

# Front porch or courtyard: some reflections on the practice of urban design

Brussels: 1930  
Participants at the  
third congress of the  
International Congress  
of Modern Architecture  
(CIAM) prepare design  
studies of housing  
alternatives and  
initiate the “towers-  
in-the-park” pattern  
of public housing,  
a pattern to be  
perpetuated in housing  
throughout the world  
post World War Two.



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*In a symbolic expression of who he was and where he came from, Libyan leader, Colonel Muammar al-Qaddafi, attending a meeting of the European Commission, refuses the customary invitation to stay at the elegant Val Duchesse Palace, choosing instead to pitch his black desert tent on the palace's manicured lawn.*

Each of these two episodes, the latter metaphorical, the former more prosaic, united by location in Europe's political capital, was the bell-wether for a flock of significant urban design initiatives. At its core, pleads Douglas Farr (*'Sustainable Urbanism'*, 2008), the CIAM movement was a humane and essential attempt to improve human health and sanitation, embodying modernist architectural styles and rational ("one size fits all") solutions.

Three score-and-ten years later, urban design discarded the towers and slabs, in favour of houses and apartment buildings. As Nan Ellin, (*'Postmodern Urbanism'*, 1996) concurs, these changes have been roundly applauded for providing a more human scale, offering more personalised and personalisable living spaces and adding visual interest to the landscape.

Curiously, for all its mobility, the Bedouin's tent, according to the *'Encyclopedia of Vernacular Architecture of the World'* (Paul Oliver, 1997), fits the new model: it is a suitably complex, segmented residence, (divided as it is into gender and status-segregated activity areas), personalisable and human scaled, which just happens to be portable. (01)

## Community as commodity

Shelter is a necessary precondition of life and social relations. In early times, the purely sheltering house belonged first to the public domain in a communal society, then to the private domain in a familial society. A common

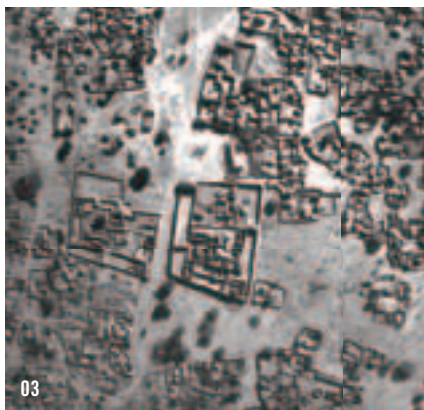
feature of both cases was the absence of conflict between public and private.

The introduction and emergence of private ownership leading to private property gradually shifted the concept of 'shelter' to 'property'. This transition takes place when the shelter is no longer in the private or public domain, but is absorbed by the political domain. As the property function began to supersede the shelter function, dwelling as property "inevitably becomes a tool for exploitation", David Shea and Mete Turan contend in *'Vernacular Architecture'* (1990).

When home and environment acquire exchange value, they do become a commodity. A sense of community, along with a sense of place, is something carefully cultivated by developers through the theming and branding of their developments, the names that they give them and the advertising copy they deploy. Paul Knox, in his book *'Metroburbia, USA'* (2008) points to the commodification of community as now the central tenet of residential development. In America at least, developers' most effective rhetorical device in packaging community and sense of place, though, Knox asserts, derives from the use of neo-traditional design and the exploitation of the brand recognition of new urbanism.

## Antecedents of contemporary urban design

Design ideas have to come from somewhere, and sooner or later in urban design, historical precedents for design approaches will come into play. Precedents give us a range of possibilities to emulate or avoid; they can inspire or they can mislead. Ideas about good urban form do not follow a singular, steady path. New ideas – curvilinear residential streets, traffic-protected neighbourhood enclaves, high-rise towers – have their impacts, then often retreat or move in another direction, perhaps to be reborn later.



While the immediate antecedents of new urbanism are traditional neighbourhood development together with a set of community design and development principles, it is substantively a derivative hybrid of ideas that go back to the City Beautiful Movement, Clarence Perry's neighbourhood unit idea, the British Townscape Movement and so on.

It is tempting to consider the design of a residential layout simply as a technical exercise, a successful collage of amenity and design standards. Urban design is, however, about the creation of places within an urban form. Jane Jacob's admonition that "*a city cannot be a work of art*," encapsulates the fundamental component of any real urbanism: close-grained diversity and unexpected encounters – both visual and social.

#### Template urbanism or urban design de novo

Faced with designing a residential development, a common first response is to structure a pattern of roads, footpaths and sections. The investiture of the housing comes later, laid out as best it can, to conform to the precise dimensions of the lots. This frequently produces a character dominated by the roading and a housing environment standardised and placeless: identikit housing strung along identikit roads.

Geographer Edward Relph was an early whistle blower on the consuming anonymity, multiplicity of exchangeable environments and growing sense of placelessness in design of the latter half of the twentieth century. In his classic work, *'Place and Placelessness'* (1976), Relph lists a sense of belonging, human scale, a fit with local physical and cultural contexts and local significance among the important qualities of place.

What is needed, Relph concluded, was an approach to the design of the lived-in world that is self-conscious, responsive to local situations and experience and to the variety of levels of meaning of place, an approach that takes its inspiration from the need that many people have for a profound attachment to place.

So an alternative approach might be to anticipate the architecture: how will people use the site, the act of sheltering. Rather than separating design considerations from human behaviour, we can approach the designed physical environment first and foremost as a setting for human behaviour. We can consider

the design of housing (in its collective sense) as the design of a place for eating, sleeping, loving, playing, socialising and raising children.

#### Enfronting or surrounding: front porch or courtyard

In Latin countries (and North Africa) tradition has suggested a way of fitting a house to the land quite different from our own Western, suburban model. An enormous advantage is the ease with which the house can fit directly onto a street and tight up against other houses, so that all the open land on a small lot is where it counts, can be seen from the house and used by the occupants. It eliminates the token front and side yard syndrome, which more often than not serves only to give the owner exercise with a lawn mower.

With its rooms wrapped around an open core, this form of dwelling provided ultimate privacy against the outside world. (02)

People who are allergic to privacy often look upon garden walls, hedges and fences with suspicion. Still screens of every conceivable sort have always been indispensable requisites of civilised architecture. (03)

In direct contrast, in many Western countries our tradition has required houses on small plots of land to enfront the street. As Charles Moore et al have observed (*'The Place of Houses'*, 1974) "the unsullied residential areas which remain here and there from the early part of this century are splendid, sociable manifestations of the tradition." Often these houses had front porches from which the inhabitants could survey the passing scene. (04)

This relationship of house to street is often confused; either the house opens entirely to the street and there is no privacy, or the house turns its back on the street and communion with street life is compromised. Successful transition space solutions are, nevertheless, possible. (05)

#### People, architecture and place

I take the perhaps heretical view that urban design is a subset of architecture and not vice versa. The Oxford Dictionary's spare definition of architecture is "the science of building".

But I feel more comfortable with architect and anthropologist, Paul Memmott's, intensely scholarly, but more inclusive approach that:

"Architecture is a selected, arranged and constructed configuration of environmental properties..." (*'Gunyah, Goondie and Wurley: The Aboriginal Architecture of Australia'*, 2007).

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To seem inhabited, a place must show evidence that there are, in fact, people about. There are a number of well-trying and traditional ways to people space. The common space in a housing group can bring attention to the people who are using it and set the stage for mutual endeavour. There can also be, in any common environment, contentious space that may be temporarily claimed by passers-by as a place to pause, and talk, or seized as their turf by the assembled children of the neighbourhood. The traditional front yard usually is contestable in this way, but characteristically is too empty to provide much incentive for inhabitation.

#### **A process of unlearning**

The more housing I see, the more convinced I become that the design of residential areas offers more potential than any other aspect of urban design. Why this potential is so rarely reflected in practice is a question that continually challenges my thinking.

Perhaps author Alain de Botton has an answer when he says, "It is easy to recognise when a room is properly lit and a staircase easy to navigate, but so much harder to convert this intuitive sense of well-being into a logical understanding of the reasons for it. To design means forcing ourselves to

unlearn what we believe we already know (and) patiently to take apart the mechanisms behind our reflexes..." (*The Architecture of Happiness*, 2007). **U**

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