

# WILL URBAN DESIGN DESTROY PLANNING?

URBAN DESIGN MAY BE FASHIONABLE, IT MAY BE DESPERATELY NEEDED, BUT WHO IS QUALIFIED TO DO IT - PLANNERS?

At two recent workshops 22 Auckland-based architects, planners and landscape architects were asked what is 'urban design', and they gave 22 very different answers (1). A fortnight later the Auckland chapter of the Urban Design Forum fared no better.

There is clearly no agreement in New Zealand on what Urban Design is, let alone what its role could be in creating sustainable cities. The looseness of the term 'urban design' is a cause for concern because we are developing a new national Urban Design Protocol and more Urban Design Strategies and Guidelines at the local level.

While Urban Design is clearly a fashionable concept, what do we know about it?

## URBAN DESIGN IS A GAP

The term 'urban design' was coined in the United States in the 1960s. At the time Urban Planning was evolving away from the physical arrangements of urban realms towards a focus on the social, environmental and economic aspects of development (2).

Architects and landscape architects sought to fill this gap. Academic programmes in Urban Design were created to provide them with a sufficient understanding of the urban condition so that they can lead community and neighbourhood design at any scale (2).

In subsequent years most aspects of physical development planning have been gradually reclassified as 'Urban Design', especially in the UK and New Zealand. Urban Design is now commonly seen as occupying the middle ground between architecture, urban planning and landscape architecture.

In this middle ground Urban Design extends architecture beyond the design and development of individual buildings, and extends planning beyond structure or zoning plans to consider the quality of the public realm (3).

However, despite its growing following Urban Design still lacks an independent theoretical base, and has very few publications and journals to support practitioners.

## URBAN DESIGN IS AN ALLIANCE

In the UK five urban professions have come together in the Urban Design Alliance. As a result, there are around 220,000 architects, planners, surveyors, civil engineers and landscape architects who share a concern with Urban Design, or more specifically, with the following areas of practice that are now called Urban Design:

- (1) The planning/design of urban development
- (2) Planning/design of the public realm
- (3) Formulation and evaluation of design guidelines
- (4) Community or neighbourhood planning/design.

The Royal Urban Design Institute supports the alliance by gathering good practice examples and related literature ([www.rudi.net](http://www.rudi.net)).

## URBAN DESIGN IS A CHALLENGE

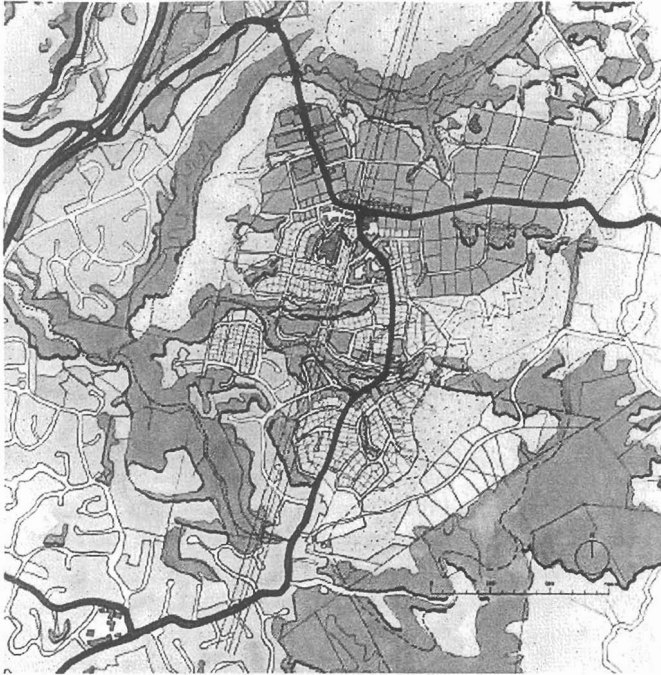
Reports by the Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment (4), Ministry for the Environment (5) and recent newspaper articles (6) all criticize the quality of urban development design in New Zealand cities.

At the Urbanism Downunder conference in March 2002 most local speakers lamented the poor quality of the public realm in our towns and cities. Much of the blame was assigned to the very evident gap between architecture, planning, surveying, engineering and landscape architecture. In short, on the absence of Urban Design.

## URBAN DESIGN IS A FREE-FOR-ALL

While Urban Design may be urgently needed in New Zealand, there is no agreement on who does it, or who should do it.

As Urban Design has no professional registration requirement in New Zealand and



*Is this planning or design? The process for developing drawings such as these used to be called Urban or Town Planning, but is now increasingly referred to as Urban Design. This plan (or design?) for an extension to Newlands for Wellington City Council is by Brad Wright from Sinclair Knight Merz (Auckland) and Wendy Morris from Ecological Sustainable Design (Melbourne).*

overseas, anyone who wants to can write 'Urban Designer' on a business card or website. The 40 or so New Zealanders who currently call themselves 'Urban Designers' fall into five groups, arranged here from largest to smallest:

- Architects with formal overseas training in Urban Design or urban planning, notably from Oxford Brookes University
- Architects with interest and experience in larger urban scale projects and issues
- Landscape architects with an interest and experience in the larger urban condition and urban processes
- Planners with interest and experience in 3-dimensional design issues, notably planners who trained overseas where most planning education has a stronger focus on the physical environment
- Planners with formal overseas training in Urban Design or landscape architecture

The only organisation that gathers together the self-defined 'Urban Designers' in New Zealand is the Urban Design Forum, an informal network with groups that meet in Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch and Dunedin. Anyone can join the mailing lists and there is no formal membership or organisation.

## URBAN DESIGN IS A THREAT

The popularity, vagueness and free-for-all

nature of Urban Design poses a threat to the planning profession in New Zealand. There are two aspects to this.

Firstly, the trend to re-define Urban Planning (especially physical development planning) as Urban Design in continuing unabated. For example, the Auckland Regional Growth Strategy is now increasingly referred to as an Urban Design strategy, which may come as a surprise to its Strategic Planning authors. And while such a re-definition may be confusing but mostly harmless, there is a danger lurking in the 'Design' tail-end. Some local (and vocal) architects now argue that only designers can be Urban Designers because planning processes are fundamentally different to design processes.

As most planners in New Zealand (especially those trained over the last decade outside Auckland) have no or very little design training, the implication is that planners are being excluded from the large (and traditional) component of Urban Planning that is now called Urban Design.

For example, the only degree programme in Urban Design in New Zealand excludes planners. The MArch (Urban Design) programme at the School of Architecture at the University of Auckland admits only those who have formal training in design.

The implication for Urban Design in New Zealand is, however, even more serious. Good

Urban Design requires a thorough understanding not only of the design process, but also of the urban condition. And developing such an understanding of the urban condition (and formulating appropriate responses) are the traditional strengths of the planning profession.

Fortunately most of the Urban Designers in New Zealand would agree that every one of the 'Urban Design alliance' professions has a critical role to play, and that the exclusion of planning, surveying and/or engineering will lead to poor Urban Design. In short, Urban Design is not an extension of the architecture profession.

## URBAN DESIGN IS AN OPPORTUNITY

In New Zealand we seem keen to call planning anything but that. Some of my colleagues argue (with some justification) that Urban Design is yet another faddish (and politically acceptable) name for the same thing: Town Planning, Resource Management, Strategic Planning, Community Planning, Urban Design, etc.

However, Urban Design offers us more than a trendy re-naming of planning. The fledgling discipline has developed some very useful methods and tools for urban development and public realm planning/design that integrate all the 'alliance' professions in very effective and exciting ways.

Urban Design therefore creates an

opportunity for planning to re-engage not only with the urban development process, but also with architecture, surveying and landscape architecture. But there are two very important preconditions to maintaining a permanent seat for planning at the Urban Design table.

Firstly, through relentless advocacy, we must remind everyone that Urban Planning has always incorporated Urban Design, and that a planner can be (and often is) an Urban Designer.

Secondly, in terms of homework, we must re-introduce physical urban development (aka Urban Design) training into all our accredited planning programmes, and provide opportunities for planners to specialise in Urban Design (7).

Urban Design can become part of the slow undoing of the planning profession in New Zealand, or it can strengthen it significantly. I believe the latter option is possible, and that Urban Design in New Zealand will not achieve its significant potential without the active and equal participation of the planning profession.

## REFERENCES

(1) These workshops were hosted by the Department of Planning in the development of new urban design training courses for the Auckland City and Regional Councils, and for a proposed new graduate degree in urban design

(2) For an overview of the history of 'urban design, refer to *The Mayor's Institute on City Design* in New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 2002.

<http://www.archfoundation.org/micdl>

(3) From a report of the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister of the United Kingdom on *Training for Urban Design*, 2001. The report is available at <http://www.planning.detr.gov.uk/urbandesign/training/index.html>

(4) Refer to the hard-hitting (and controversial report) by the Parliamentary Commissioner *The Cities and their people: New Zealand's Urban Environments*, 1998. The report is available at

[http://www.pce.govt.nz/reports/pce\\_reports\\_subject.shtml#urba](http://www.pce.govt.nz/reports/pce_reports_subject.shtml#urba)

(5) Refer to the Ministry for the Environment *People + Places + Spaces: A design guide for urban New Zealand*, 2002. This is our first official central government publication on Urban Design in New Zealand. The report is available at [http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/rmal/people-places-spaces-mamind\\_ex.html](http://www.mfe.govt.nz/publications/rmal/people-places-spaces-mamind_ex.html)

(6) On Saturday 1 November the *New Zealand Herald* published 5 articles on the low environmental quality of new inner city developments, and on Monday 3 November in an editorial carefully supported greater controls on the environmental quality of new development.

<http://www.nzherald.co.nz/>

(7) Of the five universities that offer NZPI accredited training programmes, only the Department of Planning at the University of Auckland offers core courses in Design and Urban Design. 