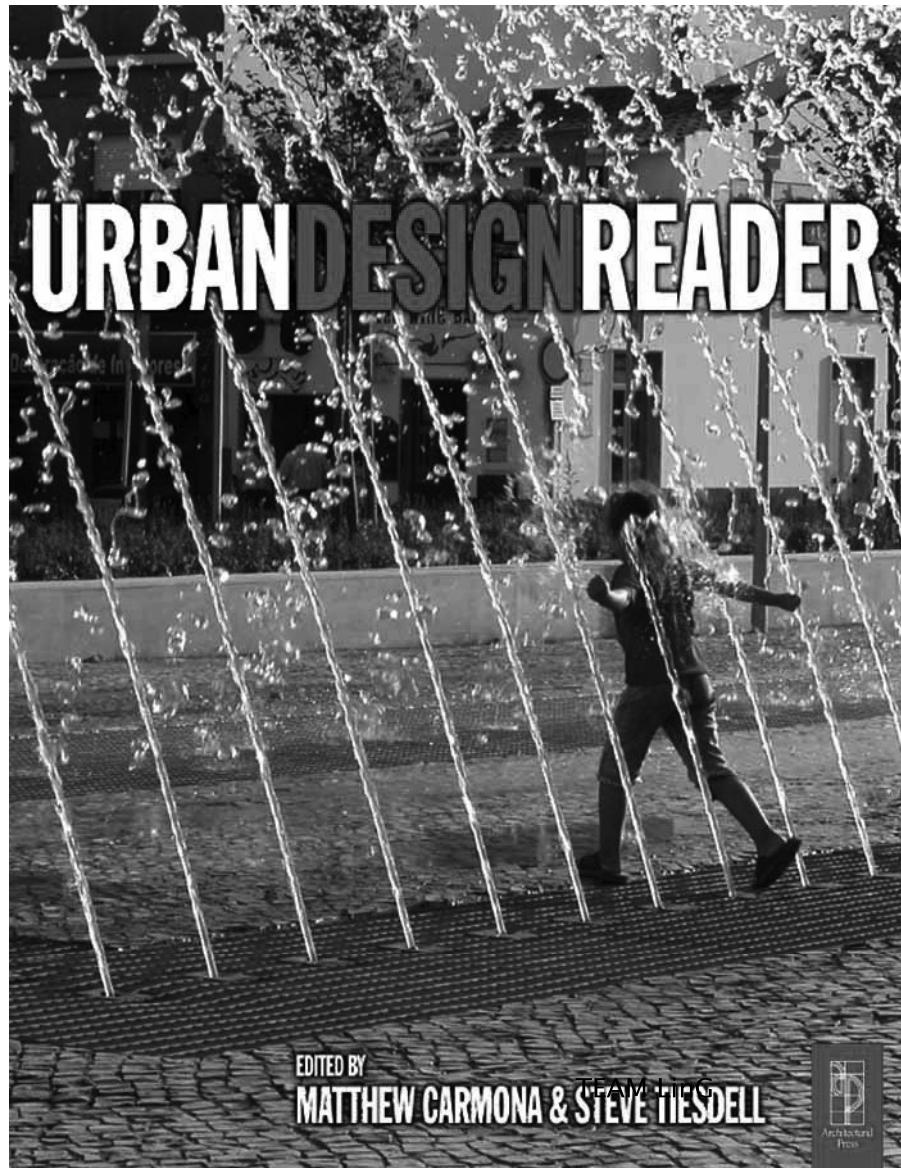




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‘Places’ matter most

Francis Tibbalds
[1992]

Places matter much more than either individual buildings or vehicular traffic. Yet, all over the world, our planning endeavours seem to concentrate almost exclusively on the latter considerations. We seem to be losing the ability to stand back and look at what we are producing as a whole. Most of us can think of collections of roads and buildings that simply do not add up to anything at all. We need to stop worrying quite so much about individual buildings and other individual physical artifacts and think instead about places in their entirety. We need to forget the spaced-out buildings of the past few decades, separated from each other by highways and left-over tracts of land. These unthinking, tired solutions to development have not served us well. We must concentrate on attractive, intricate places related to the scale of people walking, not driving. We must exploit individuality, uniqueness and the differences between places. An attractive public realm is very important to a feeling of well-being or comfort. Traditionally, building craftsmanship was not just about buildings, but also spaces. This should still be the case. Collaboration between all the environmental professions will be essential to achieve this..

The inescapable reality for all of us is that people judge the activities of architects and planners, landscape architects, highway engineers and civil engineers by the quality – principally the physical quality – of what they see and experience around them. And rightly so. Because, at the end of the day, it is the *product* rather than the *process* that matters most to the users. For all manner of reasons and quite understandably, the judgement that they make is rarely a complimentary or favourable one – largely due to the legacy of several decades of Modernist planning.

There are signs of a new approach to architecture and planning – a fundamental change in approach from the days of ruthless Modernism. British architect Terry Farrell succinctly describes how in the Modernist approach the primary object was a building or some other physical artifact. It was often separated from its neighbours by large tracts of land and/or highways – the left-over public realm. Designs were open and non-urban in character. The modernists obsessively and rigorously applied concepts of the grid, simplistic hierarchies, tidiness, low densities, zoned separation, the international style, large-scale engineering, a severance with history and tradition, high technology construction and mechanization. They thought at the scale of a moving vehicle. Growth and comprehensive redevelopment were the norm. Unconstrained, green field or war-damaged sites were the ideal canvas.

The devastation that this approach has produced on the public realm can now be seen in virtually every town and city in the United Kingdom and in many other countries too. A strong rejection of this philosophy is now emerging. We are witnessing a return to the spirit of urbanism that characterized well-loved traditional towns and cities. The concern is once again for the scale of people walking, for attractive, intricate places and for complexity of uses and activities. The object has now become the public realm – the space between buildings – rather than the buildings themselves. The aim is to create urban areas with their own identities, rooted in a regional and/or historic context. The physical design of the public domain as an organic, colourful, human-scale, attractive environment is the overriding task of the urban designer.

On urban sites, then – both in town and city centers and in inner city and suburban areas – we need

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a proper urban solution, with an urban scale. We need a clear appreciation of the urban grain and built form – what is sometimes called the morphological context. We also need to understand fully the local architectural *typology* – related to the uses and functions of the particular buildings. New proposals – whether for a large piece of urban design or an individual building – must have a positive relationship to the existing morphology – by harmonizing with it, by adapting to it or, where there are clear reasons so to do, by contrasting with it. The important thing is to take a positive design stance not just an arbitrary one.

During the 1950s and 1960s many towns and cities around the world underwent change on an unprecedented scale in terms of built development and in terms of massive highway construction. This undoubtedly resulted in considerable commercial vitality and unique levels of accessibility for motor vehicles, but it is now fairly widely recognized that it also produced physical environments that fall a long way short of current public aspirations.

Much of the problem derives from the loss of urban scale or grain. Traditionally cities were composed of blocks of buildings with streets around them. The so-called *comprehensive redevelopment* schemes of the past twenty or thirty years have tended to destroy this familiar and successful urban form and the results have been largely unsatisfactory. They have rarely produced places which are now widely recognized as being attractive.

It is a useful exercise to compare the plan forms of towns over time. Most traditional towns and cities are compact and tightly organized with a simple block layout punctuated by hard and soft open spaces. In many places this clear structure was lost, or significantly eroded, during the middle part of the twentieth century. A combination of war damage and the desire for new roads, new shopping centres and various forms of mass housing has, in many instances, led to the loss of original street patterns.

We don't have to let this happen. As vacant sites are brought into use and obsolescent buildings are redeveloped, the opportunity must be seized to use the new buildings to create proper urban streets again, with proper frontages – to make a tight-knit urban fabric where public spaces and landscape are intended, rather than just being the left-over bits that were of no use to the architect or developer. Spaces left over after planning and development has taken place are not only visually unattractive and functionally useless: they are also awkward and

expensive to maintain, with the all too frequent result that they become neglected and unkempt. There are thus functional and environmental advantages to the restoration of the street.

Of course, it is not only streets that are important. The places that make up the public realm come in many shapes, sizes and uses. They include streets, squares, public footpaths, parks and open spaces and extend, also, to riversides and seafronts. These places all belong to the wider community. It is important never to forget that they are there for their use, benefit and enjoyment. In designing and developing buildings and environments which interrelate with the public realm, it is therefore essential to ensure that this tremendous value of the public realm to the wider community is acknowledged, respected and enhanced.

One of the joys of towns and cities is their variety. Different areas have different characteristics – of activities, scale, uses and function. Some places are lively and busy. Others are quiet and secluded. There will be intricate, dense areas; open, monumental areas; soft areas; hard areas; old areas; new areas; areas of high building; areas of low building; shopping areas; commercial areas; entertainment areas; recreation areas; and so on and so on. We need to recognize this variety – to define areas of cohesive character. Often such areas will have blurred edges. They will overlap. This simply adds to the richness of the environmental character. But, great care is also required. As places, precincts or areas of special character are recognized, defined, created or developed, it is important to ensure that they are real and not contrived. It will not be an asset to the town or city if they take on a fake-believe or stage-set quality. Nor should such areas be allowed to develop simply as single-use enclaves.

All too often towns and cities simply continually re-adapt to accommodating more and more traffic and bigger and bigger buildings. What is desperately needed is a new approach to producing and looking after good urban spaces. We have actually got to address the re-structuring of our urban areas, over possibly quite long time scales, to reflect a new set of priorities in which the needs of people – as pedestrians, cyclists, the young, the old and the infirm, as well as the able-bodied – take precedence over the voracious demands of traffic and developers. The current fragmentation of urban areas in many ways mirrors the fragmentation and separation of the professions who are supposed to be looking after them – urban planners, traffic engineers, landscape architects, land surveyors and architects in particular.

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Greater multi-professional collaboration would, I am convinced, produce better, more coherent places, because no one profession has all the answers to the complex task of designing livable cities.

Public places within a town belong to the people of that town – they do not belong to developers or investors, the police or traffic wardens. Their nature will be influenced by their scale, shape and size; the ways in which they are related one to another; the uses and activities which they contain, and the way in which traffic of all kinds is handled. The proper civilized use of places – streets, squares, alleys, promenades and so on – can be achieved visually, functionally and psychologically, through sensitive and imaginative design. If, for example, motorists feel like guests in a predominantly pedestrian area, hopefully they will behave like guests. Is this not infinitely to be preferred to a plethora of street signs and prohibitions backed up by tedious byelaws and penalties?

The same is true of buildings. New buildings are also guests in the existing urban environment and need to show due deference to their host and their companions. This is not to invite false modesty; nor is it to say that there shouldn't be room for the occasional live wire or prima donna. What architects and clients need to accept, however, is that the greatest contribution that they can make to the built environment of the town or city is to construct good, backcloth buildings.

The challenge is clearly very great – finding ways of promoting the renaissance of the public realm in our towns and cities. But it is a potentially very rewarding and enjoyable one. It demands a new set of priorities in which, basically, places take precedence over buildings and traffic. This will be hard for the individual players to accept – be they architects, engineers or developers – if they maintain their professional separations. The more they learn to collaborate – to try to meet agreed, common objectives for the urban environment – the easier and more productive the process will become.

In the hope that it will be useful to readers, this chapter concludes with a short list of recommendations, related to the theme of the chapter, which can be used as a checklist by practitioners.

Recommendations/action checklist

1. The first priority is to agree what sort of public realm is appropriate in any particular area and then to agree the buildings, development and circulation system which are appropriate to it. Usually this is done the other way round, with devastating results for the urban fabric.
2. Places need to offer variety to their users. They need to be unique and different from one another – each rooted in their own particular historical, geographical, physical or cultural context.
3. In most instances, individual buildings will be subservient to the needs and the character of the place as a whole. If every building screams for individual attention, the result is likely to be discordant chaos. A few buildings can, quite legitimately, be soloists, but the majority need simply to be sound, reliable members of the chorus.
4. Many town centres are small enough to be considered as single places. In the larger towns and the central areas of cities, over time, areas of different character are probably discernible. These should be defined and developed, providing they are for real, rather than artificial bits of make-believe or urban theatre that will, in the long run, devalue reality.
5. Try not to view the organization or reorganization of towns and cities purely from the rather exclusive points of view of the motorist or the developer. It is of greater importance to consider the needs and aspirations of people as a whole – with priority being given to pedestrians, children and old people. This simple change or widening of priorities could, by itself, transform our urban environment and lifestyle.

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