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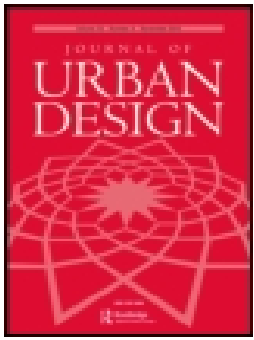
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COMMENTARY

Response to Nico Larco's sustainable urban design framework

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Developing more sustainable communities is among our foremost challenges, and urban designers have a leading role to play. I view this role very broadly, not just in terms of designing public spaces, neighbourhoods, streets and sites, but as writers such as Shuman (1998), McDonough and Braungart (2002), Hester (2006), Beatley (2011) and Lovins et al. (2014) have argued also through designing new energy systems, industrial ecologies, community participation processes, more locally oriented and equitable economies and biophilic cities. In this view physical design overlaps substantially with system design, process design, policy, ecology, and even engineering and economics.

It is always a tough question to decide which sustainability opportunities to focus on in a given situation. In this issue Nico Larco (2015) performs a very useful service in surveying much of the literature relating to sustainable urban design and proposing a draft framework for this endeavour, along with potential metrics for evaluation. The various green rating systems around the world (LEED, BREEAM, Sustainable Sites, Green Globes, etc.) set out similar frameworks for other scales of professional design work, including architecture, site design and neighbourhood design.

No such framework is likely to satisfy everyone, and personally I might amend Larco's proposal somewhat. For example, I would suggest combining his two energy and climate 'foci' into one, and adding new focus areas for Sustainable Materials Use, Healthy Society and Restorative Economy. These changes would broaden the framework and expand consideration of how urban design could promote goals such as social interaction, healthy democracies, and more locally and regionally oriented economies.

However, rather than arguing the details of such a framework, several other points regarding sustainable urban design can be highlighted. First, its priorities are going to change from time to time and place to place. Having a checklist of sustainability dimensions may be helpful, but it is not enough to enable urban designers to set sustainability priorities for particular projects. The appropriate balance and nature of elements – housing, work spaces, green spaces, civic spaces, etc. – within any large development project will depend on the needs of local and regional communities. Desirable densities will also be at least somewhat place specific. Affordable housing may be desperately needed in some communities and not others. Local conditions may create specific opportunities for cutting-edge projects – zero net energy communities, car-free housing, ecological restoration projects, and the like – that should be seized in order to provide influential examples of green development practices, even if all other sustainability goals cannot be met. Therefore, sustainability priorities will be deeply rooted in place.

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Sustainability priorities will also change over time. Responding to climate change, for example, is a vastly greater need now than it was in the early 1990s when LEED and other systems were developed. This is because we now understand the climate problem better and because societies have failed to act sooner, leaving us on the brink of catastrophe. During the past decade LEED has had to expand the number of credits it awards to energy- and climate-related design features, and it may need to increase those further in the future. Arguably, social equity has also grown in importance as a design and planning goal in recent decades, due to worsening inequities worldwide.

Therefore, beyond a simple framework of sustainability goals and metrics, a sophisticated understanding of the geographic, temporal, social, cultural, economic, political, institutional and environmental context of any project is essential in order to determine priorities and strategies. That is a tall order. Yes, designers have traditionally performed site analysis for their projects, and have produced constraints and opportunities maps and other analysis materials. However, much broader considerations of context are necessary. For example, some understanding of global economic systems may be needed to appreciate how creating spaces for particular types of commercial and industrial businesses will affect both local communities and the global future. An understanding of migration trends and cultural needs may be necessary in order to design public spaces that will work for immigrants. An understanding of global climate change is essential to appreciate the importance of carbon-neutral development and to decide among specific mitigation and adaptation strategies.

Finally, sustainable urban design requires that designers should be more proactive about linking knowledge to action and ensuring that more sustainable places are actually created. Designers will need to work hard to educate clients, decision makers and communities about sustainability options. They will need to ensure that cutting-edge alternatives are on the table and to challenge the assumptions behind business-as-usual. They may need to serve as advocates, or to ensure that advocacy organizations are informed about projects and at the table. They may need to walk away from unsustainable projects when clients simply will not consider better solutions. That is a difficult call, I know, but should be required by professional codes of ethics if it is not already.

Changes to urban design education can help instil this proactive approach and holistic understanding of contexts within young professionals. Many universities are beginning to make such changes, for example, encouraging students to pursue broad 'sustainable environmental design' majors at the undergraduate level while completing professional design degrees at the graduate level. Within professional programmes definitions of what constitutes site analysis and sustainable design are also broadening. Alas, there is still often a tendency to slap 'sustainable' labels on existing courses and professional activities without really thinking through what this term means. However, the times are changing, and both sustainable urban design frameworks such as Larco's and more fundamental changes in mindset and worldview will help urban designers be more effective at promoting community sustainability in the future.

Disclosure statement

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