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Imaginations beyond architecture

Rahul Mehrotra

Urban design is a bridge practice – one that implies flows, is open, plastic and reconfigures itself depending on the problem and the agents, actors and constituencies it has to influence. It is plastic enough to even configure and reconfigure itself between built form and the broader ecologies of the natural system in which it is situated, and more critically as the bridge discipline that embraces the autonomy of architecture and the rich terrain of social science that (ideally) informs the discipline of urban planning.

Today urban design seems to be understood in complete contradiction to this intent. In fact, democracy with advanced capitalism and neoliberal policy is a fatal combination for the urban form of cities more generally and for urban design as we imagine its practice. Under this combination, material configuration through architecture and the aspiration of permanence become the default conditions for our cities and by extension for the expectations of society from urban designers. Here architecture becomes the sole instrument through which cities are imagined and formed. This is particularly limiting, given that cities in the world are in such a state of flux on account of both political and economic uncertainty as well as climate change. So, if anything, urban design should be making this state of flux and the impermanence it implies, as well as the design of transitions in our built environment, the central agenda. In other words, the mission of urban design as a bridge practice could be to straddle and create productive feedback loops between these different conditions that are moulding our built environment today.

However, the practice of urban design globally has been limited to create coherence, efficiencies, and stability in ways that the urban form for our cities is imagined. Architecture becomes the central organizing device for the formation of cities. In autocratic governments, the city and its form are imagined more often than not by multinational design corporations patronized by the monarch and often in complete detachment to the realities on the ground. In democracies, on the other hand, it is usually the combination of market forces leveraged by developers and financial interests and in some cases (at the smaller neighbourhood scale) by community groups or not-for profit-organizations – thus resulting in often disparate imaginations as a result of varying aspirations. This is a non-productive condition because what has resulted from this are boundaries of

containment for urban design practitioners, thus depriving cities of this crucial bridge practice – urban design. A practice that in its original aspirations was to connect different disciplines to make for a more productive and synergic engagement with the construction of the city. And to imagine the city as a broad and complex ecology of living and working in co-existence within natural systems. Thus, the critical questions for the practice of urban design are whether, as a practice, it should only respond to the context of its operation, or should it also engage with the construction of that context itself?

Today that context is of a city in flux. In several cities around the world, in the post-industrial scenario, a new system has resulted where living and working have become extremely fragmented in the formal sector of production but much more intertwined in the informal sectors where living and working often occur in the same space. Locations of jobs and places of living are not interrelated in the predictable fashion when job locations were centralized. However, this has some advantages which are not adequately recognized in the formal imaginations of the city. For while being fragmented, in some ways working and living have become intertwined, albeit informally. Today, in the majority world (of the Global South) self-employment accounts for a large majority of livelihoods, often in public spaces or private homes. This reality should be the real driver for imagining the new self-employed city and what its urban form might be.

Furthermore, in today's networked economies, these patterns are not only fragmented but in flux and constantly reconfiguring. This results in a condition where there is simultaneous fragmentation as well as intertwining of work and living spaces and in fact in the structure of the city itself and its form. The notion of clear zoning or predictable and implementable land use all breaks down into much more multifaceted ways in which the city is used and operates. This is an urbanism created by those outside the elite domains of the formal modernity of the state. It is what Ravi Sundaram refers to as a "pirate" modernity of the poor who slip under the laws of the city to simply survive, without any conscious attempt at constructing a counter-culture (Sundaram 2001). The spaces created or occupied by the poor have been largely excluded from the cultural discourses on globalization, which focus on elite domains of production in the city. They tend to fall below the radar of most urban designers, who focus on the public realm as we have defined it traditionally, but in this condition the meaning of space itself is in flux and ever changing. It is not only the city of the poor, or the regular models of the formal and informal and other such binaries, but a kinetic space, a space where these models collapse into singular entities and where meanings are ever shifting and blurred.

The questions this raises are as follows: can we design for multiple uses and users of space as urban designers and planners? Can we design with a porous and fluid mind – one capable of accepting the simultaneous validity of varying aspirations? Can other forms of organizations be embedded in the discussion about our cities and, if so, how do we recognize and embed this within the formal discourse of urban design? This is not an argument for making our cities temporary but rather one of recognizing the temporal as an integral part of the

city and seeing what space exists for this within the possibilities of urban design – all the way from its urban form, public spaces and governance structures.

So, then, what is the role of urban design in this condition? Most certainly this flux is the new normal and, in addition, the spurts of growth and flux triggered by natural and political uncertainty are going to challenge our reading of the urban condition and the role of urban design. The issues that could be negotiated in this form of urban design practice, then, are as diverse as memory, geography, infrastructure, sanitation, public health governance, ecology, new forms of livelihood and urban form, albeit in some measure temporary. These parameters could unfold their projective potential, offering alternatives of how to embed softer but perhaps more robust systems in urban form otherwise imagined with aspirations for more permanency. Andrea Branzi advises us on how to think of cities of the future. He suggests that we need to learn to implement reversibility, avoiding rigid solutions and definitive decisions. He also suggests approaches which allow space to be adjusted and reprogrammed with new activities not foreseen and not necessarily planned (Cardevila 2016). Thus, urban design as a practice must acknowledge the need to re-examine permanent solutions as the only mode for the formulation of urban imaginaries, and instead imagine new protocols that are constantly reformulated, readapted, and re-projected in an iterative search for a temporary equilibrium that reacts to a permanent state of flux.

One could argue that the future of cities depends less on the rearrangement of buildings and infrastructure and more on the ability of urban designers to openly imagine more malleable technological and material solutions for rapidly shifting economic and social landscapes. That is, to imagine a city form that recognizes and better handles the temporary and elastic nature of the contemporary and emergent built environment with more effective strategies for managing change as an essential element for the construction of the urban environment. The challenge is then learning from these changing conditions on how to manage and negotiate different layers of the urban while accommodating emergent needs and often largely neglected parts of urban society. Thus, the aspiration would then be to imagine a more flexible practice of urban design more aligned with emergent realities, enabling us to deal with more complex scenarios than those of static or stable consolidated situations.

The challenge for urban design today is to transform to become more inclusive, thereby recognizing its dependency on other actors and agencies for implementation and multiple domains for its design. Integral to this new emerging approach are incremental strategies and multifaceted feedback loops making the process of urban design increasingly dynamic. New technologies could potentially help us spatialize and combine big data as well as grounded knowledge and find new ways of discerning emergent patterns to understand spaces in flux. This then facilitates a more nuanced, fine-grained, and grounded registrar of the reality in which we operate. Perhaps emblematically, urban design today is in a place between an intuitive exploration between the formal city represented by architecture and the instant city premised on temporality. That is, between

formalism with its quest for functionalism and the temporary character of informality – in the space of true transitions.

Then urban design could be about how these spatial possibilities play out to influence the quality of lives, of our evolving economy, society and culture and the broader well-being of the planet. It is the broader view of planetary implications and ecological thinking that will prepare for us questions of equity and humanism in the context of our urban design praxis. Design for this condition of flux will necessitate urban design to think in terms of transitions rather than in absolute terms. That is how we may actually avoid designing permanent solutions for perhaps what well might be temporary problems.

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