Matthew Carmona (ed.) (2014),
*Explorations in Urban Design: An Urban Design Primer*

Published by: Ashgate, Farnham
ISBN: 978-1-4094-6264-4 (hardcover)

Reviewed by:
Sergio Porta
Dept. of Architecture, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

Pages: 275-278
Book Review:
Matthew Carmona (ed.) (2014),
*Explorations in Urban Design: An Urban Design Primer*

Published by: Ashgate, Farnham
ISBN: 978-1-4094-6264-4 (hardcover)

Reviewed by

Sergio Porta
Dept. of Architecture, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow

Good books have this in common: they have something to say to everybody, which is not necessarily the same to all. Readers can go through them following their own personal paths and find their own way to make the journey worthwhile. This is the case with Matthew Carmona’s edited *Explorations in Urban Design*, a work which certainly is recommendable as a source of interest, information and at times of fascination for all scholars and professionals in the disciplines of the built environment and for urban designers in particular.

The book is a conspicuous circa 400 pages collection of 28 researches recently undertaken at the Bartlett School of planning at UCL by 31 authors and the editor himself, complemented by some 177 full-colour illustrations, 24 pages of unified bibliography, 12 pages of index, 7 pages of listed illustrations, and 7 pages of listed contributors with short biographies provided for each of them. An introduction at the beginning and a short postscript at the end, both by the editor, complete this remarkable scholarship. The core of the book is the collection of the 28 research contributions. These are grouped, according to their focus and approach, into 5 parts: 1. philosophical approaches; 2. process investigations; 3. physical explorations; 4. propositional experiments; 5. performance inquiry. Each of these parts includes 5 contributions, with the second adding to them the editor’s own research piece (Carmona, 2014a).

According to the editor’s postscript (Carmona, 2014b), the urgency to write this book came, back in 2011, from a sense of frustration for the barriers persistently separating various urban design courses offered in the different articulations of The Bartlett School of Planning, i.e. the schools of Architecture, Planning, Development Planning Unit and Graduate Studies, resulting in quite distinct and in fact complementary approaches to the subject. The aim of the book is to offer a fair representation of this diversity and yet to demonstrate that, rather than being it a weakness of a discipline in perennial formation, it actually testifies the essence of its ‘mongrel’ nature and therefore it defines it.
As in every case of life, the way something originates tells you a lot of what it is in essence, and this book is no exception: it is in fact a journey around and across an area of culture and professional practice, education and research, animated at every step by the urgency to understand the nature of the subject, its boundaries, its past history and present state, in order to enlightening our daily practice as urban designers with an understanding of the broader temporal context we are both part and expression of. Or, at least, that is what fascinated me most in reading the book. In that sense, I was attracted by the editor’s introduction and some of the contributions on the history and nature of the discipline provided by leading figures in the field such as Terry Farrell (2014) and Michael Hebbert (2014). I will try in the next few lines to comment on this particular course of reflection which is certainly a backbone of the book, even though that should not lead the reader to underestimate the wealth of primary research that is represented in all contributed articles, spanning from ecological modelling to policy analysis, community engagement, street networks, sensorial analysis, theoretical reframing of urban design practice, and much more.

There is, and there continues to be, an evident hiatus between the approach of urban designers and architects towards the built environment. This hiatus is here with us every day, and emerges painfully every time the two points of view get in touch in some form over our daily practice, be it a university course, a design competition or a research grant bid. If you don’t believe so, try to ask a student in architecture who has devoted the last semester to designing a house for an artist, what will happen of his house when, in 5-10 years time, the artist will be gone and replaced by an ironmonger. It is a practical and tangible hiatus that shapes different and distant solutions for the same problems. At the heart of that is a profound opposition which is, in fact, of a disciplinary nature, which goes far beyond a difference in scale or subjects, the origin of which must be tracked back to that spring of 1956 when urban design was first proposed as an autonomous area departing from the great cradle of the Modern Movement in architecture. It was not meant to be so: certainly the intentions of the leaders when urban design started was just to reform and expand the modern project to include the ‘heart of the city’, a larger appreciation of the historical heritage as an environmental (not just monumental) asset of places, a wider opening to participation, social engagement and radical community movements, as beautifully illustrated by Hebbert. But the seeds of those attitudes towards the built environment were explosive in nature, and they exploded in fact relatively soon leading to the ‘post-modern’ strand that defines what urban design currently is. And it is very interesting to note that finally Urban Morphology as a separate field of studies finds a place and its own significance in this story: urban morphology actually stemmed in the early 1960s from two roots, one of which is Italian, mainly brought forward by architects after Saverio Muratori, and the second is British coming from the German born MRG Conzen (1960), a geographer, now continuing in Birmingham with Whitehand, Larkham and others. I emphasise this point because the full reintegration of urban morphology into the field of urban design is just now starting to occur, and does represent a fundamental step in the historical development of our discipline.

It is my opinion that, despite the various forms that this departure of urban design from modern architecture took since 1956, the essence of it is simply this: for urban designers what creates that quality that people love in cities, which makes places resilient and vibrant as much as sociable and prosperous, the same quality that Alexander called ‘quality without a name’ (Alexander,
Book Review: 
*Explorations in Urban Design* 
Porta, S.

1979), does not come by design. It comes by the uncoordinated (or self-organised) continuous adaptation of places in time, fuelled by the informal participation of people and society at large in triggering and operating spatial change. In cities, that requires design, rather than excluding it, and this is what distinguishes them from other complex systems in nature, society or technology. But, contrary to the artistic nature of design that still sits at the heart of architecture’s ‘signature pedagogy’ (Shulman, 2005), again a product of its origins as a branch of early 20th century avant-gardes (Wolfe, 1981), the role of design here is that of setting the conditions, first of all the spatial conditions, for this process to take place and continue to happen in time.

The ethic mission of design in this new framework is not new at all, with all the controversies that this brings with it: orienting urban change towards the common good, however society defines it. It is a structural role, which focuses on the process, especially the post-design and post-development process, and is therefore time-conscious. It is design for change. It is this awareness of the crucial importance of evolution in the process of change that creates the different attitude towards history which so brilliantly is portrayed by Hebbert (2014) and, at the same time, opens up to a higher sensitivity to the ‘natural’ evolution of cities advocated by Terry Farrell (2014). The appreciation that when it comes to urban places the design of the product cannot bring the solution, while the design of the structure can, is what sits at the heart of the bifurcation of urban design from the Modern Movement – gradually – after WWII; yet, it is still taboo nowadays for mainstream architectural design all over the world, and more than ever taboo in the schools of architecture, and increasingly so as time passes.

If that is true, and evidence from this book’s historical contributions seems supporting this conclusion, then we need to be aware of two aspects of it: 1) that part of urban design practice, especially when delivered by professional architects, is not yet entirely aware of this process, which is far to be completed: too often, as a result, we see masterplans still realised as if they were building designs, just at a larger scale, therefore ignoring for example even the most elementary notions of urban morphology; and 2) that the hiatus I was talking about is destined to get wider in the next future, as the discipline of urban design consolidates around this fundamental identity core, which in fact spans across the amazing diversity of concurrent areas of studies that gravitate around our ‘mongrel’ discipline.

An ultimate consequence of this scenario is that the recurrent calls for a more integrated education and practice of architecture and urban design must be entirely reframed. We may soon reach the point where urban design will have more in common with biology than architecture (by the way, one of the oldest generators of our discipline exactly 100 years ago (Geddes, 1915)) yet retaining a strong – in fact even stronger – design core. I guess that means that an integrated approach to architecture and urban design, which remains indispensable, can only proceed on the ground of a sharp understanding of the different identities and roles of the two disciplines, thus turning integration into something we are more familiar with: interdisciplinarity.

These conclusions may be agreeable or not, but are just a few of those that reading *Explorations in Urban Design* has gifted to me, of which I am deeply grateful to the editor Matthew Carmona and all the contributors.
References


Muratori, S. (1960), *Studi per una operante storia urbana di Venezia*, Istituto Poligrafico dello Stato, Roma, IT.
