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# Theory's Role in Placelessness

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## **Abstract**

*Amongst the range of forces that determine the built environment, the formalized process of urban design makes a small contribution. Within that process, the urban designer is required to respond to various and sometimes conflicting interests in the generation of plans and proposals – a negotiation that has been described as the symbolic attempt to express urban meaning in urban form. This chapter will propose that urban design theory captures urban meaning which is then reflected in the physical form of built environments. It will explore how spaces frequently deemed to be 'placeless' may in fact be a reflection of changes in urban meaning and suggest that qualities of placelessness can be linked to a particular theoretical perspective.*

## **Expressing urban meaning**

Urban design is contested as a term, a discipline and an activity. Whilst the many attempts at a definition all offer some kind of insight into the field and function of urban design, they are heavily criticized as being either tautological or axiomatic, "...radically empiricist, functional, technocratic, historicist, or practice and skill-based definitions" (Cuthbert, 2007), and consequently chiefly devoid of any meaning. Alexander Cuthbert argues that they fail to forge any theoretical links between urban design activity, the historical process, social development and other professions. Manuel Castells' definition of urban design as, "the symbolic attempt to express urban meaning in certain urban forms" (Castells, 1983) is preferable in this respect as it theoretically embeds urban design activity in other urban, social and political functions. Urban meaning is defined as "...the structural performance assigned as a goal to cities in general (and to a particular city in the inter-urban division of labor) by the conflictive process between historical actors in a given society." (Castells, 1983). The social structure it reflects includes economic, religious, political and

technological operations. The conflictive process is that of domination and resistance to domination. An example of this is given as the city defined by merchants as a market which will then have markets, street fairs and socializing as well as the associated commodification of economic activity, monetarization of work and development of transport in order to move goods. Urban form is defined as "...the symbolic expression of urban meaning and of historical superimposition of urban meanings (and their forms) always determined by a conflictive process between historical actors." (Castells, 1983). It can be tangible things such as materials, volumes, colors and heights as well as uses, flows, perceptions, mental associations and systems of representations, which change with time, cultures and social groups.

Castells deduces from this that three fundamental things shape the city: conflict over definitions of urban meaning; conflict over the implementation of urban functions; conflicts over symbolic expressions of urban meaning and/or urban functions. From this, three disciplinary definitions are offered including that of urban design: "We call urban social change the redefinition of urban meaning. We call urban planning the negotiated adaptation of urban function to a shared urban meaning. We call urban design the symbolic attempt to express urban meaning in certain urban forms." (Castells, 1983). Redefinition of urban meaning occurs through urban social change, thus conditioning all forms of urban praxis:

"Spatial forms... will be produced by human action... and will express and perform the interests of the dominant class according to a given mode of production and to a specific mode of development. They will express and implement the power relationships of the state in a historically defined society... And the work of this contradictory historical process will be accomplished on an already inherited spatial form, the product of history and support of new interests, projects, protests, and dreams. Finally, from time to time social movements will arise, challenging the meaning of a spatial structure and therefore attempting new functions and forms." (Castells, 1983).

This can be seen in the arrival of the capitalist mode of production and the manifestation of its dominant values and interests. It is evident in the concentration and centralization of the means of production (the metropolitan area); the specialization of an area; the commodification of the city itself; and the assumed need

to transport people in order to maximize the profitability of the model, collectively seen to lead to a crisis in housing, services and social control. Cuthbert's interpretation of Castells' definition is urban design as "...the actual material expression of the history of capitalist development, writ large in the built form of cities using the medium of urban design, or more succinctly, the accrued history of symbolic capital." (Cuthbert, 2007). Urban meaning is translated as social distinctions, social conflict, collective memory, war and reconstruction, representations of science, art and philosophy whilst physical expression is through the components of urban form: "individual architectural elements, monuments, street sculpture, including spaces and places as well as their naming and associations." (Cuthbert, 2007). This interrelation of function, form and meaning is considered to give a superior definition, which leads to other suppositions in theory by connecting the process of designing cities to the processes of the production of space – listed by Castells as production, consumption, exchange and administration (Cuthbert, 2007).

Several key points emerge from Cuthbert and Castells. Firstly, that deliberate action creates urban form. Secondly, there are multiple groups with conflicting interests but urban form reflects the interests of only the dominant, the exception being when actively challenged by new social interests; and it is a process of spatial adaptation from what historically exists. Castells' assessment appears to suggest that the urban designer is a conduit for urban meaning, negotiating a complex and conflictive situation in order interpret and express urban meaning in urban form. So how might urban meaning be captured and synthesized? The following section will propose that urban design theory is a reflection of urban meaning.

### **Theories in urban design**

Theories in urban design are those that act as tools for the urban designer. They may have considerable integrity but are "descriptions of common urban features or processes..." (Cuthbert, 2007) and, as such, are self-evident and not universally applicable. Some of the most established are deeply rooted in the modernist movement and the architectural perspective. More recently urban theory started to emerge from new areas, outside design, such as urban sociology and human geography. Consequently, abstractions explaining urban design have been developed

away from urban designers and the design process has been articulated in a variety of ways, from a variety of sources (Cuthbert, 2007). Although it remains subservient to a range of other influences (such as site, brief, client, users, policy and regulation) this body of knowledge influences the urban designer's decision-making within the creative process, both explicitly and implicitly (Montague, 2014). Therefore to some extent it contributes to the eventual form of built environment. John Punter regards the impact of design theory and practice on the built environment to have been profound, "...whether one considers the 'garden suburb' council housing that followed the Unwinian principles of site planning and design (House of Commons, 1918), the post-war central area redevelopments following the 'open planning' modernist principles of Holden and Holford (1947), the 1960s high-rise council housing based on loose Corbusian principles, or the neighborhood unit/green belt/New Town designs of Howard, Gibberd and others (Gibberd, 1963)." (1997).

Individually, theories address the dominant issues at the time they were conceived. A key characteristic of theory is its cyclic nature, resulting in a dominant paradigm at given time (Stevens, 1998, Carmona & Tiesdell, 2007, Cuthbert, 2007). Accordingly, Carmona and Tiesdell divide theories in urban design into three paradigms: the visual-artistic tradition; the social usage tradition; and the place-making tradition, which we are currently in (Vernez Moudon, 1991, quoted in Punter, 1997, Carmona & Tiesdell, 2007). Garry Stevens (1998) advises that this could be interpreted as competition for consecration, approached in one of two ways – conservation or subversion. Those who are established and dominate the field employ the first approach, conservation, defending their position in order to maintain it. "These tend to be strategies of silence, not so much of defending their orthodoxy as holding it forth as self-evident." (Stevens, 1998). Newcomers or those already competing for consecration have two choices. They can either "affirm the values and capital of the dominant members, and thus join them, or they can adopt the far riskier strategy of creating a new aesthetic, a new form of symbolic capital, and thus challenge the establishment." (Stevens, 1998). This gamble is only taken by those who already possess substantial economic and/or social capital and can therefore afford to take the risk.

Simmonds (1993) categorizes theories in urban design and in a way that can be seen to relate to the cycles of dominant paradigms. He contrasts conservative reformers with radical reformers, defined by their position in relation to the new city. Conservative reformers are thought by Simmonds to be the dominant group in Europe and the USA, with the largest subscription from urban design theorists and practitioners. Meanwhile radical reformers are the nascent opposition: “As yet it has little coherence, but it is possible to detect an emerging theme of ideas and practices with a small but growing body of followers.” (Simmonds, 1993). He predicts that they will “...mount an attack on the way conservative reformers dominate urban design thinking and practice” (1993), a notion which resonates with Garry Stevens’ perception of contending groups within the field of architecture.

The theories categorized as conservative reformers seek to suppress the emerging form of the new city, aiming to direct new kinds of growth into traditional built forms. Aesthetic and social concerns contribute to their skepticism, as they contrast chaotic built form with the earlier historical development patterns, disrupted public realm and social polarization with more traditional examples. Capitalism is believed to be the root cause of this situation, and more specifically “...the incompetent management by local and regional governments who have failed to control new development pressures along the traditional lines they have used in the past.” (Simmonds, 1993). Two discrete subcategories are defined within conservative reformers:

The first type of conservative reformer is one who derives his/her urban design principles and inspiration from traditional cities, and whose practice most likely involves the repair of the same subject. They are deterministic, coercing new social and economic activities into traditional patterns of built form, with a view to reforming them in the process. Jane Jacobs’ *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1962) is offered as the model approach for this group, as well as *Responsive Environments* (Bentley et al., 1985), which formulates a general theory around principles derived from studying the traditional city. This publication really underpins the position of the first type of conservative reformers, offering an accessible resource to guide masterplanning by synthesizing, distilling and building on earlier work including that of Jacobs, Gordon Cullen and Kevin Lynch. It espouses the core principles of permeability, variety, legibility, robustness, visual appropriateness,

richness and personalization. It has wide utility and application in the United Kingdom at least, where its approach is established as the norm for dealing with interventions into existing urban areas.

The second type of conservative reformers work with greenfield sites more frequently, rejecting the emergent new city on the basis of its 'unsustainability' and disregarding the potential for information technologies and the automobile to alter the built form of the city. Instead they design settlements modelled on small towns, which pre-date these phenomena, taking the form of higher density developments with commercial centers. This is most commonly recognized as the approach of neo-traditionalists like Leon Krier, Andres Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk. Typical concepts include: poly-centric structures, mixed use cores, civic centers, employment and socio-economic diversity, well-designed streets, intensively used public spaces, and distinctive architectural character.

In contrast to both types of conservative reformer, theories belonging to the category of radical reformers seek to embrace the emerging new city, its form and products. They believe that "...through intelligent and caring interpretation by designers, it can become the basis for a new and better kind of city in the future." (Simmonds, 1993). *Learning From Las Vegas* (Venturi, Scott Brown & Izenour, 1972) is an early example of this burgeoning body of theory, encouraging urban designers to study the built form and function of the contemporary city (rather than the type of form) in order to understand and design it. More recent additions have been made by Rem Koolhaas. In contrast to their conservative counterparts, the radicals expect that changes in social and economic practices will result from cultural and physical changes in the built environment. Their view is that the impact of new technology and rapid mass-transit will result in the shift of the public realm from streets and squares to out-of-town shopping centers, airports, stations and theme parks. This is reflected in the specialization of functions and zoning (business-, science-, and innovation-parks), as well as park-like settings. Criticism is leveled at the apparent lack of concern for the political economy behind the environments they study, as followers tend to be more optimistic about the ability of new information technologies to better society.

So far then, it is proposed that we consider urban design as the symbolic attempt to physically represent urban meaning; urban meaning is the societal product of conflict between politics, economics, religion and technology; and redefinition of urban meaning are reflected in cycles of urban design theory - currently accepted paradigms of the field and attempts to challenge them. We will now explore the relationship between urban meaning, urban design theory and the phenomenon of placelessness.

### **Radical reformers and placelessness**

Alisdair Rogers defines placelessness as, “the condition of an environment lacking significant places and the associated attitude of a lack of attachment to place caused by the homogenizing effects of modernity, e.g. commercialism, mass consumption, standard planning regulations, alienation, and obsession with speed and movement. Shopping malls, highways, post-war US suburbs, and edge cities are typically described as placeless, although cultural geographers have argued that they can be sites of meaning-filled engagement and identity.” (2013). There are many factors that may contribute to this perceived phenomenon in our built environments. Access to a wide range of construction materials in the modern age has swept away the prior necessity to use locally available materials which inadvertently maintained similarity therefore and character within an geographical area and distinctiveness from others, supporting a sense of place. Also, urban design and architectural services have become internationally portable, with many practitioners working on projects across the globe. One of the implications of this might be that despite very different cultural, physical, social and economic contexts, similar processes, principles and understandings are applied.

However, an emerging shift in urban meaning – social conflict in social, political, economic, religious and technological forces - may be the more fundamental root of placelessness. Doreen Massey, for example, in the context of discussing the concept of place, describes the current era as one, “...when things are speeding up, and spreading out. Capital is going through a new phase of internationalization, especially in its financial parts. More people travel more frequently and for longer distances.” (1994). Observations should, according to Castells arguments, be evident spatially as well and socially. If, as it is proposed earlier in this chapter, one way in which urban

meaning is captured and expressed is through urban design theory, then these observations of contemporary society should be identifiable in an emerging body of theoretical works. In this respect, consideration of Simmonds' categories of conservative and radical reformers seems to point to an inherent link.

Whilst theories (and practitioners) falling into the 'conservative' category are largely contextually driven, preferring to maintain the traditional urban form of the city, those in the 'radical' category reject it in favor of the form of the new city. This is linked to their optimism for technological advances and acceptance of modern patterns of development represented by spaces such as retail parks and iconic, globalized architecture. In this way the theoretical position and associated spatial phenomena of the radical reformers seems to resonate with the qualities of 'placelessness' or 'non-place' and the types of space commonly diagnosed with them.

Although conservative approaches remain dominant in western urban design, following the principles of Bentley et al., Jane Jacobs, Gordon Cullen and the like, increasingly movement and information technology enables greenfield and satellite development that embrace the form of the 'new city'. Consciously or unconsciously notions of historical commercial centers are rejected as a result of increasing car ownership and online retail activity: changes to societal patterns that could be interpreted as symptoms of a change to urban meaning and evidence of spatial responses to the theoretical position of the radical reformers. As Marc Augé comments, "If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity will be a non-place. The hypothesis advanced here is that supermodernity produces non-places, meaning spaces which are nor themselves anthropological places and which, unlike Baudelairean modernity, do not integrate the earlier places..." (1995). So are the radical reformers proponents of supermodernity and producers of placelessness? If we look for prime examples of this, we find retail parks – agglomerations of consumerism located out with the historic commercial center of a settlement (see fig 1); and volume housing, which tends to emerge on greenfield sites that are either peripheral to existing settlements or constitute entirely new, predominantly mono-functional, satellite settlements (see fig 2 ). These appear to strongly align to the sympathies of radical reformers, being market driven and

following non-historical patterns of development. There are also similarities in their preoccupation with function asserted by Simmonds (1993) and the linguistic functional focus of a non-place. Labels such as ‘leisure spaces’, ‘sports spaces’ and ‘rendezvous points’ are useful precisely because of their lack of characterization (Augé, 1995).

The other striking physical quality apparent through even casual comparison of the examples presented in fig 1 and 2 of, is the degree of homogeneity within each of these types of urban environment. They are global and transferable products largely unaffected by geographic, cultural, spatial and temporal contexts. The degree of sameness and unity they exhibit exceeds that which Edward Relph (1976) asserts is necessary for the user to understand their environment, instead making differentiation between them difficult. This could be interpreted as “...the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place” (Relph, 1976). They epitomize the category of ‘non-place’ reported by Augé because, like motorways, chain hotels, airports and supermarkets, they appear “the same or similar regardless of where they are situated in time and space” (Roger, 2013). Further examples are readily available in the form of financial centers within global cities [fig 3], spatially demonstrating the value ascribed by contemporary society to capital and enterprise, physically asserted through a powerful urban form symbolic of a capitalist system. Highways [fig 4], business parks [fig 5] and the high-rise residential developments of the 1960s and 70s [fig 6] further exemplify the links between placelessness, urban meaning and the radical reformers theoretical position.

It is argued then that these examples of perceived placelessness are symptomatic of the latest redefinition of urban meaning; illustrations of urban design as the “symbolic attempt to represent urban meaning in certain urban forms” (Castells, 1983); and reflections of the challenge made to conservative reformers by the radicals in terms of a theoretical position. Of course this redefinition of urban meaning is neither a sudden nor a decisive change in terms of the lived experience because the speed at which our urban environments alter is relatively slow and typically extends well beyond an individual’s career or lifespan. As David Seamon (2008) acknowledges, Relph first pointed to this concept several decades ago, yet it remains relevant and worth revisiting in this volume published forty years after ‘Place and Placelessness’ (Relph,

1976). The contemporary exception, where the shift is immediately visible, may be in parts of Asia. Here, current rates of urbanization are so rapid that new urban meaning arising from social, cultural, economic, religious and technological change is physical evident in the collision of old and new [fig 7]. Instances such as this illustrate in a particularly dramatic fashion what is not only a temporal, architectural or material collision of old and new, but rather the abrupt encounter between a redefined urban meaning and its eschewed predecessor.

## **Conclusion**

In order to embed urban design within the other functions that fundamentally influence development, urban design is defined as “the symbolic attempt to express urban meaning in certain urban forms” (Castells, 1983). In this, urban meaning can be understood as the goal given to a city, reflecting the societal structure in a given time and space, itself the conflictive product of dominance and resistance to dominance in economic, political, religious and technological operations. The essence of this at present is the capitalist mode of production, its values and interests. Urban form includes the existing, inherited, spatial form reflecting prior and supporting new interests, functions and conflicts. Societal changes occasionally redefine urban meaning, which is then expressed in new urban forms and spatial structures.

One way in which urban meaning, and changes to it, are captured and documented is through body of knowledge constituted by theories in urban design. Although subservient to range of other influences, these theories in urban design are one of the many things that inform the decision-making and value judgments of the urban designer, both explicitly and implicitly. Theory is cyclic in nature, with a dominant paradigm at any given time. This cycle can be interpreted as another conflict – the competition for consecration within the field. Those established in the field hold a position of conservation and newcomers have the option to either subscribe to this also in order to gain acceptance or to adopt a subversive position, attempting to affect a paradigm shift and gain the dominant position.

Simmonds’ definition of two theoretical positions for urban designers can be seen to relate directly to this. He identifies the conservative reformers, who are currently

dominant in Europe and the US, and their challengers the radical reformers, who have an increasing following. These two groups are defined by their position in relation to the new city. Whilst the conservatives draw on traditional urban form and attempt to negotiate new urban functions into that spatial structure, the radicals embrace the emergent form of the new city, accepting that economic and cultural forces such as mass transit and a market economy will result in physical changes to the built environment.

Studying the position of the radical reformers and their acceptance of new urban phenomena such as out-of-town retail parks, theme parks and transit corridors, it seems there is significant alignment between them and the qualities and types of space frequently perceived to be placeless: “a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity” (Augé, 1995). Their theoretical position and the associated spatial structures can also be seen as a consequence of a redefinition of urban meaning. Indeed, as Massey (1994) has observed, we are in a new age in which capital is increasingly internationalized, and more people are travelling more frequently and across greater distances. In addition to the dominant conservative adherence to the traditional urban form, new urban meaning and functions are leading to new patterns of development such as volume housing and retail parks. The homogenous nature of these spaces is self-evident, unaffected by geographic, cultural, spatial and temporal contexts. It is arguably a placeless effect of modernity – “commercialism, mass consumption, standard planning regulations, alienation, and obsession with speed and movement” (Rogers, 2013).

In summary, the phenomenon of placelessness can be seen as a potential paradigm shift within theories in urban design, the latest iteration of a cyclic process. It can be viewed in the conservative reformers’ passive defence of a “...nostalgic paean to pre-modern times and places” (Seamon, 2008) and the active subversion enacted by the radical reformers through supermodernity: “the presence of the past in a present that supersedes it but still lays claim to it” (Starobinski quoted in Augé, 1995). This shift is a result of conflictive change to urban meaning through social, economic, political, technological and religious forces, reflected both in urban design theory and urban form. It yet remains to be seen whether over time this particular challenge will

succeed in achieving consecration for the radical reformers and result in a new dominant theoretical paradigm that embraces placelessness; or whether the present theoretical constructs of the conservative reformers will retain dominance for the traditional form of the city.

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