

To be able to use the new metaphor, and because we are still functioning within an existing practical, educational and professional framework, we will need to discuss a repositioning of some of the disciplines in charge of the urban realm. In particular, I will propose a redefinition of the *role* of urban design, not of Urban Design itself. At this point a fixed definition of Urban Design itself seems an epistemological impossibility that would only fall back into the current quicksand of definitions and counter-definitions. Redefining the role and not the discipline is similar to using another one of our 'open-ended pictures' to signify Urban Design itself. Urban Design can thus retain its flexible definition, necessary for its fulfilling of the multidimensional role proposed. A similar concern will lead us to discuss a redefinition of the *urban designer* rather than, again, Urban Design itself.

The role of urban design

There is no single definition of urban design. It is not for Government to dictate what is good urban design.⁵

Urban design as an activity seemingly has a very loose definition, and means different things to different people. While some consider it as a discipline in its own right, others consider it merely an 'interface' between other disciplines. Is it a multidisciplinary activity, or an interdisciplinary activity?

Traditionally, the most popular definition is that urban design is the interface between urban planning and architecture. In this sense it plays a mediative role between two major disciplines involved in the urban realm, but at different levels and scales. Moreover, the latter directly tackles the physical built form in unitary particles, while planning manages more 'abstract' notions such as zoning, functions, transport networks and economy. Hence urban design focuses on the urban space created through the effects of planning and realized through the physicality of architectural buildings.

If the subject of architecture (buildings, etc.) is particle-like and that of planning (policy, etc.) is wave-like, then urban design thus defined

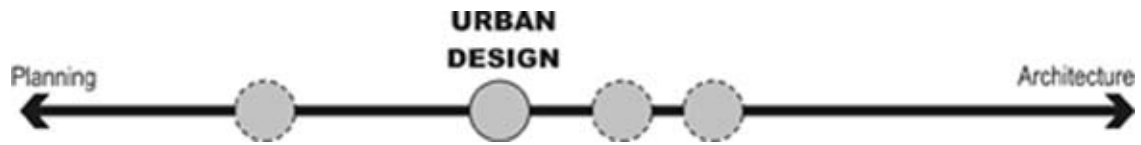


Figure 6.1
Urban design as the interface
between planning and architec-
ture.

already shows notions of wave–particle duality, but that is a limited and limiting definition of its true role – although we are already beyond the pejorative definition of urban design as ‘big architecture’ (Figure 6.1). Yet this is the role perceived by most actors and players in the development process,⁶ and it is not surprising to see it relegated to a secondary level in many real-life situations.

This misconception of the importance of urban design is due to a lack of awareness at the public, the professional and even the educational levels, of the responsibility it can and should handle.

In order for urban design to fulfil the role of a real interdisciplinary interface, it should be thought of – and taught – as a multidimensional activity. Other than planning and architecture, it should be clear that other seemingly independent disciplines play equally crucial roles in the study and/or creation of cities. Landscape architecture, communication and transport engineering, but also the ‘soft’ disciplines – sociology, economy, group and individual psychology and behavioural studies, even art and the humanities – are some of the poles that together shape the urban environment and give it its inherent subjective qualities.

Urban design can and should form the interface between all the relevant specialties that deal with the human and the human environment, both objective and subjective (Figure 6.2). Urban design should thus function as a multidimensional interdisciplinary interface, with the *responsibility* to manage and transform the interactions of the different aspects of urban life *into a physical and/or usable form* (Figure 6.3).

In our current educational and professional models, these different disciplines are clearly defined and entrenched in their respective

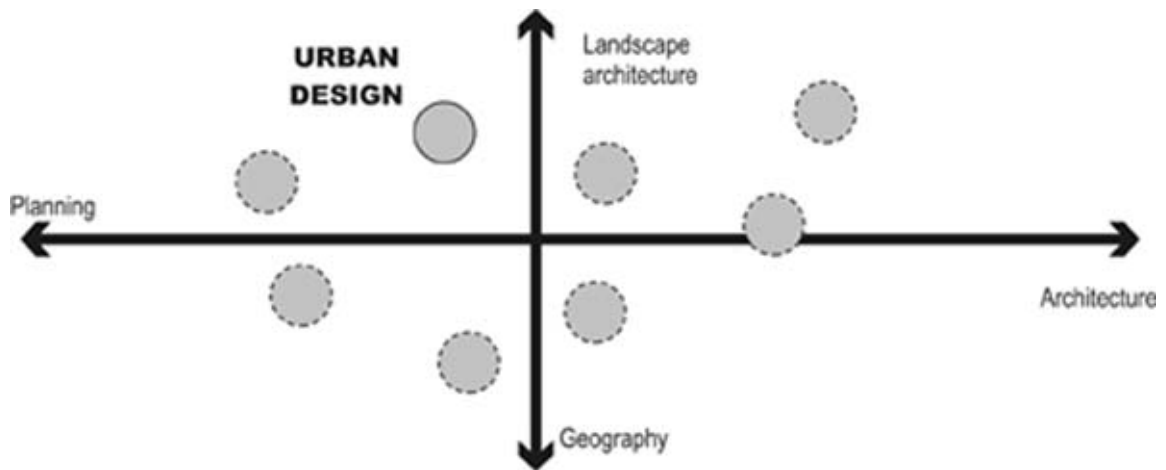


Figure 6.2
Urban design as a multidisciplinary interface.

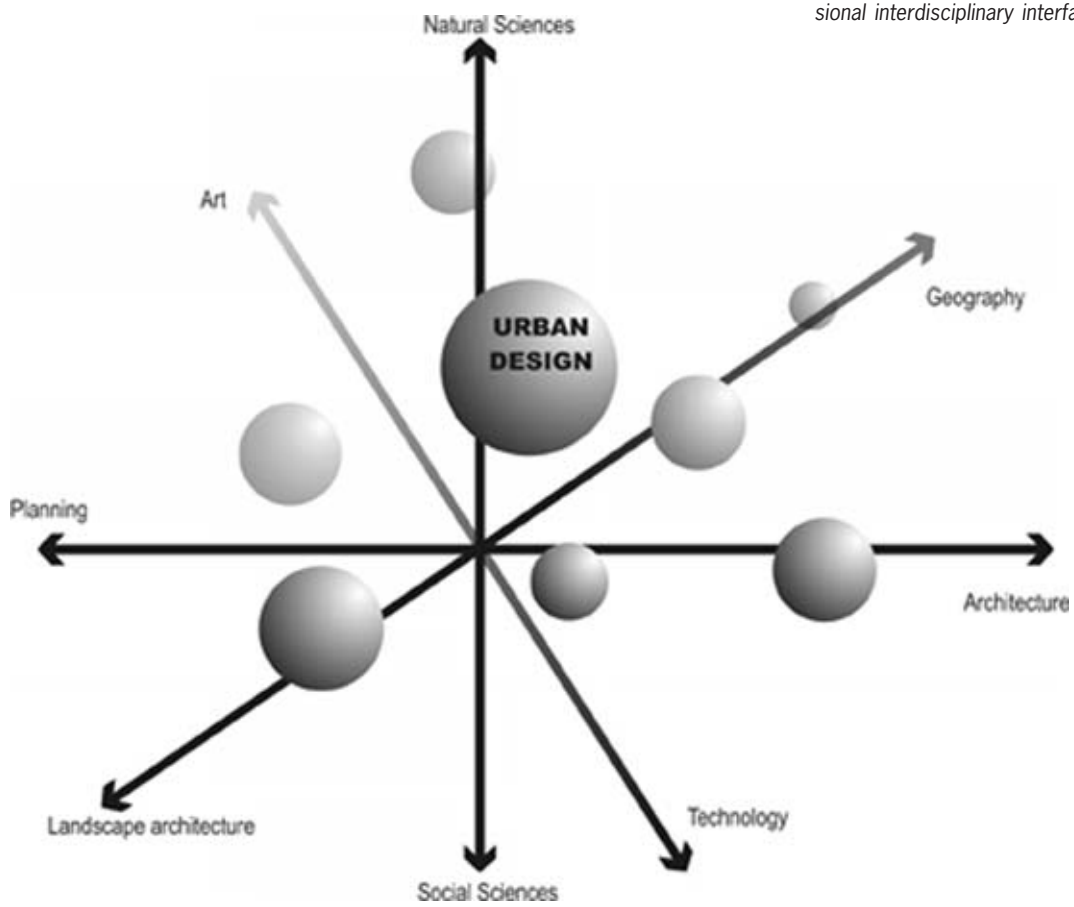


Figure 6.3
Urban design as a multidimensional interdisciplinary interface.

responsibilities. This is partly due to the segregationist logic brought about by Newtonian atomism and Cartesian dualism, the two pillars of the mechanical worldview that preceded our paradigm. It is interesting that this new attitude of urban design sounds so relevant to the *mended* worldview described by quantum theory. We suggest therefore an additional role for urban design: to provide society with settings relevant to its current paradigm, and to be positively active in its dissemination and adoption.

This role is not new; it has simply been an automatic, *de-facto* effect of the design of cities to be resonant with the worldview of their inhabitants. Like a work of art, the city has been designed and built with a vision in mind, and that vision has generally coincided with its contemporary worldview. With the atomization and mechanization of the professional disciplines urban design, like architecture, shifted away from art and has become a more rational, analytical discipline. Urbanists adopted dogmatic manifestos, and a self-conscious, self-righteous attitude developed within the discipline. Within the politicized discourse of the profession, antagonistic ideologies were often pitted against each other, yielding polemics instead of cooperation (see Carmona⁷).

Urban design as an occupation is relatively new, but historically it has always played the major role in forming cities. Under different guises and definitions in different periods and places, the longest lasting imprint on cities and people was due to whoever controlled the urban design decisions. The term itself was first used only in 1957, by the American Institute of Architecture. It gradually spread, mainly through the work of Kevin Lynch and Jane Jacobs in the 1960s and Christopher Alexander, Leon and Rob Krier, and Robert Venturi, amongst others, in the 1970s and 1980s. The last decade of the last century saw urban design coloured by the views and counter-views of Charles Jencks and Sir Richard Rogers, HRH the Prince of Wales and Rem Koolhaas, to name but a few ...

In all cases, many today have accepted the fleeting nature of urban design definitions as an unavoidable fact, as Alan Rowley concludes in a highly revealing article:

Many urban designers reflect a deep seated anxiety when challenged to define urban design. They long for a short, clear definition but in reality this simply is not possible. No one or two sentence definition is really adequate, nor is it likely to prove of lasting value. So it is pointless to search for a single, succinct, unified and lasting definition of the nature and concerns of urban design. It is much better to follow a number of signposts about, for example, the substance, motives, methods and roles of urban design.⁸

A precise definition of urban design is necessary only for administrative purposes, to relegate responsibilities and liabilities, and to keep legislators busy. For a designer, it is not necessary. In fact, for a 'real' designer – you know, the passionate artist in all of us – boundaries are anathema, and definitions are just that. Thoughts and pictures are not. That is why I believe a new mindset is what is needed, and that is what I hope to define in this book.

The underlying search is for the starting point of a theory that relates 'good urban design' to the *faithfulness to an organic worldview* – not to the retrograde vision of traditionalists and neo-traditionalists, nor to the nihilistic futurism of postmodernists, and not even to the numb practicalism of post-postmodernists. We will go after a synthesis of all these approaches and more, going deeper – almost literally – into the heart of the matter. We will be looking for the role of a unified worldview in the making of urban environments, beyond the formalism adopted by typical research. An urban design process that responds to the current paradigm should provide positive urban space, as long as this worldview is holistic and organic, as it was in pre-Cartesian societies, and as long as it is technological and pluralistic, as it needs to be in the twenty-first century. Because the new sciences provide such a worldview, they should be ingrained as early as possible in the minds of the different players of the urban realm.

The urban designer versus Urban Design: a new attitude

'Urban design' is a relatively recent occupation, and therefore so is the profession or expertise 'urban designer'. It is remarkable that the introduction of this new expert class at a time when Urban Design itself

has such a loose definition has only added to the confusion facing young graduates at the moment of choosing their professional path. I still have in mind the welcoming speeches of the respective chairpersons when I started studying architecture in Beirut and then urban design in Oxford. The first phrase of each speech is the only thing I remember clearly, probably because in both cases it sent my mind scrambling for implications. The architecture chairman gathered the 50 or so new recruits, and proclaimed: 'Welcome to the elite'. Several years of boot camp later, armed with a state-of-the-art architecture degree, I went on to the professional battlefield only to realize the absurdity of that phrase. Looking for a new mantra, and for an upgrade of my weapons arsenal another few years later, I was aghast at the urban design Chair's welcoming speech: 'Forget all you have learnt before'. He might as well have said 'Abandon hope all ye who enter here'!

Our educational system is as atomistic as Newtonian physics ... the illogical need to proclaim the supremacy of each discipline only to break with it at the next step creates a sense of unfinished business and wasted time. The five or six years spent in architecture schools have got to be worth something to remember in urban design! And what of the years spent studying and practising landscaping, social sciences, history, geography or planning? Postgraduate urban design courses cater to professionals from all these and more disciplines, not to forget the personal and cultural experiences of each individual, particularly in international courses. Is forgetting everything and replacing it by monothematic, brainwashed 'urban designers' the right attitude? We shall return to defining a better mode of interaction between multicultural design teams in the coming pages, but let us ponder first just *who* the urban designer is.

We propose to examine the proposition 'the urban designer is the designer of the urban realm'. Let us quickly define 'design' as the act of 'initiating change in manmade things',⁹ and extend it to 'change in any environment', whether physical, mental or virtual. 'Urban' throughout this book is considered to signify any human settlement, in its most generic sense. We have a tendency to equate 'Urban Design' with 'the

design of the urban realm'. But while 'Urban Design' is only the professional discipline with the role defined above, the urban realm itself is the collection of spaces and buildings, landscapes and ecosystems, mindscapes and people that make up and shape any environment.

The traditionally defined 'urban designer' has a generally limited role in time, space and society. He or she typically intervenes in a finite context – for example, to propose an analysis and then a solution/strategy for the built environment. The urban designer's work is little more than an informed bet on the possible outcomes of the future development of a site. It can be a catalyst for change (hopefully positive), but in the end the real actuators of urban design are the end users themselves.

It thus becomes obvious that the straightforward proposition 'the urban designer is the designer of the urban realm' does not relate to the 'urban designer' as the class of specialists that practise the profession 'Urban Design'. Rather the urban designers of our proposition are the literal *generators* of the environment – in other words the users themselves with their continuous shaping and re-shaping of the urban realm: *the urban designer is the urban realm user*.

The professional unit responsible for urban design is the 'urban design team'. Expert members of the urban design team can themselves happen to be users of the same site under study in some cases; conversely, lay users could collaborate in the team. What should be kept in mind is that the product of the urban design team is limited and relative in time, and it is only fulfilled by the continuous use of it.

The claim that users are the urban designers is not made in the same manner as proponents of 'participatory urban design' make it. It is made in the sense that the urban realm is a constantly redesigned continuum completely interlinked with its users. In other words, the urban realm is not merely the 'container' of urban life, it is both the container and life itself, and urban design is the design of the continuum, not merely of the container. In the first democracies of Greece, *polis* signified both the city and its inhabitants; in the Arabic language,

*'Neighbour' translates as *jar* in Arabic, while 'neighbourhood' sounds like 'the container of neighbours'; in spite of its clear social connotations it remains much more spatial, as it is easy to imagine a neighbourhood without thinking of the actual neighbours. In its literal Arabic translation *jivar* it is the physical vicinity and is not equivalent to *hayy*. Similarly, the French *quartier* (quarter) and *secteur* are decidedly spatial, even geometrical words.

the word for 'neighbourhood' or *quartier*, both with purely spatial connotations* is *hayy*, which is the exact same word for 'alive', while its plural *ahya'a* is the same word for 'the living'. This intricate relationship between the container and the contained is felt very strongly in the liveliness of Middle Eastern cities. It is even more remarkable when you realize that the Arabic language has an extremely rich and nuanced vocabulary, making the choice of words more philosophical than merely practical, especially in such cultures where Urban Design is not a common professional discipline.

The point is that the separation between the designer and the designed, the container and the contained, common to Western culture and language in the Cartesian paradigm, is similar to the absolute separation between observer and observed in classical Newtonian science, but is superfluous in the language of the quantum worldview. Yet the best-willed attempts to counteract traditional approaches of 'top-down' design have translated into little more than 'participatory urban design', branded as the secret elixir for all urban and social ailments. My own sentiment, especially from living and practising in a part of the world where 'container' means 'contained' and *vice versa*, is that in many cases participatory urban design is an artificial solution to an artificial problem. It is more often than not a localized, apologetic attempt at 'bringing the locals in', which remains in most cases based on severely patronizing attitudes and, when exported to non-Western settings, on almost colonial attitudes dressed up in orientalist clothes. The 'locals' are in whether we like it or not – whether our elitist education admits it or not. They are themselves the intrinsic ties to the space they will be living in. In other words, if they cannot have this link, they will simply either move on or destroy the place until it reflects if not their comfort at least their discomfort – and in both cases their state of being.

Participatory design tries to counteract typical top-down design by looking at the 'community' of users as a fixed, predictable mass of people and customs, and thus attempts to 'give the people what they want'. But 'nowhere in the society are people's futures mortgaged so

far ahead as when the municipalities plan housing projects, earmark uses of land and build highways'.* With all the goodwill in the world, besides a few successful experiments, such an attitude remains oblivious to the fact that this community is an open, living organism that will develop in time new lifestyles, new tastes, new needs, new politics and new economies, and as such it is almost unavoidable that the next generation of users will feel alienated by the setting of its predecessor. The same sample group of people involved, say, in a participatory design workshop will provide totally different answers depending on how the questions are formulated, or even depending on whether it is a sunny or cloudy day. People are more moody than electrons, and in quantum theory electrons themselves seem to adapt their behaviour to the experimental setting!

*from a report by the Swedish Secretariat for Future Studies, quoted in Myers and Kitsuse.¹⁰

Whenever the changeability of the current users is recognized it is looked at as transience, mainly when dealing with communities with particular identity of social class or ethnicity. The attitude then becomes based on postulates of high transience of the users, thus building generic or worse: 'universal' environments that are rigidly regulated against 'personalization' – in other words, against 'tampering'. The theory goes that the next 'wave' of users will find it easier to adapt to it this way.

By using the both/and logic and accepting that the real urban designers are the users themselves, a stronger attitude considers the users as both transient and fixed, with their environment completely and intricately linked to them at any particular moment in time. In other words, it allows the production of fault-tolerant design that accepts the changes and adaptations made to it by its users as the essence of what it is: *theirs*. Those changes do not need to be reversible (a costly and irrelevant quality), but simply re-appropriable by the next wave of users, whether of a different generation or simply of a different group or identity. In all cases, and in a long-term planning attitude, consecutive generations should be allowed to relegate to their successors a memory of their own knowledge and their own memory, as a basic need of humanity's supra-conscious continuity.