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Review of Krieger A, Saunders WS (Eds) *Urban Design*
University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis

Urban Design is a fascinating topic for debate. Unfortunately, such debates happen too rarely. The term was coined by José Luis Sert, who became Dean of Harvard Graduate School of Design, shortly before its landmark conference on 1956. This book includes extracts from the conference before going on to reflect upon them. As Charles Waldheim explains – the contributors discuss past, present and future directions through a series of essays that offer significant and substantive knowledge. Depending on your point of view, the richness or confusion in urban design flows from it not being a specific discipline. Alex Krieger sets out ten interpretations of urban design and then states that the list is not exhaustive and other activities could be added. Jonathan Barnett reduces the number to three components. One focus is the public realm. There seems to be a persistent fear of designing empty public spaces that are devoid of life. Ever since the first conference, Jane Jacobs has become the designers' conscience in this respect – continually reminding everybody that spontaneous undesigned places can be as successful as designed places. Indeed, it is even questionable whether real places can be professionally designed. Lewis Mumford noted that the original conference could at least report on the absolute folly of creating physical structures at the price of destroying the intimate social structures of a community's life. Jane Jacobs and Lewis Mumford remain important and relevant voices today (Michael Sorkin). Their work continues to provide references for academic papers and copies of their books are often seen in the hands of academics and practitioners. The message is simple – the starting point must be whatever is workable and has charm; and above all whatever has vitality in urban life. Fumihiko Maki agrees that the basic human need for delight has remained largely unchanged, and this gives urban designers both

encouragement and a clear objective. Peter G Rowe reflects that the absence of beauty and delight in contemporary cities was a main bone of contention in 1956, and has remained a cry throughout history.

The character of urban place at local, regional and even national scales is determined by a number of differentiating factors, including – geography, climate, religion, political history, and opportunity in economic markets and trade (Marilyn Jordan Taylor). Although economics, sociology, psychology etc. have been long recognised as impacting on the contemporary notion of the city and its community; by the second conference in 1957, urban design was intentionally attributed to the combined professional expertise of planning, architecture and landscape alone. This reduced the scope to those aspects over which the design professions have control. By 1959, this had diminished further to solely the architects' view. Sert justified this approach by referring to the previous conferences as a 'fog of amiable generalities' (49). Denise Scott Brown disagrees. She offers the concept of urban design as a particularly broad subject area, creating multiple connections both physically and across disciplines. Alex Krieger considers that urban sociologists and theorists are the present-day equivalents of the great urban reformers of the past – not in deeds but in interpretations of urban culture. Edward Soja is a case in point. His observations about how people interact with a city, such as his Amsterdam experience 'On Spuistraat'¹ linger long in the memory as a major influence on one's own perspectives. The future of urban design now lies in the development of knowledge and tools that all players in the community-making process will use (John Kaliski). One aspect of Dutch urbanism is that it brings fresh views of the world, not just those used by official policy makers or market forces (Michelle Provoost and

Wouter Vanistiphout). In the early 21st Century western commoditised city, urban design can appear as a collection of private sector lifestyle centres. Emily Talen quotes William Saunders in labelling them as ‘delusions and falsities’² (185).

Following the 2006 roundtable discussion at Harvard Graduate School of Design, William Saunders’s rueful conclusion was that they were not able to come up with any promising new models. This is part of a growing realisation that perhaps urban design’s unique value actually stems from diverse frameworks that create a more vital urbanism across a broader spectrum of culture (Timothy Love). Once we accept that cities are individual, complex, multigenerational and never-finished; the need is recognised for flexible frameworks that allow for innovation, hybridization, organic growth, change and surprise (Kenneth Greenberg). By its nature, urban design defies neat categorisation – it is not a profession but a ‘way of thinking’ (54). It attempts to operate holistically in a world fragmented by disciplinary distinctions (Richard Marshall). According to Joan Basquets, urbanisation has now strongly re-established its intellectual credentials, which is considerable encouragement for future work. Richard Sommer further identifies a role for academics when he suggests that urban design must be founded on solid research and methodological processes. Alex Krieger’s conclusion is that one may rejoice in the many possible spheres of urbanistic action for those who are passionate lovers of cities. The contributors to this book explore these insights in a way that invites readers to revisit their own assumptions, and inspires engagement with the great urban design debate.

References

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