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ADVANCED URBAN DESIGN LEARNING

Every profession has its educational challenges. Most of them stem from a need to develop an educational system that ensures all necessary knowledge within the discipline has been covered, and checks and balances have been put in place to ensure the pockets of knowledge can be put back together for use in professional practice.

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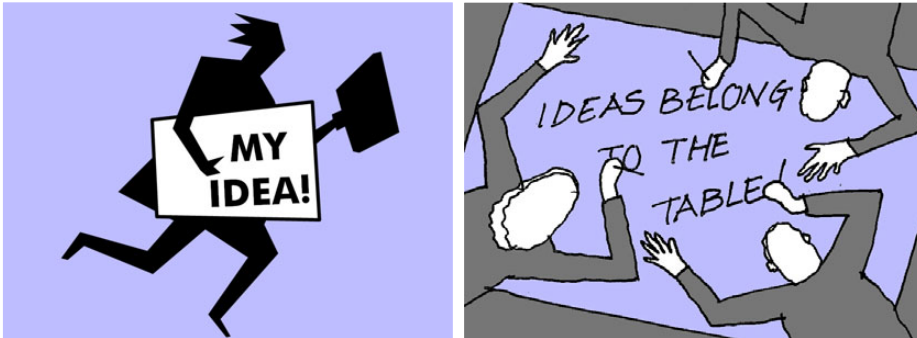


Urban design operates beyond the confines of a single discipline area and routinely helps to set the agenda for a project in the city, rather than responding only to a pre-defined brief. At its best it integrates the full range of elements and activities that take place in the city, coordinating the full set of urban disciplines to achieve social cohesion, economic efficiency and environmental sustainability.

This role brings with it responsibilities. Urban design thinking, when applied at city scale and over a sustained period, works directly on the core value systems of a community. It affects high level issues such as identity and equity as well as more tangible issues such as affordability, efficiency, and opportunity. Urban design must, therefore, apply a holistic, value-based approach to the city and its professionals must not be indiscriminately for hire or prepared to support any cause.

The learning challenge for urban designers is, therefore, a multi-faceted one. In addition to design and technical training, education must also cover organisational, leadership and value issues. Urbanists need to study how people's lives are shaped by their environments and by the processes and designs through which the environments are delivered to them. It is an 'all of life' subject with infinite complexity and variability, and should not be restricted to the regular professional updates required by doctors, lawyers, planners and architects. Post-graduate study, whilst beneficial, is just a beginning.

URBAN DESIGN LEARNING NEEDS ARE DIFFERENT:



The process starts with the individual developing good day-to-day learning habits and continues on with an understanding that ideas should be surrendered to the group so that they 'belong to the table', not the individual.

At its core, the practice of urban design is inclusivist, acting as the glue that orchestrates comprehensive and cohesive outcomes. This attitude is often counter-intuitive for many disciplines. Part of the learning process has to be some 'un-learning', of solutions which detrimentally interfere with the legitimate objectives of other disciplines. Integrated approaches should not de-emphasise in-depth investigation and understanding of technical issues. Shallow solutions will give shallow outcomes.

A good urbanist should have the ability to deliver integrated solutions that reconcile multiple high quality technical aspirations (economic, environmental, cultural, social, transport et.). As American management consultant Mary Follett said in the 50's, 'Its not that we don't want silos, we just want them to be leaky'. To manage leaky silos the urbanist requires a significant degree of knowledge of many other disciplines. Good project management skills must also be added to efficient coordination. Welcome to life long learning!

Value based

To be sustainable urban design strategies and proposals are informed by a set of value principles. To varying degrees, these will be borrowed from prevailing theory. They are then prioritised through consultation and developed further by the urban designer's professional view.

In large and complex growth strategies and urban plans urban designers are in a powerful position to influence outcomes through their management of the process, their communication of ideas and the options they put forward. Prevailing theories and core principles (such as the Urban Protocol's 7 C's) can have different outcomes when driven by urban designers who have different moral positions on issues such as individual rights versus public good. Self awareness is necessary when occupying such a powerful position. In order to conduct honest community wide dialogues it is necessary for urban designers to recognise and to articulate when their opinion or advice is subjective, and to define the value system that is informing their position.

Theoretical principles and consultation techniques can be readily learned. Personal value systems, however, are derived from life experience. The challenge for learning is to gain a fuller understanding of the built implications of urban strategies, frameworks and rules and to calculate their social, environmental and economic consequences.

Left brain and left field

The 'city of a thousand designers' approach, which aims for a healthy urban framework populated by infinite creative designs requires a process that allows rational and creative input with room for wisdom, intuition and innovation.

The challenge for an urban designer is to crystallise these diverse types of input into a viable yet aspirational proposition. The ability to reason through multiple steps of logic is needed. There is a danger in assuming that theoretical positions are always right. A strategy to reduce car movement through pedestrianisation may be found to be counter-productive to the viability of local businesses. An evidence-based approach that gives fuller consideration to the movement economy, viability of uses for local benefit, safety associated with normal streets, and access for the elderly may lead to an opposing strategy.

The best results will come about through discourse with others. There is no prescribed method of learning in this area. One must develop a habit of listening to other people's opinions and constantly challenging the presumptions behind every design or strategic decision.

Design matters even if it is delegated

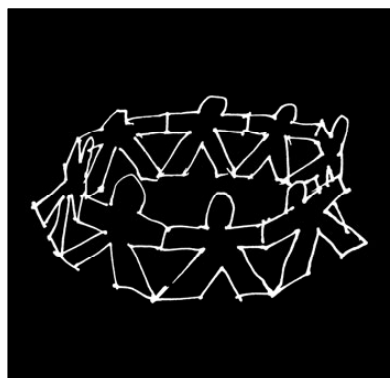
To deliver inspirational places design skills are a prerequisite. Fortunately, urban design work is usually delivered in teams. A team leader with poor design skills can deliver quality outcomes by delegating and directing the craft aspects of design, provided they still have an appreciation for its value.

For many, design skills beyond the rudimentary diagrammatic level, do not come naturally.

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LEARNING in ORGANISATIONS



Knowledge sharing

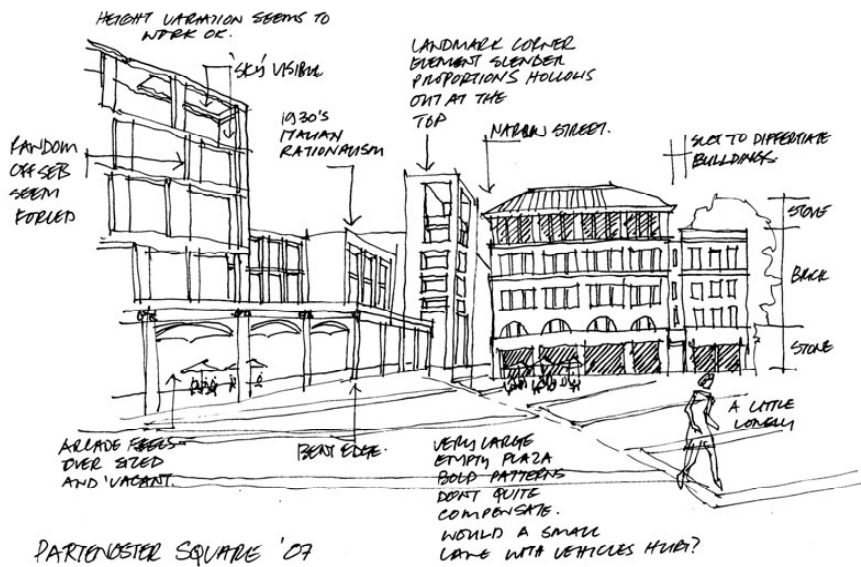
Much can be gained by simply exchanging knowledge already existing within the organisation. It is challenging for large organisations to develop healthy learning habits and routines which are spontaneous, rather than institutionalised and time-consuming. Several territorial authorities within New Zealand are, however, noticing the benefits of developing interdisciplinary organisational structures and procedures.

Pre-consent meetings with all key disciplines represented achieve a wider integration of public and private interest and significant learning takes place between specialists in transport, parks, community services, economic development, and planning as knowledge is shared. Unless this is done against a clearly-articulated sustainability framework, a well coordinated compromise may emerge, that does little more than follow the path of least resistance.

Catalyst events

A catalyst event or project has been seen by many territorial authorities to be a highly effective way to achieve a meaningful culture change and to develop an appetite for ongoing interdisciplinary learning. The "Inquiry by Design" process, that involves not only the local authority, but also community representatives and key stakeholders, has been found to be a powerful tool in this regard. If carefully coordinated and led with experience the dividends can be substantial. Many community aspirations will be met, competing disciplines can be reconciled, proposals will have greater technical rigour and a large set of project champions will have been born.

An event of this kind also leaves behind a lasting legacy of public trust in the organisation, councillors or boards with a more holistic view, improved interaction between authorities and



the development sector and increased cooperation between previously adversarial disciplines. If orchestrated well, the whole process is a meaningful learning experience for the entire community.

Control Alt Delete

In order to induce existing and new employees, within an organisation, to learn about and participate in this knowledge sharing culture and to renew its sense of purpose, organisations need regular points of reflection. Periodic one-day training/review workshops can be useful in this regard. Urban design best-practice can be updated, recent project outcomes within the organisation can be reviewed and improved techniques can be explored. Wherever possible the development sector and local consultants should be included in these reflective sessions so that all groups learn from each other and relations are strengthened.

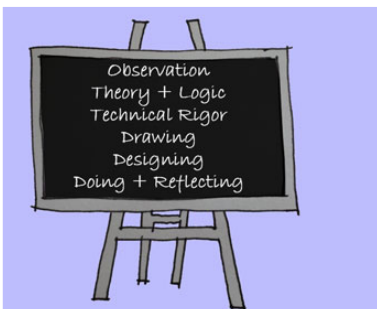
LEARNING in PRIVATE PRACTICE

Spontaneous knowledge sharing does not always happen in private practice given time pressures, profitability needs and competitive attitudes amongst some individuals. To foster this culture you sometimes have to put people on project teams for the learning experience alone. Individuals gain and retain the most knowledge from their colleagues whilst undertaking projects. Understand that age brings more experience but allow the young to help set the agenda. Encourage them to bring their sustainability values to the meeting and trust that discussion will encourage learning all around. Insist that staff regularly inquire into other projects in the office, do lunch time report backs and ensure staff at all levels present material.

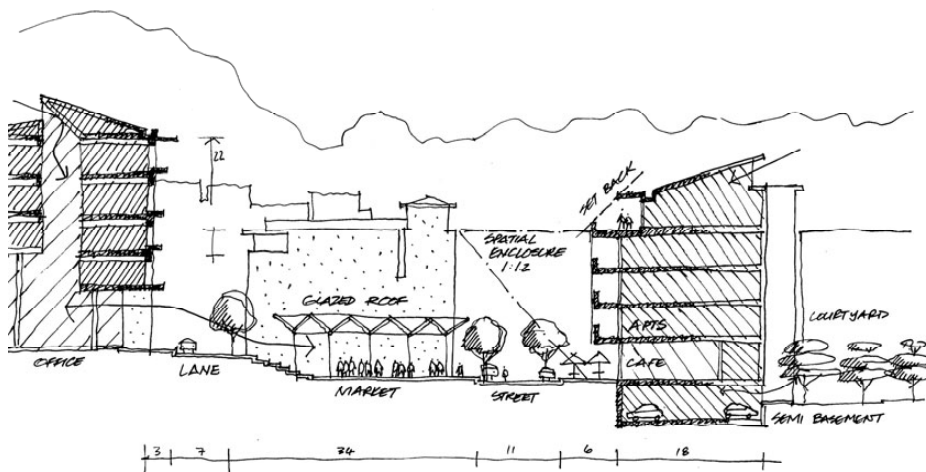
LEARNING for INDIVIDUALS

Individual learning should focus on developing skills in observation, reasoning, asking, drawing, designing, doing and reflecting.

Observe the places around you



Urban designers are regularly asked to diagnose the urban condition to define the problem as much as the solution. Initially this is done through observation. Observation is a skill that is often under developed in urban designers, yet it can be practised on a daily basis. Observe



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how places and spaces perform. Ask yourself how they are used, and whether they are viable, safe and stimulating. Have they evolved over time and what is their environmental impact? Avoid discounting certain solutions because they don't fit a previous formula without assessing whether they may work in this particular situation.

Develop your reasoning skills by reading (and Googling) selectively,

Theoretical study, usually through casual reading, can be daunting given the mass of material available. A useful approach is to share the reading in groups, then to have collective discussions. Systematically reading book reviews can also be a time saver, as it focuses your time on the books that sound most interesting. Precedents can be useful when applied with care. Dissect the reasoning that led to a solution rather than just cutting and pasting the plan. Recognise contextual differences regarding issues such as development economics, cultural values, regulatory frameworks, and even parking standards. Focus particularly on case studies with a sustainability foundation and solutions that require less space, have multiple uses or are exceptionally energy efficient.

Develop the capacity to challenge other disciplines

Technical rigor is important as passion is not enough. Urban design in this country has suffered from many idealistic, proposals which have quickly unravelled in real situations. Be the person in the room who knows the most about the other disciplines. Urban design is a compilation of architecture, landscape, planning, civil and environmental engineering, surveying, transport planning, and social sciences. An urban designers' ability to drive balanced outcomes will depend on whether they can convincingly engage with other disciplines and withstand attempts by single-interest groups to high-jack the agenda.

Drawing is the key

Visual intelligence is substantially achieved through the hand-eye coordination demanded by drawing. Carry a sketch book with you at all times and use drawing as a means to record, analyse, invent, illustrate, and demonstrate potential solutions. Draw, draw, and draw!

Practice designing

Designing and drawing, whilst related, are not the same thing. Sophisticated design work with its three dimensional geometry and complex interrelationships will not come easily to urban designers from non-design disciplines.

Practice doing original building designs (as opposed to using existing typologies), on irregular sites for non-typical programmes. To do this the internal functions of buildings as well as their external relationships have to be understood. This may be difficult for beginners but it will be worth the effort. Re-draw, and re-design projects by others that inspire you.

Learn by doing and reflecting

Systematically building on one's accumulated experience takes effort. It requires regular points of reflection, self analysis and a method of recording ideas. In the absence of real project opportunities learn through others, ask about their experiences and undertake informal case studies. Redesign existing projects and ask yourself how you would have done it differently.

FORMAL LEARNING OPPORTUNITIES

Post graduate urban design education in this country has traditionally not been valued, with students opting instead for courses delivered overseas. The masters course at University of Auckland, began in its early years with no more than five students. It has now grown to twenty students in 2010 with forty-five applications already received for 2011. Under the guidance of Professor Errol Haarhof, Professor John Hunt and outside practitioners it has developed a comprehensive curriculum that has more recently prioritised stronger reality-based outputs. Morale and enthusiasm is high as student's recognise this shift.

Mid career urban-design training delivered by the professional institutes has made a significant contribution to raising awareness of urban design issues in New Zealand. The next challenge is to deliver on-going training for senior professionals at an advanced level. This will require the co-operation of all of the professional institutes involved in the development of our cities, so that a series of connected modules, enabling cross-disciplinary knowledge transfer can be developed. Attendance at such a course should be highly sought after and should carry significant recognition amongst the professions.

LEARNING SHOULD BE FUN

Anyone, from any discipline, can become a good urbanist. There are many paths to pursue and someone seeking to advance their understanding of urban design should select prudently. There will never be enough time to do everything and not all of the paths can be travelled without a supporting organisational structure and a thorough knowledge of the technical issues faced when working in the city. If you find the right balance between doing, learning and reflecting, your life in urban design will be enjoyable and rewarding, and most importantly, will help make the world a better place.

Kobus Mentz is director of Urbanism + and adjunct assoc professor on the Masters of Urban Design course at the University of Auckland. He is architect-trained with post graduate qualifications from the Joint Centre for Urban Design, Oxford. He has lectured at 6 universities and delivered urban design and transport training for approx. 800 mid-career professionals in NZ and Australia.