

BOOK REVIEWS

UNDERSTANDING CITIES: METHOD IN URBAN DESIGN, by Alexander R. Cuthbert. New York: Routledge, 2011.

Understanding Cities: Method in Urban Design is the third text in the *Designing Cities* (2003), *The Form of Cities* (2006) trilogy from the author Alexander Cuthbert. Cuthbert describes them as one text in three parts, to be read separately sequentially or in parallel.

Understanding Cities is both a guide and a challenge to the direction of Urban Design. The book takes the reader from the roots of theory and method to contemporary debates in the domain. In a field dominated by iconic forms and their emulation, the author demonstrates the importance of understanding diversity.

Revealing the diverse interpretations of history, intellectual heritage and competing discourses underpins Cuthbert's project of freeing Urban Design from the colonization of the related built environment disciplines of architecture, planning and landscape architecture. This is not a denigration of those disciplines, but a strategy for Urban Design to reassert itself as a discipline in its own right. It is a guide for Urban Design to realize its potential, freed from subjugation to the imperatives that, of necessity, inform the other built environment disciplines. It will be a useful text for students or practitioners in the field.

He says of his book:

“So, as method this book is not concerned with *what to do* about urban design projects but *how to think* about what to do.” (p.2)

Understanding Cities commences with a handy matrix which guides the reader through the content, the links between its ten chapters and its two related texts. While the related texts are cross referenced and parts of a whole, *Understanding Cities* has the structure and coherence of an independent work. Chapters entitled theory, history, philosophy, politics, culture, gender, environment, aesthetics, typologies and pragmatics organize the text.

Cuthbert questions the relation of science to the urban and reviews debates over the scientific method and method in the social sciences. He illustrates the consequences for practice of using the concepts of rationality and science as a mantle for legitimacy in urban design.

Reflecting on the writing of history Cuthbert argues we have to do more than portray the designs of the time. We must understand them in context. Designers need to understand the principles embodied in the creative process. He offers the example of Hippodamus' Plan for Miletus (480 BC) as a masterpiece in urban form that if simply transposed by the student to another time and location, would be superficial or disastrous.

From thirty classical urban design histories Cuthbert illustrates the utility of history in creative urbanism and focuses on four authors, Mumford, Moholy-Nagy, Roe and Kotter and Tafuri to interrogate the method behind their histories of urban design.

Cuthbert proposes that philosophy enables us to pose questions to which there are no answers. The happy corollary to this is that our philosophy becomes transparent in practice. Nowhere is it more transparent than in the built form. Cuthbert interrogates six schools of thought on urban form. These are Vienna, Frankfurt, Chicago, Weimar and Dessau, Paris and Los Angeles.

He reflects on the contest between Sitte and Wagner for the design of the Vienna Ringstrasse in 1893.

“(Sittes).. love for the mediaeval city and the historical traditions of German urbanism and public space..... emerged from these influences as the most powerful example of contextualist thinking in the history of urban form, not as a mere aesthetic choice, but one that for him expressed his own deeply held convictions about the redemption of national ideals through cultural regeneration and urban design.” (p.58)

Of the victor Wagner he says

“Wagner’s method was the totally functional approach of the engineer and the slide rule, and indeed Sitte’s overt concern with artistic principles and beautification played no part in the brief for the competition.” (p 58)

In a most important debate on public space Cuthbert challenges the notions of the public realm, sphere and space and our somewhat vague and confused use of these terms. He argues that the centrality of public space to the civic role of urban design should be axiomatic. As he illustrates, everywhere, the public realm is being sequestered by private interests at the expense of the essential contribution of urban life to the evolution of democracy, freedom of movement and association.

He discusses New Urbanism as a reaction to the move to postmodernist architecture and in relation to preceding movements informed by the work of Patrick Geddes, Ebenezer Howard and the City Beautiful movement.

In a discussion on aesthetics he returns to the contest between contextualism and rationalism, with contextualism being “an appeal to the heart, to emotion, to the senses and experience.” (p.207). In contrast

“For rationalist methodology, therefore, function was the vector directly connecting method to form, and the aesthetic projection of beauty depended on how well this process was accomplished.”(p.216)

He argues that design guidelines in aesthetic governance provide the power to assert a particular taste, morality and right over aesthetic judgement.

Cuthbert concludes his final chapter *Pragmatics* by reinforcing the agenda of the text to get urban designers to think about the ideas that inform their practice.

He asserts

“The understanding that comes from deconstruction becomes the complex knowledge that is required to infuse urban space with structures of symbolic meaning that enhance social life”

He quotes Corbusier who, when asked if his analysis of his proportional system the *Modular* would guarantee good architecture, said,

“no it would not. But it would make bad architecture more difficult.” (p.290)

Understanding Cities is a scholarly, stimulating and informative text. It is a guide to method in urban design and a challenge to urban designers to reflect on their practice, to understand what informs them and to grow as a profession.

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CITY LIFE, by Adrian Franklin. London: Sage, 2010.

The triumph of the city is undeniable. It is evident in the ever-growing rate of urbanization, where absolute numbers and percentages prove that the future of humankind is overwhelmingly linked to the future of cities. Yet cities are not self-evident and their appraisal is often imbued with doubt and even negativity. In the ancient world the genesis of cities was shrouded with myth. Notably, both Hebrew myth and Roman lore make the point that the foundation of cities was associated with fratricide. Genesis 4:17 attributed the founding the first city to Cain, who had murdered his brother Abel. Roman lore attributed the foundation of the city that later on became an Empire to Romulus and Remus. However, following the dispute between the two brothers about the exact location of the new foundation Remus was killed. These mythic renditions suggest human skepticism towards cities, expressed in the idea that the building of cities followed atrocious acts of bloodshed that cast their shadow on the city as a human endeavor. The idea that cities defy and violate the moral order resurfaced in modern times in entrenched notions of the city as a place of transgression and alienation, the epitome of all that is lost in the course of the transformation of the pristine *Gemeinschaft* into a (post)modern