

## Preface

Midway through architecture school, I first heard the term “urban design.” I found the idea amusing: could one really design a city? My fellow students and I found the design of buildings to be challenging enough; designing a city seemed impossible, never mind unlikely. Gradually I warmed to the idea. At New York City’s Department of City Planning, myself and my colleagues, architects all, sketched design concepts and wrote zoning regulations for growing areas of the city, mostly in Manhattan where developers sought to build more than was currently permitted. Our urban design was slow and halting; regulations took years to be enacted and we urban designers could not oblige building construction—that had to wait for market interest. Participating in New York’s incremental urban design, watching its cityscape slowly respond, was a different creative satisfaction than my schoolmates possessed. As architects they could design smaller spaces where every detail reflected their hand. My urban design hand was spread widely over the cityscape, but its imprint was fainter.

When I departed New York to become involved in urban design education, I saw a different side of the discipline. As in architecture school, urban design students represented their ideas through plans, sections, and perspectives. Gazing one day at a plan for a hilltop complex with hundreds of new housing units in dozens of buildings, I was struck both by the drawing’s seeming completeness and by my realization that the project, if constructed, would take years if not decades to complete. Although my students saw and represented urban design as scaled-up architecture, I knew it to be a gradual enterprise, constructed

by many and built over time. Why did we design such projects as pop-up cities—ready to build, complete in and of themselves, and immune from the realities that afflicted real urban design? Maybe it was because we knew nothing else, no other means of design.

What was urban design? Was it the gradual, incremental aesthetic enterprise of my time in New York, or was it the large, ready-to-build project of our urban design studios? My colleagues, experienced and talented as they were, either did not know or could not articulate the difference. All knew that cities were constructed over time and that urban design took time as well (of course) but nevertheless, we continued teaching and producing ready-to-build models. Urban design, it seemed, was a paradoxical field whose practitioners and scholars seemed uninterested in its paradoxes. We taught urban design as a larger version of architecture, but it functioned this way only rarely in practice, where it was a slower, piecemeal art. We felt urban design to be both a formal and a social enterprise but these latter ideals contributed little to the three-dimensional schemes that constituted the discipline's visual language.

History and theory offered only intermittent assistance in resolving these paradoxes. Urban design histories were mostly turgid affairs: long, beautifully illustrated lists of cities that culminated somewhere in the twentieth century. Urban design theory consisted either of best practices—anodyne but attractive to many students—or of tracts of political economy or even philosophy that came from outside the discipline and rarely ventured far within. Most interesting by far were urban design manifestos, each purportedly a radically new take and disdaining, even attacking others. It seemed that nearly all such manifestos had been written by architects except for one, *Good City Form*, written by city planner Kevin Lynch.

Lynch was himself paradoxical; extremely well known, he remained an outlier in urban design's intellectual universe. He did not self-identify as an architect, yet all aspiring urban designers knew his first book *The Image of the City*, and he garnered no disrespect from architects. Lynch wrote about history, but his books were not histories. Nor were they best practices; except for *Image*, they were difficult to apply in classroom or studio settings. Lynch's work puzzled me mightily; well known as it was, it had failed over several decades to stimulate significant later work, either by theorists or practitioners. I found much of interest in Lynch's work, yet his observations on urban design seemed under-recognized today: contemporary discussions of "urbanism" oscillated between different visions, none of which referred to Lynch's work, almost as if his ideas had never been.

I felt differently. Lynch's thoughts mirrored my own convictions from my New York work, and they seemed more apt than ever. I knew that urban design had unique

qualities—this art’s vast scale, length of time for construction, and dependence on multiple builders differed radically from those of architecture. And the public was a living, active agent, enmeshed in urban design as inhabitant, shaper, and designer. Urbanism was always public.

Treating urban design as a problem that could only be solved by architectural methods explained architects’ dominance in the studio, as well as the predominance of architectural thinking in much contemporary urban design dialogue. How limiting this was for urban design! Whereas urban design was nearly limitless in its qualities, architecture required a single site, often a single client, and a single form completely rendered and constructed. No wonder that urban design mimicked architecture’s qualities: instead of urban design having its own inherent qualities recognized and expressed, the larger art was being shaped by its smaller sibling.

I have seen many urban design problems that architects could never solve; places that needed a design vision to save them from unintended, unshaped growth, places with multiple municipalities and thousands of inhabitants. I saw cities where thoughtless developers constructed towers wherever they wished, damaging cityscapes while citizens endured speeding cars and crumbling parks. I saw places that needed to shape their directionless growth, where inhabitants lived in shacks while shopping malls rose behind their houses and where traffic choked every road. These were not architectural problems to be solved by a single building complex, no matter how vast. Nor were these planning problems either; aesthetic visions could not come from land use plans or participatory processes. These places needed urban design, but they needed urban design of a foundationally different kind than that offered by schools, scholars, and studios.

I thought there was a lot still to say about urban design. Urban design was a distinct and unusual art; one that was needed everywhere, one whose presence was often faint, and one that was incompletely understood. Urban design needed a new manifesto that would declare it for what it really was, and that would distinguish it once and for all from the other building arts: architecture, landscape, sculpture, and land art.

I would structure this manifesto by reaffirming and describing urban design’s plural qualities. Unlike other building arts, urban design was *plural* first and foremost. Why pluralism? The term was widespread in studies of politics and society; I borrowed it for its broad meaning of multiplicity or manyness. Urban design was plural in scale, time, property, agency, and form; these qualities distinguished it from its sister building arts, and it was these qualities that enabled it to be the largest of all arts.

*The Largest Art* is a declaration of independence for urban design, a descriptive theory explaining the many qualities that distinguish urban design, or urbanism, from its sister building arts, particularly architecture. Throughout the book, I use the two terms urbanism and urban design interchangeably; many would view the term urbanism as broader and more encompassing than urban design, but this larger term is also consistent with this book's broader understanding of urban design as a plural art. The book is not a history; there are no lists of designed cities, nor canonical urban design projects. Nor is it a compendium of best practices, a guidebook for professionals. Instead this book is a measured manifesto, a declaration of urban design's plural qualities that is intended for scholars, students, and devotees of urban design. Projects, designers, cities, and history are to be found in this book, but only as supportive elements of theory, the concept of *plural urbanism*. *The Largest Art* is the product of my twenty-plus-year encounter with urban design; it constitutes my understanding and aspirations for urban design. I hope that the book's readers will find it to be rewarding and compelling.

Chapter 1, "Unitary Architecture, Plural Cities," presents urban design's current "dead end(s)," as framed by critic Michael Sorkin, as a false alarm. Instead, the chapter explains that urban design has never been fully understood as the plural art it actually is; beginning with early twentieth-century modernist schemes, through modernism's midcentury crisis, to the "dead end(s)" of today, urban design has wandered stylistically while remaining confined to what I call its unitary conceptions, stemming from monumental architecture such as Versailles. I highlight an alternative concept of the discipline that was cut off at midcentury, when architects stylistically imitated Cedric Price's radical architectural proposal for an unfinished "Fun Palace," while ignoring its deeper lessons for a balance between designer and public. I conclude the chapter by defining the qualities of and differences between unitary and plural urban design, or urbanism.

Chapter 2, "Five Dimensions of Plural Urbanism," by far the longest chapter in the book, is a descriptive theory of urban design's plural qualities. Plural scale explains how urban design has the widest scalar range of any of the building arts (i.e., architecture, landscape, sculpture, and land art), ranging from the space beyond a building to the scale of a metropolitan region, or even larger. Through scale, urban design becomes the largest of the building arts. Plural time explores urban design's profound relationship with history, where a design gesture becomes part of a city's life, even after its destruction. Plural property reminds us that urban design has many owners, and that these plural properties make urbanism the most challenging of the building arts. Plural agents describe the many makers of urban design, ranging from the designer to the

public. Urbanism is a collective art, yet this very collectivity can diminish urban design's meaning, an existential tension that has stimulated profound urban design thinkers. Lastly, chapter 2 describes urban design's plural form. More than others, this plural art possesses a distributed quality that allows it to exist among diverse elements of the city that are not part of an urban design idea. Together, these definitions of urban design's plural quality secure the plural art's distinction from unitary building arts, particularly architecture, that lack these qualities.

Chapter 3, "Three Pluralist Projects," contextualizes chapter 2 within the setting of three urban design projects constructed at various times and locations during the twentieth century. Each ensemble is linked to well-known designers and artists, and the design of each has been long acclaimed, but none of these projects has been understood and analyzed through the lens of pluralism until now. The first, Constantin Brancusi's sculptural ensemble in Târgu Jiu, Romania, economically shapes an urban axis and a city center through three exquisite Platonic forms: circle, arch, and column. The second, a social housing project at Twin Parks in New York City's Bronx, intersperses late modernist apartment towers between vernacular Bronx tenements to shape a monumental, large-scale composition with both social and formal meaning. The chapter's culmination comes with Jože Plečnik's work in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana, a programmatically, formally, and spatially diverse grouping of projects that range from infrastructure to landscape to private and civic buildings, but that together shape what is the finest built example of plural urban design.

Chapter 4, "Three Plural Urbanists," revisits the thoughts and works of three urban designers from the late years of modernism, from 1960 to the 1980s. Each of these urban designers was also considered an urban planner, which is an interesting commentary on their devotion to the city as a plural space. These three urban designers knew that urbanism was not simply large-scale architecture. Each of them understood urban design's plural qualities, wrote about these qualities, and incorporated their understandings into their built work, though none did so to their full satisfaction. Before entering into decades of professional practice, David Crane published a series of articles in the early 1960s on a concept he called the "capital web." Edmund Bacon is well known as Philadelphia's chief planner for almost twenty years, but he was also a scholar whose 1967 book *Design of Cities* emphasized a conceptual tool called the "movement system." Kevin Lynch, familiar from this preface, both wrote and practiced much, and his ideas of "city design" come closest to this book's theory of plural urbanism, though Lynch's thought eventually veered into other directions. Understanding these designers' ideas

contextualizes this book's theory of plural urbanism within a trajectory of modernist urban design thought whose innovative qualities were never fully understood.

Chapter 5, "Designing Pluralist Urbanism," takes the reader from existing projects and designers into three scenarios for imaginary places, fantasies of plural urbanism in locations that have many connections to reality but that do not fully exist. Each is borrowed from personal experience, and the design ideas—founded in precepts of plural urbanism explored in the previous three chapters—are mine, though the delightful illustrations come from my collaborative discussions with a talented former student, now an architect in Texas. These three scenarios remind us that a variety of locations exist that might benefit from plural urban design, and that the creative potential of plural urbanism is as vast as that of any other creative discipline. Like any of the building arts, plural urban design will stem from the qualities of a place and from a designer's (or designers') inspiration, but these scenarios also show that urban design's plural qualities of scale, time, property, agency, and form are what transform these diverse environments into something special: the largest art.

Chapter 6, "Principles and Potentials of Plural Urbanism," concludes this book by outlining three signal considerations that every urban designer must acknowledge: eternal change, inevitable incompleteness, and flexible fidelity. Cities are entities whose inhabitation by thousands or millions of autonomous actors make them as ceaselessly active and motile as an anthill. By becoming part of the plural cityscape, any urban design project will itself change perpetually as it is added to, subtracted from, or otherwise altered. Generating art whose aesthetic qualities can survive perpetual change is a challenge for plural urbanists. Incompleteness is embarrassing and dysfunctional in architecture, but it is inevitable in urban design, where projects take decades, styles change, and political regimes shift support with comparative rapidity. Unlike unitary urban design, plural urbanism need not be complete to succeed, for this largest of the arts can never be complete. Similarly, fidelity of a finished work to a designer's intention is the hallmark of every art from sculpture to landscape, and diminution of that intention is correspondingly a diminution of that art's value. Plural urbanism, in contrast, must be content with more flexible fidelity, because it is too large to be effectively controlled by a single actor and because its many other plural qualities preclude a high degree of control. Urban designers must create a design that can survive enactment by others with less capability or even commitment. These three principles need be appreciated and accentuated through great creativity, and the book closes by calling for creativity from all quarters to continue the enterprise of plural urbanism, the largest art.