Seven Fallacies in Urban Design

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Introduction

Ever since urban design was recognized as a discipline, a large number of projects with the tag 'urban design' has come to be known, a voluminous body of literature has got published, and various academic institutions around the world have been offering urban design courses. Yet, the comprehension and the practice of urban design are not free from ambiguities even after several decades from its inaugurating Harvard conference in 1950s. Surging from these ambiguities are the debates on the possession, processes and prerogatives of urban design. Some argue that by virtue of the skills acquired in designing space, architects have a better command in the subject than anyone else. There are others who argue that regulating land uses, building heights, organizing vehicular and pedestrian movements and maintaining spatial characteristics, which are the means by which the urban design objectives are realized, have conventionally been the tasks of urban planning. Apart from these, there is an emphasis of a need for a new profession, which perhaps is located between architecture and planning, carving out from both of these disciplines. Texts on urban design, often do not take a clear position as to where it belong or who should take lead for it to succeed. In order to contribute towards a long standing discourse within these uncertainties, this article presents a few notions that have been dominating the practice and the education of urban design in Sri Lanka. Each of these notions is not necessarily exclusive, but connected with the others at some level. At the same time, they are not always explicit, but implied by many project reports, discussions in public forums and academic programmes in urban design. They have also been gathered out of what was expressed by the few selected professionals in the practice of urban design, in the interviews carried out by the author. This article argues that these notions are either built upon faulty premises of understanding or derived out of weak argumentation, and therefore, 'fallacies'.

1. Urban Design is: Architecture in a bigger scale

The authors of the “urban design” projects, examined for this article, seem to have had deliberations to reorganize all spaces located within the identified boundaries of their projects into specific themes and to suit specific sets of users. Therefore, the spatial units in each of these projects were mostly designed to finer details envisioning a particular way
of use. To that extent, the approach in these projects was quite similar to that of a building design project, except for their scale, and spaces within urban areas were handled more like parts of buildings. In some cases, the schemes consisted of nothing but a few building complexes. In other words, in terms of presented contents, these urban designs are more like over sized or overly expanded works of architecture.

An architect usually intends to orchestrate all spatial units into a predetermined theme transforming an existing spatial order of a physical setting. He is responsible for a single or a corporate client for organizing the whole as well as every little detail in the product he delivers. Since a complete product is envisaged at the end the architect is not supposed to leave anything for users to think about. This notion of responsibility seems to have extended to urban space as well, perhaps, due to the fact that a majority of urban design specialists involved in designing urban development projects over last four decades were architects.

Two false assumptions are clear behind this notion. The first is that, as many text books often state, urban design is a function of architecture (Hedman & Jaszenski, 1984). To that extent, spaces outside the buildings are as amenable to the control of the architect as the buildings themselves. Space, thus, is taken as a prototypic at all scales and the processes involved in designing of them as typical at all levels. The second is that, similar to architecture products, urban projects too have a dominant set of clients. With no doubt, space, either disclosed by or centering the private domains of buildings and other structures in urban areas, frequently claimed as the ‘public realm’, is the main substance handled in urban design. This view is formalized by many texts that are widely used in the field (eg: Cullen, Hedman & Jaszenski, 1984) and also by the proceedings of the inaugural urban design conference in Harvard University in 1956. But on the other hand, it is clear that the urban spaces are relatively more complex than the spaces of a building or a building complex, and cannot be authored by a single person in one brush stroke. At the same time, urban spaces unlikely to serve a few dominant users. Rather urban spaces are jointly produced and reproduced by many of its stake holders, built over extensive spans of time than within specific project periods, incremental than single stroke, accumulated composition over time than a product presented overnight (Lynch, 1974). The forms and shapes of all good and bad urban spaces are collective dispositions of administrators, designers, owners, lease holders, marketers, visitors, and many others over time. Hence, designing them demands not only the approaches different to those of architecture, but also an involvement of multiple stake holders.

2. Urban Design handles urban space by smaller blocks

The question as to ‘what level in space’ that urban design can and should intervene has been discussed at length (eg: Madanipour,1996; Frey,1999; Moor and Rowland,2006). Jon Lang’s (2005) work presented urban design case studies ranging from smaller site planning exercises to large scale metro region development projects. However, a great majority of projects and academic studio work with the title ‘urban design’ confined either to delineated urban districts or to even smaller scale project sites, reflecting a notion that urban design shall deal with delineated small scale urban spaces. In fact this notion has been there throughout, as advocacies to focus upon the physical forms and the structures of half a mile by half a mile
urban blocks was apparent even in early texts of urban design (eg: Banham, 1976). This practice can still be seen in many urban design academic projects, where the students are guided to study and find problematic of an area, bound by specific spatial elements such as canals, highways, streets, etc.

It is agreed that any urban study first needs to define its means and bounds because of the fact that urban areas are rather complex and therefore, likely to be protracted unless the boundaries are clearly defined at the beginning. Hence, the notion is built upon the premise that urban areas and their design problems are conveniently dealt with when taken in isolated blocks. Yet, the false thinking behind this premise is that problems that need to be solved through urban design are confined to particular locations, and do not extend beyond known physical boundaries. For example, in an urban environment a concentration of certain type of activities into some urban blocks is seen more as a result confined to the attractions in those block, rather than as a result of unequal configuration of attractions among different blocks (Hillier, 1996). At the same time, a change in the setting of one block is seen as having impacts limited to that block, but not on many of its surrounding ones. On the other hand this notion is detrimental to the fundamental unit of urban design: the spaces disclosed by buildings. What come within the focus when a block is defined in the said manner are the buildings and private domains, instead of streets and other public spaces. They get dissected into pieces without being conceptualized as spaces by themselves. Therefore, urban designer may need a better way of defining the area for work at an appropriate scale that enables holistic understanding even though specific actions can be confined only to some selected locations.

3. Urban Design is a last step in a sequential process

Another notion that has been there until recent times with the public sector planning agencies and other development organizations and still there with some professionals is that the need of urban design arises at the subsequent stages of a planning and development projects because it contributes to the visual aspects of the environment and the aesthetics of urban areas. This is quite evident with the “urban design guide lines” indicated in urban development plans and “special urban design project” proposals prepared for many urban areas. The said guide lines intend to maintain building heights, façade characteristics, setback locations, street widths, etc, and the special projects are introduced for purposes such as revitalization, conservation, reuse, etc of locations identified by the plan. Thus, they imply that urban design is a dressing up or a cosmetic application over a planned and developed environment, in which aesthetics and visual aspects can be thought after the economy, infrastructure, society and other hardware set in place.

The false thinking integrated with this notion identifies visual characteristics and aesthetics more as impositions, rather than outcomes of effective configurations. Accordingly, they can be infused into urban environments as isolated applications at a particular point in the process. However, the problems arise when these impositions become incompatible with the ground realities that get temporarily hidden behind them. Commonly found examples include the regulation of building heights, floor area limits and use restrictions imposed in some areas for urban design reasons, which later happened to be relaxed due to the pressure for development. Relaxed regulations dilute the outlooks and the
qualities envisaged by the urban design projects, but the thinking of the designers in these cases was mostly confined only to vistas, skylines, visual qualities, etc of smaller quarters of larger urban areas. In an alternative scenario the urban area could be ‘designed’ to direct the pressure for new spaces and developments into an alternative location, in a more holistic approach, integrated with the planning process. Hence, shaping and designing should not be an afterthought as Tibbalds (1992, cited in Frey, 1999, p16) shows, because design that is applied to a pre-existing and pre-developed plan is a ‘kind of magic dust sprinkled on at the end’, which hardly can contribute to the shaping of the urban area at that stage.

4. Urban design aims at a physical product

Most of the urban design projects what we see today seem to have aimed at specific end states of urban areas, commonly consisted of tree planted shaded streets, well maintained building facades, attractively arranged public spaces, etc. There is no doubt that these presentations are highly fascinating, but they largely distract our attention from the processes likely to take place within them. However, this reflects another notion that urban design should be able to provide the ultimate physical conditions to solve problems prevalent in urban areas. The designs therefore, show us some frozen conditions from the time ‘x’ onwards. Even though long term changes are not accounted for any valid reason, some situational changes such as rainy weather conditions, deserted holidays, etc, do not seem to have bothered the designers. The most common result of this situation observed in the cases examined for this report is the use of urban spaces for activities, which were totally unexpected at the stages of their designs. While some of these unexpected activities complemented the urban areas, a great majority of them worked the other way. There are spaces that enabled anti-social activities and became eye soars to whole of their environments. The qualities of the spaces presented in the pictures are mostly not there in physically realized projects.

This notion of designing urban areas as products has direct associations with decades old false thinking, known as environmental determinism. According to this thinking, physical environments work like stage sets in which inhabitants act. Stage sets enable the whole drama to go smoothly in line with the order of a script and the drama can be seen from an audience. But, the urban environments hardly work in that manner. They do not follow a script and not experienced from an audience. The main criticism against environment determinism was that it could not comprehend the subtle relationship between the environment and the inhabitants that lead both parties into a continuous evolution (Werner & Altman, 2000). In that sense neither the urban areas, nor their inhabitants come into static end states, and therefore, shall not be designed to be so. Urban design shall then be a task of orchestrating people and spaces for a long term spatial process rather than an exercise of regimenting physical elements in space for lasting end products.

5. Urban Design accomplishes universal attributes

Yet another notion that loomed over many projects, studies and practices is that urban design accomplishes urban areas with some universally acclaimed attributes, based on which urban design projects could be evaluated. For example, planting shade providing trees along urban streets is regarded as a universally accepted strategy not only to overcome sun and heat, but also to make
places attractive. At the same time, eating out in the restaurant spaces extended to streets, similar to what is experienced in many European cities, is a common sight in many recent urban design proposals. These imply that there are universal attributes that can be generalized and applicable to all urban areas in any part of the world. This notion is a direct result of the urban design education, which has not deviated much from its original structure. Although much advancement can be noted, urban design is still taught mostly as it was first taught in the institutions that pioneered to introduce its present form of practice. Most of the widely used and recommended urban design texts are authored by the persons who got their training either in USA or Europe. In other words, the knowledge base we have on urban design is largely organized in the West. The idea that ‘cities in some countries (especially in the west) are superior in urban design’ is mostly a result of this situation.

The false understanding behind this notion is that all urban areas, irrespective of where they are and what social, economic and climatic conditions available in them, are similar in terms of substances and composition dynamics. Turning back to the example stated above, while there is nothing wrong with trees and eating out in the street, practicalities available in some parts of the world prevent such practices over and above the designer’s imagination. One such practicality in tropical environments such as in Sri Lanka is the crow population that inhabits in large tree canopies as integrated part of the urban areas. Unless some uneasy regulatory measures are adopted to control crows, such as the ones adopted in Singapore, those attractive attributes in European urban areas are not easily achieved in tropical settings. Therefore, the good and bad urban qualities are highly contextual and general attributes for an evaluation are not easily derived. Any urban design exercise must first needs to understand the contextual realities and then think of the most appropriate qualities that can be attributed to an urban area, instead of replicating ideas borrowed from elsewhere.

6. Urban Design is a task of dominant professionals

Even though community participation has been rhetoric for many decades, not many urban design projects provided space for an active involvement of the communities of respective urban areas. At instances, where participation occurs, they are limited only to some powerful stakeholder groups, invited to participate in an already set process led by a few designated professionals. The lead role played by professionals in the urban design process is not a question, but the notion is that urban areas get ‘appropriate’ shapes only with professionals’ intervention and therefore, the professionals have an uncontested role. This is reflected in the way that urban areas are frequently described as ‘ad-hoc’, ‘disorderly’, etc, before design interventions, despite the fact that some interventions worsened the situations.

The false understanding behind this notion too has some associations with the environment determinism discussed above. As argued elsewhere in this article, urban areas and their spaces are in never ending processes of evolution, and not passing specific end states. They are subject to change in every moment in a manner that cannot be seized permanently at a given state. It was also argued that they evolve as a result of the continuous transactions between the inhabitants and the environment. In that context, although not eminent in formal design processes, inhabitants are active
participants in urban process and not mere recipients of what is offered to them by the environment or the professionals intervened. They partly decide what they can afford to have and how they would be accommodated in the resulting environment. Hence, urban areas need to be understood as collective statements and contested decisions of multiple groups. Among all participants inhabitants are the prime decision makers. What is introduced by a professional becomes viable in the long run, only if the inhabitants endorse it. If not they will transform it in the way they want to have it. In that sense, whether the professionals have an overwhelming role in the practice is a question that may never arise in the cases of architecture, engineering and the allied disciplines, but in urban design.

7. **Urban Design is a profession**

Partly surging from the previous notion, is another notion that urban design itself is a profession. Professions of planning and architecture are frequently shown as not having capacities to cater to urban design needs and therefore, a gap for another profession to involve in the making of urban areas is discussed nowadays. It is also said that this vacuum was created by the planners who had neglected the designing of physical environment in early sixties in order to adopt more scientific approaches and address sociological concerns (Rydlyn, 1993). In some countries organized professional institutes as well as chapters within main planning and architecture institutes have already been established in recent times. Hence, the trend seems to be towards the recognition of a separate profession, which will specialize in a specific domain of knowledge, a body of people trained in distinguishable vocational skills, clearly defined scope of work and fairly established set of responsibilities by the society. If questions arise as to what knowledge, what specific skill, what kind of work and responsibilities, then the answers would be wrapping around ‘design’ of urban spaces at the centre.

The false premise here is that, once appointed in a project an urban designer, he will be able to infuse the units of ‘design’ into the project process. According to many definitions given to design, it is a mental act of conjecture that sets into motion a process towards a known direction. Design, thus is rather a skill that should be there in everyone that partakes in the process, and that should be conceived in a parallel processes than in one professionals work. Hence, designing the city should not be left to a 'specialist', the 'urban designer'. As Frey (1999) shows separated disciplinary responsibilities such as planning activities, land-use pattern, designing appropriate urban forms and structure should not be there but an interactive process of developing should be the responsibility of, and should be carried out by all who involved in the generation of plans for urban development.

This suggest that urban design, if need to be understood within a specific domain of consideration, is not a profession by itself, but a discipline that cuts across all professional involvements in the shaping of urban areas. The requirement therefore, is to furnish all professionals involved in urban areas with relevant knowledge and necessary skills in urban design.

However, these are only the dominant fallacies associated with urban design and its time all interest groups get together and look for better use of the knowledge evolved in urban design for better results in our urban areas.
References:


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