

URBAN DESIGN GROUP QUARTERLY

Feb/March 1981. 50p

This issue of the Urban Design Group Quarterly has an educational flavour. We publish the closing remarks made by RTPI President John Collins at the extremely successful joint RIBA/RTPI meeting held at RIBA on 18th February which was supported by UDG. Collins concluded his address, entitled 'Urban Renaissance: the quality of the product', with some very practical recommendations for the closer integration of architectural and planning training. Incidentally, many of the sentiments expressed by Collins in his address were supported by Andrew Derbyshire in his vote of thanks and there is no doubt that Derbyshire's election to RIBA President would bring in an era of much more constructive relations between the two Institutes. UDG members who are also members of the RIBA should be in no doubt about which candidate should get their vote

Continuing the educational theme we have an article by David Leyland of the City of Birmingham Polytechnic on the relevance of part-time education, and the first of our reviews of Urban Design courses throughout the country which looks at the Scott Sutherland School of Architecture at Aberdeen.

As a departure from our main theme Neil Parkyn dusts the sand from his boots and looks back on five years urban design work in the Middle East.

Our letters column is beginning to take off and we publish two of the letters received so far. Please keep writing in.

Finally, UDG's Annual General Meeting will be held on 8th April and all members are urged to attend and contribute to the review of the Group's activities to date and to discuss our expanding range of activities. The meeting will be followed by an illustrated talk by Hugh Cannings of Warrington, so it should not be missed.

Contents

URBAN RENAISSANCE: THE QUALITY OF THE PRODUCT : John Collins, President RTPI	Page	2
EDUCATION AND URBAN DESIGN - A PART-TIME ALTERNATIVE? David Leyland		4
URBAN DESIGN COURSE REVIEW: THE SCOTT SUTHERLAND SCHOOL OF ARCHITECTURE - ABERDEEN		6
'ONLY HERE FOR THE EMIR ... ?' Neil Parkyn		8
LETTERS COLUMN : Alan Stones on Stockport Katherine Oliver on Social Anarchy		10
AGM AGENDA + EVENTS		12

Urban Renaissance

The Quality of the Product.

The following article is an extract taken from John Collins' address to a joint RIBA/RTPI meeting held at the RIBA on 18th February which was supported by the UDG. (The full transcript is available on request from the Editors).

The skills needed for 'place making' and 'joining it all together'; to be the 'catalyst' to achieve change "for the better" in town and countryside; have not yet been clearly defined, and certainly need a great deal more consideration than I have been able to give in the limited time available to me to put my thoughts together for tonight. Despite that, let me put up a cockshy for starters, a rough specification for the new breed of townscape, to replace the dying breed of architect/planner which the present educational system is killing off.

First, I must have someone with imagination; then I would concentrate on developing a deep understanding of the core of general design knowledge, including how buildings are put together, leading on to the specialist design knowledge of the art of townscape the 'Cullen Factor'; then I would develop an understanding of how to plug into the skills of the professions who contribute to the built environment; in other words, the core of Town and Country planning knowledge. Essential parts of this field of knowledge would be: decision taking, economic trigger mechanisms, and the art of effective communication.

In effect, I am seeking the closer integration of the educational and qualification routes for architects and town planners. The RIBA has only itself to blame for handing over design control to geographers and mathematicians - well intentioned but, nevertheless 'amateur' designers. The 'townscaping' content of their courses can only be elementary and cursory in the time available to them. Until we tackle this and integration has been achieved, and the 456 local government planning teams in the UK each contain these design trained creatures amongst their number, I believe we shall continue to suffer architect/planner demarcation disputes and misunderstandings. The joint RIBA/RTPI Statement, which goes a fair way, if used intelligently, to create a partnership, itself spells out the need for urgent thought to be given by the two Institutes to joint educational/professional reform.

The Architectural profession is surely aware that the speed on technological changes is such that the Schools of Architecture can no longer produce in 5 years 'The Complete Architect' - a person who can design every aspect of every building commission that may come his or her way, or manage the building operation itself from A to Z. All that any school can do is to develop core design skills and knowledge and then develop certain specialist areas of building design or project management skills.

The RTPI has recognised for some time now that not all planners will be able to do everything, and so it has recognised this also in its educational policies - which is now based on the concept of core knowledge, followed by the development of specialisations as an educational exercise. In this way, it has created alternative routes to qualification! If the RIBA can develop a similar core/specialist approach, I see no insoluble difficulty in bringing together our two educational routes - townscaping being a specialist route for architects.

In simple outline, the first three years of the course would concentrate on the building design core, the final two years on the planning core. A Graduate Architect/Urban/Rural Designer would emerge, who after two years of relevant practical experience, would be eligible for full membership of both Institutes. If they can do this in Denmark, surely we can in the UK. The present 11 year span of architect/planner qualifications can then be brought to 7.

The November issue of Urban Design Quarterly contains a hard-hitting letter by Paul Velluet calling for higher standards in urban design and more effective decision-making in the development control process. He claims that RIBA has seemingly abdicated "in the realm of concern for the quality of the built environment".

Until the two Institutes do come together to pursue a common educational route leading to a qualification for a new breed of Urban and Rural Designer, then I shall continue to have a good deal of sympathy for Mr Velluet's views, but applied to both my Institutes.

Bryan Jefferson, speaking in Chester last week, reminded us all of the RIBA Charter and its total commitment to quality. The RTPI too, has in its Charter as its objective "to advance the science and art of town planning in all its aspects...for the benefit of the public". In the words of Hamlet, I say to both Institutes, "Come, give us a taste of your quality".

An urgent need for the RTPI and the RIBA's skills to be harnessed in tandem is highlighted by Tom King's foreward to the DoE's Urban Renaissance Report.

"If the campaign is to bring a true renaissance in the quality of urban living, we need to remember that cities and towns are not simply buildings and spaces. They are essentially places where people live, work and play. And the best safeguard of the quality of life in towns and cities is to have caring, informed and involved local citizens".

If this job is really going to be tackled, then the two Institutes must abandon their mutual suspicions and work together to spearhead the fight for quality in urban living, and the achievement of real success in the eyes of local citizens.

Education and Urban Design

a part-time alternative?

In the November issue of the Urban Design Quarterly, concern was expressed at the falling student numbers of urban design courses. It should be recognised that this lack of support pertains to most full-time postgraduate courses, including those that lead to a 'meal ticket' qualification such as professional membership and so education in urban design can be expected to adapt or to perish, as indeed many full-time postgraduate courses have done within the last three years or so.

Few people can afford to pay the full cost of education without some form of subsidy in the form of grants, studentships, or employer sponsorship, but there are no mandatory grants for postgraduate courses of this kind; there has been a drastic reduction in the funds available to the Research Councils who have in the past provided studentships, and moreover the subject of urban design is peripheral to their activities and hence low among their priorities; employers can no longer sponsor staff because of reductions in public expenditure and because the current shortage of jobs usually enables them to recruit qualified personnel. Self funding students are now a rarity because of the massive increases in fees for full-time courses that have occurred, particularly in the last two years.

The most likely strategy for survival would therefore appear to involve the conversion of full-time courses to part-time. Such a step would involve a whole new set of opportunities although part-time courses have a predominantly regional catchment, and so have fewer potential students available to them. On the other hand the much lower cost to the student, in terms of both fees, and income foregone can lead to a significant increase in demand.

In the 1960's when most urban design courses were established, part-time education was generally considered to be educationally inferior to full-time because it was associated with technician level courses which had a training and fact-cramming orientation. The few part-time courses that existed in related subjects, notably town planning, did not appear capable of developing the kind of expertise and breadth of view necessary for urban designers.

But in the last ten years there have been a number of major innovations in part-time education, including the Open University, which have shown that understanding in truly academic subjects can be developed. The Technician and Business Education Councils have brought new concepts of organisation to improve the flexibility and educational value of sub-degree courses. And more recently the developing awareness of the need for continuing professional development in architecture, surveying and planning has created a demand for part-time educational opportunities from practitioners.

Part-time education can now be seen as having the potential for academic respectability and for relating more closely to the practice situation than full-time courses although whether this potential is realised depends on the skill of the educationalists responsible for designing and running courses. It may still be true that most courses providing for first degrees or initial professional education are best undertaken on a full-time basis, because of the volume of knowledge and skill that has to be imparted and the breadth of understanding that needs to be developed, but even here employers have a clear preference for those students who have gained practical experience as part of their full-time education. The value

of part-time education is that it may be undertaken in close relationship with practice and this value increases with the career stage of the professional. It would thereby be of relevance to urban design which is essentially an applied activity, usually undertaken after initial education in another profession.

The experience at Birmingham Polytechnic of providing a part-time course in Environmental Management is particularly relevant to urban design education as it is a mid-career course for qualified and experienced professionals in planning, architecture, landscape, environmental health, housing management and other subjects concerned with the management of the physical environment. The course is a recent innovation in a Department primarily concerned with initial professional education both full and part-time. Market research undertaken in the design of the course indicated a high potential level of demand from those who wished to acquire academic knowledge and skills in an area in which they were already employed, and those who sought a qualification that would enable them to change jobs to areas of greater personal interest.

Consultations with employers indicated that their financial support of students would be erratic, particularly since the completion of the course would leave some students looking for alternative jobs, and a number of potential students did not wish to be sponsored because of the job - ties that sponsorship may bring. Consequently the course was designed with a high level of evening attendance, supplemented by one-day integrative teaching sessions distributed more or less evenly between two local government leave-years. The intensity of the course enables it to be completed in twelve months, and so it incurs only one session's fees (currently £70). At the same time the structure of the course enables it to be taken over one, two or three years for those students who cannot, for domestic and other reasons commit the time required for the one-year route. These and other operational arrangements, as well as academic content and teaching methods, were determined following a questionnaire survey and establishment of an advisory committee of people who were thought to be typical of potential participants.

As a result of this approach to the design and operation of the course it is now well subscribed and has generated a significant level of interest in the region. Most participants have received some form of employer support, either in payment of fees, or release for the one day element without loss of leave.

While these ideas would clearly need appropriate development if applied to urban design education, they may help solve the problem of low student recruitment, regenerate enthusiasm among employers for the practical value of the subject, and thereby help to secure the improvement in design that our environment sorely needs.

David Leyland, Head of the Department of Planning and Landscape, City of Birmingham Polytechnic.

Urban Design Course Review

The Aberdeen Scott Sutherland School of Architecture runs a one-year full-time Diploma course in Urban Design which is approved by RIBA. Each session comprises three eleven week terms.

The intention of the course is to equip the student with the skills required for practice. Course Tutor Alastair Methren believes that this can best be brought about in a project based course: that is, through the application of knowledge and skill to urban problems within a simulated situation. The core of the course therefore is the project. Projects vary in duration and are tackled by students in groups, although individual performance is monitored.

Complementary lectures and seminars are run by a multi-disciplinary team of staff, visiting lecturers and practitioners on the following subjects:

- Urban Systems
- Urban Environment
- Urban Sociology
- Urban Development
- Urban Management
- Urban History
- Urban Planning
- Urban Landscape
- Traffic Management.

Study trips are made to other areas of Britain during each session, and students participate in the organisation of symposia on various urban topics.

An important premise behind the course is the view that the architect operating at the urban scale requires to reassess his skills, techniques and principles and to substantially increase his awareness of the problems of the urban environment.

This can only be brought about by contact with ideas from related and peripheral fields, for example planning, transportation policy, traffic management, landscape architecture, sociology, estates management, valuation. This does not mean that a student of urban design should acquire fragments of elementary knowledge from other disciplines, rather that he should have an understanding of their principles, procedures and application to urban design in order to integrate contributions from these fields with his own work. He must develop a synoptic grasp of complex situations in order to develop the faculty of creative synthesis at the urban scale.

Much of the above applies to the student with a planning background; in addition he must develop the ability to visualise the three-dimensional results of planning proposals.

Methren believes that the urban designer must not lose sight of the fact that ultimately he is judged not by policies and academic theorising, but by the quality of the actual places produced in which we live, work and recreate.

Central to the aim of providing a satisfactory built environment is the concept of design briefing, the philosophy of which is to maximise the urban design potential of specific sites or areas while controlling the architecture as little as possible.

Student reaction to the course seems to be enthusiastic. John McManus feels that the strong practical emphasis is justified in that it is the end product on the ground that is the most important consideration. In addition all students entering the course have had considerable training in theoretical studies. He feels that the Design Brief projects offer a direct physical means of improving the quality of design in the cities and towns, certainly in terms of scale and massing in relation to the surrounding buildings.

Philip Godwin, a student with a planning background, finds the course especially useful. He feels that it is heightening his design awareness and improving his aesthetic education in the urban environment. The design briefing exercises prove particularly valuable. As an urban designer/planner working within a Local Planning Authority he feels that he should be able to make a positive contribution to development control as a result. His view is that the course's strength lies in its emphasis on urban design techniques which can be used in practice, although some stronger theoretical background could be beneficial, thereby broadening and diversifying its appeal to prospective students.

Another student, M F A Rahman, hopes the RIBA could give support to Urban Designers of other disciplines apart from those of architectural background. Further information on the course is available from Alastair Methren, Urban Design Unit, Scott Sutherland School of Architecture, Robert Gordon's Institute of Technology, Garthdee, Aberdeen AB9 2QB, telephone 0224 33247. Scottish or Scottish domiciled students automatically receive a grant award from the Scottish Education Department (English or Welsh students qualify for a discretionary award from their council authority).

'Only here for the Emir...?'

Heathrow Terminal Three. Through the customs with the aluminium suitcase rattling with Magic Markers, tracing rolls and miniature hotel soaps for the kids, hands still strained from that late night lash-up to meet a deadline that the Hawk Eyed Son of the Desert, your client, had thrust in your path just to keep things interesting.

There may be some romantic role playing as a member of some latter day Long Range Desert Patrol Group or the warm feeling that comes from knowing that your contemporaries safe at home have precious little to do at present while you are putting your urban design expertise to very good use in one Desert Kingdom or another.

So often we assumed that our skills as 'tailors of the urban fabric', pastrycooks of the urban 'crust' or carpenters of the urban 'grain' were strictly for domestic use. Hardly exportable. But after the heady optimism of the '60s in Britain - with a New University or a City Master Plan in every self-respecting office and plenty of chances for the young'uns - there came opportunities abroad to soak up available urban design talent. After setting themselves up with Mercedes, welfare programmes and a rudimentary television system many of the oil-rich nations were made aware that they really hadn't made the grade until urban designers had passed amongst their settlements, recording ethnic facilities before shaping boom growth. And so we set off, families and felt tips in tow, on the Tristars of the Gulf.

Five years on, with enough layout options, site analyses and massing studies behind us to paper any Emir's Palace, the urban veterans take stock. Did we achieve anything apart from financial self-improvement? Or did the proverbial desert sands blow over it all?

There was much to admire when we got there. Our first reports always contained enthusiastic homage to the architectural strength and climatic performance of such existing buildings as caught the eye, even if the locals saw little merit - no longer the case - in these modest structures of their grandparents. Hard to reconcile the compact, shady clusters of courtyard houses with car access and the desire for what was felt to be a 'modern' expression of villa living. But we tried, and were given the benefit of this particular doubt by the client.

When the real action began on the drawing board the scale of these jobs became disconcertingly clear - sites three by four kilometres, 60,000 people, no existing infrastructure, Crown Prince biting his nails, for results etc. And never enough people in the project office to get the necessary lines on paper by the deadline. The first design decisions had to be right and, with increasing experience, they probably were. Cut off from the warm support of colleagues, libraries and English precedents but having to absorb a whole new set of planning 'rules' such as the need to segregate school sites by sex, the team struggles to build a working vocabulary of layout elements which can be deployed rapidly across all those square kilometres while still generating acceptable 'places'. Plenty of cardamom in the Arabic coffee and a clutch of Pink Floyd tapes from the souk are a very great help.

But there is always the sneaking suspicion that any tinkering with urban space in the western sense, the deft manipulation of housing units, access routes and landscape, is going to seem tame and feeble in the desert sun. The client may politely accept it, build it and pay your fee and yet the whole delicate construction may never be maintained, respected or understood. Any visitor will remark upon the exquisite gardens and plantings created behind blind plot walls in contrast to public squalor, although such cities as Jeddah and Riyadh are now convincingly houseproud in their open spaces. Much of the 'raw material'¹ available to the urban designer in Europe or the States - planting, finishes, local variety, expertise - does not exist here. But he does have a demanding climate and a very formal society to build upon in the organisation of his plans. There can be challenge enough in arranging a footpath and the built form that defines it in such a way that it remains in shadow through the midday heat while catching what breeze is to be had. Or in responding to a deep seated desire for ceremony and symbolism in the ordering of urban places. There are so many possible concepts and design patterns touched off by the use of Water in the Middle East, for example, or in Islamic geometry and colour palette.

At first it seemed merely a numbers game - getting the units safely onto the site. Once the mechanics were under control the layers of route, orientations, and community structure could be built over each other to create, hopefully, a subtle and satisfying pattern. Just like back home. But without the doubters, the critics, the public squabbles and delays. Perhaps that's really why we stayed away.

Neil Parkyn



Letters Column

Sir ,

Although I regret not having had the opportunity of listening to Dick Hargreave's talk on the 15 October, the presentation of his Stockport work in UDG Quarterly gives cause for concern. Much as I admire his pioneering HE work at Rochdale, I feel he has gone seriously astray in Stockport.

Stockport has, or had, an intricate and small-scale townscape enhanced by a dramatic topography. Dick Hargreave's proposals for development at the station and Mersey Square appear to give more heed to the tawdry, windswept spaces of the nearby Ormdale Centre than to the grain of the old town centre. His envisaged curtain-walled slab office blocks, high-level walkways and pedestrian piazzas are climatically unsuited to Stockport and reminiscent of the developers' perspectives of the mid-1960's.

Surely there must be other ways of attracting investment to Stockport's town centre , and surely the UDG should not be lending its support to this kind of insensitive approach.

ALAN STONES, Kelvedon, Essex

(Ed: We are unsure whether this is fair criticism. Any other comments?).

Dear Sir ,

In a letter in the November issue of the UDG Quarterly, Mr Paul Velluet described our tendency to make 'planning' the scapegoat for "all that is wrong in the urban scene". 'All that is wrong' is our reliance upon state control, and hence debilitation, of our responsibility for our personal space which retreats into ever more private worlds and lays waste 'their' public place(s).

The RIBA may seem to have abdicated from "the realm of concern for the quality of the built environment"; but it is not enough for the UDG "to advocate the cause of high standards in urban design, and efficient and effective decision-making in the development control process" , as Mr Velluet suggests. Turning a blind eye on our self-substitution by such concepts as these five which he suggests might well, and does already in some spaces, house these concepts efficiently and effectively in various 'styles' of intellectual conceit. There are many econometric hypotheses of 'effective' decision-making. These do not, however, amount to enjoyable places because the "development control process" per se is not investigated adequately. Perhaps this is because people, not concepts, motivate this process. Indeed, if there is one process which we, the 'new petty bourgeoisie' , do not advocate with either assertion or coordination, it is accountability which in itself demands that we take responsibility for our own actions.

As an unprofessional participant in the creation of places which I and others may or may not enjoy, I have taken it upon myself to explore the decision-making process called 'planning' and to describe the experience of places. I am wandering in the conceptual , material and political maze through which the high streets of five towns appear as they do, and are vilified or appreciated as they are.

I find that the official development process is not, nor ever has been practised by decision-makers. I therefore suggest that if the UDG is to fulfill "a leading 'radical' role", we must seek to understand not just how places are made, nor even by whom, but why they are made as they are. Certainly this quest relies upon theoretical analyses of political action; but it also requires that we understand the (un)limits of our personal responsibility for our social action and public space.

In humility of the social whole, in pride for our places, in trust to each other, we should perhaps ditch the 'development of the control of the development process'. Instead we should leave room to practise social anarchy; value the ephemeral gifts of individual joy in public places which are at present repressed as uneconomic insurgents; regard the truism that developing material space is tantamount to developing people; and respect everybody - unqualified as we are - who wants to decide both how to develop and, more importantly, what that means.

Thank you, Mr Velluet, for opening the debate on our individual responsibility and social action. You have provoked me into assuming it as my responsibility at least to air these views.

Katherine Oliver
Department of Geography, University College of London

Annual General Meeting

The second Annual General Meeting will take place on Wednesday 8th April 1981 at 6.15pm in Room 604/605 at the Polytechnic of Central London, 35 Marylebone Road, London NW1.

- AGENDA:
1. Apologies for absence
 2. Chairman's Report
 3. Secretary's Report
 4. Treasurer's Report
 5. Election of Committee and Officers
 6. Any other business.

Nominations of people wishing to serve on the Committee as Ordinary Members or in the position of Chairman, Vice Chairman, Secretary or Treasurer should be sent to the Secretary at 20 Portland Street, Lancaster LA1 1SZ by 1st April.

Following the AGM

Come Back Street - all is forgiven

Hugh Cannings, Chief Architect and Planning Officer of Warrington New Town, will talk about the importance of the street as a public place, and how at Warrington, through the integration of planning, engineering, landscape and architectural disciplines, they have been able to develop and apply new ideas on the relationship of buildings fronting onto streets, in a local centre and residential area in the New Town.

URBAN DESIGN GROUP

Committee (1980-81) : Francis Tibbalds (Chairman), John Billingham, John Evans, Keith Ingham, Arnold Linden, Robert Meadows, Tony Meats, John Peverley, Peter Studdert, Tony Tugnut.

Correspondance and material for publication should be addressed to:

The Editors
Urban Design Quarterly
c/o Francis Tibbalds Associates
39 Charing Cross Road
London WC2H OAS

Telephone 01 734 3935