

URBAN DESIGN AND PEOPLE

MICHAEL DOBBINS



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Preface

Urban design is a diffuse and abstract term. It means different things to different people. For those not directly involved in its practice or aware of its effects on their daily lives, it may not mean much, if anything at all. I first heard the term in architecture school, but I didn't really think much about what it might mean until my schoolmate Jonathan Barnett started using it to describe his aspiration to put together with some of his colleagues a design capability in the New York City government. That opportunity had come up after the election of John Lindsay as mayor in 1966. Lindsay, concerned about deterioration in the public environment, empanelled a study commission on design, chaired by William Paley, chair of CBS. The commission's report asserted that the quality of design was of utmost importance, that the city government should take the lead in advancing a public design agenda, and that, among other measures, it should recruit and employ trained designers toward that end.

I am honored to have been the first hired by the design group initiators (which in addition to Jonathan, included Jaquelin Robertson, Myles Weintraub, Richard Weinstein, and Giovanni Pasanella). They had negotiated with the Lindsay team and settled on placing the group in the City Planning Department. We set up shop in April 1967 in an "eye-ease" green-walled, gray linoleum-floored space on the 14th floor of 2 Lafayette Street where the city planning department was housed. So began for me a total redirection of my career, from an architect worrying about finding the next commission to devoting my energies and whatever were my design capabilities to improving the quality of the public environment. I came to a whole new concept of the *client*, from single patron to the city's 7.5 million citizens. I've been a public servant ever since.

For me, *urban design* came to describe the design and functionality of all urbanized places—how they looked and how they performed. Furthermore, the emphasis in urban design is on *public* places—the streets, parks, plazas, the open spaces that everyone shares. These are the places that provide the interface with and connection to the *private* places—the home, the workplace, the mostly enclosed spaces where people carry on their more personal and private life activities. Urban design is the design of the public environment, the space owned by all, as it connects to, frames, and is framed by the private environment—that space owned by individuals or corporate entities. Urban design is the public face and public base of human settlements. People proud of their places are the mark of good urban design.

In 40 years of practice as a public sector urban designer, in addition to the usual base of urban design theory and practice, I have identified at least three important themes that get short shrift or are ignored altogether. First, people are the core of successful urban places. If a place looks good, feels comfortable, and meets its functional expectations, it will attract people and engender their embrace, ongoing interaction, and stewardship. Such a happy outcome is more likely to occur if representatives of the people who are or will be in the place play an active role in guiding the design and development decisions and priorities that make places happen. I've never met anyone who didn't want to live in a better place.

Second, urban design work does not and cannot happen without the integration of all the interests that together regulate, build, and use the

public realm. Whether conscious of the role each plays or not, every public place reflects and exhibits the government, which owns it; the private sector, whose buildings frame it; and everyday citizens, who need it to get around and to come together. Where the relationships between the three spheres are often more important than the spheres themselves, a conscious and positive partnership is a key factor for making places better.

Third, the disciplines responsible for designing public places must integrate and synthesize their activities in an informed, thoughtful, and respectful way—the opposite of what usually happens. Civil engineers in their various subdisciplines are most responsible for the design of the public right-of-way. Architects design the private buildings that frame and connect to the public space. Landscape architects are more and more involved in designing streetscapes, public parks, and plazas. And city planners design and administer the public policies and rules that determine the activities and sizes of buildings and their relationships with the public realm. Other design forces are in play as well, but these big four must come together around common design visions if places are to get better.

I write this book because much of the information that my colleagues and I have gained in carrying out wide-ranging urban design and development initiatives was not sufficiently covered in existing texts. Pieces of what constitutes urban design practice are covered in many books, often in elegant forms. But the substance of mine and others' day-to-day work experience, what really happens and how to get the job done, I have not found. Furthermore, while most of us agree that urban design is mainly about design of the public realm, I find little that covers the three themes noted above, which I believe to be vital to successful urban design and development outcomes.

The book is organized in five parts: Background, Content, Principles, Processes, and Strategies. The text draws on experience, mine and others'. It is an exposition more of practices that work than a product of academic research. Accordingly, the reader will note that most references and many examples are presented as sidebars. In addition, as a comprehensive treatment, the text suggests many references in the form of websites, and the reader is encouraged to use Google or Yahoo search engines to probe subjects in depth and to gain other perspectives. It is for students, for teachers, and for practitioners across the spectrum of disciplines who come together to design and build the public environment. Maybe most importantly, though, I have written it as a guide for everyday citizens who are concerned about their public environment and who want to (and work to) make it better. If it's successful, it should provide a general roadmap to design and development in the public environment and a starter kit of tools for effectively engaging these processes. Further, it should prepare people in their various roles to understand and embrace the role of everyday citizens as stewards of the public environment, at all scales.

Finally, a word about civil service and government: Usually, city planning and urban design administrators working for the local government are in the best position to understand and help facilitate the necessary, but often left out, interactions among all those who make public places happen. And they are often the "point person" responsible for bringing together all parties in the more complicated of the private-public-community development initiatives. Committing to public service generally is an uphill battle in the privatizing societal and economic structure

and culture that began with the Reagan years, first in California and then nationally. Civil servants became easy to attack and hard to defend, and both government and the numbers of service-minded citizens who might be drawn to it went into a protracted state of decline. People are now awakening to the effects of this decline on their daily lives, in public institutions, parks, infrastructure, services, the quality and functionality of the public environment, and, most recently, in the impacts of deregulation on the finance industry. I hope this book will serve as a useful reference for citizens pushing to shift American priorities toward public service, toward government meeting citizens' day-to-day needs and improving their quality of life, a role that privatization has not fulfilled.

I have worked for a few local governments and with government agencies at all levels. I find that my fellow workers are good people, committed to making things better in their various spheres of activity, and they generally work on an ethical plane usually above their private sector counterparts. When I talk to students, I remind them that as they look for work in the private sector they will have to be valued more for the revenue they generate minus salary, than for making places better, the reason why most of them went into urban design and planning in the first place. Then I ask them where else could they work twice as hard for half the pay but have 10 times the impact—local government. And I leave them with the thought that if they want to take back their government, the best way is to work for it. Some of them do.

Acknowledgments

Everyone I have ever worked with to make places better—neighborhood people, businesspeople, city planners, engineers, architects, landscape architects, civil servants, elected officials, my colleagues at city halls, teachers, students, colleagues at universities, developers, contractors, homebuilders, attorneys, lenders—has contributed to this book.

My wife, Peggy, has contributed the most, sustaining me through 40 years of practice with ideas and analyses, providing a rich theoretical base, only some of which I have so far been able to put into practice. So I have a way to go. My son Jeb, a writer, early on reminded me that writing something that is readable requires a kind of attention different from that of bureaucrats writing memos—and he marked up parts of the text to make his point. At least the text is better than it might have been. My son Clem, a neuroscientist who was finishing his PhD while I was working on this, kept my head up, looking forward, as I tried to do for him.

A whole string of colleagues, public, private, and community leaders, have guided me into and through my quests for the better design of places. Bill Gilchrist, my collaborator in saving Birmingham's Civil Rights Institute as a building of distinction and my successor there as planning director, has steadfastly encouraged me to put my experience into print. My Atlanta City Hall urban design colleagues, Alycen Whiddon, Aaron Fortner, Caleb Racicot, Enrique Bascunana, Renee Kemp Rotan, and Beverly Dockeray-Ojo, worked with me to infuse the city with urban design guidance and influence. More recently, my Georgia Tech colleagues in the City and Regional Planning Department and the Architecture Department have provided valuable feedback and encouragement as I pushed along. The work of my urban design colleagues at Georgia Tech is reflected throughout the text, whether noted or not. Doug Allen, Ellen Dunham-Jones, Richard Dagenhart, Randy Roark, David Green, and John Peponis have all contributed significantly to the rich dialogue that we share in Atlanta with communities, government agencies, and private sector practitioners and developers. More generally, colleagues whose voiceprints have guided me include the late dean, Tom Galloway, who figured out how to provide me a home in academe; behavioral psychologist Craig Zimring; and city planning professors Michael Elliott and Catherine Ross. All of my other city planning, architecture and building construction colleagues have encouraged me along my way, as well. Mike Meyer in the Civil and Environmental Engineering Department and Eric Dumbaugh, now at Texas A&M University, gave me good feedback and advice on how to incorporate transportation and traffic engineering considerations into the context of the book. Georgia Tech students Renato Ghizoni, Chelsea Arkin, and Jared Yarsevich all contributed valuable research on various aspects of the content, as well as examples from which some of the illustrations are drawn.

Paul Drougas at Wiley somehow thought that I would be able to write this book, or something like it, thus giving me both the confidence and the structure to persist, for which I am most grateful. And his colleagues have borne with me as a newcomer to the publishing world.