**Urban design: a learning bridge between architecture and planning**

Urban design is the ‘art and science of ‘place-making’ (Butina Watson, 2016, 545) and, as such, is necessarily grounded in an understanding of what constitutes a ‘good place’ and how spatial quality and greater levels of liveability can be achieved. Higher Education plays a vital role in helping develop this understanding and in fostering the skills of those professionals who will become the shapers of our future cities. This understanding, however, differs between professional groups, being shaped by particular educational choices and pathways. For the time being, the urban design profession does not have its own accrediting institution of the type that planners and architects rely on for asserting their professional identity f credentials (in the UK, the Royal Town Planning Institute and the Architects Registration Board / Royal Institute of British Architects, respectively).

This is reflected in academia: urban design is sometimes viewed as a sub-set of other, more established, fields (see, for example, Gunder 2011; Koolhaas 1995) and is currently taught in both planning and architecture schools (as well as in other built environment departments) although often with divergent focus, concerns, and outcomes that mirror the theoretical predilections and preoccupations of the ‘hosting’ discipline. Indeed, in planning and architecture schools, as well as in practice, very different design cultures have incubated over the past century and now exist quite independently of one another. Whilst the architectural approach to urban design is often ‘dogmatic, deterministic and elitist’, urban design in planning schools is typically delivered in a ‘pluralistic, deliberative and participatory’ way. On the one hand, urban design is considered a ‘heroic act’ led by renowned architects; on the other, it is regarded as a ‘collective and participatory effort’ (Banerjee, 2016: 540).

My own experience - as an architect trained in Italy, who has worked in an Italian school of architecture, urban design practices in both Italy and the UK, and three London-based planning schools - has confirmed the broad difference in disciplinary traditions when approaching design (albeit with variations between the two countries). Within planning schools, the culture of design is far more context / place and policy dependent with an orientation towards remedying socio-economic challenges. Design leans towards problem-solving and the visualisation of planning requirements. In architecture schools, on the other hand, design is often seen as an experimental, free-standing activity that provides an opportunity for individual expression. Both approaches have faced criticism: the former, for its tendency to advance ‘space-less’ perspectives (owing to its architectural illiteracy) or for a physical determinism too reliant on pre-conceived solutions, with little vision (Arefi and Triantafillou, 2005); the latter for the promotion of ‘place-less’ visions, a self-referential reliance on its formal vocabulary and a detachment of the design object from its social and historical contexts (Shuman, 2006). This design schism (or the failure to connect ‘space’ and ‘place’ priorities) is often blamed for poor-quality urban outcomes, induced by a practice of urban design as ‘large-scale architecture’ that ignores ‘issues of justice, equity, exclusion, sustainability, preservation, health and general well-being of the public’ and generates banal landscapes, sparsely punctuated by signature buildings (Banerjee, 2016: 541).

If better outcomes are to be achieved for the built environment, it is paramount that we bridge these different design cultures, and the best place to start doing that is within the programmes of design education offered within universities. ‘Inter-disciplinarity’ has become a clarion call within higher education and, more specifically, in the training of built environment professionals. It is viewed as the essential recipe for tackling today’s ‘wicked problems’ (Rittel and Webber, 1973): those with no definite or agreed formulation and no singular solutions (such as climate change and global inequality). Wicked problems, incubating in complex social and political spaces, can only be comprehensively confronted when professionals climb out of their silos and step beyond the boundaries of their own specialisms and disciplinary beliefs. Planners and architects must recognise (or be encouraged to recognise) that they are concerned with the same challenges affecting cities. There is a need within universities to synthesise a new way of thinking about design that brings together the core knowledge and skills of architecture, planning and other fields – from landscape design to property development. That new way of thinking for students (and future practitioners) needs to be guided by a shared understanding of priorities, a common language for dealing with the ‘wicked problems’ of cities, and some collective appreciation of what makes a ‘good place’. The recent appeal from architecture students in the UK – in an open letter to the architectural community, calling for a curriculum change in higher education institutions[[1]](#footnote-1) - testifies to the growing awareness of a skills gap, and also the desire of young professionals to broaden their understanding of the complexities and inter-dependencies within built and natural environments - as the only means of addressing the planet’s most urgent ecological, social and political challenges.

With the above in mind, and motivated by a belief that different perspectives on the built environment are necessarily complementary, a group at the University of Liverpool in London is attempting to build an experimental bridge between the disciplines of planning and architecture. A new ‘Design Lab’ at our London Campus has brought together the Departments of Architecture, Geography and Planning, and Industrial Design. Members of that Lab have, for the past year, been running a joint design studio with students from the architecture and planning programmes. This has been led by Johanna Muszbek and I.

Design studios are a foundational component of architectural education and are also widely used as a pedagogical tool for the training of planning students. Through ‘learning-by-doing’ activities and by providing opportunities for critical reflection, studios are an effective means of fostering inter-disciplinary working. Students from both departments were tasked to work together on the analysis of an urban area in London before proposing measures for its future development and improvement. Our hope was that through a collaborative learning experience, students with different disciplinary backgrounds would be able to bridge the ‘design gap’ described above and broaden their understanding of place quality.

The area selected for this exercise was Canary Wharf. Its urban (design) scale seemed a pertinent meeting point for planners and architects. Students worked to a common design brief, which required them to tackle the ‘wicked problem’ of the housing crisis (Gallent, 2019) whilst imagining that technology and automation might, much later in this century, fundamentally shift the economy function of Canary Wharf. They were given a template for the analysis of the area that guided them to address challenges at different spatial scales: from the global and national (drawing comparisons with other global cities), to the urban scale (with a view to understanding the function of the area within its city-wide context), to the Canary Wharf site itself, down to the building scale and the consideration of individual urban and architectural elements (such as its external and internal corridors, for instance). Students were also asked to take account of socio-economic attributes and drivers, as well as demonstrating an appreciation of the urban form. It was hoped that they would acquire a multi-scalar and more nuanced understanding of the context: one that extended beyond the site itself and its immediate surroundings, and that incorporated a multiplicity of design ‘dimensions’ (Carmona et al, 2010).

Students worked in mixed groups for the preparation of an analytical poster before separating into their disciplinary groups to propose solutions at different scales: planning students focused on master planning the entire area (but with the benefit of an architectural perspective) whilst architecture students concentrated on the smaller scale of urban blocks and individual buildings (but now armed with a planner’s take on key challenges). The different student groups continued to come together at key stages, for the mid-term and final reviews of their projects, to ensure a continuing exchange of thinking.

Outcomes from this first joint studio experiment were encouraging, with evidence of different groups broadening their focus on the use of space and the connectivity of place to broader socio-economic contexts. Feedback from students was largely positive, although there are of course lessons from this first year to be carried forward. Class discussions and presentations, which at times also involved external experts from the two fields, encouraged students to think laterally and critically about the many future scenarios that projects might respond to. For planning students, this meant a departure from preconceived ideas of, and standard solutions to, place quality – tied to a fixed set of planning orthodoxies - and a broadening of their horizons to produce imaginative visions for the future of the area. For architecture students, it meant addressing housing design, for instance, with a deeper awareness of the social, economic and environmental issues that housing development must address. For both groups, the experiment resulted, firstly, in a demonstrably wider understanding of the aims and working assumptions of different professions and secondly, an appreciation of the potential of design, as a shared and collaborative undertaking, to bring different stakeholders together and build support for critical interventions aimed at delivering place quality.

The importance of inter-Faculty cooperation cannot be underestimated for the success of inter-disciplinary exercises: the university’s effort to create a ‘Design Lab’ made it easier for students and staff to work together in the same place and at the same time (a similar experiment in inter-disciplinary collaboration undertaken in the past at a different institution was far more fragmented, and complicated to organise). However, limitations in the academic calendar (planning students had only 12 weeks to complete their projects whilst architecture students had a longer time) and the different weight attributed to the design studio within the two departments (for planners the studio was only one of several other equally-weighted modules, whilst for architects it was the central element of their curriculum) meant that the time that students could dedicate to the project was unequal, and planners found the experience sometimes too intensive and time-consuming. A further challenge – and also an opportunity - arises from the international composition of student cohorts. Students from different countries and contrasting planning and design cultures brought their own, often very particular and diverse, ideas about place quality to the studios. Inter-disciplinarity needs to accommodate not only the professional biases that have developed in the Anglophone world, and are now represented in UK universities, but also the diversity of student background and experience. This is a very important challenge and opportunity. Cities are increasingly diverse and it is important that we reflect that diversity in our classes, so long as we can achieve cultural understanding and a common design language that brings professions together.

Looking ahead, the intention is for the collaborative design studio at the University of Liverpool in London to address these challenges and add further layers of sophistication to inter-disciplinary teaching and learning, through the involvement of additional disciplines (real estate and transport planning, as well as industrial design, are amongst the skill-sets already present within our ‘Design Lab’) and the cooperation of students on the elaboration and pursuit of common projects. Urban design is a ‘mongrel discipline that draws its legitimizing theories from diverse intellectual roots’ alongside various ‘professional theories and practices’ (Carmona, 2014, 2). This is perhaps its great strength, making it an ideal interactive and collaborative arena for those built environment professions that must work together effectively if we are to shape better urban places.

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**Pictures:**

**Picture 1.** Canary Wharf

**Picture 2.** Example of analytical poster (credit: Olivia Dolan, Tianjiao Ma, Yunhe Ye and Huanqi Zhang)

**Picture 3.** Example of analytical poster (credit: Hans Julia Aguadera, Emma Clarkson, Jiangyi Guo and Yuxuan Shi)

**Picture 4.** Example of student master plan (credit: Chang Sun; Jing Zhang; Jiyngzi Xu; Yunhe Ye)

**Picture 5**: Example of student 3D model (credit: Congcong Yao, Kexiang Huang and Yanbai Zhao)

**Picture 6**: Example of student model (credit: Dan Liu; Yi Cheng; Yuting Chen)

1. <https://architectureeducationdeclares.com> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)