

Editorial: Design and planning for an urban planet



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Urbanisation is one of the four mega-trends of our age, according to Joan Clos (Executive Director of UN-Habitat, and former Mayor of Barcelona) – along with globalisation, information and communications technology and climate change (UN-Habitat, 2011). Indeed, the majority of the world's population now lives in towns and cities. As humanity becomes an increasingly urban species, the urban built environment is increasingly the signature human habitat. The prerogative for urban designers and planners to shape that environment for the better has never been greater.

Against this background, the scope and scale of urban planning seems to be ever expanding. Planners must be concerned not just with the organisation of urban development – in land use zones, neighbourhood units and new settlements – but also with public health and transport impacts, economic development, property markets, social inclusion, environmental protection and resilience. We need to consider not just the ground plan, but the potential for 'vertical cities' and underground spaces. We plan not just using plans in the traditional sense, but a whole spectrum of information and communication devices for inclusively shaping urban proposals. We need to consider not just town and country, but urban agriculture and the workings of whole regions and ecosystems – and in principle the future of the planet.

While urban design has traditionally occupied a reasonably well defined domain situated roughly between architecture and planning, its terms of reference also seem to be expanding. Urban design is not just about the arrangement of buildings and spaces, but encompasses built formats from pop-up markets to bat boxes, the morphology of squatter settlements, the specifics of construction materials, environmental psychology and affinity with nature, the politics of public spaces, identity and place-branding, and a welter of other issues that overlap with the scope, if not scale, of urban planning.

This expanded range in scope has implications for the knowledge and skills to be mastered by the urban designer and planner: the need to know about how the world works, and how to intervene – the craft of urban design, and planning as the 'art of the possible' when negotiating a path between a messy fray of urban authorities, developers and the public.

But while the overall envelope of knowledge expands, the need to focus on critical details, to allow informed decisions, remains. And while there has been a massive expansion of information exchange in the internet age, through websites, blogs and social media, the role of academic and professional journals remains important as a platform for communicating robust, reliable and accountable knowledge. In this issue of *Urban Design and Planning*, we see a range of papers connecting with the foregoing range of contemporary issues.

In the first briefing paper, Newman (2012) addresses the landmark issue of 'peak car' – the apparent halting and reversal in the rise of car travel observed in several countries – and suggests implications for planners and urban designers. Newman distils four strategies for action: no increase in road capacity; plan for 50% reduction in cars; quality electric transit by way of value capture; and green urban renewal.

In the second briefing, Bell (2012) reports on a seminar hosted by this journal at the most recent World Planning Schools Congress, which brought together an intercontinental cast of academics and practitioners (and 'pracademics'). Herein, Bell discusses the possibilities for linking theory and education to practice, while affirming the need for professionals to have not only scientific and technical skills, but a grounding in humanities and social sciences.

In the first of the full papers in this issue, Derix (2012) reports on a form of 'digital masterplanning'. The paper reviews earlier models of 'urban computing' before going on to showcase a project which was part of a collaboration between academia and industry. This future-oriented enterprise among other things demonstrates urban structure and accessibility simulations, applied in two London boroughs. This work promises to pave the way forward for 'computing urban design', integrating designers' tacit knowledge and design processes with software algorithms and visualisations.

Greed (2012) then provides a welcome and timely review and critique of transport planning from a gendered perspective. The author questions the value of transport policies that aim for generic sustainability principles, but fail to address 'the realities of everyday life' as experienced by users, especially

women and children. The findings and messages here could perhaps help support UN Habitat's 'gender mainstreaming' prerogative (UN-Habitat, 2011) and indeed extend it on the urban mobility front.

While climate change is of global concern, combatting its effects requires local action. Burton *et al.* (2012) address the increasingly important issue of flood defence in an urban environment, with a report on the award-winning Lewes Cliffe scheme in southern England. This account demonstrates some of the complexities of practical implementation in a conservation area, featuring public consultation, as well as reporting diverse practical details from 'smart bricks' to slow worms.

Finally, Sterling *et al.* (2012) provide an international review addressing the design and planning of underground spaces in urban areas. In a rapidly urbanising planet there is a need to make efficient use of prime urban land, and it is advantageous to plan ahead so that capacity for future densification and servicing for underground spaces can be provided for in advance. This paper offers insights into the practical possibilities for future urbanism, and an example of innovative solutions integrating urban design and planning with engineering.

Overall, the papers in this issue reflect several of the aspirations of this journal over the 5 years since its inception – to bridge between disciplines, between academia and practice, and between nations (Marshall, 2008a); and the conscious attention to the user's perspective (Marshall, 2008b). As *Urban Design and Planning* moves into a new phase – increasing to six issues per year from 2013 – we look forward to the journal's authors continuing to provide a stream of useful knowledge of international significance, which can support planning and design solutions for an increasingly urban planet.

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