

Urban Design. Ethics and Responsive Cohesion

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Abstract

The paper examines the reframing of some principal areas of discourse in urban design in terms of Warwick Fox's theory of Responsive Cohesion, set out in his book *A Theory of General Ethics: Human Relationships, Nature, and the Built Environment* (2006). In Fox's work, responsive cohesion offers a single integrating theme that applies across the spectrum of issues and scales of urban design. Indeed, in his theory of general ethics responsive cohesion is an integrating theme in any field – and across fields.

The following description of urban design from The Urban Design Group places connections and drawing together in the forefront, two aims that map easily on to principles of responsive cohesion.

“Urban design is about making connections between people and places, movement and urban form, nature and the built fabric. Urban design draws together the many strands of place-making, environmental stewardship, social equity and economic viability into the creation of places with distinct beauty and identity. Urban design is derived from but transcends planning and transportation policy, architectural design, development economics, engineering and landscape. It draws these and other strands together creating a vision for an area and then deploying the resources and skills needed to bring the vision to life” (Urban Design Group 2009).

This description also emphasizes a broad rather than narrow interpretation of the scope of urban design and demonstrates the way it intertwines with related disciplines. It positions urban designers as people who ‘pull things together’ into a *coherent* whole that *responds* to its many contexts.

Very briefly, in achieving ‘responsive cohesion’ a ‘thing’ (creature, community, building) or process (learning, play, design) exhibits mutually beneficial interactions between itself and its contexts, and also between its internal components. This contrasts with domination by one factor (fixed cohesion) or anarchy (discohesion). Achieving this with a context that already exhibits responsive cohesion is ultimately more important than achieving it internally, although the aim is to achieve both. The largest and most important context is the natural or biophysical environment, because it sustains all other systems. The next largest context is the social environment. Recognising an ethics of responsive cohesion therefore places emphasis on connection (not separation), on collaboration (not individualism), and on design as sustaining context (not creating set-piece entities).

The discourses of urban design contain many principles and assertions that support these emphases, but they tend to do so by examining and advising on particular sub-

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areas. Fox's work provides a means to integrate the analysis and advice in these separate areas and shifts the grounding and authority of the advice from instrumental strategy to ethical value.

The paper will elaborate on this theme in three common sites and scales of urban design: city (or region), neighbourhood, and streetscape (or the block). It will prospect and sample some of the best-known literature and ideas associated with urban form in each of these sites: the writings of Peter Hall on cities and city groupings, Christopher Alexander on the qualities of meaningful urban places, Andrés Duany and Elizabeth Plater-Zyberk on design codes and new urbanism, Peter F Smith on aesthetics in the built environment, Trystan Edwards and Gordon Cullen on the relations between buildings and streetscape, Jan Gehl on the human use of urban space, and Kevin Lynch on urban form. This sampling of the discourse will be accompanied by a sampling of some places that exemplify different degrees of responsive cohesion and strategies for its achievement: the cities of Dubai, Kampala, Edinburgh and Venice, the new urbanism of Poundbury, Seaside and Malmo West Docks, the streets of Paris, Helsinki and Adelaide.

It will be argued that such an investigation affords credibility to Fox's argument. The success of places that are extolled in the literature can be at least partly explained by their achievement of responsive cohesion, and the lessons of the literature that have proved to be influential can be similarly explained. Much follows from recognition of this common theme. Two corollaries are the universal need for 'whole of system' analyses of urban issues and situations, and for urban designs that 'best fit' multiple (and often apparently conflicting) objectives and priorities.

What appears at first to be a distinction between seeking responsive cohesion as an instrumentally useful strategy and seeking it as an ethical foundational value in fact disappears in practice. If it always leads to better outcomes, then urban designers should treat it as a foundational value; otherwise they will underachieve, which will be less beneficial to humans and to the environment. None of this is easy, but a common foundational value for all of urban design can focus the discourse, provide a basis for decisions and assist in evaluating outcomes.

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