Book review

URBAN DESIGN FUTURES

M. Moor and J. Rowland (eds). Routledge, 2005. ISBN 0 415 31878 5, £32, 198 pp.

This is an important book that should be read by any engineer engaged in the design and planning of major development. It should also assist anyone who wants to gain a deeper understanding of urban design in the (recent) past and what developments are likely to occur in the future.

The book comprises 21 essays by some of the leading practitioners in the field. It is extensively illustrated with case studies from around the globe and, although these are drawn from the more prosperous countries and regions, particularly the UK, it does reflect a comprehensive view of the state of the art.

The book is divided into four sections, or themes. Each theme covers a particular area: overview of urban design, creating the public realm, sustainability and new forms of urbanism.

Some examples will be well known to many practitioners, for example BedZED (London), Olympic Park master plan (London) and Woonerfs (The Hague), but most examples will be less familiar to all but the specialist. Having all of these examples drawn into a single volume is valuable in its own right, but having an overview of the principles and processes at work in their creation is very valuable.

Urban Design Futures does not only concern itself with streetscene and land use planning. Many examples are given of domestic dwellings; public spaces; retail, commercial and distribution centres. The only significant omission appears to be industrial estates.

The book is not intended as a pattern book for designers but a review of how we have got to where we are now. This is not a book for the reference library, although it could usefully be held for that purpose, but a book to ponder and discuss. It provides a thoughtful analysis of the master planning exercise and the, sometimes hidden, assumptions that are implicit in the process.

The major strength of the book is that it urges practitioners to analyse the needs of the community the development serves and to provide an infrastructure to meet those needs. In that sense it is conventional in arguing that form follows function. It also urges designers to delve into the true needs of society and investigate the sustainability of designs so as not to repeat the mistakes of the past. Again, in that sense, it is conventional. What is unconventional is a discussion in the closing section of what forms of living we can reasonably expect to arise in the future and what urban designs might be appropriate to meet these needs. It points out that all too often clients ask for a pastiche of the past but, when it is provided, they are disappointed with the result.

One criticism that can be levelled is that many of the pictures and diagrams are too small and poorly labelled to illustrate the developments for which they were created. But this is a minor criticism as the explanatory note for these schemes is the major purpose of the book.

Many engineers will have led, or taken part in, 'planning for real' events and community consultation exercises. More than a few will have found how difficult it is to engage with people who are wary, and frequently distrustful, of the 'the suit' selling them a new vision for their area. It is popular wisdom (or an urban myth?) that a community will be left with a mess of broken promises and aspirations when the glossy display boards come down and the 'team' moves on. This issue is not, specifically, discussed and this is a serious omission in a book that sets itself the task of opening a debate on urban futures. It is to be hoped that this issue will be addressed in a second edition.

Designers, be they architects, planners or engineers, are increasingly being called upon to address development issues in many contexts: regeneration, new build, city centre and suburb. As the book reminds us, 'those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it'; this book should assist the practitioner to avoid this mistake and make a meaningful contribution.

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