Designing Urban Transformation

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Designing Urban Transformation

While designers possess the creative capabilities of shaping cities, their often-singular obsession with form and aesthetics actually reduces their effectiveness since they are at the mercy of more powerful generators of urban form. In response to this paradox, *Designing Urban Transformation* addresses the incredible potential of urban practice to radically change cities for the better. The book focuses on a powerful question, "What can urbanism be?" by arguing that the most significant transformations occur by fundamentally rethinking concepts, practices, and outcomes. Drawing inspiration from the philosophical movement known as Pragmatism, the book proposes three conceptual shifts for transformative urban practice: beyond material objects: city as flux; beyond intentions: consequences of design; and beyond practice: urbanism as creative political act. Pragmatism encourages us to consider how we can make deeper and more systemic changes and how urbanism itself can be a design strategy for such transformations. Analyses of transformative urban initiatives and projects in Barcelona, Belo Horizonte, Boston, Cairo, Karachi, Los Angeles, New Delhi, and Paris illuminate how these conceptual shifts operate in vastly different contexts. The book is a rare integration of theory and practice that proposes essential ways of rethinking city-design-and-building processes, while drawing critical lessons from actual examples of such processes.

Aseem Inam is Director of the Graduate Program in Urban Practice and Associate Professor of Urbanism at Parsons The New School for Design in New York City, and Fellow at the Center for Ethics and Transformative Values at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He has practiced as an architect, urban designer, and city planner in Canada, France, Greece, Haiti, India, Morocco, and the United States.

"In this thoughtful, hopeful and truly illuminating book, Aseem Inam combines a profound critique of urban design theory with a thorough examination of an impressively global range of projects from Barcelona's Olympic Village to Al-Azhar Park in Cairo, from the favelas of Brazil to the villages of India, from the Pompidou Center to Boston's Big Dig. Inam draws on his own extensive design experience and an original reading of Pragmatic philosophy to re-orient urban design toward social and economic empowerment. Not since Kevin Lynch's *Good Urban Form* has there been a book so constructively critical of conventional practice and so hopeful for urban design's proper role and future."

Robert Fishman, Professor of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan.

"Aseem Inam has written a wise and thoughtful challenge to those who believe in static models of the city, and the developers, politicians and professionals who hold power over its material form. Insisting on the priority of the public realm, Inam presents urban design as a broad moral vision rather than a set of narrow, technical choices. This book is a stunning manifesto for critical global urbanism in the 21st century."

Sharon Zukin, author, Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places

"Inam's excellent treatise vests urban design in its larger socio-political context, using the lenses of pragmatism to understand its transformative potential. Instead of looking into the past, the author is more interested in exploring how urbanism can be a positive force in the ever-changing context of the contemporary and future 21st century city. Solidly grounded in theory, Inam expertly makes his message tangible by presenting a series of design initiatives or "case studies" from different parts of the world. This is a thought-provoking contribution to the field of urbanism!"

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Professor of Urban Design, University of California at Los Angeles.

"Though many claim to do so, few books actually succeed in capturing the symbiosis of urban theory and praxis as convincingly as this. Rich, erudite, practical and robust, it compels us to reconsider our very relationship with cities – whether as inhabitants, decision-makers or consumers. It reminds us that the art of urbanism is a constant negotiation between personal biases and socio-political realities, and that cities are evolving repositories of complex decisions, whims and choices, all in constant flux. This outstanding re-evaluation of contemporary urbanism will serve to expand and enrich the worlds of both academia and practice."

Vinayak Bharne, Director of Design, Moule & Polyzoides Architects & Urbanists.

"Drawing on examples ranging in size from a museum to an Olympic village, and from around the world, Aseem Inam demonstrates how urban design can be transformative by being more inclusive and more political, and by abandoning its traditional commitment to a city fixed in time in an ostensibly ideal state. Simultaneously critical and practical, Inam has made a bold statement."

Robert Beauregard, Professor of Urban Planning, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Preface

I have wrestled passionately with the ideas of *Designing Urban Transformation* for many years. These ideas were formed, challenged, tested, and refined through the writing process and will continue to evolve even after the book is published. Even when I started studying architecture in college at the age of 16, I combined a keen interest in design with a perhaps equally keen skepticism of the overly narrow range of its practice. Further, as a lifelong student of urbanism, I brainstormed and tested my ideas in classes and studios as a student, through formal projects and design strategies as a practitioner, through experimental pedagogies as a professor, through serious theoretical and empirical research as a scholar, and through firsthand experiences as a resident and visitor of cities all over the world. These realms of urban investigation continue to intertwine and enrich each other.

Rather than focusing on how we can make urbanism somewhat better, or cataloging and imitating so-called best practices, or articulating how a singular approach such as a focus on sustainability or technology will supposedly save our cities, this book makes a seemingly simple yet profound meta-argument: How we think about cities absolutely impacts how we design them. The most fundamental shifts in transforming cities do not happen by tinkering around the edges, but by fundamentally

rethinking processes, methods, and outcomes of urbanism. From this perspective some readers may view this book as largely theoretical or even polemical; rather, the philosophy of Pragmatism helps inspire a framework for crafting this fundamental rethinking, and the ten case studies of urban interventions demonstrate the different ways and widely varying contexts in which this new approach can work – all with extremely impressive results.

This book is the result of a rigorously researched project that begins with a clear yet thoughtful critique of the ways in which urbanism is currently conceived and practiced. What follows is a compelling argument about the conceptual shifts that can transform cities, with a wide range of built case studies illustrating these shifts. The book is primarily about the practice of what I call urbanism, and what most may refer to as that narrowly defined field known as urban design. Conventional pedagogies and practices of urbanism tend to focus primarily on the design of cities as the production of static three-dimensional finished objects such as building complexes, open spaces, neighborhoods, new towns, and infrastructures. The conceptual shifts towards city as flux, consequences of design and urbanism as creative political act – which I develop in the book – are significant because they lead to practices of critical engagement and urban transformation.

I came to these conceptual ideas and the philosophy of Pragmatism through my own extensive professional practice. Prior to completing my Ph.D., I found the actual practice of urbanism to be far more messy and complicated than anything we were taught at university or anything that theorists of urbanism were writing. As I demonstrate in the book, I tested the thinking inspired by Pragmatism in professional projects (e.g., the Uptown Whittier Specific Plan), pedagogical experiments (e.g., the MIT Experimental Design Studio), and through scholarly research and writing. Ultimately, this book is a marriage of conceptual thinking derived from Pragmatism and case studies of actual projects from all over the world. This marriage accomplishes two things: it emphasizes the significance of the underlying conceptual framework derived from the philosophy of Pragmatism as a powerful force in rethinking urbanism for designing transformation, and it illustrates how these conceptual shifts operate in the vastly different historical, geographical, and political contexts of cities all over the world.

I thought carefully about the selection of these case studies and their role in furthering research and practice. The reader should keep in mind that each case study – and for that matter, any case study in any book – is flawed in one way or another. The point is not to have perfect case studies; the point is to have case studies that help elucidate and provide rich detail to conceptual ideas, demonstrate how each conceptual idea may be carried out in practice in different ways, and provide useful insights for future practices and projects, which I describe at the end of every chapter and in the Conclusion. All the case study analyses are relatively brief in order to elucidate the variety of ways in which the conceptual ideas may be followed through in projects. For example, the analysis of the Olympic Village case study in Barcelona highlights aspects of city as flux. The same case study may be analyzed through other lenses that would highlight other aspects of the project (e.g., as landscape urbanism, or political decision-making, or infrastructure investment as catalyst, or in terms of only economic impacts). The chapter on city as flux contains analyses of two other case studies – one in Cairo and the other in Boston – to illustrate different possibilities and impacts of operationalizing this concept. The way in which case studies are framed in this book allows the reader to gain enough critical knowledge about each initiative, to see how each one illustrates the proposed conceptual shift, and to gain valuable insights for future urban practice.

There was also quite a lot of consideration given to the images, which are essential for the reader to actually see each project. The use of photos rather than drawings is a deliberate choice that argues for a shift from the *ideas* and *intentions* of projects (as represented by drawings, models, and computer renderings) to the actual *outcomes* and *impacts* of the designs (as seen in fully built and occupied projects). Photographs, especially with people in them, convey that one can only properly assess the quality, strengths and weaknesses, and import of urbanism after it has been completed, occupied, and experienced in four dimensions, including the dimension of time. There are far too many examples of magazines, books, and even awards (such as the American Institute of Architects' national urban design awards) that speak rather superficially about the import of urbanist initiatives in hypothetical terms that are based primarily on analyses of renderings, drawings, and plans. In this manner, they fail to acknowledge the

messy and complicated processes of implementation and, even more importantly, their after-effects.

What do I hope to accomplish with this book? The conventional fields that engage most directly with what I call city-design-and-building processes (the hyphens indicate continuous, evolving, and ongoing phenomena) such as urban design, architecture, landscape architecture, and even city planning are involved with one of the most critical tasks of the 21st century: to imagine the cities of tomorrow, starting with tomorrow morning. These fields possess many unique strengths: they are inherently creative, visionary, interdisciplinary, and action-oriented. Yet, they are also among the most ineffectual fields when it comes to actually shaping cities in ways that make a genuine difference in people's lives. This lacuna derives from an often-singular obsession with form and space and from a willful indifference to the deeper political economic structures that actually shape cities. With this book, I hope to inspire such urbanists to more critically engage with these power structures so that they can have a genuine impact on the city. I also hope to offer a much broader view of design and urbanism for activists, urban scholars, artists, social scientists, policy-makers, and involved citizens to realize that they too can engage with cities in creative, visionary, interdisciplinary, and ultimately transformative ways through the kinds of conceptual rethinking and design strategies described in this book.

I am deeply grateful to the many individuals who contributed to the book. Professor Larry Vale, former head of urban studies and planning at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Professor Miodrag Mitrasinovic, former dean of design strategies at Parsons The New School for Design, saw the value of this research early on and supported me in many different ways. I benefitted from the valuable feedback and encouragement regarding the conceptual shifts from Deepak Bahl, Tony Perez, Konstantina Soureli, David Thacher, and Ashwani Vasishth. Many generous individuals helped me with the case study research: Flavio Agostini, Jason Claypool, Surekha Ghogale, Arif Hasan, Fernando Lara, Markie McBrayer, Junia Naves Nogueira, Marcio "Bacho" Gibram Silva, and Maher and Laila ElMasry Stino. I was fortunate to have several excellent research assistants at Parsons The New School for Design: Namkyu Chun, Matthew DelSesto, Amanda

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The book is dedicated to my incredibly loving and supportive family: my parents, Ambassador Inam Rahman and Mira Rahman, my late brother, Amar Inam, and my younger brother, Arun Inam. I am who I am because of their unwavering love and their faith in my deepest beliefs.

Aseem Inam
April 8, 2013
New York City

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What Can Urbanism Be?

Power of Language

Designing Urban Transformation is about the incredible potential of urban design practice to radically change cities for the better. I deliberately choose to use the term "urbanism" rather than "urban design," because conventional urban design has an overly narrow and limiting connotation in pedagogy and practice as essentially architecture on a larger scale, with its attendant obsessions with aesthetics and three-dimensional objects. Conventional urban design largely overlooks the deeper structures and dynamics that actually shape cities. This book proposes multiple shifts in thinking and practice to render urbanism far more effective than currently practiced, beginning with the power of language.

Throughout the book, I use the following terms with their respective definitions:

- City: metropolitan area or urbanized region, as in "The city will continue to be a concentration of people, activities, and structures, and their interrelationships."
- Material city: built environment and physical form of the city, as in "The transformative potential of the city lies at the nexus of the material and the immaterial."

- Urbanism: city-design-and-building processes, *and* their spatial products, as in "Urbanism is as much about designing processes of social and political empowerment, as it is about designing systems and structures."
- Urbanists: practitioners who engage in willful, creative, and daily acts of designing and building cities, including – but not limited to – more conventional professionals such as urban designers, city planners, architects, and landscape architects, as in "Urbanists engage in multiple modes of practice in order to shape cities."
- Transformation: significant and fundamental positive change, as in "The fundamental task of urbanism should be to transform cities."

Thus, I define urbanism from the perspective of design and practice as ongoing city-design-and-building processes *and* their spatial products.

A significant portion of this introductory chapter is devoted to a critical analysis of the state of the art of urbanism, including a review of the major publications that have influenced both thinking and actual practice in recent decades. The chapter outlines major ways of thinking by drawing from a wide range of literature, without claiming to be exhaustive or comprehensive.[1] Instead, I draw from recent influential publications to touch upon and analyze the dominant strands of thought in contemporary urbanism. I then argue for a theoretically robust, radically altered, and truly future-oriented idea: "What can urbanism be?" is a question I have been investigating through reflective practice, interrogative research, and experimental pedagogy for several years.[2] The question: "What is urban design?" focuses on the present, and thus emphasizes the status quo while confining itself to narrowly defined and uncritically accepted notions about the design and building of cities. "What can urbanism be?," based on my rethinking of the field, is more problematic and potentially transformative, since it plunges headlong into unfamiliar territory and challenges fundamental assumptions. I began this chapter by discussing the power of language, and proposing a shift in language to reflect a more sophisticated and more powerful understanding of cities, their ongoing design-and-building processes, spatial products and their impacts.

This use of language gets to a critical shift in thinking: it is no longer a viable project to tweak the edges of a relatively narrow, benign, and, I would argue, ineffective, conception of a field. Urban challenges and crises of the 21st century demand that we more fully explore the enormous potential and possibilities of an urbanism that designs and builds cities in transformative ways. As will be seen throughout this book, I use the word *design* in both broader (e.g., to encompass the design of processes, policies, and institutions) and deeper ways (e.g., immersive in its context and impactful on the city). Before delving further into these ideas, I now provide an outline of the state of the art of the field by describing current urban conditions, their significance, and current thinking as well as practices.

Why Urbanism Matters

While the significance of cities is well known to urbanists and scholars, it does bear revisiting. In economic terms, 600 cities will soon generate about 60 percent of global gross domestic product, making them significant economic actors in the global economy.[3] In terms of demographics, over 50 percent of the world's population is urban and 80 percent of countries as diverse as Argentina, Saudi Arabia, and the United Kingdom live in cities, with millions more expected to live in some of the largest and fastest growing cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. By 2030 the urban population is expected to approach 5 billion while the rural population will continue to decline. Indeed, the next few decades will see an unprecedented scale of urban growth in the developing regions of the world along with the challenges that this circumstance entails.[4]

In the year 2020, the five largest cities will be Tokyo with 37 million people, Mumbai with 26 million, Delhi with 26 million, Dhaka with 22 million, and Mexico City with 22 million.[5] These are cities of unprecedented size with their attendant challenges of designing and managing housing and infrastructure for such scales and densities of populations. Apart from sheer size, the speed of urbanization is also rapid, albeit in smaller cities. From 2006 to 2020, the five fastest growing cities in the world will be Beihai, China, growing at an average annual growth rate of 11 percent, Ghaziabad, India at 5 percent, Sana'a,

Yemen at 5 percent, Surat, India at 5 percent, and Kabul, Afghanistan at 5 percent.[6] Such trends represent enormous challenges – and creative opportunities – for urbanists.

There is an equally compelling and yet more nuanced argument to be made for the criticality of urbanism. Cities are significant as the locus of people's direct engagement with the material reality of the everyday world and their perceived meaning of social realities via the symbolism of urban artifacts. Even as the city is considered by theorists to be increasingly dominated by the amorphous and expanding spaces of urban networks, citizens "experience their globally situated and connected urban space as decidedly local lifeworlds, thick with specific experiences, practices, imaginations, and memories."[7] In these experiences, the material city reflects the identities of class and culture, and demonstrates the interests of the state in social order and the private sector in stimulating consumption.[8]

Moreover, the material city is not simply a straightforward mirror or neutral container; rather, it is a continuous process, a socio-spatial dialectic.[9] In this dialectic, people create and modify urban spaces while being conditioned by the spaces in which they live, work, and visit. As cities are produced and reproduced, the attitudes and behavior of inhabitants are influenced by their surroundings as well as by the values, attitudes, and behavior of the people around them. At the same time, ongoing processes of urbanization and transformation establish a context of change in which economic, political, and social dynamics are continuously interacting with these urban spaces. In this manner, the material city is both structured and structuring.

The material city not only reflects the underlying structures of society, it also serves as one of the means through which these structures are sustained and legitimized. At a fundamental level, how primacies for urban interventions are established, how scarce resources are allocated, and how cities are designed by urbanists and others all reflect the values and priorities of those in power. In other words, power designs cities.[10] One of the most blatant forms of power in the material city is the control of land, such as when single entities like the government or a private developer owns, designs, and develops vast tracts of land more or less as it so chooses. The material city also contains multiple

and often more subtle mechanisms and expressions of power, for example, expressed via decisions as to which areas of the material city will receive attention and resources, and which will not. Thus, cities represent not only the mediation of the everyday world for citizens, but also the means through which power structures are reproduced.

Conceptual Shift: From Urban Design to Urbanism

So what exactly is urban design? The question has been asked multiple times and many continue to wrestle with it. However, I believe that it is not a very useful question to ask. First of all, such a question focuses immediately on a narrowly defined answer that rests on the status quo. The framing of the question as "What is ... ?" suggests a complacency with the existing way of thinking and, in the case of urban design, satisfaction with precise professional definitions that may nonetheless be exceedingly limited in their scope. Second, the term *urban design* carries with it baggage that I referred to at the beginning of the chapter. One is the claim, widely accepted by many, that the Dean of Harvard University's Graduate School of Design in 1953, Jose Lluis Sert, named and developed the discipline of urban design through a series of conferences.[11] There are two problems with this claim.[12] One is that what Sert actually named was a particular form of architectural project design and capitalist development in the aftermath of World War II. The second and much more significant problem is that urban design has a millennia-old tradition pre-dating the cities of Europe and the United States, and no claim of authorship can be made on it. The second piece of baggage that the term *urban design* carries with it is that it has long been dominated by architects and architectural thinking, which is ultimately about three-dimensional form. No matter the challenge, such as homelessness, disaster recovery, or a lack of clean water, in this type of thinking the solution is almost always a set of three-dimensional objects (e.g., homeless shelters, modular prefabricated housing, water treatment plant, etc.). While the material city is indeed a critical facet of our world, the primacy of the three-dimensional object tends to overlook other strategies, such as public policy, resource management, community mobilization, or more democratic power structures, which might actually lead to the deeper structural changes needed to truly improve cities.

There are other ways of thinking about the field conventionally known as urban design, which I problematize in this book by broadening and deepening, and calling a newly defined field "urbanism" that I defined at the beginning of this chapter. These ways include morphological definitions, as a default focus, as the keeper of the public realm, through lists of categories, as a map of bodies of knowledge, as a field of research, as different modes of practice, via models for understanding and making cities, and practical "how-to" approaches such as best practices. I describe each of these nine ways briefly in the following sections.

A *morphological definition* of urbanism relies on describing the structure of the field, usually in terms of other fields. Such morphology includes a combination of architecture, landscape architecture, city planning, or, as a bridge to fill a gap: "Urban design falls between the professions of planning and architecture. It deals with large scale organization and design of the city, with the massing and organization of buildings and the spaces between them, but not with the design of the individual buildings."[13] Similarly, other definitions include not only planning and architecture, but public policy as well: "urban design is the discipline between planning and architecture. It gives three-dimensional physical form to policies described in a comprehensive plan. It focuses on the design of the public realm, which is created by both public spaces and the buildings that define them."[14] The challenge with such approaches is two-fold: to describe a field in terms of other fields leaves out a deeper examination and understanding of the inherent nature of that field, and it justifies its existence as some sort of bridge rather than what its own purpose is. Thus, a teleological question such as "What purpose does urbanism serve?" is a question that is far more rife with potential than the morphological perspective of "What combinations of fields does urbanism consist of?"

A second common way of thinking about urbanism and the material city is through a *focus on the formal qualities of the city by default* rather than forethought. In other words, it has supposedly "developed as a result of a need to address problems that other professionals and laypeople were not addressing."[15] If the typical morphological approach is about overlaps or combinations of fields, then the default approach is about filling the gaps between fields. Such a view, however, posits a