Urban Design in the Postmodern Context

Koray Velibeyoglu,PhD Candidate at:
Izmir Institute of Technology, 1999

ABSTRACT

Why is urban design becoming more important? When did the term "urban design" start to be commonly used and when did "urban design" as distinct from planning? Despite its popularity in educational and professional literature, urban design is still a misleading term, used by wide variety of groups in different circumstances.

Emergence of urban design is no more. Actually a postmodern phenomenon. It is distinguished from urban planning about thirty years ago and became a very effective tool for professionals who manage the cities. In the postmodern reflex designing of cities in terms of its environmental quality and the integrity with their users' needs are the most common issues. Therefore there has been much debate recently about the future role of urban design in making better places.

This paper will focus on three important debates. Firstly, the rise of urban design will be described. Then the role of urban design will be discussed in the postmodern context. Secondly, scope of the urban design, and the debate between urban design and urban planning will be discussed in correspondence with postmodernism. Finally, the future of urban design will be considered in the guidance of current debates and themes on postmodern urbanism.

A. RISE OF URBAN DESIGN

Urban design initially evolved at the end of 1960s as a critique of the built environment produced by modernist architects, urban planners, landscape architects and the other related professionals involved in the making of public realm. The majority of writings on urban design, therefore, are the product of postmodern thinking. In this part, firstly, the widening popularity of urban design will be examined. Then the emergence of urban design will be explored in consideration of major writings in this field. Lastly the role of urban design in the postmodern urbanism will be discussed.

1. Why Urban Design is Important?

We can discuss the motives that make urban design more important into three main headings:

1. Ecological Significance: Urban design involves modifying the natural environment. It follows, therefore, that the quality of the built environment will have important implications for the natural environment. Urban design largely deals with the quality of the built environment that is vital for preserving the natural environment.

2. Economic Significance: There is a cruel competition between the countries that are seeking to get a larger piece from the global economy. Therefore the quality of the built environment is the key factor that significantly affects local, regional and international image of countries and sets the stage for all economic activity. As Harvey points out, there is strong relationship between technological changes in the economic production and structural changes in the quality and production of urban spaces. In this context, urban design is an effective tool that advances the quality of the urban environment.

3. Social and Cultural Significance: According to ALGA Guide, an important factor determining why people choose to visit, invest in or relocate to a particular place is the "atmosphere" or the "cultural identity". Tourists now look for the "local culture" of places rather than a visit a particular art gallery, monument or place of natural beauty alone. Also a desirable location, good educational facilities, a friendly, caring community, a healthy and safe environment, good quality housing, and a competitive, stimulating local atmosphere are essential for business development. Therefore the "image of the local community" is becoming more significant to attract investors and tourist to that area. "Stress on personal identity", "the love of difference", and "respect to otherness" are all coming from the spirit of postmodernism. These are the positive ones. Contradictory to this, one can easily suggests that emphasizing the local colors is just a "commercial trap" for investors and tourists. Modernist motto of "form follows function" is modified by postmodernists' "form follows finance". But from another point of view this trend also gives opportunity to enhance the physical quality of built environment and promotes the role of urban design.

2. Sources of Urban Design

One of the earliest writings in the field of urban design is Camillo Sitte's "City Planning According to Artistic Principles" of 1889. Sitte was the admirer of Medieval and Renaissance forms. He suggested that the remedy could be found in a return to methods of the medieval town a way humanizing the contemporary city. His emphasis on aesthetic quality of city's public realms gave him a significant place in the timeline of urban design. American City Beautiful Movement in early 20th century and Charles Mulford Robinson's "The Improvement of Cities and Towns" of 1901 and "Modern civic Art" of 1903 are the early efforts in this field.

But the first usage of the term "urban design" was in 1956 in Urban Design Conferences at Harvard. These conferences encouraged for Harvard's launching an "Urban Design program" in 1959-60. In this decade Jane Jacobs's, Kevin Lynch's, Gordon Cullen's, Christopher Alexander's milestone works constituted the real body of urban design.

Many current initiatives in urban regeneration and urban design take their inspiration from Jacobs' work "The Death and Life of Great American Cities: The Failure of Town Planning" published in 1961. In this book, Jacobs attacked on CIAM's Modernism and advocated that the publicly unowned spaces created by "city in the park" notion of Modernists are the main generators of the crime. Instead she proposed "eyes on the street" which means the resurrection of main public space precedents, streets and squares, in the design of cities. Furthermore, Kevin Lynch published "The Image of the City" of 1961 which resulted the evolution of the concept of legibility based on five basic elements (paths, districts, edges,

nodes, landmarks) His usage of mental maps in understanding of the city liberated urban designers from the previous two-dimensional physical master plans.

Gordon Cullen's "The Concise Townscape", first published in 1961, has probably had the greatest influence on a many urban designers. Cullen examined the traditional artistic approach to city design found in the ideas of Camillo Sitte, Barry Parker and Raymond Unwin. He created the concept of "serial vision" which defines the urban landscape as a series of related spaces (Fig.1). His aesthetic approach in the designing of the picturesque urban quarters enriched the vocabulary of urban designers. Jacobs's, Lynch's and Cullen's works originated from the view of the city dwellers. Other books, Rossi's "Architecture of the City" (1965), Venturi's "Learning from Las Vegas" (1972), Colin Rowe's "Collage City" (1984), and Peter Calthorpe's "The Next American Metropolis" (1993), were mostly based on theoretical and philosophical context. While Rossi bringing "historicism" and "collective memory" concept Rowe and Cotter proposed a "collage metaphor" that means the collage of new and older forms within the same urban space. On the other hand, Calthorpe developed a manifesto for sustainable urban living at medium densities and a design manual for building new settlements with his concept of Transit Oriented Development (TOD). These works gave urban designers a postmodern idea of urban space and design. Also they provided the reviving interests on the terms "historicism", "sustainability", "livability", "aesthetic", "high quality of urban components" and so on.

As we look at closer to these well-known works we see that true sources of urban design are mostly maintained by the postmodernists' ideas. Therefore urban design can mostly be seen as the by-product of postmodernism.
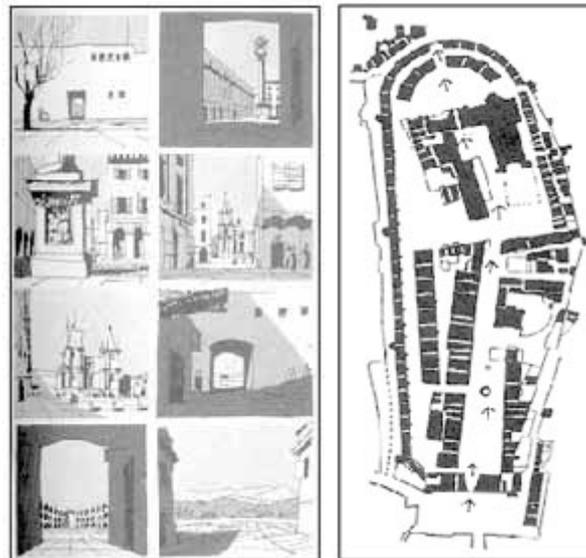

Figure 1. Gordon Cullen's Concise Landscape: a city of serial visions

3. Urban Design in the Postmodern Urbanism

Themes of Postmodern Urbanism

Postmodernist idea of the city emerged as reaction against modernism. In "The Condition of Postmodernity" David Harvey defines the postmodern city with the rise of;

- **historical eclecticism**, (as inventing tradition by imitating the older forms) (Fig.2),

- **multiculturalism**, (reference with the locality and ethnicity) and,

- **spectacle** (a theater scene, commercialization of built environment) (Fig.3).

He explains the turn from "modernism" to "postmodernism" in reference with the change of economic system and cultural codes. He asserts a correlation between the shift to postmodernism in the cultural sphere and the shift to "flexible accumulation" (post-war fordism) in the economic sphere. In the chapter entitled "Postmodernism in the city: architecture and urban design" Harvey demonstrates a link between Fordist methods of mass production and the international high modernism of Le Corbusier. He shows the usage of industrial methods of Fordism as a model for mass housing projects in response to the crises of the Great Depression and the Second World War. Harvey also indicates that when the decline in the rate of profit forced the rigid "Fordist system" to the "flexible accumulation", there was a corresponding shift in architecture and urban design. The functional universalism of high modernism (International Style) gave way to new forms of particularism (anti-universalism).

Another commentator Stuart Hall thought postmodern city as discontinuous and fragmented space, self-contained 'alternative' cities, and rediscovery of the local. Collectively there is wide variety of overlapping themes in the postmodernists' vocabulary. These themes, according to Ellin, include contextualism, historicism, the search for urbanity, regionalism, anti-universalism, pluralism, collage, self-referentiality, reflexivity, preoccupation with image/decor scenography, superficiality, depthlessness, ephemerality, fragmentation, populism, apoliticism, commercialism, loss of faith, and irony.

Figure 2. An example of historical eclecticism: Piazza D'Italia by Charles Moore

Figure 3. City of Spectacle: Euro-Disney Hotel, France: Disneyism is perfect model for commercial theme parks attracting large number of visitors.

Harvey views postmodernism as enveloping modernism and adds "there is much more continuity than difference between modernism and postmodernism." In this sense postmodern urbanism can be seen as a more diversified and ephemeral discourse on the pre-existing structure of modern urbanism. The rising values and fields of postmodern urbanism are community participation (based on pluralism and regionalism), mixed use (associated with ecological approaches), pedestrian friendly design (addresses the vitality and livability) and urban design (maintained mainly by historic preservation and environmentalism).

Urban Design in the Postmodern Context

In the beginning of our century urban planning had evolved as the branch of architecture dealing with urban design issues. During this early period design had a central role in urban planning, as best demonstrated in the modernists' Charter of Athens (1933).

However, in postmodern period the structural change in the economy, from mass production for a mass society to flexible production for a fragmented society brought about a new interest in the built environment. The center of the urban design has moved from producing good and beautiful forms to drawing inspirations from mass culture, the social context, the site and the past. New attention to the qualities of built environment has been given after 1980s in response to global competition of cities and their parts. This made the role of urban design more significant in the production of the built environment.

The postmodern school of thought in urban design promoted the "return to vitality" after late 1960s under the guidance of prominent designers such as Rapoport, Appleyard and Altman. They suggested that vitality could be restored by creative land use allocation and sound urban design principles by encouraging integrated and mixed land use and making these uses more pedestrian oriented. They aimed to create an intimate physical environment that supports the communal identity. However this romantic reaction against the boredom of modernist's projects failed to success due to the ignorance of the social equity and prevailing economic forces.

Another group of postmodern architects and urban designers, (neo-classicists) advocated the return to vitality and the beauty of pre-industrial forms. Ingersol criticizes this new type of

historicism: "pre-industrial forms and spaces are not necessarily suited to post-industrial ways of life". Then he asks, "if one proposes all kinds of nice public spaces, connected streets and figured piazzas, will there still be an audience in a highly technological society for their use?" No doubt that, the search for urbanity based on historical eclecticism may become misguided when it ignores the contemporary context. One the other hand there was some between the historicists and modernists. In their works "Collage City" Rowe and Cotter proposed a harmonization between old and new, present and past.

In sum, we can not mention about the single and dominant theme and approaches in postmodern urbanism. This complexity and chaos is explained as "schizophrenia" by Jencks. Urban design in postmodern urbanism, therefore, reflects wide variety of design approaches, contexts and applications. But current implications in urban design chiefly refer to downtown revitalization projects, historic preservation, and public space enhancement projects (i.e. street design, traffic calming etc.).

B. URBAN DESIGN VERSUS URBAN PLANNING?

Urban design is still a polemical term between the disciplines that shape the built environment. Because urban design is chiefly considered as interdisciplinary field there are some conflicting points in the definition and the role of urban design between the mother disciplines. The recent trends indicate that the planning profession is shifting towards to the urban design centered profession. Hence there is also a debate between urban design and urban planning. In this section firstly the definition and the role of urban design will be clarified in light of current literature. Then the conflicting points between urban design and urban planning will be highlighted.

1. Scope of Urban Design

Urban design has replaced the "civic design" which dealt primarily with city halls, museums, streets, boulevards, parks and other open spaces since 1960s. However there is not a consensus about the definition and boundaries of urban design.

> "Urban design is the generally accepted name for the process of giving physical design direction to urban growth, conservation, and change. It is understood to include landscape as well as buildings, both preservation and new construction, and rural areas as well as cities".

> "Simply defined, urban design is the composition of architectural form and open space in a community context. The elements of a city's architecture are its buildings, urban landscape, and service infrastructure just as form, structure, and internal space are elements of a building. Whether public or private in actual ownership, urban design comprises the architecture of an entire community that all citizens can enjoy and identify their own. Like architecture, urban design reflects considerations of function, economics, and efficiency as well as aesthetic and cultural qualities".

On the other hand some theoreticians rather not to describe urban design but to explain what it is not:

> "I will provide no solution to the problem of how to define urban design for I wish to avoid certain failure, which will surely retard further discussion. We know what it is not. It is not land use policy, sign controls, and street lighting districts. It is also not merely sensitivity to design in the drafting of public policy, nor respect for the urban fabric in which architectural design are wrapped. We also know that it is not strictly utopian or procedural, and that it is not necessarily a plan for downtown, however architectonic, nor a subdivision regulation no matter how particular".

Descriptions explained above suggest that there is no easy, single, agreed definition of urban design. However we can determine the general framework of urban design. The basis for a framework defining urban design can be grouped under six main headings according to The Institute for Urban Design (IUD)'s criteria:

1. Historic preservation and urban conservation
2. Design for pedestrians
3. Vitality and variety of use
4. The cultural environment
5. Environmental context
6. Architectural values

The jargon-free qualities, goals and principles describing urban design can be grouped under eight major headings:

- Place,
- Density,
- Mixed and compatible uses,
- Pedestrianization and human scale,
- Human culture,
- Public realm,
- Built environment
- Natural environment

Undoubtedly these classifications should be extended in a very widely range of topics. However in all these definitions we see that there is a strong emphasis on livability, historic preservation, environmental quality associated with aesthetic values, and positive urban space correspondence to basic human needs which are also the major themes of postmodern urbanism.

2. Urban Design and Urban Planning

2.1. Role of Urban Design

Urban design is generally considered neither a profession nor a discipline. There is a trend to formulate urban design as the interface between architecture and town planning, or the gap between them. For example, when Kevin Lynch saw urban design as a branch of architecture Michael Southworth thought urban design as a branch of urban planning:

> "Urban design is defined... as that branch of city planning that focuses on analysis, design, and management of environments with particular attention to the experiential qualities of place".

Most of urban design literature put urban design as an extension of architecture, an extension of planning, or in a field lies between them (architecture and planning). (Fig.4) David Mackay also put urban design between the urban planning and architecture:
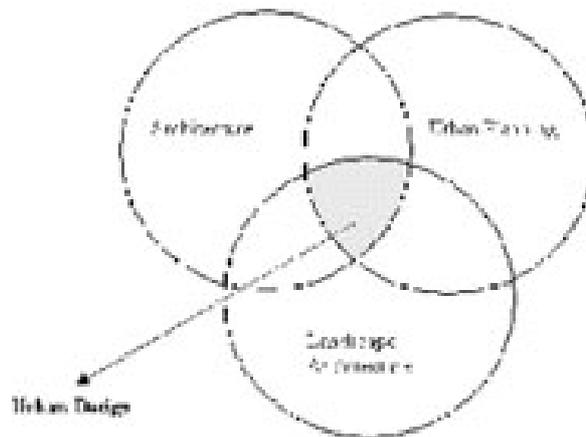
Figure 4. Urban Design as the interface of three main professions

> "It is easier to talk about urban design than to write about it… In between (planning and architecture), but belonging neither to one nor the other, lies the magic world of urban design. We can recognize it by its absence. It is inferred, suggested, felt".

Another commentator Jonathan Barnett also recognizes the crucial role of urban design between the urban planning and architecture:

> "What is the difference between an urban designer and urban planner, or between an urban designer and an architect? An urban planner, was some one who was primarily concerned with the allocation of resources according to projections of future need. Planners tend to regard land use as an allocation of resources problem, parcelling out land, for zoning purposes, without much knowledge of its three-dimensional characteristics, or the nature of the building that may be placed on it in the future. The result is

that most zoning ordinances and official land use plans produce stereotyped and unimaginative buildings. Architect, on the other hand, designs buildings. A good architect will do all he can to relate the building he is designing to its surroundings, but he has no control over what happens off the property he has been hired to considered. There is a substantial middle ground between these professions, and each has some claim to it, but neither fills it very well. Land use planning would clearly be improved if it involved someone who understands three-dimensional design. On the other hand, some one is needed to design the city, not just the buildings. Therefore, there was a need for someone who could be called an urban designer".

Undoubtedly urban design can not stand alone between these three main professions. Because urban design is an interdisciplinary concept these diagram can be extended with the other disciplines and professions such as Real Estate Development, Economics, Civil Engineering, Law, Social Sciences and Natural Sciences. But here the debate between urban planning and urban design will broadly be highlighted.

2.2. Debate between Urban Design and Urban Planning

Urban planning emerged as the practical solution of the haphazard physical environment of the 19th century industrial city but later on developed as a discipline beyond the compressed framework of physical design. Because planners focused primarily on social, political and managerial aspects of the built environment they ignored the physical qualities of public realm. After 1960s architecture, planning, landscape architecture and other professionals blamed each other for declining urban quality. Urban design therefore initially developed as an attempt to build bridges between different design and planning professions and focused on the quality of the public realm. Although urban planning recognized the importance of urban design there is a debate between urban planning and urban design into two broad areas: emphasis on design, and scale.

Role of Design: Spatial or Social?

One of the important critics of urban design is that the high priority given to aesthetics over ethics and other social issues. For example the physical design of a new quarter can be more important than the gentrification impacts within that area. Aesthetic over ethic or design over social management is one of the conflict points between urban design and urban planning. Firstly aesthetic itself is critical. Is the aesthetic control really an important part of the urban design process? The postmodern re-emphasis on aesthetics is often explained as a reaction to the modernist neglect of aesthetic issues however mainly originated by economic speculations. Rediscovery of the local in the global economy increased the quality of the environment for commercial purposes. This process, according to Boyer, is part of the commercialization of culture, through which "eventually even city space and architectural forms become consumer items or packaged environments that support and promote the circulation of goods." The return of capital to the city centers as the real estate investment involved the creation of specially designed environments and spectacles, which emphasizes the aesthetic of urban space. Because much of the application of urban design projects was followed aesthetic quality without any regard to social and economic dimensions the result was a strong reaction against any design imperative by the planners.

The role of computer technologies has a significant impact on the aesthetic preferences of urban designers. Some find introduction of CAD (Computer Aided Design) and GIS (Geographic Information Systems) constraining, on the other hand others find it liberating. However there is no doubt that these new technologies have given to an emphasis on appearance over substance and image over content. The dominance of audio-visual communication maintained by mass media has already done the same thing in postmodern epoch. Then can we think of urban design as nice images? In other words, should urban design be associated only with drawings and not with realities? (Fig.5). In terms of design, form and content are very closely interrelated. Unless we think urban policy for just nice words urban design also should not be reduced just visually expressed aesthetic images. Urban design is not only dealing with visual and aesthetic qualities of urban environment. Therefore it will be a limited view to see urban design as dealing with only the aesthetic quality of space, or to see it outside the social dimensions of place making.

Figure 5.Is urban design only making nice drawings? (Source: Madanipour, 1996)

Another point is the role of design. To Schurch, urban design within urban planning emerged as not necessarily emphasizing "design" as architects and landscape architects do but evolved by emphasizing the public sector involvement, i.e. the public realm and the public trust. Madanipour also suggests that when we are engaged in shaping the urban space, we are inevitably dealing with its social context. In postmodern epoch the role of social sciences increased and the interaction between space and social processes was recognized. It is seen that the city could not be treated merely as large-scale architecture and the social/cultural context needed to be addressed.

Still many commentators see urban design as a design-rich spatial process without a social dimension. In many cases, it appears that urban design is seen merely as a visual concern masking the social concerns. In this sense urban design is perceived as the return of aesthetics to city planning. However in any case urban design should be formulated as balancing act bringing the urban planning spatial as well as social concerns.

Urban Design Scale

Another debate between urban design and urban planning is around urban scale. Is macro or micro scale urban design possible? Urban design deals with urban space at all its scales. Threshold of urban design scale involves implications from individual land parcel to neighborhood, an entire city to the region in which a city lies. (Fig.6) In broader sense, urban design can be seen as "the art of creating possibilities for the use, management, and form of settlements or their significant parts" In micro scale, urban design is conceived as the design of small urban places which carries aesthetic and spatial concerns of arts and architecture. While the modernists' notion of space is abstract but integrated the postmodern reaction to such abstraction was an attention to small-scale urban places. In reaction to gigantisms and impersonality of modern cities, architecture theory returned to the human-scale, diversity, and civic society imagined to obtain in pre-industrial settings. Design for pedestrians again became a focal point.

Masters of modern movement had designed all the features in their proposals from the objects within the buildings to the city itself. But now, the role of the artist designer shared by the teamwork of several professions such as urban planning, architecture, landscape architecture etc. Similarly in urban design implications, planning for a new settlement and designing a detail of a street is extremely different. Therefore the separation in scale of engagement can be more useful.

Figure 6. Large-scale urban design: IBA, Tegel Project in Berlin

C.RECONSIDERING URBAN DESIGN

Urban design is an interdisciplinary area and still emerging. It tries to merge particular aspects of architecture, urban planning, and landscape architecture to form a true field. In this context, firstly the basis of urban design can be discussed as a discipline or an interdisciplinary skill. Then the recent trends in its evolution will be examined to give references to the future of urban design.

1. Is Urban Design becoming a discipline?

On the basis of urban design we see the two competing approaches: urban design as a distinct "discipline" or a "bridge" between related fields responsive to the production of the built environment. The former suggests that urban design is becoming a discipline in its own right, with its own

• history, essentially the architectural and formal history of the city;

• practices, i.e. positions on what constitutes 'good' urban design, with several competing schools of thought;

• explanatory theories, i.e. accounts of why cities and urban spaces develop in particular ways, in a social, economic and cultural context.

On the other hand the latter sees urban design as a part of interdisciplinary approach between the realms of the true disciplines. Can we construct urban design as a bridge between fragmented professional worlds? According to holistic approach in urban design interdisciplinary urban design will be greater than reducing an independent discipline. Here the urban design has collaborative role between highly fragmented professions but its power is higher than its parts. Initial experiences indicate that urban design issues will always require a "team approach". Therefore we can not ignore its multi-disciplinary nature. The best effort might be encouragement of the teamwork between professionals those who work in the production of built environment.

2. Recent Trends and Facts affecting the Structure of Urban Design

The recent trends influencing the role of urban design can be collected at three major points:

1. Changes in Planning Profession: A recent trend in the planning profession has been away from the social issues and policy paths towards an urban design centered profession. If this trend continues, as some commentators suggest, by the year 2010 the planner will have to develop a broad design knowledge in order to effectively communicate with the designers of the urban environment or to actually design that environment.

2. Public Realm Design: Spaces between building are as important as the buildings themselves. Urban design addresses the public realm, dealing with the structure of development, and the space between buildings. It is mainly about the physical design of the public domain. Public spaces are related to social behavior, transactions, culture, safety, commercial success, etc. that refers to gathering of people. Therefore public realm can be seen

as a major factor in the urban design thinking.

The public realm today has many problems. It is often seen as unsafe, and therefore to be avoided or restricted. It is sometimes claimed to be unnecessary, and about to be replaced by cyberspace. Computer mediated communication (CMC), sterile neighborhoods and highly protected indoor malls via electronic surveillance systems are becoming the important parts of our daily lives (Fig.7). Urban policies and strategies are increasingly directed to try to shape both urban places and electronic spaces. The changing characteristic of public realm, therefore, will be one of the vital problems of urban design in the near future.
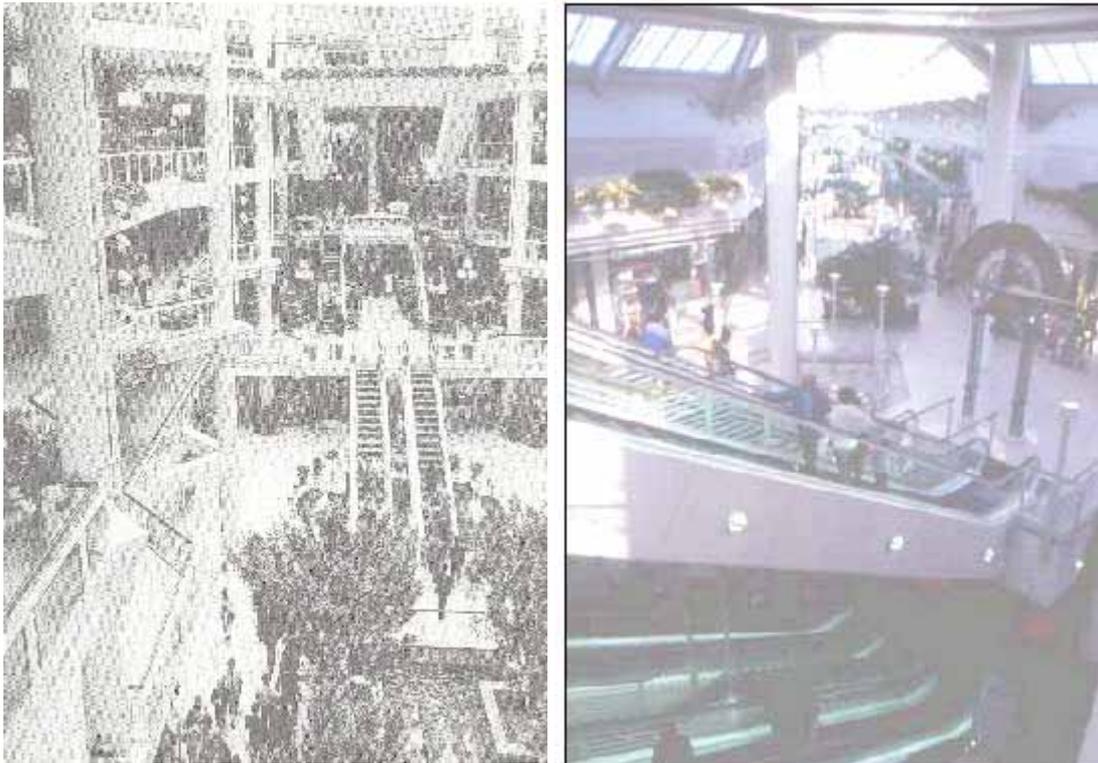
Figure 7.Transformation of public realm as privatized, monitored indoor malls

3.Environmental Changes: Environmental change is more incremental and subject to increasing public review. John Dean suggests that a good development plan today should express priorities which reflect a concern for, among other things, energy efficiency and biodiversity (Fig. 8). For the future, the conventional development plan might become an instrument which will form part of a wider environmental policy formulated primarily within a science based environmentalism. If this view is true we should promote the development of environmental improvements combining with the urban design principles.

Figure 8. Principles of sustainable urban design

3. Post-modern Urban Design

As previously discussed, the most obvious is the postmodern vision of the city as "place of images", that are designed to project the city in competition with other cities. The competitive 1990s have shown that we have the change in the spirit of the age, the present idea of planning as urban design. Urban design paradigms have been developed on the basis of postmodern architectural theories so far. In this context, urban design implications have been criticized by planners due to their lack of social and economic dimensions. Strictly speaking, urban design does not merely concerns with "design". Its scope is wider than producing nice images. It seriously deals with environmental, historic, public realm issues as both process and product. Urban design is still an emerging field but in the near future will face three important issues:

• global competition which requires good urban design solutions to enhance the built environment;

• sustainability which addresses environmental improvement and conservation;

• decline in public realm which urban design chiefly concerns and need to be reconsidered. We should, therefore, think of urban design in a holistic approach that gives way a wider look in the solution of these issues. Urban design should not be a short-term fix for long-term problems of the future. Now it is the time for widening the scope of urban design. Future issues are so complex that can not be solved by the arrogance of a single field. Urban design should work collaboratively with other built environment professionals and the users in order to bridging the gaps between specialist's areas.
At the very beginning urban design has emerged as the by-product of postmodernism. Postmodern approaches in architecture and urbanism have enriched the vocabulary of urban design despite their neglect for social problems. Urban design has a great potential to fix the future problems. One-step beyond, the "post-modern urban design" is practicable if it provides long-term solutions to the production of better living environments in the interdisciplinary context.

REFERENCES