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Editorial: Designing in a complex world

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The practice of urban design and planning is becoming increasingly complex. New aspirations are regularly added to the agenda, but none are taken away. Building and transportation technology advances apace and new development formats emerge year by year. Economic conditions are driven by events on the other side of the world and lifestyle fads spread virally via globalised media and the Internet. The list of stakeholders and their level of engagement continues to rise, while innovation breeds new specialists with inputs to be synthesised. Even the climate is growing less predictable.

In the face of this rapidly mounting complexity, is large-scale urban design and planning a viable proposition? Is it possible to gain enough understanding of the context in which we work, and to predict the future with sufficient certainty, that we can create new visions that will stand the test of time? Or are our long-term plans destined to become an albatross around the neck of their unhappy inhabitants?

Our cities are already littered with failed planning experiments ranging from the relatively harmless to the seriously detrimental. Some have resulted from too much intervention in the market, some from not enough. So how do we avoid the failures of the past?

In this issue, Simmons (2010) postulates that successful large-scale planning requires exploiting the 'self organising' characteristics of the market to respond nimbly to an ever-changing world, while retaining sufficient control over it to maintain a focus on quality of place and quality of life.

In the second briefing, *Adapting to a changing climate*, Henderson (2010) argues for a front-on response to the challenge of climate change via leadership and policy from international to local levels. In the aftermath of the somewhat underwhelming Copenhagen climate change conference, its description of the green and blue space adaptation for urban areas and eco-towns (GRaBS) project is a heartening demonstration of the ongoing work at local levels to build climate change resilience.

The GRaBS project highlights the increasingly complex role of parks and open spaces as carbon sinks, sustainable drainage conduits, habitat corridors and productive landscapes, to say nothing of places of recreation. The complex nature of public space is taken up by Neal (2010), who identifies a need for a more sophisticated approach to its planning and design that

integrates legal-economic, socio-spatial and political perspectives.

The final two papers address the complexities of sustainability assessment. Thomson *et al.* (2010) illustrate the diverse range of knowledge sources and stakeholders involved in a model sustainability assessment. They conclude that an effective knowledge management system is critical to ensure stakeholder engagement and the establishment of a culture of learning around sustainability.

Finally, Colantonio (2010) explores a relatively recent addition to the sustainability agenda: the social dimension. Again, multiple perspectives and increasing complexity are noted, particularly in relation to the inclusion of more subjective matters such as happiness, wellbeing and social capital alongside the more traditional and easily measurable themes of basic needs, equity and employment.

These papers demonstrate that, rather than fiddling while the globe warms (like many of our political leaders?), urban designers and planners are actively confronting the challenge of creating more sustainable and climate-resilient urban places.

They also reveal diverse endeavours to better understand and model the escalating complexities of the environment in which urban designers and planners work. But, as Simmons reminds us, successful complex systems often emerge without being designed. So we must be careful to use our new understanding judiciously in prescribing futures.

In the words of Roger Lewin (1993), 'At the root of all complex systems lie a few simple rules.' The trick is knowing what the rules are.

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