

RESEARCH YOU CAN USE

Urban Design vs. Urban Planning: a Distinction With a Difference

It was bound to happen. This bimonthly column is entitled “Research You Can Use,” and I have tried to live up to the name. In April, for example, I described a new method of analyzing the traffic impacts of mixed use development that may someday supplement the deficient methodology of the Institute of Transportation Engineers. But after scanning the articles scheduled for publication in leading planning journals, I was unable to come up with a good example of practical research for this month’s column. A few potential candidates were not yet available as preprints. So I decided to take a different, more theoretical approach.

My focus is the June issue of the *Journal of Planning Education and Research*, which features a symposium on the relationship between urban design and urban planning. In his commentary, “Is Urban Design Still Urban Planning?” New Zealander Michael Gunder, of the University of Auckland, reviews decades of literature seeking an operational definition of urban design. He concludes that “contemporary urban design, as an independent field, is largely a creation and product of neoliberalism, because it effectively mirrors its values of reification and facade, the superficial, the surface, in the commodification of the built environment for the achievement of capital accumulation under competitive globalization.” Can you blame me for being confused?

Finally, toward the end of the article, when a specific city was mentioned, I got the point: “The City of Vancouver, Canada,” writes Gunder, “is particularly effective in achieving aesthetically pleasing livable communities by combining good urban design in its collaborative plans, planning processes, and practices.” I have been to Vancouver, and it looks and feels different from other North American cities. If it represents good urban design, then I can intuit what urban design means to the author.

The same issue of *JPER* contains strong responses from Tridib Banerjee, FAICP, of the University of Southern California and Emily Talen, AICP, of Arizona State University. They note that Gunder conflates new urbanism with urban design and then accuses both of ignoring social equity and environmental protection—a lack of care that causes him to call for urban design to return to its 20th century position as a subfield of urban planning. Gunder is unfair, they say, both to new urbanism (as it has matured) and to urban design.



Downtown Vancouver.

Keep the distinction

Here is my own take on urban design versus urban planning. Both are, and should remain, distinct but complementary disciplines. Urban design differs from planning in scale, orientation, and treatment of space. Its scale is primarily that of the street, park, or transit stop, as opposed to the larger region, community, or activity center, which are foremost in planning. Its orientation is both aesthetic and functional, putting it somewhere between art, whose object is beauty, and planning, whose object is utility. The treatment of space in urban design is three-dimensional, with vertical elements as important as horizontal ones. Urban planning, on the other hand, is customarily a two-dimensional activity, with most plans visually represented in plan view, not model, section, or elevation.

This characterization of urban design is most prominent in the numerous

planning studies of the built environment and its effects on personal travel. In these studies, the built environment is represented by the three “D variables”—density, diversity, and design—first described by Robert Cervero and Kara Kockelman in a 1997 article in *Transportation Research*. Additional D variables have been introduced since then: destination accessibility, distance to transit, and development scale. Travel choices—trip frequency, trip distance, mode choice—have been found repeatedly to depend on these variables.

In a recent meta-analysis of the literature relating to D variables, Cervero and I describe the third D, design, this way: “Design includes street network characteristics within an area. Street networks vary from dense urban grids of highly interconnected, straight streets to sparse suburban networks of curving streets forming loops and lollipops. Measures include average block size, proportion of four-way intersections, and number of intersections per square mile. Design is also occasionally measured as sidewalk coverage . . . ; average building setback; average street width; or numbers of pedestrian crossings, street trees, or other physical variables that differentiate pedestrian-oriented environments from auto-oriented ones.”

So defined, design proves to be as important a determinant of travel choice as density, diversity, and other dimensions of physical form.

Some urban designers might object to this characterization as too limiting. But after reviewing classic writings in the urban design field by Edmond Bacon, Christopher Alexander, Kevin Lynch, and others, I will stand by it. The debate over urban design versus urban planning is a distinction with a difference, even if one that is often blurred.

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