

*“ I mean, Disney makes places.*

**Professional boundary-making, (public) place-making and the  
envisioning power of Urban Design”**

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## Introduction

The changing state of urban planning, with significant differences both within and between Global North and Global South countries, from a previous plan-oriented approach to a project-based one has fostered place-making activities all across the world. The globalization of signature architecture, flagship projects and the making of a stardom system of Architects is both the signal and one of the most visible outcomes of such a transformation.

This was possible because of the scalar transformations of State power that reoriented the locus of political activism at the urban level, while undermining and underfinancing municipalities altogether, and because of the changing state of policy-making that followed. It is also the reflection of the contemporary transformations of both capitalism, with its essential turning towards the second circuit of capital and the *real estating* of the world, and of its geography, with the emergence of huge spots of investments in China, the Arabic peninsula and along the highest levels of urban hierarchies, namely throughout global cities.

Mobile urbanisms and fast policy regimes are increasingly on the making and different professionals work beyond the (urban) scenes. Beside the most obvious “place entrepreneurs” (developers, real estate agents, financial institutions, companies and public actors), there is a whole world of new expertise who deserve a closer scrutiny. This paper is aimed at providing a first description of the professional field inhabited by Urban Designers, one of the most relevant yet ambiguous group of professionals within the urban realm.

UD is a rapidly growing field especially in Western countries. It has a progressive, environmental, community-based and pro-public stance, which contributes in making urban designers trapped between their ethical commitments and the hard fact of building places thus contributing significantly to uneven development (as in the quote of the title, referring to a professional firmly denying any place making activity by his firm). It is a field with its own University programs, key-thinkers, and objects. It is a profession, with an unclear status, still longing to get its own legitimization within both urban élites and established disciplines (namely architecture, landscape architecture and urban planning).

In the following paragraphs we will show why UD is getting greater visibility among the urban professionals. We will argue that we are witnessing a growing interest for both the notion and the production of public space, which is largely addressed by urban designers as the key professionals for such a specific yet undefined territory. We will then briefly trace the historical making of UD as a discipline, in order to link its contemporary fortune with its own founding theorists and debates. This historical sketch will help in making sense of the specific common elements in contemporary

design, namely its architectural path-dependence and its self proclaimed progressive stance.

The core of the paper will then be devoted to the analysis of the field of Urban Design as it emerges by early data on the making of global élite of urban professionals. These data are drawn from an ongoing research on the global manufacturing of local atmospheres both in the US and in Europe, mainly qualitative interviews with professionals in both firms and academic settings. Interviews are carried in diverse cities and contexts such as New York, Chicago, San Francisco, London, Edinburgh, Newcastle, Berlin, Amsterdam, Delft, Haarlem, Rotterdam, Utrecht, Copenhagen and Stockholm.

We will then conclude this journey across urban design by arguing for a closer and more comprehensive examination of urban professionals, their role in shaping urban worlds being not simply cosmetic or providing smoke and mirrors for the hard side of development and redevelopment but rather having a foundational role in the framing of the contemporary urban landscape.

## **1. The growth of UD**

Short history of Urban Design and its most recent evolutions.

NOT READY

## **2. The conundrum of public space**

PARTIALLY READY

As we have seen, the development of urban design as a “way of thinking” [Marshall 2009, 55] between practice and theory, firms and academia, is related to the growth of both internal and external forces. Internally, the nexus between the architectural curriculum and the making of this field has given a specific historical imprint to urban design, eschewing other professional as well as academic traditions from contributing to its own development. Externally, urban design has profited from the changed landscape of space production. On the one hand, the rise of signature buildings, flagship projects and starchitecture has boosted the visibility and commitment of urban design as a support for built environment interventions. On the other hand, a specific and historical growing demand for place-making activities has coalesced around a typical urban setting: the public space.

Architects primacy in urban design and architectural fortune in the contemporary production of space are thus particularly evident in streets, squares, parks, waterfronts, as well as in masterplans, large-scale interventions and urban regeneration activities. We have chosen to focus on the

relationship between urban design and the production of contemporary public spaces for two essential reasons: their quintessential urban nature and their problematic and puzzling nature.

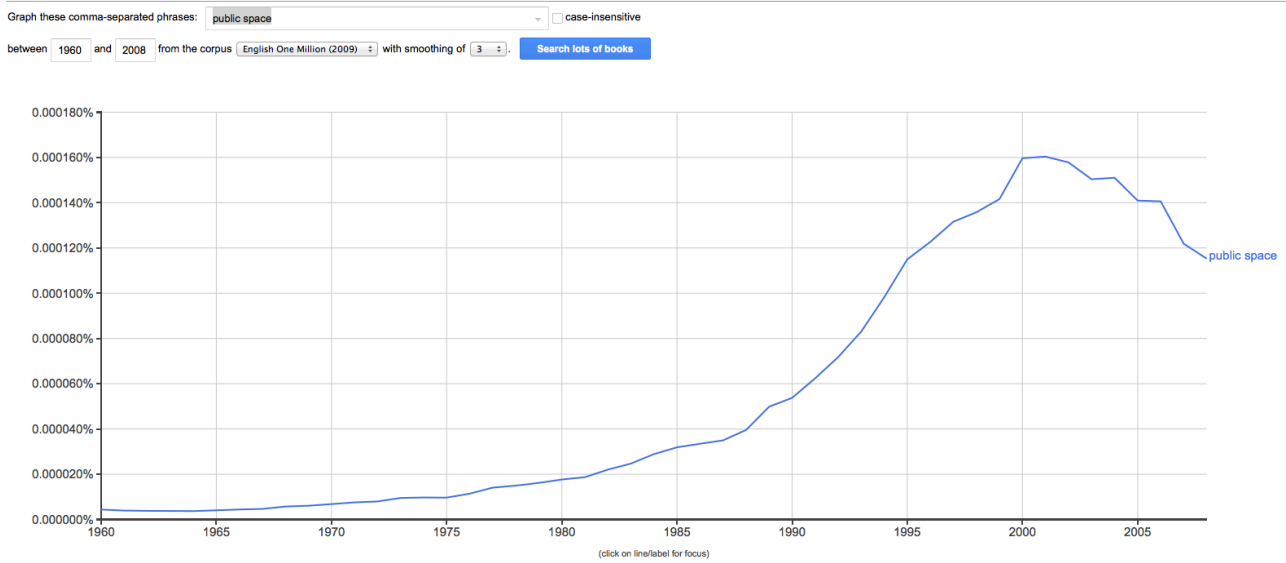
Public spaces are essentially urban. First of all because they recall the notion of the public sphere; the legacy of both Greek political philosophy, as witnessed by the notions of polis and agora (which are undoubtedly urban metaphors), and Ninetieth century bourgeois culture (with its institutions such as the café or the newspaper, again two prototypical urban spaces and media [Habermas, Park]) are firmly linked to the city [Benjamin, Habermas, Sennett, Mitchell]. Moreover, it is precisely the opposition between the urban and the rural realms that fostered spaces such as the public ones. Public places are born, grow and eventually die within cities, not in rural areas<sup>1</sup>.

Given their deep urban “nature”, public spaces remain nonetheless problematic and puzzling territories. Trapped within the dichotomy against private spaces, which are regulated by public laws defining private ownership rights, public spaces are also highly regulated, precisely because of their challenging non-private essence. Rights of entry, entitlements, rules of proper behavior and the constant definition of order are at the basis of such spaces. Regulations are the rule, not the exception, and it follows that politics and conflicts are ontologically part of the deal, they frame the artificiality of the public space. These are therefore historical and contingent creations, bearers of divergent and often opposing visions.

The chaos and complexity of the theory of public spaces, to quote a famous Beaugregard’s statement on gentrification [1984], must be distinguished from their contemporary fortune. As witnessed by the next graph, even though the Western world has a millennial experience and knowledge of them, public spaces are very recent urban objects of desire and inquiry.

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<sup>1</sup> There is an evident ambiguity in such a statement, one that follows the well-known difficulty in demarcating the city



The growth in Anglo-American books on such spaces is telling. The golden-age of public spaces is thus very recent, starting mostly in the Eighties, when neoliberal policies were rapidly substituting postwar social contracts with the dismantling of the Keynesian welfare system [Jessop]. Moreover, the fact that this rise of consideration has accompanied the growing of place-making interventions is not in contradiction with several criticisms, that in the same period, were eulogizing the end of the public space [Sennett; Sorkin 1992]: the latter were simply acknowledging the death of the romantic vision of urban life, the one that fostered the visions of authors like Jacobs or Lefebvre and their longing for authentic encounters in the urban realm. We may call such places, *oppositional public places*. In contrast to them, from the Eighties onwards, a new public place emerged, a *festive* one as correctly stated by Don Mitchell [2003, 138]. The festive substituted the oppositional, being highly promoted by neoliberal policies during third and fourth waves of gentrification [Hackworth and Smith; Lees, Slater and Wyly 2008] and, in general, through most regeneration interventions throughout the deindustrialized urban landscape of the Western world [Harvey; Moulaert]. The elements of such new spaces are well-known: “Corporate and state planners have created environments that are based on a desire for security more than interaction, for entertainment more than (perhaps divisive) politics” [Mitchell 2003, 138; Hannigan, Zukin]. Beside the securitarian aspect, in which the technologies of CCTV’s and GPS have also contributed to reshape the physical and spatial experience of gatherings [Graham and Marvin; Lyons; Garland], the most evident elements of the festive public places are in the transformed façade of the visible urban landscape: lighting, sidewalks, shop windows as well as the built environment as such have been refurbished to communicate the easygoing essence of urban experience, signaling above all that the “back to the city movement by capitals” [Smith 1996].

The festive city, with its transformed rhythms, is a matter of capitals and political choices and urban design may be considered one of the multiple sites through which we may observe its making. It is a city strategically planned in favor of the contemporary middle classes that emerged from tertiary economy, more educated, post-ideological with regards to political and religious values, with precarious and ill-paid jobs but having two major resources to foster its new consumption patterns: cultural capital and time. The public space thus becomes the friendly milieu reassuring these generations of young and educated urban middle classes on their locational choices. The contemporary public space is a playground for the middle classes, a context where socially acceptable and legitimate urban virtues are practiced. It is built on a striking paradox: it is designed and manufactured by sanitizing any kind of conflict in order to generate a disciplined sociability, apolitical and friendly, secured and vibrant. Architecture, landscape architecture and urban design play a pivotal role here: they transform such political projects into urbanism.

In the next section we will show the chaos and complexity of urban design by defining its field and clarifying the research design.

### **3. Mapping the field**

#### **PARTIALLY READY**

As we have seen, in the last few decades public space has been gaining increasing relevance, and so have done those who produce it. Who are those involved in producing public space, and, more specifically, in producing the urban built environment that is “between the buildings”? We may include within this set a large number of actors: architects, urban designers, planners, academics, local authorities and, of course, residents and city-users. Within them we aimed at investigating the field of urban design as it is performed, framed and intended by urban designers (here conceived as professionals producing urban design projects) and academics. To say it differently, we focussed on the professional and academic field of urban design.

The issues we aimed to address can be summarized in the following questions: who are the relevant social actors within the field of urban design? How do they frame and interpret the field of urban design? What is the geography of such field, where are the centres and the peripheries?

To investigate these issues we have chosen a mainly qualitative approach, conducting a number of semi-structured interviews with two different actors: 1) people working in firms that produce projects/visions of urban design, for public and/or private clients, and 2) people involved in University programs that teach and/or carry research within urban design, and therefore produce knowledge and reflexion over the field and breed the next generation of urban designers.

For each of these two fields we have followed a different sample strategy, with a common goal: 1) exploring the hubs where urban design has been traditionally or increasingly theorized and developed and 2) including different traditions of urban design. For these reasons we have built the sample on an international basis, including cases from Europe and the USA so far<sup>2</sup>.

To build the sample of the University programs, we started from the work by Palazzo on the pedagogical traditions of urban design [2011], which we updated through a web inquiry and an experts inquiry carried out by the jiscmail devoted to urban design<sup>3</sup>. We specifically focused on University programs on urban design. To built the sample of firms we started by analysing the winners of the American Institute of Architects (AIA) awards<sup>4</sup>, section of urban design, of the last 5 years and few directories partly or entirely devoted to urban design, such as archdaily, laud8, urban design group, dexigner. We also adopted a snowball sample strategy, asking to all the firms and academics contacted to signal up to 5 firms that have been carrying out interesting and/or influential works in the last couple of years. On this basis we contacted more than 29 academics and 62 firms. The result of this first stage of research is a body of 39 recorded interviews carried out in May 2014 and between April and May 2015<sup>5</sup>.

	USA	UK	Denmark	Sweden	Netherlands	Germany	
<b>Academics</b>	3	5	1	1	3	1	<b>14</b>
<b>Professionals</b>	7	7	4	4	3		<b>25</b>
	<b>10</b>	<b>12</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>5</b>	<b>6</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>39</b>

An early analysis of the interviews provides the following elements:

1 – Accordingly with the historical making of the field of urban design, the geography as well as the approaches that we are inventorying are significantly dependent on both national and local contexts. To summarize, not only there are still an American, a British and a Northern European traditions within urban design, but cities play a pivotal role both in attracting student and scholars and in developing firms and approaches. Schools do reproduce themselves and programs that developed early, such as GSD at Harvard or the equivalent at the Bartlett-UCL, have provided cohorts of skilled professionals that had a serious impact on both public and private sector. Not only there

<sup>2</sup> The research is still in progress: we consider what we have already accomplished a first, explorative stage of a larger research project that has to be further developed

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<sup>4</sup> <http://www.aia.org/practicing/awards/history/index.htm>

<sup>5</sup> The current state of the research may be also be seen here: <https://searchingforurbandedesign.wordpress.com>

appears to be a scholarly path-dependence with a somehow clear geography, but also an urban path-dependence. Beside the few, gigantic global firms such as SOM, ARUP or HOK (some of which we also interviewed) that run offices worldwide and hire thousands of skilled architects and urban designers, most of the other firms are middle to low size and locally embedded in the city they are based in to get commissions and foster their social capital throughout meetings, conferences and events. In a similar way to what was shown by Fainstein on local developers, urban design firms, even when they “go global” they have to keep their local roots [2000].

2 – As mentioned, firms differ significantly in terms of their perspectives on the field. Rival approaches flourish and it is therefore an interesting challenge to provide an inventory of internal field differentiation. For instance, as a senior associate in a global-size firm declared:

“you know we’re building new cities, so urban design *is* the city, outside of what the specific architecture is; other than opportunities like that, it is still kind of hard to define what it is when you engage in a city that is already built or is a little bit of improvement here and there and is not a tabula rasa like starting from scratch greenfield city-building exercise” (Firm with 24 offices worldwide and 1900 employees, US and Global)

Firms who mainly aspire to work on “a city that it already built”, provide rather opposite perspectives:

“Most of the projects that we do, relate to that idea of public space, I would say that the way we frame most of the project is a way that we look at the under realized aspects of the city, and how those can become part of the city again. Some of them are just either completely vacant, obsolete, they are removed or some are existing but they maybe don’t operate the same way they are intended, or are fragmented, so there is an opportunity to improve them” (individual firm, US)

While these two firms are at the opposite side of the professional field, insofar the former produces cities “from scratch” in China while the latter aims at improving “under-realized aspects of the city” in Midwestern cities, they nonetheless float in the same professional world, defined by specific awards, rankings, procedures, rules and a shared understanding of the historical necessity for “better design”.

3 – Moral boundary-making in professional work is an essential part of the deal and a well-recognized feature in professional cultures [Abbott; Lamont and Molnar]. There are different directions of boundary-making: an external as well as an internal one. The external is devoted in setting the differences between urban design and other fields and professions, namely architecture,



landscape architecture and planning. It is a fundamental strategy in order to gain respectability and autonomy towards commissioners and the public, but a very slippery one given the uncertain status of this discipline and the heavy dependence on the architectural curriculum. Many respondents were, for instance, defining themselves as “architects” during presentations. The second direction of boundary-making is an internal one: given the close relationship between urban design and the public space, setting the moral stage for further interventions is a crucial step. While in the academic literature on urban design there is a general confusion with regards to place-making (viewed as essential as well as critical), when we interrogated scholars, we gathered mixed reactions, and some of them were harsh:

“I really don’t use the word place-making, I think it’s retrograde, conservative, nationalist. ... I think place-making is too easy....it’s trivial and suspect...I mean Disney makes places. [...] urban design is the means in which social and cultural transformations are made physically making manifest in public space..[...] I think the success of the High-Line it’s not its spectacular catwalk showpiece, you know kind of facebook tourism culture, but that there’s really a part of the industrial city that has become a lush environment, that was what captivated the people” (Dean, US)

Contradictions between the “trivial” aspect of working in the production of serial projects (“Disney makes places”) and the craftsman-like or quasi demiurgical role advocated by the aristocracy of urban designers, is a common element in our interviews. Other levels of mismatch between the professional progressive ethos and the mundane working arrangements may be found in the attitude towards communities and community-led design (or participatory-led design) and in the adoption of catchy adjectives such as “resilient” or “smart”, whom many respondents felt were mostly fashionable buzzwords and nonetheless used during the interview as well as in their daily practice.

EXPAND

## **Conclusions**

## **References**