TOWARDS UNDERSTANDING QUALITY OF URBAN SPACE

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Preamble

Waiting for the Bus: a way into quality of urban design

The humble London bus shelter illustrates connections between quality of space and quality of life, the theme of EUSS 2011. London bus shelters are designed by architects. Their brief emanates from the planning system. The bus stop area and spaces linking it to its surroundings fall into the realm of urban design. Their wider context depends on a multitude of values influenced by diverse protagonists.

The planned objective of a bus shelter is to accommodate persons who are using buses. Its function is to provide shelter, a roof, somewhere to sit, a view to see the bus arriving. The functional requirements devised by the bus company and its controlling transport department are for people to get on a bus and alight as fast and as economically as possible. When bus conductors were withdrawn to save a second salary, machines were installed for passengers to buy tickets in advance, thereby accelerating the process of entering and stepping off the bus. Another economic criterion is to produce the bus stop as cheaply as possible. It has to be vandal proof to prevent expensive maintenance and repairs. Moreover, it has to generate income. For this reason it offers space for advertisements. A prototype applied London-wide generates economies of scale, although it may not satisfy local conditions.

Information available at the bus stop about buses, their frequency of passage, their arrival time, their routes and destinations is an improvement for passengers. Other functional prescriptions emanate from health and safety concerns regulated by politics and the state. An example is the need of the bus stop to protect the waiting passengers from passing traffic. Implicit (socio-political) conditions are to make the travelling public

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feel safe, for instance by preventing vagrants from using the bus shelter as temporary accommodation. Together, such physical, functional and legislative performance specifications provide the brief for the design of London bus stops.

The resulting design is a roof and a vertical protection against the weather, glazed to feel safe and to see the bus arrive. A very narrow, high and sloping bench prevents lying down and sleeping on it. For economic reasons the roof is detached from the walls letting rain fall on sitting passengers. The bus shelter opens inward towards the pavement to prevent waiting passengers from stepping into street traffic. Optional electricity supply provides lighting for passengers' safety and to show bus arrival times. Parts of the shelter are obscured by advertisement while parts onto the street and oncoming traffic are transparent. Unfortunately, the ticket machine and the post which shows the bus lines, routes, timetables and destinations are obscuring the view. Situated closely together these objects are obstructing access to, and exit from the bus.

The result of this design is that passengers get wet when it rains, cannot see the bus arrive and have difficulties in getting on and off the bus, especially when it stops away from the pavement and obliges passengers to step into a gutter full of storm water: all in all a dysfunctional design, not fit for purpose, an aesthetic clutter repeated throughout the city.

1º dia - London bus shelter and street furniture obstructing view, photos Judith Ryser

The humble bus shelter encapsulates the complexity of urban design and the importance of its wider context. Thus the purpose of our contribution to EUSS11 was threefold:

- increase knowledge and skills of students;
- apply a practical urban design tool to two concrete projects at the workshop;
- explore wider connections between design, cities and people.

We were discussing contemporary urban design criteria and interdependence between architecture, urban design, planning and use of space as contribution to the knowledge, skills and ability of design students.

Our key questions for professional practice of urban designers and planners were:

- which urban design and planning criteria may lead to better urban places?
- what are the relations between physical form, functional structure and social aspiration to improve quality of life?
- which spaces are contributing to urban quality: public, private and links between them?
- how is urban quality generated and at what scale: neighbourhoods, districts, cities, metropolitan regions and beyond?

1. Tool Kit of Urban Designers

The bus shelter example shows the importance of reconciling potentially contradictory sectoral and functional requirements, as well as integrating design at various scales, from street furniture to neighbourhoods and the city as a whole. Academics and practitioners have elaborated a number of planning and urban design tools to understand the built environment

on the one hand, and to provide guidance for physical – spatial design interventions on the other hand. They aim to contribute to the improvement of the quality of urban space and the quality of life of those who use it. Design tools constitute a vast resource. Besides relating to the human scale, their appropriateness depends on a wide range of contextual aspects, such as the fine grain of a specific built environment and its relation to the wider context.

2º dia - Quality of urban space: Rio project, Madrid, Spain, photo Teresa Franchini

Urban design techniques developed during the second half of the 20th century were instrumental in introducing sustainability into the production and regeneration of cities. Shaping urban spaces is about the relation between physical form and functions structures, about how physical attributes are affecting the use of the public realm. Increased awareness of the interdependence between planning, urban design and the use of public space have led to internationally applied design criteria.

Planning criteria

Planning criteria have evolved alongside organic changes in the built environment and society. The latest planning principles for the transformation and adaptation of the urban fabric and the provision of a good quality, sustainable urban environment include the following seven characteristics: compactness, high density, mixed development, sustainable transportation network, diverse housing supply and tenure, environmental conditions, and good urban design[12]. More generally, sustainable planning concentrates on four key issues: urban fabric, urban structure, environmental conditions and formal definitions of sustainability.

A sustainable 'urban fabric' provides a balance between buildings and open spaces. Open space networks are composed of natural and artificial elements to satisfy different uses at various scales, and sustainable 'urban form' means compact built up areas. This is more likely to be achieved by 'the compact city'[13] than urban sprawl, by regenerating and recovering abandoned, underused or degraded urban areas, while protecting urban heritage. High densities are assumed to attract necessary urban amenities and economic activities as part of a viable urban fabric. However, the concept of residential high density varies with cultural context - relatively low in northern and central Europe and quite high in Mediterranean cities, albeit with changing trends.

Sustainable 'urban structure' is related to the functional aspects of the city, the linkage between uses (activities) and accessibility (transports). Neighbourhoods are considered the basic units of civic life and social integration where urban activities are best accommodated in well-balanced mixed uses comprising housing, workplaces and services. Housing constitutes the major part of urban environments. Mixed housing types and tenure promote social diversification, while optimum use of urban infrastructure is achieved by concentrating productive and service activities in centres and sub-centres located around transportation nodes.

12 Classics and contemporary authors on urban design are among many: Gordon Cullen, 1961, The Concise Townscape, Architectural Press; David Gosling, 1996, Gordon Cullen - Visions of Urban Design, John Wiley & Sons; Francis Tibbalds, 1992, Making People Friendly Towns - improving the public environment in towns and cities, Spon; Andy Karski, on Francis Tibbalds http://www.rudi.net/books/9943; Matthew Carmona, 2003, Public Place, Urban Spaces - the dimension of urban design, Architectural Press; Ron Kasprisin, 2011, Urban Design, the Composition of Complexity, Routledge.

13 Richard Rogers was spearheading this concept as head of the Urban Task Force: Towards an Urban Renaissance, 1998.

3º dia - Example of applying integrated sustainable planning criteria: Ecocity Sarriguren, Pamplona, Spain, source: Fundacion Metropoli

Sustainable 'transportation networks' are composed of different interactive modes, giving preference to public transport, cycling and walking and favouring alternatives to private individual means of transport. Pedestrianisation is a core concept in achieving sustainable micro-urban structures. They are best combined at neighbourhood level with good access to a centre with mixed uses at high gross density, where priority is allocated to pedestrians.

Although 'environmental aspects' have formed part of the urban planning agenda since the 1970s, the movement towards urban sustainability gave a revival to the environmental dimension. Core matters in any urban project include energy efficiency in buildings, infrastructure and services, with emphasis on renewable energy, resource recycling and new green technologies for buildings and infrastructure.

Urban design criteria

The formal success of this type of urbanism rests on good quality urban design expected to foster a sense of belonging among residents of integrated and well connected neighbourhoods. Current criteria of good urban design encompass identity, continuity and enclosure, ease of movement, legibility, character quality of the public realm, connectivity, accessibility, visibility, diversity, permeability and adaptability, security[14].

More specifically, 'character' signifies places with their own 'identity'. Landscapes inform such urban areas which preserve natural features and integrate existing buildings with valuable urban components. They include local forms, architectural style and construction details to reflect their specific urban fabric.

'Continuity and enclosure' mark a clear delimitation between public and private spaces. In design terms this amounts to buildings aligned onto the street. Such streets and their active facades define the urban environment, create activities, generate movement and facilitate social control. Set-back buildings create valuable urban spaces while changing continuity of use; rear facades define inner courtyards, communal spaces; sense of security form relationships with other buildings and public spaces. Partitions and other design components facilitate change of levels and access to buildings; they also provide privacy and shield unsightly places, such as parking areas and waste disposal [15].

'Ease of movement' ensures external 'connectivity', local 'accessibility' and 'permeability'. Design contributes to fluid movement by providing multi-modal spaces which are shared or segregated depending on local needs. Besides accommodating all modes of traffic, traffic calming does not only contribute to security but creates a better public realm. 'Permeability' and 'legibility' of the whole communication system are the essential

14 By Design, Urban Design in the Planning System: Towards Better Practice. Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) 2000.

15 e.g. Jan Gehl, 2010, Cities for People, Island Press

aspects to solve by providing recognisable routes for residents and visitors.

Key to desirable neighbourhoods is the 'quality of the public realm' which needs to be attractive, accessible and secure. Living ground floors with dynamic activities contribute to that, as does good 'visibility' which facilitates natural surveillance and a sense of 'security'.

'Good urban design' includes a favourable micro-climate adapted to local weather conditions, adequate street furniture, paving and greenery. Design can provide diversity, variety and choice. It should foster a mixture of compatible uses in buildings and open spaces, together with mixed forms and types of public and private buildings.

'Legibility' is perhaps one of the most interesting criteria, since it represents the point of view of the city users. Early in the 1960s, Kevin Lynch and Gordon Cullen advised urban designers about the need to create stunning images to favour the development of the 'imageability' concept - or the faculty to remember urban landscapes - and to manipulate the urban elements to achieve impacts on people's emotions [16].

Legibility achieved through recognisable routes for residents and visitors enhances quality of urban life. It can be provided by elements of urban images - nodes, edges, landmarks, boundaries and barriers. Active uses of main routes and focal points represent the identity and vitality of a place.

'Adaptability' of buildings and spaces means that they are capable of conversion with other purposes. Adaptability of public spaces becomes apparent when they are hosting a diversity of uses, such as festivals, events or markets. Diverse uses of public spaces enrich urban quality, together with buildings of simple shapes, floor heights and depths with adaptable ground floors [17].

16 Kevin Lynch, 1960, The Image of the City, MIT Press; Gordon Cullen, 1961, The Concise Townscape, Architectural Press

17 Kelvin Campbell, 2011, Massive Small - the operating programme for smart urbanism, Urban Exchange. This essay is revisiting the basic building blocks of integrated urban design.

4º dia - Example of urban form based on current urban design criteria: Kronsberg District, Hanover, Germany. Source: La ciudad sostenible. Manual de Diseño, Instituto para la Diversificación y Ahorro Energético. Ministerio de Economía, 2002

Social use of the urban realm

The social dimension is an important aspect of urban design. Human behaviour is situational; it is embedded in physical space [18]. Decisions about the urban environment which are aimed to enhance the use of the city are affecting groups as well as individuals and their quality of urban life.

Three types of activities occur in urban space: 'compulsory', 'optional' and 'occasional' [19]. Together they constitute the basic demands of the urban realm which provide accessibility and security to facilitate easy use of the city. Urban routes form the basic condition of accessibility, together with interesting destinations. While many routes lead urban dwellers from origins to destinations, they may choose selected routes which offer them intermediate spaces for optional activities. Such route networks form part of a social system of movement.

18 Kevin Lynch, 1960, The Image of the City, MIT; Gordon Cullen, 1947, Townscape Casebook, Architectural Review. For a more theoretical approach see Manuel Castells, 1972, The Urban Question, Arnold.

19 Quentin Stevens, The Ludic City, Routledge, 2007

Sustainable cities are those capable of fulfilling user needs. This includes urban spaces which offer comfort, appropriate physical and environmental conditions and active links to provide opportunities for social interaction. However, spaces for proximity do not necessarily bring about interaction. Elements of discovery, such as markets, exhibitions, spectacles and social events may break routines and liven up passive links. Adjacent to pedestrian flows they provide opportunities for relaxation and observation. They can become places to stay where explicit elements such as benches or chairs, or implicit spaces such as steps or low impediments are encouraging formal and informal interchanges.

5º dia -Example of a space fostering concentrated and diverse urban activities at the neighbourhood level: centre of Manchester, photo Teresa Franchini

Vocational professions like planning, urban design and architecture contain a considerable hands-on dimension. The planning and design criteria presented above reflect that. They are captured in assessment tools - indicators, rank orders, or similar metrics to assist designers in designing better quality places for better quality of life. Whether proscriptive, prescriptive or advisory, these tools form part of 'conventional wisdom' of planning, urban design and architecture. Not all professionals choose to use them though and alternative approaches persist or are rediscovered

like those of Christopher Alexander [20] or Jane Jacobs [21] who retain their followers. This diversity gives rise to healthy continuous debates on urban design, its purpose and its tools.

2. Quality of Space – Quality of Life: Towards an Evaluation

Focusing on quality of space and quality of life in times of economic austerity constitutes a particular challenge for professionals of the built environment, politicians and local communities. In cooperation with local practitioners, elected representatives and academics the hosts of EUSS11 selected two sites with generic complexities: one a cosmopolitan fringe settlements in a large, fast growing metropolitan area; the other a sea resort with high seasonal population fluctuations.

The workshop provided a framework to explore the definition and meaning of 'quality of urban space' and its relation to 'quality of life', and offered an instrument to identify and evaluate what is essential about quality of space, which mechanisms are transforming it, and what trends would enhance it. At the workshop the students had the opportunity to apply a specific urban design instrument to understand the two given sites, evaluate their potential, make explicit assumptions about their use, and propose spatial – physical designs to improve quality of space and quality of life for their users. Beyond that, it enabled them to explore interactions among people, links between people and their environments, as well as connections between urban design and the complexity of cities.

The evaluation tool

The workshop offered students a hands-on opportunity to experiment with a simple design evaluation tool. The objective of using a matrix was

20 See for example Christopher Alexander's Eishin Campus near Tokyo and his writings on The Nature of Order.

21 Jane Jacobs' Life and Death of Great American Cities written in the 1960s is experiencing a strong revival.

to explore the existing physical conditions of both the site on the outskirts of Lisbon (Arroja) which is in need of social and cultural integration and the site on the coast (Sintra) which has to accommodate large temporary population fluctuations. The succinct audit encompassed both quantitative and qualitative criteria. It aimed to capture the quantitative conditions of the physical context, together with the qualitative characteristics assumed by the students ex ante and verified during site visits through the perception of inhabitants and visitors. Identifying desired trends helped to clarify what the physical context could contribute to the quality of life in these sites.

The audit was conceived as a process. Students would establish relevant thematic subjects for each site and - related to each of them - indicators, thresholds to be fulfilled, current trends and those which were desirable. This evidence base would enable students to evaluate the existing circumstances and assist them in devising interventions to improve the quality of space and thus the quality of life of inhabitants and visitors.

Matrix of analysis and evaluation

Thematic subject	Indicators	Thresholds	Existing situation	Desired tendencies

Four categories for each thematic subject established ex ante and post hoc site visits [23]

22 The sites are presented elsewhere in this publication, and figure also in the student projects.

23 SIn five steps, the students would clarify the methodology of their audit. They would start by putting content into a matrix informed by desk studies. They would verify and adapt the thematic issues in the light of site visits and refine indicators and criteria. These revised matrices would constitute a methodological instrument towards their analytical and design work. They would derive spatial strategies as well as proposals for actions spaced over time for the two sites. Pointers towards general guidelines for the assessment and improvement of the generic aspects of the quality of urban space would conclude the overall outcome.

Examples

Thematic subject	Indicators	Thresholds	Existing situation	Desired tendencies
accessibility	walking distance to public transport stop from home	600 m	1000 m	1000 m
	ease of movement on pavements	avoid slopes above 1% not more than 1cm of difference of level between slabs	broken paving stones	repair pavement resistant to wear and tear
	ease of movement on pavements for special needs	provide bubble surface for blind people at crossings width sufficient for wheelchairs	bollards across pavements cars parked on pavement	prevent cars from accessing pavement
security	public-private space integration	avoid barriers and access control	poor lighting in streets	promote better street furniture
	inclusive uses	activities for all ages	good situation	maintain
liveliness	compactness	100 inhabitants/ha	low density	increase
	commercial centre	catchment area: 600 m radius	small commercial activities	maintain & promote
	urban animation	day and night people flows	scarce flows	Promote better flows with more animation

The role of design tools and observation

Whatever kits of tools designers are using, it is important to acknowledge that it matters little what they think personally about the built environment and its uses. Their task is to observe people and how they are using the city and in particular the public realm [24]. In combination with design tools observations help them to understand the city and reasons for urban change as prerequisites of designing places for a better quality of life. Designers can also learn by experiencing urban places and spaces as evidence base for their design. Engaging with the built environment and how people shape and use it can contribute to a wider (theoretical) body of knowledge. It should be kept in mind that observation and urban design are embedded in a wider context of planning and the dynamic of cities as a whole.

3. Connections between Urban Design, Planning and the Complexity of Cities

Even a brief acquaintance with the two sites selected for EUSS11 has highlighted the many interdependencies between the local level and the broader spatial and geo-political context. The specific problems encountered on these sites for which design solutions are sought are linked integrally to the socio-economic development goals of the country, their dependence on the wider European region and their exposure to global competitiveness and political pressures. Interventions aimed at redressing the specific deficiencies of the two sites need to be realisable within local constraints, but their long term success depends on broader urban regeneration strategies. It is thus important to understand the dynamic interplay between the local level and spatial as well as socio-economic transformations at broader scales.

24 See for example the film by William H Whyte, 1979, on the use of New York plazas.

25 e.g. Georges Perec, Peter Kellner, Walter Benjamin.

26 e.g. Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Pierre Bourdieu, Richard Florida, Francis Fukuyama.

27 e.g. situationists led by Guy Debord, the postmodernists dealing with design such as Also Rossi, Manfredo Tafuri, Robert Venturi, Rob and Leo Krier, etc.

Before entering a discussion on concrete urban regeneration, it is proposed to explore the interdependencies between quality of place and quality of life, the theme of EUSS11. Cities form the context of better spaces for better quality of life, but planned urban regeneration constitutes only a small part of urban change which is driven by a plethora of other forces. It is important therefore to gain some understanding of these forces and how they may constrain or enhance design interventions.

6º dia - 'Spontaneous' urban change: cohabitation between the poorest and the richest in Sao Paolo, source: Tate Modern City exhibition – from Venice biennale 2006

Understanding the city

Understanding urban complexity has gone beyond the reach of 'renaissance genius' such as Michelangelo Buonarotti or Leonardo da Vinci. Besides learning from practice the professionals of the built environment need to resort to a wide range of scholars working at an abstract level or at a meta-scale. Designers tend to seek inspiration from many different sources: the arts and literature [25], philosophy [26], as well as alternative movements [27]. However, the theoretical knowledge base of urbanists is rooted in both the natural sciences (mathematics, structures, material sciences, chemistry, geology, cartography, modelling, imaging, etc), and the social sciences, such as urban sociology [28], psychology, geography [29] and economics [30].

28 e.g, The Chicago School with Louis Wirth, Robert Park, William Thomas, etc; the Frankfurt School with Jurgen Habermas, Herbert and Peter Marcuse, Georg Simmel, etc; Marxist urban sociology with Henri Lefebvre, Manuel Castells, Istvan Szelenyi Sharon Zukin, Chris Pickvance, etc

29 e.g. Ernest Burgess, David Harvey, Edward Soja, Erik Swyngedouw, Susan Fainstein

30 e.g. Johan Heinrich van Thunen, Walter Christaller, William Alonso, August Loesch, Jane Jacobs, Arthur O'Sullivan, Philip McCann.

This amounts to an enormous body of knowledge often compartmentalised into academic fiefdoms. Fortunately, many contemporary urban thinkers are making their ideas freely available on popular media [31]. Thus an unprecedented amount of knowledge is accessible to planners and urban designers which can influence urban development as well as political agendas.

Planning and urban design have continuously borrowed models of thinking from science. For example, ecology and systems theory are being used to understand rapid urban growth, while other models from physics and information technology are trying to explain urban shrinkage, or the impact of city user networks on blurring city boundaries.

With links to such diverse bodies of knowledge and know-how, planning and design are hybrids, bridging science and action. Moreover, their tools and designs are tied to particular historic times. Their practices attract critique in the light of failures and new knowledge [32] and when they embrace paradigmatic changes they become new objects of academic research. Owing to such a dialectic planning and design practitioners can improve their understanding of urban processes by drawing on a growing and changing body of knowledge which they can put to use for urban interventions and to which they can contribute in turn.

Renaissance of cities

In a period of ever increasing and accelerating urbanisation and globalisation, cities have regained a prominent position [33]. As essential wealth generators, cities are attracting the development industry and the body politic, while providing great opportunities for the professionals of the built environment. Cities can and do benefit from the body of knowledge of design to their advantage.

31 David Harvey is a good example of disseminating knowledge on media such as You Tube, websites and blogs, as well as at public gatherings, besides their academic writing. www.youtube.com/watch?v=qOP2V_np2c0 or newleftreview.org/?view=2740 (the right to the city)

32 See, for example, Peter Hall. 1982. Great Planning Disasters. University of California Press.

33 See for example UN Habitat compendia on cities.

Many cities have existed over a long time and are mature; they change more than they grow. Urban interventions - spontaneous, planned or negotiated – can lead to greater disparity between places and the life chances of urban communities [34]. Often urban (physical) renewal can only take place after destruction of existing city fabrics and displacement of existing communities. This process affects a broad range of inhabitants with different needs which relate to diverse criteria of quality of life, thus this process may not necessarily produce balanced quality of place and quality of life throughout the city.

7º e 8º dia - Planned urban change: destruction and regeneration of a central London island block, photos Judith Ryser

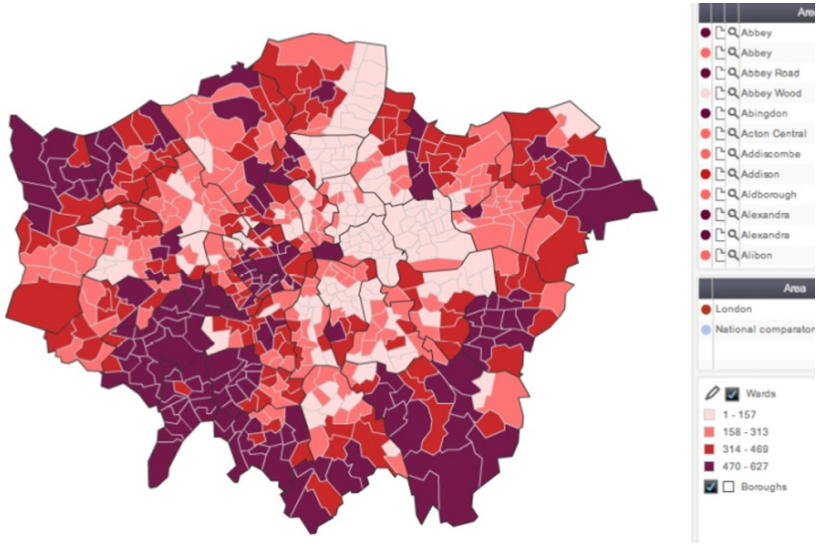
Polarisation due to urban processes and economic, spatial - environmental, social - cultural evolution are not new. The poverty maps of London compiled by Charles Booth at the end of the 19th century provide a detailed record of social disparities and differences between quality of place driven by early capitalism and industrialisation [35].

34 Some tutors at EUSS11 illustrated this process in their presentations, e.g. Pietro Elisei who studied the living conditions and built environment of the Roma in Romania.

35 Charles Booth, 1889, London poverty maps. http://booth.lse.ac.uk/cgi-bin/do.pl?sub=view_booth_and_barth&args=531000,180400,6,large,5

9º dia - Booth poverty map of London 1998, source: British Library

Contemporary interactive maps, generated by the Greater London Authority show how and where polarisation is changing [36]. While living conditions improved overall, polarisation increased in London, which is reflected in a patchwork of diverse areas ranging from wealthy wellbeing to multiple deprivations.



10º dia - Greater London Authority, datastore 'atlas': interactive map of spatial income distribution in quartiles 2007, source: GLA

36 The datastore of the Greater London Authority is compiling an interactive Atlas, showing the spatial distribution of income inequality, multiple deprivation and many other factors of urban quality of life.
http://data.london.gov.uk/datastore/package/ward-profiles-2011

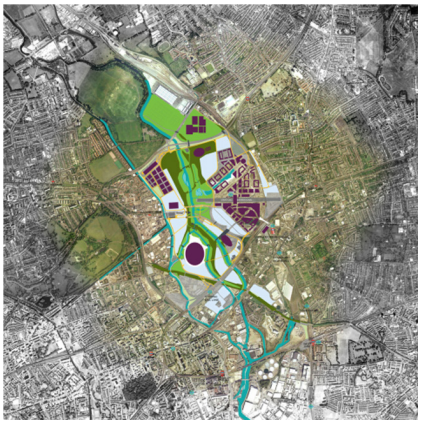
Urban regeneration

Urban regeneration aims to redress the most pressing urban deficiencies. However, the question of winners and losers remains critical, in particular whose living conditions are improving and whose are declining in the process of urban regeneration - before, during, after and in the long term. If the purpose of urban regeneration is to redress social and spatial injustice, it has to cope with inherent contradictions.

Can urban regeneration as practiced in neo-liberal environments by partnerships between the public and the private sectors really deliver sustainable, or more appropriately 'low (adverse) impact' development? Large scale urban regeneration projects with high political profiles are rarely accompanied by an independent and transparent monitoring process, especially one which evaluates not only narrow 'value for money' but broader impacts on existing populations and businesses, as well as quality of space and quality of life in these new urban environments. Annual reports to parliament by non elected development corporations are not providing appropriate scrutiny [37].

Evaluations are by no means easy and present many challenges. Measuring 'value for money' and improvement of quality of space and quality of life require a lot of clarification. Does value for money relate to the tax payers, profitability of the private sector, the land owner, the developer, the investor, other interested parties? Is quality of space and life meant to improve for those living, working and playing in the area, and/or the areas around them, or for those who move into these areas after regeneration? Is urban regeneration supposed to benefit the city as a whole, the nation at large? For example, the fact that no audits have been undertaken of the state of the local economy and society in the areas in and around the Olympic games 2012 in London, means that there is no base line to measure their legacy effects.

[37] e.g. The London Dockland Development Corporation



11º dia - Areas affected by Olympic games, source: Design for London

Cities contain inherent contradictions between sustainability principles and economic growth, man-made environments and nature, city competitiveness and citizenry as a whole, openness and gated communities. These contradictions are at the heart of urban policy debates and regeneration processes. Economic growth tends to dominate any other development objective and, in times of recession, sustainability and social justice issues tend to lose importance. This shift also affects the balance between the man-made environment and nature, the city and the countryside, built up areas and open spaces within cities.

Tensions between cities and the diverse needs and wants of those who use them - residents (citizens, voters), the working population, visitors, transient people, etc - form part of urban life. Is there a system of government which can relate equitably to all of them and improve social and spatial justice? Who are the custodians of the collective good, of the public interest? Who holds decision makers to account, guarantees citizens

a say through public participation, shares out finite public assets equitably between all stakeholders? Who preserves urbanity by keeping the city open to all, and what role does physical urban regeneration play in all this? When proposing masterplans and urban design solutions for specific sites, these questions are equally relevant as design criteria and may contradict values embedded in planning and urban design tools. Most importantly, they may neglect 'the right to the city' of those with different values.

12º dia - Occupy Isx, photo Judith Ryser

Gentrification, unintended consequence of urban regeneration?

Often, urban policies claim that by ameliorating the life chances of the least deprived sustainable urban regeneration is improving the quality of life of all citizens. Reality is not substantiating this, and in particular the presumed trickling down process lacks evidence. Gentrification is a likely result of urban regeneration and by enclosing and excluding great sways of urban substance from the public realm it is perceived as divisive and exclusive.

Gentrification contains key contradictions: social spatial (in-) justice, man-made environment vs nature, city vs citizens, openness vs gatedness. However, the impacts of gentrification are ambiguous. The question is whether gentrification is path-dependent on regeneration, whether it is

inherently adverse, or whether its divisive effects can be attenuated. It is clear that gentrification is making a major positive contribution to the improvement of the urban fabric. It releases a lot of energy and investment of individuals who are spending their time and money on improving derelict premises while often contributing to the improvement of the broader neighbourhood into which they move as a next step in their housing 'career' or to set up new innovative businesses.

13º dia - 'Organic' gentrification of run down inner city areas, photo Judith Ryser

Gentrification constitutes a social as well as a physical intervention in cities. It is often visible, in the shape of gated spaces and whole gated communities, but it also produces many less obvious infractions into the 'commons'. There is a need to balance the benefits of gentrification with its adverse effects on localities.

A path-dependent process of gentrification starts with the colonisation of derelict, abandoned sites, such as decommissioned factories or utilities by footloose artists and activists, sometimes accompanied by homeless or marginal people. The process may start with temporary events, one-off festivals, exhibitions, street markets and other events, organised by this faction of the creative industry, as part of transient urban life which enriches the city. Gradually, these premises are being occupied and

improved by those who live and work there. Often some sort of informal local economy is developing, based on innovative creativity of artists and social entrepreneurs. When such places start to show success, the erstwhile owners of the sites or the public authorities lay claim on them, evict the colonisers who have no title to land or premises, sell the sites off to private developers, often at very favourable terms, including recovering the costs of decontamination from the public purse. After lengthy conflicts, the foot-holders have to move on without benefiting from the value added which they have contributed to such sites by increasing their desirability and economic worth. A whole literature is honing these foot-holders [38] mostly without addressing their moral or pecuniary claims.

This leaves a host of questions for planning, urban regeneration and urban design. What happens to public ownership of land, premises and other urban assets and, in particular, to rights of way when they are being contracted out, sold off, privatised? What is the role of planners and urban designers in this balancing act between private property and public realm?

Spatial diversity, reflected in mixed development with different uses alongside each other forms a key ingredient of 'quality of space'. Conversely, private, development-led, profit seeking urban regeneration tends to create 'sameness'. The Broadgate office estate developed in the financial heart of London on decommissioned railway land is a typical example of privatising land, made and making it available to public use under great surveillance and private control [39]. Battersea power station expresses the generic conflict between citizens and custodians of citywide wellbeing regarding rights and responsibilities of public goods and public land, such as disused public utilities which remain natural monopolies even when transferred to private hands. In many cases decommissioned sites give rise to prolonged planning blight which may seep out to surrounding areas [40].

38 e.g. Richard Florida, 2002, The Rise of the Creative Class, and how it is transforming work, leisure, community and everyday life, Basic Books

39 http://www.britishland.com/index.asp?pageid=157

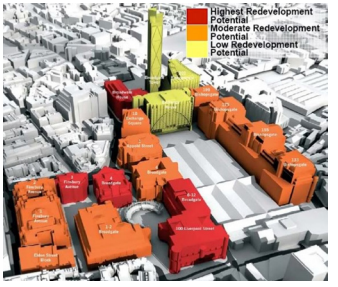
40 the urban development site is again back on the market, see http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/blog/2012/feb/15/battersea-power-station-development-housing/print.

14º e 15º dia -Battersea power station site and one of the abandoned projects with the highest tower in Europe by Rafael Vinoly.
sources: http://www.insidehousing.co.uk/development/further-800-homes-planned-for-battersea-site/6516513.article; http://www.worldarchitecturenews.com/index.

16º dia A -Broadgate 1980s redevelopment site
16º dia B -Broadgate 'Mark II', Tower, 21st century redevelopment
sources: http://www.kidsfunlondon.co.uk/kids-london/ice-rink/broadgate-ice-rink.html http://www.gardenvisit.com/blog/category/landscape-architecture/london-urban-design/

Considering the long term life expectancy of urban regeneration, many examples show that when carried out by private developers, regeneration developments do not tend to last. Broadgate is being demolished after only 20 years of existence, notwithstanding a large amount of embedded public investment, to give way to much higher densities for the same mono-functional (office) purpose. Thus, demolition adds value to land, reconstruction boosts the construction industry, new owners achieve greater yields through capital gains and higher rents. This process has become ambiguous though with securitisation which attracts corporate investors, including pension funds. 'Profit' is no longer clearly identifiable, as it diffuses across a wide range of changing stakeholders, including the general public through their pension funds. It is unlikely though that value added of this process is finding its way back into the public purse.

This process makes the physical fabric transient without lasting identity. Most critically, it reduces the public realm [41] and contributes to perceptual uncertainty and alienation. The design professionals are participating in this process, increasingly for the private sector and its value systems, and often in contradiction with the meaning if not the letter of public planning principles.



41 See for example, Anna Minton, 2012, Ground Control - Fear and happiness in the 21st century city, Penguin Books.

4. Quality of Space and Quality of Life in Cities: Changing Perspectives of Planning and Urban Design Practice

The aim of this paper is to show the connection between practical design tools and a wider contextual understanding of cities as a prerequisite of urban design and planning interventions for particular sites. A brief historic perspective exposes the dynamic of this connection.

Sustainability principles form part of contemporary planning tools [42]. However, current austerity times are eroding them by attributing preference to development-led planning [43], this despite the recent property crashes and negative equity which leave behind unsustainable 'ruins before their time'.

Before that, planning criteria focused on 'hard' physical - spatial and functional aspects, urban form and fabric, land use, transportation, housing, neighbourhoods and environmental conditions, while including some 'soft' factors, such as quality of design, liveability and sense of belonging [44]. Earlier on, land use planning and development control resorted to prescriptive norms, rather than to more generic functional criteria open to interpretation, arguably more adapted to a constantly changing urban environment.

These few changes of the planning process show that planning kept incorporating new ideas, either from planning theories, or from practice and politics. Most new approaches focused on single issues. Examples are physical hierarchy and segregation between traffic modes [45], and urban renewal of large urban areas deemed redundant involving demolition and replacement [46]. Reaction against such top down authoritarian planning manifested itself in demand for public participation, but the planning system soon reduced that to public consultation, often only of accredited groups and at a late stage of the planning process [47].

42 For example the latest London Plan 2011. http://www.london.gov.uk/priorities/planning/londonplan

43 For example the Localism Act 2011 in the UK. Relaxation of planning has even become an integral part of national budget making (UK budget of 12 March 2012).

44 These aspects had to be included in the Local Development Frameworks which were introduced in the Planning and Compulsory Purchase Act 2004 as statutory documents to be produced by the planning authorities, but may be superseded by the national planning policy framework currently under parliamentary discussion.

Akin to many other places, the two sites situated respectively on the outskirts of Lisbon and on the Portuguese coast were influenced by such ideological and/or technological changes to planning approaches and carry their traces in their physical fabric.

Similarly, urban design criteria underwent continuous change. Formerly considered as an aesthetic add-on urban design became a popular debating point [48]. While the boundaries between planning, urban design and architecture were shifting continuously, historic and environmental dimensions were gaining importance and led to conservation planning, followed by ecological and later sustainability concerns in urban design. Like for planning, present economic hardship is swinging the pendulum towards relaxation of design regulations.

17º dia - Regenerated inner city according to changing design criteria, Rua Augusta, Lisbon, Portugal, photo Teresa Franchini

45 Colin Buchanan. 1963. Traffic in Towns. A study of the long term problems of traffic in urban areas, reports of the steering group and working group appointed by the Minister of Transport. HMSO. Shortened edition. Buchanan Report S228. 1964 Penguin Books.

46 practiced all over North America and Europe, especially in the UK and France after the second world war and in the sixties during rapid urbanisation and mass immigration.

47 See successive amendments to the 1947 Town and Country Planning Act in the UK.

48 See for example the ongoing debate on the merits or drawbacks of skyscrapers. http://londonist.com/2012/03/boris-ken-and-the-london-skyline.php.

Nevertheless, design criteria derived from analysis and experimentation are worth preserving. Environmental determinism [49] has evolved into more subtle relations between spaces and their uses which have been researched intensely [50].

Studies of urban experiences focused on how people are using the city, moving through it, reaching destinations, carrying out tasks and moving on. These movements relate to social networks at home, at work and in life in general. Urban routes and intermediate spaces are relevant to that experience, such as the existence of interesting destinations. Research shows that selected routes are more enriching if they lead through intermediate spaces which give rise to optional activities [51]. By observing barriers and hurdles to these urban flows it becomes clear that urban route networks function best when they are integrated into local movement systems.

18º dia - Regenerated industrial land, Bilbao urban park creating new routes along the river, photo Teresa Franchini

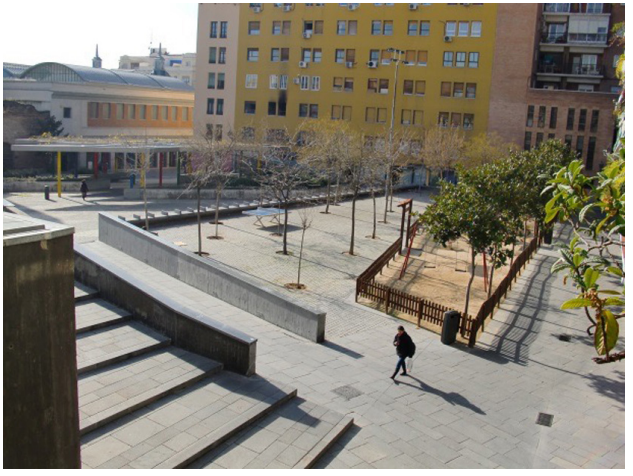
49 epitomised by Oscar Newman's defensible space theory (1972). Creating Defensible Space, 1996, HUD.

50 e.g. Caroline Holland, Andrew Clark, Jeanne Katz, Sheila M Peace, 2007, Social interactions in Urban Public Places, Josef Rowntree. http://www.jrf.org.uk/publications/social-interactions-urban-public-placesFoundation.

51 e.g. Ron Kasprisin, 2011, Urban Design, the Composition of Complexity, Routledge.

Other studies concentrating on user needs include comfort which involves physical and environmental factors and active links that provide opportunities for social interaction. Discovery forms part of user needs. Activities in the public realm can bring welcome variety and surprise and help break routines while passive links provide opportunities for relaxation and observation. Passive links adjacent to pedestrian flows constitute formal and informal, explicit and implicit places to stay [52]. From these studies it is clear that design criteria are not so much about how they can contribute to the quality of the urban environment, but how well designed urban places can influence their uses, and in particular the quality of life of those living, working, visiting and playing in these spaces.

19º dia - Agustin Lara Square, Madrid, regenerated public realm in the inner city, photo Teresa Franchini



52 e.g. work of the Urban Movement Team at Urban Initiatives, http://www.urbanmovement.co.uk/

5. Conclusion, Towards an Urban 'Intra-Language'

The interface between cities and society, between urban realm and urban quality of life contributes to the infinite fascination of cities. Cities cannot be captured by simplistic interpretations. Understanding an urban environment and how people are using it is a difficult task and necessarily based on assumptions and, as some would have it, on ideologies [53]. The complexity of cities means that expertise derived from intervening in the urban environment remains limited. Hence planners and designers need to relate to the insights of a wide range of social, economic and environmental scientists, as well as practitioners and planning instruments, such as the evaluation tools discussed above, in dealing with the complexity of cities and quality of life of those 'habiting' [54] them. Sharing knowledge across the professions helps putting design proposals into a broader context and a longer timeframe to make them more flexible and adaptable, thus resilient and sustainable.

In practice, planning and design are contributing to quality of life by conceiving user friendly places. The proof is that citizens identify with them by 'inhabiting' them and taking ownership of them which fosters welcome stability of space and place. However, it has to be remembered that urban spaces are produced by the development industry and increasingly managed by it according to different motivations and values. At present, the turbulence of the global economy, its repercussions on urban society and how the discontented are expressing their despair with the human condition are creating new challenges [55]. The way these movements are taking possession of the public realm to protest against the excesses of capitalism, the way they try to redress the erosion of urban quality of life constitute a new field of experimentation from which urban designers and planners could learn how to conceive better urban places for a better quality of urban life of the many.

53 The Urban Question by Manuel Castells, 1972, Arnold, contains a number of critiques of according to him 'misguided' interpretations of urban structures and functions.

54 'habiting' is a term for all those experiencing city life, proposed by Henri Lefebvre in theorising the right to the city.

55 Observe how the Occupy movement http://occupylondon.org.uk/ and the Indignados in Spain have used urban space and what their claims are for the public realm. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011%E2%80%932012_Spanish_protests

20º dia - Spontaneous 'taking ownership of urban space', 'sandy living room' during low tide on the Thames, photo Judith Ryser

Explanations of the interplay between space, place, use and users may always be tentative. All designers can do to contribute to what is inherent in, and perhaps the very essence of urbanity [56] is to combine their competence of measuring quantitative aspects of urban life in urban space with more qualitative characteristics and resort to their own experience while maintaining a dialogue with others in producing designs for urban quality of life.

Many urbanists consider it part of their profession to engage in raising awareness of the value of good design among decision makers of the built environment as well as the general public. This raises the issue of communication between the multitude of protagonists involved in the destruction, production, regeneration and maintenance of the built environment, and the need to construct some 'intra-language' between them. Maybe it is the destiny of the design professionals to pioneer such an 'intra-language' between urban stakeholders to create more liveable cities.

56 e.g. Matthew Gandy (ed), 2011, Urban Constellations, Jovis. This collection of short essays covers a very broad range of space-user interactions.