

And now, for something completely different: good design goes *beyond* itself

Most people come across John Cleese through Monty Python. I didn't.

A long time ago I was given a tape, with the recording of a talk he gave to a group of architecture students. He was reminding them that when they will move on to build something, this will become part of the city or town that everyone walks through, that everyone looks at, no matter how interested *in their very piece* of architecture they might be. In other words, the message was that we do things but we generate an impact that goes *well beyond them*. And, this impact is on many more people than those we might build our buildings for, because every building is always part of a much greater whole. Every building is a piece of city, and cities belong to all. As an observation by somebody that felt genuinely baffled and elated all in the space of a short stroll, his talk made complete sense: it was about having a sense of civic responsibility.

With this short article I argue for a more significant role of urban design in the architecture curriculum. This view is the result of my own education and almost 20 years in teaching, as well as my life in two significantly different contexts, Torino and Glasgow. Whilst space can encourage a degree of sensitivity and appreciation towards urban design, the discipline is too important for the development of responsible designers to be left to the fringes of mainstream education. Most importantly, it is essential to get the best out of our aspiring architects.

A little before hearing the Cleese tape I had graduated in architecture in Torino, and had a stint in architectural offices. There, every day for 5 years, I would cross the whole city to get to University. From West to East and back, by bike, bus or foot, making my way through arcades and grandeur, neighbourhoods of mundane decorum, markets, factories, cobblestones, tram tracks, a million contradictions that made complete sense. Every piece needed to be there, every piece was good where it was. Torino is a beautiful city, one whose form makes eminent sense and yet one that never bores, gracious to difference, at least from a physical point of view. In fact, Torino saw incredibly high immigration through Fiat in the 1950s, when it had to change fast, after a generally steady and moderate historic growth, with rough spots here and there. That was back then. The spots have moved, as they should in a city that modernises, and its grace has been tested hard over the past 2-3 decades, through economic renaissance, immigration, the fate shared by many other post-industrial cities. The Faculty of Architecture was housed in a Castle whose construction started in the mid 1600, and since then upgraded and repurposed throughout its history. It was not practical and it was not comfortable as we have grown to expect our places of work to be, but it was beautiful and made us all want to use it.

This learning environment encouraged curiosity and freedom but with underlying guidance. We didn't have a course in urban design, but we were taught a lot of history, of architecture and cities, and of urban and rural sociology, to understand that circumstances and society are parts and parcel of our places. This gave a natural sense of inextricability between form and life that has never left me. In class and in our design, we talked little about people, if not the clients of the buildings our teachers asked us to design. The enjoyment of 'all the others', the passers-by, was a given. Growing in a place that works, there is an expectation that that what you add to it should also work. Therefore housing, museums, squares and installations, they all had to fit, enhance, and benefit from the greater whole in which we would place them. And yet, I left with little clear grasp of how to turn this experiential appreciation into actionable, intentional guidance.

When I heard the Cleese interview shortly after arriving in the UK, I liked that somebody was talking about *the city in design terms*, not just social or economic. I discovered urban design as a precise discipline through my mentor, Hildebrand Frey. Discussion with him took us from the scale of the city to the smallest detail, in the same journey. He showed the links between the strategic, the very practical and the experiential, and I finally joined the dots that I had learned in a much more intuitive way back home in Torino. Glasgow was an ideal place to learn about urban design: it had an intentional and experimental attitude and was not shy to apply it. At the time my research interests were Community Based Housing Associations, and how they saw value in the social sustainability

afforded by Glasgow's most traditional urban form, the tenement, at a time of large-scale urban redevelopment.

My PhD was about supporting 'lay people' to become more critical participants in placemaking. Post-war housing development had remarkably changed the shape of the city and its fundamentally poly-centric network of identity-rich neighbourhoods. A lot of adjustment was still taking place and these new conditions required a proactive, aware and informed attitude towards the city.

I worked on this *attitude* through my early teaching years in a 'community design studio', where we worked in housing estates near enough to the city centre to make them desirable for new development, but isolated and dysfunctional in many ways. I understood that the need for roots, for belonging to a place, is complex and makes people develop bonds with the strangest of conditions. We accept situations and find coping mechanisms to deal with their limits and whilst inspirational this was also disheartening, suggesting that good conditions and good environments are possible, but require listening more and approaching architecture and the city through better and more aware design. And also, that it is crucial to learn from what has worked before: if something is good, functional, respectful, uplifting, it generally finds its way through *time*. Many of the areas in which we worked didn't: built in the 1960s-70s, they went through substantial changes already. The issue of *time* in the design of the city became my new concern.

Overall, my 19 years of teaching at Strathclyde have fundamentally been about looking for what works and what doesn't, experimenting not for the sake of novelty or 'innovation' but with John Cleese's sense of civic responsibility in mind. I have spent the past 10 in particular, with colleagues and students, looking for what makes cities generous in the quality of life they afford to their people; we looked for evidence in the form of shared traits, the rules and exceptions behind them, which make places grow and evolve in time, respond to human needs, adapt, or become obsolete [fig 1]. Our core interest is now the design of the resilient city. We see design as needing to respond to change, or even better, as change being the essence of design. Design is only the starting point of a long journey: to set the conditions for life to take place, for place to become and mature. Obviously, this is a significantly different way of seeing our role as placemakers, which leads me to the second point of this short article.

Until we treat urban design as *something else, that needs to be carved out into* the curriculum, we as architects have a problem. Also inviting it into our schools dressed as a specialism, later on in our programmes, generally in years 4 and 5 is too late and too little: it remains, no matter how much teachers stretch themselves to make such a rich subject fit into a fraction of what it deserves, an afterthought. It's like forcing oneself to learn a new movement when all habits and all postures are set and engrained.

The value of good urban design is that it teaches to bring together the many issues that are at play in the city (social and economic traits, habits, preferences, sentiments and hard facts) in the most tangible form: space. Students must go through their education with intention, asking questions to find out answers that they can work with, thinking responsibly about every design decision they make thanks to the questions they asked. Urban design must be intrinsic to every design project students undertake, so they learn to master complexity as a mindset, because cities are *complex systems*, made of many pieces which are all, somehow, connected [fig. 2]. A façade, a small library, or a block of flats will have impact *well beyond their boundary*, on people *well beyond those who commissioned it*. Through each of their projects, they are essentially adding a small piece to something that belongs to all, and they should be aware of and take responsibility for it.

I work in a department of architecture that attracts exceptional students. As I write our end of the year show is open; the talent I see across the 5 years is incredible, and gets better every year. I see energy, curiosity, compassion, ambition and responsibility but also ingenuity and, fundamentally, potential. Around 100 students every year graduate from us ready for the profession, to the point I would expect to see no mistakes and no ugliness in our cities and streets. And yet, I do see mistakes, a lot of them in the form of uncommitted or plainly dysfunctional buildings and spaces. Why? Some people are blessed with talent: their buildings, whether they blend in or dominate, ooze comfort, beauty or confidence at the turn of each corner. However, let's be frank, this is not the norm.

Most people need to work hard to achieve even a portion of such success. It would help them to start the professional journey as designers understanding that cities are not accidental collations of pieces, that nothing works in isolation, and greatness, goodness and even decency rarely happen by chance, even in something as diverse as a city. It would help them to understand that we all ought to have a role to play in shaping, adjusting and maintaining it; it is absurd to think and claim otherwise. Our cities and towns have always been governed by rules of logic and efficiency, with moments of exceptional beauty, and that we should all partake to the application of these rules and exceptions, designers and not [fig. 3]. How to teach it then?

At Strathclyde, we argue that urban design is the ground on which the balance between rules (including architectural rules) and exceptions unfolds, that makes the city diverse, endlessly exciting and special [fig. 4]: only the city that is built on rules, through their adjustments and evolution, is able to gift special places with true value and meaning. A city with no rules drowns uniqueness and diversity in visual noise, where nothing has the comfort of ordinariness, nor the excitement of specialness. Urban design helps understand these rules, and in doing so, can give design students the greatest chance of fulfilling the aesthetic, social or imaginary personalities that they already embody. Cleese was right: the city should belong to all. It is our job *to make it belong to all*, through its design. This is surely not the only way, but is one that can help graduates understand that their job is to create the conditions to make places that are so desirable, efficient and functional, that they will stand the test of time [fig5].

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