

Editorial: Social responsibility

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A quick glance at the table of contents of this issue of *Urban Design and Planning* may create the impression that the topics on offer are somewhat disparate; after all, post-disaster rebuilding, tourist wayfinding and Dutch urban design do not seem to have much in common. A subsequent scan of keywords reveals 'social impact' listed in four of the six contributions. Dexter Hunt and his five co-authors make no such claim in their paper 'Appraising infrastructure for new towns in Ireland', but do use the keywords 'social importance', 'social infrastructure' and 'social needs' (Hunt *et al.* 2012). Similarly, although Han Meyer's keywords are 'design methods and aids', 'floods and floodworks' and 'urban regeneration', his paper refers to 'social conditions', 'social vulnerability' and the 'social characteristics of Rotterdam' (Meyer, 2012). Interestingly, every contribution features the term 'public space'.

The built environment disciplines are often criticised for neglecting their social contract: architecture is accused of being image-driven; urban design, of propagating nostalgia; town planning, for narrow two-dimensional and diagrammatic methodologies; and civil engineering, for being too statistically and norm orientated. Regrettably, the fact that a social dimension is present in every contribution does not completely refute the negative criticism. The briefing by Manley (2012) explores the issue of access for disabled people. Manley reminds readers that although an inclusive approach is being urged by various agents, 'accessibility and access are given scant consideration'. This is a serious indictment of how architects and urban designers neglect their social responsibility. Stating flatly (and rightly so) that legislation 'is not working', the author asserts that it is morally wrong to deny access or make access difficult for disabled people. The core of the problem is identified as a lack of ownership and the briefing insists that a change of attitude is now essential.

Donovan (2012) also focuses on the plight of vulnerable people in a paper with the poignant title 'Designing to heal; reconstructing communities after disasters'. The author not only highlights the prevalence of conflicts and natural disasters, but also stresses the ethical imperative of the built environment professions to participate in post-conflict and post-disaster reconstruction projects. This is not a paper based on a review of literature; the author draws on her first-hand experience and exposure in this field and has participated in

urban design interventions in places as diverse as Kosovo, Northern Ireland and Sri Lanka. Donovan recognises some systemic flaws in rebuilding projects, for example, they tend to reflect the values of the relevant decision-makers. The paper is enriched by beautiful hand drawings and hauntingly provocative photographs.

Tourism worldwide is a major contributor to gross domestic product, and a vital source of income for many countries. Norgate and Ormerod (2012) recognise that short-duration breaks are a major tourist trend and explore ways of making tourist destinations visitor-friendly during such compact visits by cutting navigating time. According to the authors, the advent of the global positioning system has not made the process quicker, easier or more enjoyable. While the authors admit that technology (smartphone apps) is certainly helpful, they focus on 'improved quality of physical signage'. Particularly interesting is their assertion that 'the overprovision of external cues could lead to a lack of cognitive involvement'. What Norgate and Ormerod clearly envisage is a journey that offers all the excitement of an adventure, but without the anxiety.

Meyer (2012) describes how the Netherlands moved from a 'hard core' civil engineering strategy of 'dredge, drain, reclaim', which gave planners a tabula rasa on which to focus land use patterns, streets and plots, to a dispensation where the hydraulic system of the city (flood control and water management) is now integrated with the urban system. Focusing on the Rotterdam area, this dispensation fuses an eco-friendly civil engineering approach with broader spatial planning and urban design goals, while it allows engineers, urban designers, ecologists and public authorities to collaborate.

Interestingly, the paper claims that this more holistic and collaborative approach was only partly generated by the need to respond to climate change, and was primarily motivated by a need to repair the natural environment and to create an attractive urban landscape. Significantly, Meyer states that this approach 'creates the opportunity to involve hydraulic engineering strategies in a more comprehensive debate on the societal aims of the future of city and landscape'.

The title of the lengthiest paper in this issue, 'Appraising infrastructure for new towns in Ireland' and the qualifications

of the six authors – all engineers – hint at a ‘hard core’ civil engineering project (Hunt *et al.*, 2012). Not true; with Adamstown outside Dublin as a case study, the paper provides a critical and in-depth analysis of the framework intended to ‘create a sustainable and vibrant community’. The authors’ investigation of infrastructure provision (transport, energy, water, information technology and waste) has a strong user orientation throughout in the sense that walkability, disabled access, health and safety, and access to information feature prominently as criteria.

The final contribution, Rob Cowan’s ‘Urbanwords’, is of course a regular column (Cowan, 2012). It serves admirably to clarify the meaning of words related to every conceivable aspect of the built environment. The conspectus of words and terminologies range from scholarly and academic expressions (Democratic conservation: Conserving ordinary buildings from the past) to the colloquial and jocular (Granny lane: The slow lane of a highway in the US).

In conclusion, although the six contributions emanate from different disciplines and address topics in different fields and on different scales, the social dimension provides an uninterrupted theme. The continuous awareness of human needs is perfectly aligned with Victor Papanek’s ideology of social design (Papanek, 1991, 1995). This convergence also underscores that, just as architecture is both an art and a science, so is the whole spectrum of built environment professions.

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