DISTRIBUTING RESPONSIBILITIES – JON LANG’S NEWEST BOOK ON URBAN DESIGN

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In recent historiography on architecture and urbanism it is easily perceived that theorists can be divided into two antagonistic intellectual tendencies. The first mainly consists of traditional professionals on city matters – urban planners, engineers, geographers and architects. Its members commonly believe that the city can be planned and its dynamics predicted – more precisely, the good city is one which they could have designed. The other group is made up of researchers and theorists who prefer to believe that urban space is shaped by some kind of “hidden forces” ageing underneath the structures of the city itself. For this group, there is a constant see-sawing of destiny and chance which motivates citizens to desire both functional public life and sublime beauty.

We might well allocate to the first group renowned city designers from various periods of History – Filarete, Haussman, Cerdá, Lucio Costa – as well as the unknown number of professionals of all municipalities; in effect, all who try to plan their acts and are used to drawing up technical blueprints before effectively building the urban space. The second category of theorists on the city affirm that the secrets for the quality of public space are the overlay on the picturesque effects of mediaeval European arrangements produced by the silent and continuous cycle of spontaneous production. They prefer changes to and recreations of the built environment – “urban happenings” or “urban facts” – when they are carried out by ordinary people, their own users and owners. Sitte, Rossi and even Christopher Alexander are figures who belong to this category of urbanistic belief.

However, more recently, a third variety of methodological approach to the problem of the physical constitution of cities has been evolving from a different point of view. For this contemporary group of urban researchers, the attempt should never be made to find in urban phenomenon any characteristics of what they should desirably be. Their epistemological position is to endeavor to look at the city and its objects in order to understand what their essence really is, and how this is presented to us.

This paper sets out to offer a brief discussion of a specific work affiliated to this tendency to an objective empirical approach towards the Urban Design field: Jon Lang’s newest book entitled “Urban Design – a typology of products and practices”. Currently, Lang is a Professor of Architecture at the Faculty of the Built Environment at the University of New South Wales, in Sydney, Australia. This 2005 edition from the Architectural Press presents more than 50 illustrated case studies in over 350 pages of recent urban design efforts (the past 50 years) from all around the World.

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The author’s central argument is based on the public and cultural dimensions of the registered urban design events, or the “human purposes” subjacent to the “physical public realm”.

According to Lang, Urban Design (a term coined only about 50 years ago) must be understood as a clear and distinct discipline. Consequently, it constitutes something that must be studied through its own substances and idiosyncrasies. Such study, Lang says, must be achieved scientifically.

First of all, it is very interesting to observe in the text how Lang deals with the problem of the autonomy of Urban Design practice. Even though it is considered as being primarily part of an architect’s métier, it is argued that the production of physical structures in order to define the physical urban environment is the sum of many different practices, involving not only specialists but even the inhabitants of the city affected by the prescriptions of design. This statement, per se, seems to be something more complete than the traditional dichotomy between the two opposite tendencies as discussed above. In other words, the book states that Urban Design is intrinsically brought about by different kinds of professionals involved with the activity of planning, but, at the same time, it is always dependent on being appropriated by ordinary people.

According to this new perspective that Lang proposes, Urban Design experiences should be understood by considering three complementary variables. They are:

(a) The nature of the procedures for developing the project at the design level;
(b) The products, or the results, obtained, whether already built or not;
(c) The paradigms that govern the whole process.

This kind of descriptive and analytical approach leads Lang to try to solve the methodological problem which then arises – that of classifying a defined number of cases. This specific moment in Lang’s work is responsible for the term “typology” which the sub-title of the book announces. In fact, as Lang himself declares in his text, a typology refers to a classification or categorization of a well defined sample of specimens from the recurrences found in the simplest structural elements which go to making them up.

It is important to note that Lang’s interest lies in the activity of design itself, more than in the morphological aspects of the projects. His focus is on a theoretical framework for describing processes; for example, how the projected object will interface with the pre-existing ones or how something will overlap another in the city’s preexisting structures. In this sense, Lang’s method acts in a much more relativistic way than other prior studies with similar characteristics, such as that by Jan Gehl, for instance.

With regard to formal aspects of the book, it is divided into twelve chapters distributed over four parts. Part 1 has three chapters which deal with the formulation of the central argument of the study – the autonomous nature of urban design. It presents the main idea of Lang’s discourse: the activity of urban design comprehends the whole process of fabrication of the physical public realm of urban environments. It is suggested that this process can be understood as a collection of procedures and products, a pair of study objects which must always be examined together. In this part, Lang sets out his thesis. In the author’s interpretation, there are four major models for procedures-products relations which he deems: Total Urban Design; All-of-a-piece Urban Design; Piece-by-piece Urban Design; and Plug-in Urban Design. At the end of Part 1, a synthetic but efficient discussion on the problem of typology emerges and Lang states the viability and validity of his point of view for studies in the field of Urban Design.
Throughout Parts 2 and 3, the 50-odd case studies are presented in parallel to the main text. The sample, essential for the book’s proposal and goals, covers the last 50 years of projective experiences – since the term “urban design” was first used 50 years ago – in diverse cities worldwide. Despite most examples having been selected from the Anglo-Saxon world, the sample as a whole tries to encompass a global vision – Urban Design experiences from non-English speaking countries, even some from the Third World – cumulatively play an important role in the analysis.

In Chapters 4 and 5 of Part 2, Lang demonstrates the perceived relations of established professional fields with Urban Design production. The products of city planning and Urban Design appear in Chapter 4; Chapter 5 shows the products of landscape architecture and Urban Design; Chapter 6 deals with the relation of architecture with Urban Design.

Part 3 is dedicated to set out what Lang calls “the core” of Urban Design – its procedures and products as stated in the title of the book. Another series of case studies is distributed over another four chapters in order to illustrate how some precincts (or urban problems) – new towns, urban renewal, green/brown fields sites, historic preservation sites, housing, campuses and streets – have been resolved by design propositions taking into account each of the four categories previously proposed in Part 1.

In Part 4, Lang reinforces and restates the original empirical motivation of the research. He tries to deal with expectations for the future of Urban Design activity. He affirms it is possible to learn about the essence of the activity of urban designing itself from his sample of case studies. Paradoxically, at this point his discourse becomes more prescriptive than analytical and he ends by giving what amounts to guidelines for the development of the urban design field as an autonomous discipline. This restatement rounds the book off, but not Lang’s provocative propositions.

In fact, Lang’s research study aims to offer an objective guide such as this for professionals, researchers and students interested not only in the practice of urban design but also in the theoretical framework of the subject. Nevertheless, this is how Lang deals with the theme – he tries to define Urban Design as a specific area of study and practice from the start to finish of his text. He also reinforces the social responsibility inherent in the activity. At first glance, however, the format is so full of illustrations that it might give the reader the wrong impression – the book may merely be a naive manual or a simple exercise in collecting and presenting recent projects for an inventory.

Surprisingly, if carefully read, this “manual” makes one reflect on how Lang succeeds in igniting internal and external polemics in the circles of traditional professionals of the city by calling into question their role in contemporary urban problems. Hopefully, any ensuing intellectual squabbling will not lead to further quarrelling on the definition of the merits or ownership of public spaces. Hopefully it might equally improve the sense of responsibility over what constitutes a city among all “urban designers” – both those who are so regarded in a formal and informal sense.