

VIRTUES, SINS AND THE “GOOD LIFE” – 10 ETHICAL APPROACHES TO URBAN DESIGN

Pedro Brandão. CESUR. Instituto Superior Técnico. UTL.

ABSTRACT

Urban Design ethics may seem out of site, with the end of modern radical ethics about the perfection of a “new world” and the growing of individualism in our times. It's only apparent though - with today's new expectations about social and environmental responsibility, in the pursuit of “life quality”, the “good life”, all main fields of ethical thought are getting more directly concerned with urban matters:

Public or common Interest. It clarifies political ethics about cities. Governments must regulate conflicting interests (profitability and quality of life) protect scarce goods (land and environment) and safeguard intergenerational values (heritage).

Public Place, urban space. The ethical matrix of urban settlements, as the first and most lasting element of urban fabric, and the founding condition for social life, must favour interaction and the expression of citizenship.

Professions as service providers. Design professions are recognized as trustable, knowledge based, and problem solving. Urban Design answers to needs and desires, with the sense of “care”.

Ethical approaches to Urban Design are being brought to light, in a range including good wishes, statements and proposed rules, before a true ethical reflection illuminates professional practices. In this lecture I'll try to enlarge the scope of the matter; and to demonstrate how Urban Design has a relevance of altruism and joy.

SUMARIO

La ética del Diseño Urbano puede parecer fuera de lugar con el fin de la radical ética moderna acerca de la perfección de un “nuevo mundo” y el creciente individualismo en nuestra época. Es sólo aparente, aunque – hoy en día de nuevo las expectativas sobre la responsabilidad social y ambiental, con la búsqueda de la “calidad de vida”, la “buena vida”, todos los principales campos de pensamiento ético son cada vez están más directamente relacionados con el ámbito de las ciudades:

El interés público o común. Aclara la ética política sobre las ciudades. Los gobiernos deben regular los conflictos de intereses (la rentabilidad y la calidad de vida) proteger los escasos bienes (el suelo y el medio ambiente) y la salvaguardia de los valores (patrimonio).

Espacio público, el espacio urbano. La matriz de la ética de los asentamientos urbanos, como el primero y más duradero de los elementos del tejido urbano, y su condición fundacional para la vida social, debe favorecer la interacción y la expresión de la ciudadanía.

Las Profesiones como proveedores de servicios. Las profesiones del Diseño se reconocen como confiables, basadas en el conocimiento y la resolución de problemas. El Diseño Urbano da respuestas a las necesidades y deseos, con el sentido de “cuidado”.

Los criterios éticos para el diseño urbano se han salido a la luz, en una gama que incluye entre ellos los buenos deseos, las declaraciones y normas propuestas, previo a que una verdadera reflexión ética ilumine las prácticas profesionales. En este trabajo voy a tratar de ampliar el alcance de la cuestión y demostrar cómo, en el diseño urbano, es relevante el altruismo y la alegría

KEYWORDS: Ethics, Public Space, Urban Design, Professionalism, Disciplines

It's only with the modern project of remaking the world according to human needs and capacities and following a rational concept, that a promise of a life free from sin (now named “guilt”) arises. Law should then be the main instrument of this reconstruction (...) (opposite to religious strategies of repent and forgiveness). It would avoid that evil was done, by priory assuring actors of what should be done, what should be let as it is and what should not be done. The feasibility of this project was tautologically granted in advance: going by the rules would produce but goodness, because “good” had already been defined as obedience to rules.. Zygmunt Bauman, Life in Fragments – Essays in Post-modern Morality

I. The virtues of reciprocity and learning

We professionals tend to impose our own vision to others, without a true communicational process – “we know”, we have a right “global vision”. That relegates us to an isolated world apart. On the contrary we can admit, like the Socratics, that we only touch half the truth – others have the other half and it is in a communicational process that we earn more of truth. It happens with professions and with cities.

With technical jargon concepts like “spatial outcome” or “reference framework”, urban design professionals, describe city as if it was an abstract item, regardless of emotional experience. But our

experience as an urban civilization is made from everyday life occasions of “place.making” and “place.belonging”.

Today we expect from social life equity relations and responsible attitudes. Professional liability is essential to these “practical ethics” construction (Aristotle). But the main role in Urban Design is the quality of interactions with the “Other”.

We also must “know ourselves” to act ethically. To know ourselves means to acknowledge what we don’t know, or don’t know enough; to acknowledge mistakes so as to learn from them. We have to listen and understand so as to be understood.

We construct our own professional beliefs (and also some myths) but we don’t have a monopoly on vision, not even on the vision of the whole. Without the visions and plans of all actors being on stage, space may be like a brilliant scenario, but there’s no play at all if no play is going on.

Virtues of knowledge in Urban Design rely in recognizing differences in knowledge, and in a new way of learning: “bridgebuilding” between:

- Design knowledge (architects, landscapers, engineers, artists...) comes from action, with a “prospective imagination” for the “city of the future”;
- Other urban disciplines’ analytical knowledge (history, geography, sociology, ecology...) are structured retroactively, from a “city that exists, or has existed”;
- And non-professional knowledge (inhabitants) comes from direct experience of users and their own life plans

Virtues in Urban Design, are therefore recognizable: to listen and understand, to be practical and open minded, to facilitate communication and collaboration, to combine vision and realism, emotional experience and cultural literacy...

2. The sins of Vanity and Lying

Although modern ethics no more depends on commandments from a moral authority, we can still identify ethical faults and breaches in conduct, because we accept man as master of his own ends.

Moralists in modern design identified ethics with aesthetics: *We may not be able to command good or beautiful or inventive architecture: the meagreness of poverty may be pardoned, the sternness of utility respected; but what is there but scorn for the meanness of deception?* Ruskin – The Seven Lamps of Architecture

Truth (apparent materials and structure) and modesty (free from decoration) were looked as virtues in building, opposed to professional “sins” such as vanity and lying in form giving. Historicist “spirit of the time” aesthetics legitimation often leads us to ideological preconceiving and other myths about right and wrong designs.

Design critical history allows us to understand transitional periods (our times like Industrial revolution) with their shifts in references, and sensations of loss. Only after some time, new ethical paradigms and keywords moderate nostalgic moral beliefs.

Vanity starts by amplifying self images. It still exists in Urban Design, with different but perhaps more negative manifestations, today. For instance, it compels architects to think that the way in which people live is somehow directed by architecture (Tadao Ando); Mentalities and even happiness could then be designed. But even in the most beautiful place you can’t be happy, if you are not happy.

This doesn’t mean that we may quit from touching people’s aesthetical and emotional sense of place. It’s not acceptable a meaningless environment. But it’s easier to make a place aesthetical than to design people’s life. Over evaluating the “powers” of Urban Design is not only a form of vanity, but it often stimulates the plain lie, when places are no longer designed with concern for their contents but only with concern for their “looks”, “atmospheres”, “effects”, “image” and “glamour”.

Urban Design is not a collection of objects and their signatures. It is required more than trendy design hits in Public Space to foster human interactions. Truth is that real life is crucial in Urban Design. To practice it is not a given capacity:

- it requires cultural competences (understanding diverse expectations),
- negotiation competences (balancing different perspectives)
- communicational competences (between expectations and perspectives in action).

Urban Design ethics is not just about the starting point of a design process. There's always a before and an after form giving: Design starts with necessity, program, purpose, and only after it arrives to shape things... and design only finishes its' work afterwards, with the impact of things with life, in their expected and unexpected mutations. Places are designed but they're never finished.

3. Battles, paradoxes, conflicts and dilemmas

The true grounds for Ethics are moral conflicts and not ethical rules.

Paradoxes can be creative in Urban Design:

- Accessibility and the possibilities of escape, of privacy, of isolation
- Identity and "porosity" (to influences) in a borderless world
- Free space and density at the same time and place
- Technology and inherited knowledge or experience
- Environmental perception and refusal - Nimbyism

It is said that more than 80% of urban value today is made of intangibles: How can we manage value creation with intangibles? In urban terms value contradictions are not typically "against" but often "with" one another and they have to be solved with a ++ result: Technology with environment; Equality with Responsibility; Compact with dispersed; Security with trust; More with less.

But design isn't magical creation. Some things disappear when other things appear. What are the professional battlefields (professional causes) of today?. Professions are compelled to act together for social recognition. Artists always did this at the same time they mingled with society. But self centred action, technicality self protection, disciplinary borders and fences have the opposed effect, of specializing and isolating professional cultures.

Design itself has been separated in to parts with opposed paradigmatic concepts: technical concept (necessity-production) and artistic concept (desire-representation). *"Technical paradigm of design corresponds to isolate the moment of production and to consider its' relation with necessity as direct and decisive; Artist paradigm, on its side often corresponds to isolate the moment of representation and to consider its relation with desire as independent from anything else."* Pedro Brandão – A cidade entre desenhos

The paradox lies in that the wholeness of Urban Design requires more and more thr cross fertilizing of separated parts of knowledge ...

Cities are communities with narratives about themselves, where citizens look for the representation of their own identity, as an emotional sense of togetherness. But solidarity ties are at stake when society becomes organized into spatial enclaves and specialized gated units, where service is just a mechanical functionality. Competitive new urban localities are overloaded with sensorial and informational output, inherent to the will of turning them into "spectacular" places of exceptionality. But the meaning of such spaces may be irrelevant in everyday life.

Urban Design mission depends on urban interaction between city players, a sense of time duration and opportunity, coherence between simultaneous scales intervention, users' citizenship participation and interdisciplinarity. Thus it requires its' holistics in an outwards centred sense of mission - we may call it altruism.

4. Urbanity as life and how big it gets

As opposed to the political mainstream preference for old city centres, new peripheral urban settlements are looked at as bad and unsustainable, not only due to lacking qualities of identity, density, centrality or mixed uses, but also due to devaluation of their success factors in qualities like easy access, low cost, close to nature or plenty of space. Although they house the great majority of city dwellers and urban economic activities they are almost invisible in our minds. We call them non-places.

80% of European people are urban living. 50 years ago the numbers were less than half of that. How could such a change have occurred, within the limits of the same urban space without expanding urban territories? UN Habitat II concluded that accelerating urbanization is an irreversible given fact.

Are we seeing the picture or just lying to ourselves?

At the same time that urban inhabitants are growing, other changes occur in urban life. The growing of economic wealth leads families to consume more dwelling space (50 m² per person instead of 20). We have an average of almost 2 houses instead of 1 house per family, while with universal car ownership the average travel from home to work and back covered per day grew from 8 km to more than 40 km.

New urbanity breeding, must be central and not peripheral in Urban Design thinking. What is a suburb but a process of change in the sense of peoples' belonging? Instead of the exorcised "non-place", is it the space of new "types" of place, with new and different meanings for "emptiness" and "fullness"?

Answers lead us to a different point of view from the conventional passwords cursing sprawl and calling for an impossible come-back to city centres that are being promoted by the political mainstream that denies attention to where people are. My different point of view is that of regarding city growing as the call for urbanity foundation. *"Urbanity is more than the city's shape... Its' integrating and democratic form cannot be kept by museumification; instead it has to do with shared spaces where the diverse and the specific have broader implications..."* (Daniel Innerarity "El Nuevo Espacio Publico")

Some of urbanity requirements of Public Space may be quite different in peripheral condition. As emptiness is abundant while in central city it is scarce, voids not only have to be infilled here, but to be seeded of centrality functions by urban facilities, mobility systems and at the same time by landscaping and artwork required for new and humanized meanings.

Central dots, mobility lines and occupational surfaces - these are the raw material for place making. Even if today's suburban public space seems pregnant of roundabouts, highways and shopping malls, public space is to be the flour from what bread is made. But it's a huge territory that puts us to test, for we still don't know how to do it.

5. Star system, and why nobody cares

Professional success paradigms – the "consecration" of stars, the mediatic heaven of image, the individual self expression and authorship – seem to be inline with a moral unconditional affirmation of the "self", in Urban Design.

From Khoolas to Ghery, from Hadid to Foster or Nouvel... their so-called "attraction" really attracts but a small niche of specialised public. Their "performance" is more at level with local politics representations of pride, and expensive posterity desires. They offer the symbolic status of announced future visions and get in turn their feed of media addiction. We can't say it is interesting or even differentiating by design: International star system's role is on the sphere of decoration and advertising.

Local politicians want their cities to comply with desires for last fashion symbols. In today economy it's the intensity of desire that determines the value of those products and symbols. So, star projects add a specific value to a site, but its exceptionality, its "special effects" generally has little value for public space purposes. Value may have its return out of space: it's externalised from the specific space where they perform to an ephemeral, symbolic and even virtual encounter: by offering its' unique value, the artist himself: signature, small speech, shaking hands, smile, media – it's showbiz.

Monopoly of value is assured by means of a closed consecration process: awards, publication, commissions, curators, museums... The final result of this stylish object cult is the freezing of creative design in urban culture – where the connections between things are more important than things themselves. The perverse effects of glamour culture and media originalities are contaminating new generations of young artists, architects and designers, in the search for an impossible sunshine seat.

History itself may testify there always has been the powerful's private artists' in charge of show-offs and fashion objects parades. But Urban Design is more than the collection of objects and its signatures be them buildings, urban furniture, works of art, fantasy gardens. Public space is required to assume security, social cohesion and civic values and it has to be evaluated about those requirements satisfaction.

Nobody points out the never evaluated true costs of exceptionality, critics don't criticize quick substitution of ephemeral fashion images, schooling and research actors don't scrutinize if these are really innovative designs... Nobody really cares any more for like in most advanced forms of sin, fault is barely noticed.

6. Themes, economic time, images and trading

Ethics and economics are considered in common sense as being contradictory. There's a frequent ethical negative judgement on construction activities - too quickly we devilish profitability, and disregard essential

economic sustainable conditions of urban activities. But activities in a given territory must be understood and managed as economical realities.

“Economy values are not of the same order as aesthetic, ethical or spiritual values. But it is above all in the economic sphere that the word value has taken on a precise meaning and it’s certainly in the economic and financial sphere that the process whereby value becomes something subjective and variable, rather than absolute and stable, began to emerge.” Jean-Joseph Goux – Towards frivolousness of values

In value creation, economic time factors are key factors: degradation is the normal outcome, be it from insufficient investment input, from non-productive value consuming, or from time bad management. On the other hand, to predict how space will change in the future, what activities it may engender, we have to design it as a socio-economic process.

We can find economic notions such as “good”, “investment”, “value” as relevant to Urban Design and surprisingly near to ethical discourses. So, we can better understand contemporary phenomena, such as urban specialization and competitiveness, space privatization and commoditization, aesthetization and thematization.

Cities competitiveness is insufficiently understood – on an urban world cities need design to compete at several levels of value, quality, progress and identity. A positive appreciation of urban past history, is motivating strong investments in city centres competitiveness. All “rehabilitation” resources are driven to the old city, to serve a few residents and a lot of leisure, culture, consumers and tourists, while suburban urbanity is under resourced for its’ huge size, social and environmental problems.

The reconstruction of old centres today means substitution of uses, gentrification and public financing of privilege.

Some ethical dilemmas and contradictions are hiding behind “consensual evidences” such as urban sustainability or compact city. As resources are not unlimited, we have choices to make: Can we assure a true recuperation of old city strength in its original meaning, function and vitality or is it artificially reducible to a thematic scenario? Which parts of the city are we choosing to upgrade and which partners to be privileged?

History, nature, time, culture, excitement and many other assets, are involved in “thematic” public space. The “thematic park” is an expression that translates today’s commoditization of space, as a commercial value, subject to rules of trade. Too often this means the elimination of cultural and local specificity, the loss of identity value. But Urban Design is not exempt from fault for it manages the main ingredients of thematic discourses: Image, impact and identity.

Cities’ economic sustainability depends on value producing as much as resource consuming. To understand it, urban life must be valued as experiences affecting people, as behaviours and relations.

7. Three moral sentences on “soft” ethics and the sense of “care”.

Green Urban Design. To assure ethical procedures regarding urban sustainable environment, is not just a trendy techno-burocratic goal, on how to install a balanced environment and its assessment systems.

Happily, Urban Design hasn’t a closed set of rules and standard solutions – it takes part of conflicts between forces, interests and actions. While recognizing the social actors that influence decision making and the several professional roles involved, we accept that social relations are the primary context of Urban Design environmental ethics - only people can decide the sort of environment people shall live in.

Cities’ everyday life. Cities are places where inefficiencies affect populations most severely, destroying its value return and causing dangerous social and environmental degradation. At the same time City is the place of change, concentrating human resources such as vision, information, knowledge and commitment, the main triggers for public policies.

The amelioration of everyday life is a “soft” ethical goal. Solutions for environmental and social problems don’t resume in escaping from vibrant city life to some alternative non-urban said-to-be ecological form of human settlement. There’s a sense of public virtue in the idea of human life supporting systems driven by urban community participation.

Spirit of Place. Many fields of knowledge and social activities are using this concept with some ambiguity: does every place have its spirit or is it something most places lack? Some myths coexist:

- They are holy manifestations inhabited by beings like gods;

- They are intense energy fields with a form of self consciousness;
- They are authentic, undesigned, spontaneous, and organic;
- They have a narrative of the archetypal past foundations;
- They have an essence of interiority, character, uniqueness, coherence...

Instead of denial (there's no such thing as "spirit of place") we could ask what in the ideas about this "spirit" may be useful, not just for some operational purpose (protection, prevent) but to better understand the complexity of placemaking.

8. Value and value theory

Intrinsic Values are attributes independent of circumstances. But Value is a conception that influences choices from means and ends: of good from bad, of a greater from a lesser good. In that sense goodness and badness are understood as graduations and Value becomes operational, contextual.

The value of a building or an urban space is related to an end – profitability, aesthetic attraction, design consistency. Value denoting involves meaning - the perception, the description and the acceptance of that end. Value theory (axiology) underlines values, value systems and value judgements considering the human needs they relate to:

- Technical needs – Reliability, Efficiency, Compatibility
- Social needs – Continuity, Contextuality, Liability
- Cultural needs – Evocativeness, Representation, Meaning

Within a value system, value judgements don't exist independently:

- Between groups: different actors (professionals, clients, users) may judge separate values in a similar way but differently in choosing priorities.
- Between different times: in different economical, social or cultural contexts the perception of a value and the value itself may be higher or lower.

Value theory may be useful in empirical place making studies, namely concerning value systems or group preferences. Valuation may vary from simple and intuitive procedures, to detailed professional studies, at different stages of design process:

- To predict (brief evaluation, performance standards, regulations)
- To select (as in an architectural competition jury)
- To assess (post facto occupation assessment)

9. A short story on representation and theoretical models' mistakes

Rem Koolhaas published in 1994 "Delirious New York – a Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan". Using a manifesto formula, a traditional form of mythical thought communication in design professions, the author makes an impressionist diagnosis of an urban situation (Manhattan), from which he elapses a messianic theoretical model.

Koolhaas model is "Manhattan project", as if the city design had been preceded by a city's idea: "urban congestion", a concept that he doesn't define, but that he qualifies as a value, driven by the permanent excess addition of new objects upon an all-receiving generic grid. Something seems missing in the image.

To illustrate his model's historical foundations he appeals to an allegory, based on a New York (New Amsterdam) false city map: In 1672, 50 years after the purchase of the island by the Dutch, a French engraver draws a map of New Amsterdam, that Koolhaas reproduces in his book interpreting it as an idealized representation of an archetypal European port city – with city walls, central facilities, a castle, a cathedral, warehouses in front of the so called North Sea.

Koolhaas recognizes it's a forgery. But moreover, he points out the foundation character of "Manhattan project", the map is said to contain: Outside the city walls, a huge population dwelled in blocks spreading on a regular planimetric grid (cut by a diagonal - future Broadway) but in an arbitrary altimetric configuration, growing indefinitely until occupying all of the territory.

It happens that Koolhaas does not recognize the true origin of the engraving – it's really a forgery engraving map of Lisbon. The grid is after all the Bairro Alto, the Broadway is the Calçada do Combro and the North Sea is the Tagus River.

Besides the anecdote (the theory star of postmodern urbanism doesn't acknowledge the history and the shape of one of European's colonial capitals), we can see in this "mistaken fact" another allegory: forgery of speech, in city's representations.

The representation of a city future shape designed as a Manifesto is based on a mythical thought, a fiction, a slogan, not realities of urban design concepts. The way for "Generic City" is image manipulation. The false map of Amsterdam-Lisbon, double allegory, fallacy, or reinvented image, allows us two ethical questions:

- How do we transform an image into an idea and an idea into a model?
- Is an image for the city future representation still missing, or is right it in front of us, in urban realities outside the city "walls"?

10. Extra time: Beliefs and good causes for Urban Design

Good causes about cities and Urban Design are to be found where people are: To create urbanity in new territories of the enlarged city and articulate them through metropolitan connection systems, to create a new scale of belonging, in the emerging and expanding urban life. It's a good cause for Urban Design.

Culture, tourism, sports and other leisure industries may be attractive, and profitable, but Urban Design shall not forever be driven by leisure. Urban true centrality depends on places with conditions for productive activities, security providing and inspiring morals to city life. It's a good cause for Urban Design.

Conflicts are in front of us everyday, in small and big decisions. Each one of them requires at least, a reflexive practice. They are all good causes for Urban Design.

Why do we belief in what we belief?

Urban Design calls us for ethical judgements in voicing our opinions in the public space, in the name of ideas and values, of interaction, and interdisciplinarity. *"A life of values today calls for no great resources, only reflection and silence (...) to the voice of truth, to the serenity deriving from righteous or heroic conduct, to the wonder attaching to beauty and to the transcendent allure of mystery"*. Victor Massuf - The soul of values