design objectives. The stylistic imperative refers to the necessary use of a specific form of vernacular or architectural style. The proprietorial injunction represents a form of self-imposed control by developers in order to further their own specific interests. The authoritative imperative is used by local authorities to confer decision-making powers on an expert committee or commission on artistic

matters. The competitive alternative uses the well-worn device of the architectural competition in order to select the best of available design options for a given project, as is the case, for example, with all public buildings in France. Design guidelines supplement the mode of regulation by adding a detailed code, which is frequently prescriptive (elaboration of style and detail), rather than a more enlightened, qualitative approach that encourages the enhancement of distinctive character, identity and experience (Delafons 1994: 14–17).

From all of the above, it may be argued that urban planning retains significantly greater control over the aesthetics of the built environment than architects, a point that the latter bemoan on a daily basis. The crucial question here is, 'who does the planning system represent and under what circumstances?'. Setting aside the nature of planning as a state enterprise (discussed in FOC3: 75–6), it is clear that the method of aesthetic regulation, in the form of development control, design control and design guidelines, has a political substructure based on significant economic influence and interests. In many cases, a superstructure of aesthetic controls masks a deeply embedded economic rationalism, a process whereby state neocorporatism, in collusion with the private sector in 'public–private partnerships', allows developers basically to write their own rules. As David Harvey remarks:

> Public–private partnerships are favoured in which the public sector bears all of the risk and the corporate sector reaps all of the profit. Business interests get to write legislation and to determine public policies in such a way as to advantage themselves.
>
> (Harvey 2007: 29)

The same sentiment is echoed more directly in relation to aesthetic control, as follows:

> Aesthetic decision making is ultimately not founded upon objective or mutual standards of judgment, nor in consensus, but simply reverts back to those in control, the same forces that control much of the public realm; the political, capitalist, and cultural elite. Those groups outside the dominant power matrices – the disenfranchised and marginal – are characteristically excluded from the important decision making processes. Furthermore, the trend towards homogeneity, toward the violent elimination of difference through control, of regionalism and nationalism, are all trends towards domination.
>
> (Pouler 1994: 185)

In order to promote the project-based planning favoured by developers, there is a tendency for aesthetic regulation to devolve into functional and material considerations, whose primary objective is to accellerate the accumulation of capital from land development. In addition, the methodological progression towards non-uniform design regulations, reflecting what Lang calls 'all of a piece'

urban design, sits well with this overall philosophy (Lang 2005). The stress on design guides by the New Urbanism is a manifestation of this position, where design codes are assembled on a project-by-project basis, by the architect, for the developer. Consequently, most design guidelines tend to focus on density, plot ratio, building envelope, fenestration, colour, use of materials, sign control, parking provision and restrictions, building setbacks, sight lines, height restrictions, resource transfer etc. (Barnett 1974). Even greater flexibility is added by the fact that design guidelines are usually advisory rather than statutory, leaving significant room for negotiation and 'to promote the watchword of the neo-liberal state, "flexibility" . . . it trumpets the virtues of competition while actually opening the market to centralised capital and monopoly power' (Harvey 2007: 25). This process is one that clearly mitigates against any qualitatively biased outcomes (e.g. contextualist) and, to a large degree, any significant aesthetic impact whatsoever.

Problematically, and despite the clear need for expediency in the development process, the lack of resistance to the needs of capital is manifested in the myth of community. It is in the interests of this nebulous 'community' that design controls are implemented. Although traditional concepts of community based on the machinations of industrial capital are now obsolete, perpetuating the myth of community is an extremely useful device in the context of design guidelines – it allows them to be written for an imaginary form of social organisation, an avatar for the interests of development capital. In *Disciplinary Society and the Myth of Aesthetic Justice* (1994), Patrick Pouler points to the erosion and decay of the extended family, as well as notions of neighbourhood and community:

> The myth of community differs from an authentic community in the way in which exhausted ideals are artificially resurrected in order to elicit unity from the chaos of a society desperate for security and stability. Here the invocation of myth supersedes concrete and productive social activity: the image attempts to overcome the reality. In this sense, architecture is the perfect medium by which to perpetuate the dominant power structures.
> (Pouler 1994: 177)

Pouler goes on to enunciate the tendency for design guidelines to retreat into 'a new pathos of preservation', whereby 'existing character, neighbourhoods (a morphological delusion) and political organisation are reinforced and the status quo is perpetuated' (Pouler 1994: 177). In addition, the same existing forms of speculation, based on short-term profits, rampage across the landscape. Hence, design and aesthetic controls formally ascribe to the same objectives, where only a limited number of outcomes are possible. This can easily result in an aesthetic monotony of places, using the same visual language and structure and fetishising history, as in many New Urbanist projects.

It is therefore plausible to argue that as methodology, design guidelines generate little, if any, democratic control over development, and instead fulfil many other purposes on the basis of fictitious concepts of community interest

and ideals. At best, they look to the past and, in the process, seek to conserve property values, using the myth of community in housing to preserve self-interest and autonomy of control over the design process.

Conclusion

Of all urban design heterologies, the concept of aesthetics predominates in the mind of the designer. The creation of the city beautiful is the designer's mandate, in opposition to the developer's focus on capital. Significant economic interests always rule. Although there is an ongoing debate among designers over how to 'control' aesthetics, the single-minded, inexorable path to profit remains. In addition to a confused rhetoric, the mainstream urban designer's position is also weakened by learning based on intuition and uninformed by substantial theory. The academy seldom includes courses on urban aesthetics into urban design programmes, and most learning is based on osmosis or mimesis, with a liberal dose of Kevin Lynch, Gordon Cullen and Peter Smith as models. Original definitions of the word *aesthetics* suggest that the process has as much to do with morality and ethics as it does with arbitrary concepts of beauty, something to be taken seriously in class-divided society (FOC8: 173). Understandably, confusion exists as to how control should be exercised over aesthetic judgement in urban design – Whose taste? Whose morality? Whose gender? Whose right? The chosen method, for decades, has relied on the idea of design guidelines, a process whereby desirable physical attributes are meant to reflect an aesthetically improved judgement on the basis of fictitious concepts of community. Also meaningful is that design guidelines are seldom statutory documents, leaving room for 'flexibility' and 'negotiation', euphemisms for how best to accommodate private-sector requirements. Invariably, this process tends towards homogeneity and the exclusion of difference, increased social control by the private sector, and commodity aesthetics. Although the designer will almost always remain in the service of capital in one form or another, an improvement in the designer's position might occur through a transition from the mainstream to *heterologies* of design, to sources that most designers would not recognise as influential – to Freud, Jung, Saussure, Marx, Wittgenstein and others discussed above.