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Author

Kelbaugh, Douglas

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Urbanism and/or Architecture: Toward a Theory of Norm and Scale

Douglas Kelbaugh



While serving on this year's *Places* jury and recently visiting the Venice Biennale and Poundbury in England, I was reminded of how remarkably rare and difficult it is to *simultaneously* produce good architecture and good urbanism.

Too often we see superior new architecture that is part of inferior urban design and planning, or good urbanism compromised by poorly designed buildings. An obvious example of the former would be an accomplished building by a talented architect set along a freeway or arterial strip or lost on the circus skyline of a Dubai. The latter might be a tritely designed and thinly crafted neotraditional buildings facing an exemplary mixed-use street with a light rail line.

The above assertion is admittedly full of subjective values and personal sensibilities—as well as humanist belief in the possibility both of agreeing on what is good and making progress toward it. Nevertheless, I would like to try to unpack some of my underlying assumptions in order to open an important dilemma for discussion.

Some Basic Premises

Premise 1. Norms and regulations are necessary for a healthy and productive society, just as personal rights and creative freedom are essential to human growth, dignity and happiness. A dynamic and robust balance of these competing but complementary tendencies must be maintained within a given society.

History is replete with examples in which excessive swings in one direction or the other have resulted in dysfunctional societies, characterized by various combinations of oppression, indulgence and stagnation, or disorder, profligacy and anarchy.

Functional societies are self-organizing, self-regulating and self-repairing, much like ecosystems, with their feedback loops, as well as the (*very* occasional) sudden shift or unpredictable leap that punctuates the equilibrium. These cultures constantly check and balance their laws, institutions and norms.

This dialectical loosening and tightening are overlapping, messy and continuous, although the cycles of change have accelerated recently as economic, political and cultural forces have become more globally interdependent, electronically connected, diverse and polarized. Society and the metropolis combine to form an evolving whole with a soupy texture more akin to a biosphere or quantum mechanics than the clearly articulated and interacting parts of Newtonian physics.

Today, the clashes and mergers, diasporas and agglomerations, and benefits and unintended consequences of technology (real and virtual) have all combined to make humankind's future both daunting and promising. Similarly, the planet's natural systems and carrying capacity are increasingly stressed by our individual and collective ecological footprints.

Premise 2. Both a desire for individual agency and a social need for shared norms are expressed and reflected in the built environment, especially the city. (Villages tend to be more like tribal communities, where there is greater emphasis on unity—often at the expense of external enemies or internal “others”—than on the individual rights, anonymity and autonomy that typically obtain in the city.) Conversely, buildings and cities have a pervasive if under-recognized effect on individual and collective behavior and well-being.

Typically, needs and desires tend to be actively *expressed* at the architectural scale and passively *reflected* at the urban scale. Obviously, the smaller the scale of design and production, the more personal and direct the expression can and is likely to be. For example, architectural details and the facade have long been within the purview of individual expression.

At the larger scale—from the neighborhood and district up to the metropolitan area—there is less ability to proactively and holistically design the built environment. Except in the case of prescriptive zoning or autocratic political regimes, the built environment at this scale becomes a more inadvertent embodiment of market economics, real estate development practices, and political forces.

Premise 3. It is not good to be expressive, creative and inventive—or, conversely, to be normative, standardized and prescriptive—at *every scale* of the built environment. Totalizing consistency risks losing the balance between the individual and society, tending toward disorder and chaos on the one hand or regimentation and ennui on the other.

Examples of either excess abound, whether it be homogeneous suburban sprawl (where an isotropic monoculture and repetition tend to be the rule), or the heterogeneous,

mixed use cityscape and informal settlements of global cities (where buildings fight each other for public attention or scarce construction materials). Thus, in the fantasy extravagance of Dubai or the exuberant but composed spectacle of Singapore, one would be hard-pressed to identify a building by Zaha Hadid or Rem Koolhaas (whose research firm AMO first made this observation, suggesting that a great many firms can do flashy and creative designs, if not with equivalent skill and competence).

At one extreme of imbalance are places of disorienting if vibrant heterogeneity, such as Tokyo, whose urban fabric consists of a *mélange* of one-off, exceptional buildings set amidst a tangle of infrastructure and circus of advertising. At the other are places of numbing, monochromatic uniformity, such as the carpet-like residential subdivision in America. In the former case, the architect's job may be to calm and bring order to the visual cacophony—to add some repetitive bass notes; in the latter, it may be to intensify or corrupt the monotony with some bold, treble riffs.

Premise 4. There are some scales that are more appropriate for the exercise of personal expression and creativity, and other scales more suitable for society's imposition of norms, standards and restrictions.

Intimations of a Theory

Premise 4 is where my argument takes a subjective leap and complicates itself. Specifically, it requires positing some of the essential differences and similarities between architecture and urbanism. This is unavoidable if one wants to tentatively approach a unified theory of scale and norms, despite the suspect quality of the universal and master-narrative in this poststructuralist, posthumanist theoretical and academic climate (in decline ‘tho it is.)

We might first consider the characteristic physical dimensions of a work of architecture and how they are typically represented. Despite recent and worthwhile attempts to blur the distinction between conventional modes of representation, of the basic drawing types used to produce buildings, elevations tend to be planar, while plans and sections tend to be spatial. Movement through space adds the fourth dimension of time, as does the weathering and adaptation of a building.

The spatial and temporal aspects of architectural tend to trigger more primordial and universal human instincts and senses than stylized form. The olfactory, auditory, kinesthetic

Opposite: Tokyo provides a vivid example of the disorienting quality of design heterogeneity at too many scales. Photo by author at Venice Biennale exhibit.



senses are harder wired and have a smaller comfort zone, and they therefore offer less latitude for and adaptation to arbitrary or superficial manipulation and stylizing.

Although various cultures and epochs may emphasize them differently, the physiology of our senses—or, for that matter, the reach of our arms or length of our stride—have changed little if any over historic time. In the same way, certain pleasures and fears closely tied to survival and evolution are deeply programmed into our psyches.

Take the example of Venice. Most people feel innately comfortable and titillated while exploring its narrow streets and being released from their spatial and auditory compression into a more luminous and open piazza. Likewise, our psychological need for refuge and privacy is provided

Above: The natural pleasure of walking Venice's confusing narrow streets and discovering open plazas reveals that spatio-temporal experience is harder-wired than the aesthetics of architectural style.

by the security and sanctuary of a home base (e.g., a hotel room) in which we can collapse and recharge ourselves. Our basic curiosity for prospect is accommodated by a view from a roof garden or campanile—not to mention the equally satisfying flirtation with hazard and kinesthetic confusion that energize us in its narrow passages after dark. And our instinctual desire to get to down to water, which we seem to share with other animals, is readily satiated.

To the extent architecture is experienced two-dimensionally, statically and pictorially, it tends to be less timeless and less constrained by physical and functional demands.

The design of vertical surfaces can more easily and inexpensively be expressive, even whimsical, than a plan or section. An incredibly broad range of period styles and fashions have emerged to satisfy the seemingly insatiable human appetite for aesthetic variety and change—from Classical to Cubist, Ruskinian to Richardsonian, Byzantine to Baroque, Mughal to Modernist. It is in the vertical dimension, the manipulation of building materials, pattern,

texture, transparency, etc., that these styles are most readily expressed and understood.

Although plans and sections can also vary radically from style to style—as can tectonics—the manifestation of most styles tends to be most easily produced and read in the essentially planar exterior and interior elevations. That is why a building’s style can be dramatically transformed, for instance, by a skin-deep facelift.

Urban design is also two-, three-, and four-dimensional, and it is subject or not to style in the same ways. But as scale enlarges to encompass the urban realm, increasingly functional and operational concerns begin to dominate. Furthermore, although there are examples of long-lived structures adapted and utilized for different purposes by successive occupants of differing cultures, cities must function over a longer span of time, and for a larger and broader pool of people than individual buildings (although they too can and should be built to be more adaptive over time, with some parts more permanently constructed than others).

In a sense, then, the stakes are higher and time cycles longer with the city. At the same time, urban projects can now be so large and the pace of urban development so fast that there isn’t time to evaluate, learn from, and relate to adjacent increments of the city. Indeed, buildings can be thrown up so rapidly as to be “weapons of mass construction.” Urbanism, fast or slow, is less susceptible and conducive to arbitrary styling than architecture.

It is nonetheless possible to plan at a large scale. However, providing from the top down a vision, metaphor, conceptual diagram, planning framework, comprehensive plan, infrastructure plan, illustrative plan, zoning code, and/or adopting from the bottom up a self-generating algorithm, pattern language, field of emergence, or community process is less about aesthetic experience than about the structure, operation and character of a city. *To be sure, there can be big ideas and large-scale patterns in urbanism, including at the metropolitan and regional scale, but on the ground and in the senses they are inherently beyond reading in the optical or visual sense.*

It may be possible (and effective) to design an urban ensemble or skyline in a visually compositional mode. But no matter how based on facts or systems thinking, it is indulgent and ineffectual for architects or urban designers to consider whole cities in terms of precise master plans or as painterly canvases. In the contemporary world the ambition to be totalizing, whether dystopian or utopian, is a conceit doomed to frustration and failure in all but the smallest or most autocratic of political contexts.

Unlike the metropolis, buildings, building complexes, urban precincts, and even whole neighborhoods, districts, corridors and urban centers or downtowns can be conceived from or as a single formal idea or system. And form-based codes can bring a balance between community and design freedom. But whole cities are too complex, incremental and dynamic to be captured by a singular hand or *parti*.

Norms and codes may help shape a city, but the design of a whole cloth city is beyond the normative—initially because it is too large, complex and specific to its site, topography, climate, and historical origins; and over time because of changing technology, demographics, and cross-fertilization with its own and other cultures.

Implications for Design

What does this mean for physical, on-the-ground architecture and urbanism? Here, an architect or urban designer must disclose his/her personal aesthetic tastes and sensibilities (which are to a large extent hard-wired early in life), and his/her design values and principles (which are learned later in life, usually programmed in architecture school, and subsequently either developed or rebelled against).

Although raised in several American suburbs, with some early years in urban settings, I was trained as a Corbusian modernist, and educated to think critically, independently and creatively. (The big unspoken norm was that you never designed a project that looked like anyone else’s in studio.) Soon after, I was swept away by the social and cultural tsunami of the 1960s and 70s, working first in what was then called the ghetto and then in a municipal architecture office. This led to starting a passive-solar architecture firm, part-time teaching, and ultimately a full-time academic appointment. This path included more than a passing interest during the 1980s in Critical Regionalism and phenomenology. And for the last two decades I have been involved in New Urbanism, which was founded by former colleagues and friends, and which I continue to support, but not without reservations and criticism.

With this background, I am torn between Modernist and traditional orientations, and appreciate both avant-garde and vernacular modes. The best, perhaps only, way for me to resolve this tension is to sort it out by scale. In short, I have come to believe that while Modernism and the “critical project” are superior at some scales and have produced some exquisite buildings, New Urbanism offers a sounder and more enduring vision for organizing cities at most scales, at least in most North American cities.

However, despite the great promises of its Charter,



New Urbanism’s lofty goals are often not achieved, partly because the architecture and building tectonics that the movement has utilized are frequently disappointing. These failings cannot be entirely blamed on middle-class taste or the marketplace, as is often the refrain. New Urbanists need to be as assertive and passionate about the quality of design and construction as they are about compact, mixed-use, walkable neighborhoods. And they should not be so normative at every scale and across the entire cross-section of the city. For example, there needs to be an alter ego, right side of the New Urbanist Transect where some hell can break loose once in a while—within a let-it-rip entertainment district, for instance.

Alternatives to New Urbanism currently come primarily from two directions—although Landscape Urbanism is fast emerging as another, if somewhat more sympathetic, position. On one side, Neo-Modernism (or, as I

Left: Barcelona shows how a gridded, normative plan with standard and consistent architectural types can provide sufficient and elegant urban variety. Photo by author at Venice Biennale exhibit.

Right: Lower Manhattan shows how stylistic consistency is rarely a hallmark of a vibrant, diverse and market-driven urban environment, especially when the architectural types are so varied. Photo by author.



have called it, Post Urbanism) also mixes up land uses, but it sexes up the architecture, devalues contextualism, and focuses too much on the spectacular solo building or urban fragment. As a result, it remains captive to an attitude of change for its own sake and an ever-escalating race for media attention, transnational capital, and brand recognition, all of which favor the treble over the bass clef. It’s not particularly friendly or humane, either. On the other side of New Urbanism is Everyday Urbanism, which is admirably committed to social equity, but sets its goals too low for urban formal coherence, and places too much design hope in the ordinary.

Having criticized the avant-gardist and sometimes the vernacularist approaches to urbanism, I must admit that the superior design talent of the former and the egalitarian community-mindedness of the latter often give me pause. Many of the designs by “star architects” are stunningly and seductively beautiful. Likewise, the social justice and community-based design of Everyday Urbanism is exemplary. But the Latinate clarity and humanity of New Urbanism, as well as its program to rebuild our cities and rethink our suburbs, are also compelling. And the ecological sensitivities of Landscape Urbanism are positive. If there were only a way to combine the best of them!

The following is an attempt to sketch the initial outlines



of such a resolution—not by resolving or compromising their differences or robbing them of their frisson or long-term power, but by letting them coexist proportionally and synergistically rather than awkwardly and antagonistically.

Principles of an Integrated Urbanism

Accept that cities rarely can be aesthetically conceived, composed or built as a whole. Although the size of urban development projects may be increasing, cities are increasingly large, dynamic, chaotic and beyond the normative—i.e., neither controllable by rules and customs, nor based on shared cultural values. They can and often should be guided by big visions, but these should involve flexible frameworks and infrastructure rather than totalizing or aesthetic *uber* ideas.

Recognize that the most effective scale at which to be normative, even prescriptive, is that of urban design and infrastructure. Useful norms at this scale include Transit-Oriented Development, connective street networks with small block sizes; a clear hierarchy of street types frequently defined by continuous street walls; a rich mix of uses and of building types and architectural types; pedestrian and bicycle friendliness; buildings that are as low-rise as possible (with high-rise towers in central cities as required); on-site energy production and conservation; sensitivity to and

preservation of historic buildings and neighborhoods; sustainable water and waste reuse and recycling; a clear hierarchy of public and private buildings and spaces; and a use of foreground and background architecture, respectively, for honorific and everyday purposes.

Try to be as typologically consistent as possible along a street without giving in to excessive repetition or banal formulas. Architectural typology and its coherent deployment is an increasingly effective and needed ordering device as messier mixes of use continue to replace the single-use zoning of the Modernist city. And as projects get bigger, it is more challenging to create an adaptable and nuanced urbanism, because of the greater granularity of development. New tools are needed to encourage a finer grain, as well as to require large-scale developers to be less repetitive and formulaic.

Accept that it is not reasonable or equitable in heterogeneous societies to highly regulate architectural style. Because human expressivity is irrepressible, style is unavoidable, which means a diverse population will naturally produce incon-

Above: As the size of developments get bigger and societies become more diverse, it becomes more challenging to create an urbanism that is incremental, contextual and culturally sensitive. Photo of Montonde Casitas in Ixtapaluca, Mexico, by Oscar Ruiz.

Table 1 Normative(N) and Free(F) scales in architecture/urbanism.

	Architectural detail/ component	Building architectural style	Architectural type. building massing	Street, plat., block size, configuration	Neighborhood, Cor- ridor and District size +	City and Metro Region
Modernist/ Post Urbanist	N	F	F	F	F	N
Traditionalist/ New Urbanist	F	N	N	N	N	F
Proposed Synthesis/ Resolution	N or F	F*	N*	N*	N	F

Zone of individual expression	Zone of community control	Zone of less control
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* Key area of compromise—Traditionalists/New Urbanists need to be less normative at the building scale, especially about architectural style and façade design.

Modernist/Post Urbanists need to be more normative at the urban design scale, especially about building massing and block size.

sistent styles. Although norms, incentives, and form-based codes can effectively promote common architectural types and massing, it is unrealistic and sometimes falsely communitarian to expect or demand stylistic consistency (unless a clear majority favors such uniformity).

As the scale of buildings and developments enlarges, societies become more diverse, and demographics more dynamic, we need to find new ways to design contextually sensitive buildings, (perhaps by requiring common materials, colors, and landscaping rather than forcing a common architectural language or style). As global culture bleaches out regional differences and challenges the creation of authentically local place, it becomes less tenable to hope for an architectural consistency that is organic and rich, not overly repetitive or staged. But ways can and should be devised to voluntarily achieve more design harmony at the scale of the street and square.

The small scale of the architectural detail and component, e.g., windows and doors, is an appropriate scale at which to promote craft and individual self-expression. Craft can be achieved by machine as well as by hand. Computerized fabrication can be developed that is as sensitive to the shaping and joining of materials as traditional handcraft. This is also the right scale in some building types to allow for spatial flexibility over short-term cycles and adaptability over the long-term, by providing movable and replaceable partitions, doors and windows within structural frames and cores built to last longer, in the tradition of “Open Building.”

Normative and Free, Local and Universal, Customary and Open

As cities and urban agglomerations across the world explode in size, we want to strive to balance the individual and the collective. There is neither the time nor the resources to reinvent architecture and urbanism every few years, or to solve our legion of problems one at a time. The risks are becoming higher and the odds worse. The planet will survive, but will the fragile and irreplaceable ecosystems that support human life be sustained? At present, we seem to be headed for very inconvenient, painful discontinuities and involuntary downsizings.

We need to get it right—*soon*—by focusing more on enduring and sustainable models at all scales—from the window to the watershed. In addition to knowing when to be normative/prescriptive and free/open at the right scales, we must find ways to make our cities more restorative and sustainable in environmental, economic and social terms. They are, after all, forecast to receive the next two to three billion increase in world population, should the planet end up permitting such growth. And we need to attend to the social and ecological consequences of our architecture and urbanism, or *nature will respond* in ways that we haven’t planned for or can’t adapt to.

Success in these endeavors might just bring an additional if trivial pleasure: awards jurors would be able to premiate good architecture and good urbanism in the same place at the same time.