

# Urban Design Services

David Dixon, FAIA

*Urban design—like other aspects of architecture—begins with envisioning built environments and then transforms these visions into reality. While most architects focus on individual structures, urban designers work with groups of buildings, neighborhoods, campuses, districts, cities, and even regions.*

Urban design gives form and definition to the full spectrum of forces—cultural, ecological, economic, political, social, aesthetic—that shape the built environment and the public realm. Urban designers synthesize diverse factors—which might include, among others, the *policies* of a city planning agency, the *values* of neighborhood advocates, and the *technical findings* of transportation and real estate consultants—into plans, guidelines, and regulations that shape the physical character of everything from individual sites to entire regions. Their work establishes the parameters (height, massing, use, total development capacity, design character, connection to the surrounding context, and comparable elements) that enable other architects to design buildings, developers to initiate projects, mayors to revitalize cities, governors to launch smart-growth initiatives, and similar activities.

Urban design can be an integral aspect of an architecture practice. Urban design projects can represent anywhere from 5 percent to virtually all of the work of a firm. Urban designers are often instrumental in creating new markets for firms—conducting initial studies for developers, preparing campus master plans, creating visions for new neighborhoods, working with communities to ensure that new developments become welcome neighborhoods, crafting strategies for complex mixed-use projects, and undertaking a wide range of other tasks that lead to substantial architectural commissions. In the public sector, urban designers play a central role in shaping complex public policies that will determine the character and quality of communities, as well as helping communities, elected officials, and others understand the physical shape and dimensions of policy decisions. Academic research and publications from urban designers in academia build awareness of issues ranging from design theory to sustainability and are an important source of inspiration for the design profession as a whole.

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## Summary

### URBAN DESIGN SERVICES

#### Why a Client May Need These Services

- To manage regional growth
- To reinvigorate downtowns, main streets, and village centers
- To redevelop waterfronts
- To revitalize neighborhoods
- To guide campus growth
- To create or rebuild communities
- To address special planning needs

#### Knowledge and Skills Required

- Proficiency in building design and site planning
- Familiarity with a wide range of building types, including design characteristics and parking requirements
- Ability to convey planning and design ideas visually and verbally
- Familiarity with real estate economics, transportation, zoning, and related fields
- Ability to hear, understand, and balance multiple points of view
- Appreciation of the need to build political and community support for planning and urban design concepts

#### Representative Process Tasks

- Define the project
- Identify and analyze key issues
- Articulate a vision
- Develop a plan

► **Urban design is about finding the fit between people and place.**

## A Comparison of Urban Design and Building Design

URBAN DESIGN	BUILDING DESIGN
<i>Define the project:</i> Goals, stakeholders and outreach approach, project area (region, neighborhood, or site), development program, financing	<i>Programming:</i> Goals, uses, costs
<i>Identify and analyze the key issues:</i> Transportation, real estate economics, environment, community values and history, sense of place	<i>Conceptual design:</i> Design character, building configuration, site plan, cost-effectiveness, and feasibility
<i>Articulate a vision:</i> Planning and design qualities, character and place-making, trade-offs	<i>Schematic design:</i> Floor plans, sections, elevations
<i>Frame recommendations:</i> Implementation strategy; new zoning, design guidelines, and other policies to translate the urban design effort into quality buildings and public spaces; report preparation	<i>Design development and working drawings, construction administration:</i> Building systems, design details, construction documents

► **Urban design can result in visions and new public policies that establish long-term legacies, offering guidance for shaping growth and change for generations.**

*William A. Gilchrist, AIA,  
director of planning,  
Montgomery, Alabama*

Urban designers often lead the response of the design profession to cultural, economic, and social change. Most notably, they have placed the issue of sprawl on the national agenda, helping to promulgate the need for healthier, more sustainable communities. Urban designers across the country have led public forums and produced visual materials that help people understand the benefits of directing regional growth to developed areas, building walkable communities and transit-oriented projects, and embracing well-designed higher-density areas as communities grow and change. Urban designers often lead large interdisciplinary teams in crafting building and zoning codes that encourage mixed-use development, creating models for mixed-income housing in the face of declining public investment in housing, advocating higher-density urban housing in response to changing demographics, and promoting reuse of waterfronts and derelict industrial sites.

The American Institute of Architects (AIA) recognizes excellence in urban design through its Honor Awards program. The five Institute Honor Awards for Regional and Urban Design granted in 2004 illustrate the breadth and scope of contemporary urban design:

- **Chicago Central Area Plan.** A framework to guide the evolution of downtown Chicago, including the shape and character of buildings and public spaces, over the next twenty years (Skidmore, Owings & Merrill with Panto-Ulema Architects)
- **Mission Bay Redevelopment Plan, San Francisco.** A plan for a new mixed-use, mixed-income neighborhood in San Francisco's Mission Bay area (Johnson Fain with Simon Martin-Vegue Winkelstein Moris, and Machado and Silvetti Associates)

### At What Scales Do Urban Designers Work?

- **Regional.** Smart growth, regional transportation planning, economic development
- **District.** Downtown plans, larger mixed-use developments, greenfield site developments, design guidelines and zoning, development studies, design review
- **Neighborhood.** HOPE VI, neighborhood revitalization, larger urban and suburban residential development, design guidelines and zoning, design review
- **Campus.** Campus planning, institution-related development, design review
- **Site.** Site planning for large-scale projects (traditional developments, TOD), public agency-sponsored site studies, development planning, design guidelines, design review
- **Streetscape.** Streetscape elements, graphics, design guidelines, design review
- **Building.** Feasibility studies, conceptual design studies, design guidelines

## Origins of Urban Design

Contemporary urban design has its roots in the City Beautiful movement, born in the 1890s in an effort to give new shape to American cities straining under the effects of rapid industrialization. City Beautiful architects were the urban designers of their day, going beyond building design to conceive whole neighborhoods, park systems, and roadways to accommodate the needs of a rapidly industrializing society.

Daniel Burnham's 1909 plan for Chicago represents the crowning achievement of the City Beautiful movement, but it also marks the point at which leadership in shaping the character of American cities began to shift from architectural visionaries supporting the efforts of civic groups to professional planners operating within government agencies.

Rapid economic change following World War I led to the emergence of city planning as a new field. The *city functional* replaced the *city beautiful*, with an increasing emphasis on the economics and mechanics of city planning and a reduced emphasis on design. During the 1950s and 1960s the city functional concept reached its zenith in an urban renewal movement that led to massive rebuilding of city and town centers across the United States with little regard to their quality, character, or human scale.

Contemporary urban design was born of a reaction to urban renewal and recognition of the need to bridge the gap between planning and design. No discussion of urban design is complete without paying homage to Jane Jacobs, whose *Life and Death of American Cities* and other landmark writing in the 1950s and 1960s renewed interest in cities that celebrated the human desire for community. Her work and that of others spurred a renewed interest in the role design could play in making cities livable and, as a consequence, in the discipline of urban design.

- **Getting It Right: Preventing Sprawl in Coyote Valley, San Jose, California:** Guidelines that explore alternative development models intended to combat sprawl at the suburban edge of San Jose (WRT/Solomon E.T.C.)
- **The Confluence: A Conversation, Heritage, and Recreation Center, St. Louis.** A plan for creation of a 200-square-mile regional park around the confluence of the Mississippi and Missouri rivers north of St. Louis (The HOK Planning Group and H3 Studio)
- **Urban River Visions, Worcester, Massachusetts.** A series of visions that demonstrate how redevelopment of urban waterfronts in seven smaller cities across Massachusetts can spur revitalization and enhance livability (Goody Clancy & Associates)

Urban designers are active participants in the AIA, principally through the Regional and Urban Design Committee (RUDC) and the Regional/Urban Design Assistance Team (R/UDAT) program. RUDC holds an annual one-day spring roundtable, which serves as a forum for discussion of current urban design trends and issues, and collaborates with other AIA groups to hold conferences that explore significant urban design issues. The R/UDAT program sends panels of architects, urban designers, and fellow professionals from many fields to help communities plan projects that have ranged from central business district planning in Butte, Montana; park system planning for St. Louis, Missouri; to post-tornado planning for Nashville, Tennessee.

## CLIENT NEEDS

Whether working for a private firm, in the public sector, in academia, or in other aspects of practice, urban designers focus on projects that reflect the critical forces—primarily economic, environmental, and social—that shape communities. The typical nature of such projects changes over time, but today a list of likely projects would at least include the following.

## Regional Growth-Management Plans

Urban designers increasingly are engaged in a wide variety of smart-growth planning projects. Virtually unknown a decade ago, this type of project involves a rich mix of

► I am very pleased to have found a way to work in the design area that I feel most passionate about—the design of cities.

*J. Roger Boothe, AIA,  
director of urban design for the  
City of Cambridge, Massachusetts*

► **Architecture is an art, but more a social and public art than a personal or fine art. My greatest satisfaction comes from . . . architecture that incrementally revitalizes an urban street or neighborhood.**

*Douglas S. Kelbaugh, FAIA, dean,  
Taubman College of  
Architecture + Urban Planning,  
University of Michigan*

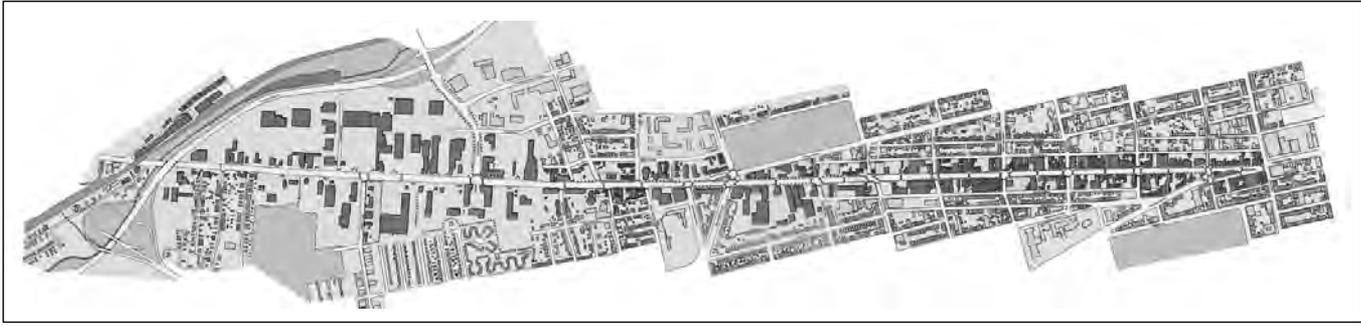
social, economic, environmental, and design issues. Diverse public agencies, ranging from the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency to state agencies and regional planning agencies, foundations, nonprofits such as the Urban Land Institute, and civic coalitions, among other groups, are sponsoring initiatives intended to curb sprawl, direct investment and growth into developed areas, and preserve the natural environment. Projects such as Envision Utah—a regional effort to encourage growth in already developed areas, redirecting it from environmentally sensitive regions—focus on entire states. Regional initiatives under way in Washington, D.C.; Chicago; and other large metropolitan areas focus on reversing patterns of sprawl. Smaller communities such as Concord, New Hampshire, have launched initiatives to preserve traditional community character.

## Plans for Downtowns and Major Commercial Districts

Local governments, chambers of commerce, foundations, institutions, public/private partnerships, and other entities sponsor a variety of projects intended to guide growth and change in downtown areas and other major commercial districts. In cities with strong real estate markets, such as Boston or San Francisco, these efforts often focus on managing growth and change to ensure it respects the character of existing districts and produces substantial public benefits, such as new parks and affordable housing. In contrast, other communities ask urban designers to create a vision and plans for revitalizing a downtown or new mixed-use urban districts to reverse years of disinvestment and attract office, housing, and other development projects. In recent years, universities and other institutions have increasingly asked urban designers to create ambitious revitalization strategies that will attract mixed-use development and add vitality to nearby districts.



South Bay Planning Study, Boston: Jointly sponsored by two government agencies, the South Bay initiative lays the groundwork for a new mixed-use district in downtown Boston. The plan helps achieve several goals simultaneously: to provide needed housing and recreational space for nearby neighborhoods, to enliven the downtown public realm, to provide commercial space for regional economic development, and to create air rights above a regional highway.  
*Goody Clancy*



Central Avenue Study, Albany: A business association commissioned this study of a long-neglected central thoroughfare in Albany, New York. The recommendations offered a blueprint for reinforcing a sense of place along the three-mile corridor as a tool for strengthening existing businesses, attracting new investment, and reviving older neighborhoods.

*Goody Clancy*

## Main Street Revitalization

Municipalities, business improvement districts, and business- and property-owner groups sponsor development of revitalization strategies and urban design plans for older commercial districts and corridors. Study areas can range from a single key block targeted for redevelopment to a former Main Street, such as Central Avenue in Albany, New York, that extends for several miles and serves many neighborhoods. Projects that cover wider areas usually involve plans to attract a wide range of retail, housing, institutional, and mixed-use development to older commercial areas. Such extensive Main Street projects often raise significant historic preservation issues. For many older communities, such as Miami's historic African-American Overtown district, a revitalized Main Street is viewed as a key step in attracting people back to nearby residential neighborhoods. Urban designers also prepare plans and designs for entirely new mixed-use, walkable districts—often for the private sector—that resemble traditional Main Streets and form the heart of new communities such as Celebration or Seaside, both in Florida.

## Waterfronts

State agencies, local governments, private developers, property owners, and a range of other clients sponsor development of strategies for transforming older industrial waterfronts into mixed-use districts with vibrant waterside promenades or more targeted efforts to redevelop individual sites or increase public access along the waterfront. Cities facing very different bodies of water—from the Ohio River in Louisville, to Lake Erie in Cleveland, to Puget Sound in Seattle—have turned to underutilized waterfront areas to create lively mixed-use development in active, pedestrian-oriented districts. Urban designers in cities in heavily developed regions have worked to expand water transit and find new ways for people to enjoy urban harbors and shipping channels. Demand for experience in planning and design for urban waterfronts is increasing as cities such as Pittsburgh; San Antonio; Washington, D.C.; and Boston report that a significant share of regional investment is being targeted toward redevelopment of waterfront areas.

## Neighborhood Revitalization

During the 1980s and 1990s, many U.S. cities began to experience a reversal of decades of disinvestment and abandonment in older urban neighborhoods. City governments (including housing authorities), developers, community-based nonprofits, universities, and other institutions responded by sponsoring neighborhood revitalization projects across the country. The federal HOPE VI program played an important role in this process, funding transformation of public housing into mixed-income neighborhoods. More recently, growing demand for housing at every income level has spurred significant collaboration between cities and developers. Their common goal is to build significant amounts of mixed-income housing and reinvest in existing housing in older neighborhoods, along with developing new parks and reinvigorating commercial districts. Universities have funded innovative neighborhood-revitalization programs in cities like Baltimore, Cincinnati, and Columbus.

Uplands Redevelopment, Baltimore: The Housing Authority of Baltimore City chose to replace a deteriorated public housing development with a new mixed-income community of choice. The plan increases the site's density and offers a much broader range of housing types set along walkable streets.

*Goody Clancy*



## Campus Planning

The need to continuously upgrade and expand, combined with a desire to respond to changing social and cultural trends, leads colleges, universities, and medical campuses to sponsor a steady flow of campus-planning initiatives. Such projects vary from traditional studies to determine the location for a new building or public space to innovative initiatives aimed at breaking down physical and social barriers between campuses and adjacent communities. Their need to meet growing housing needs for students, faculty, and staff has made institutions more significant stakeholders in the planning and design efforts of surrounding communities. Some cities and public agencies have asked urban designers to create plans to guide institutional growth.

## New Communities

Over the past fifteen years, private developers have created a number of new communities outside major cities or in resort locations. Many reflect design concepts pioneered by the Congress for the New Urbanism. Planned and designed as alternatives to formless sprawl, these new communities stress traditional qualities such as street grids; a public realm of streets, squares, and parks; and pedestrian-friendly neighborhood centers. Some of these communities are age-restricted, but others—such as Reston, Virginia; Kentlands, located near Washington, D.C.; and Celebration, Florida, developed by the Disney Corporation—welcome a broad mix of ages and household types.

## Transit-Oriented Development

Transit agencies, cities, private developers, and state and regional planning agencies have become increasingly active in sponsoring housing and mixed-use development near transit stations. Projects range from devising broad strategies and planning and design guidelines that encourage transit-oriented development (TOD) on the state level to site-specific feasibility and design studies commissioned by developers. Regions as diverse as Washington, D.C.; Dallas; and Seattle are witnessing significant growth in TOD, and states such as Massachusetts and New Jersey have promoted this approach to community planning.

## Development Projects

Private developers, universities and other institutions, and a variety of public agencies sponsor studies of specific sites to determine their potential uses, development capacity,



South Gateway Center, Columbus: Three decades after turning away from neighboring communities, the Ohio State University has begun the process of restoring connections to High Street, the commercial thoroughfare that once served as the campus front door. South Gateway Center will introduce a mix of retail, entertainment, and office space designed to jump-start redevelopment along High Street.

Client: South Campus Gateway  
Architect: Elkus Manfredi Architects

scale, financial feasibility, design character, and other characteristics. Increasingly, urban designers are asked to craft planning and design strategies private developers can use to develop new parks, affordable housing, and other benefits that have traditionally been funded by the public sector. While many of these development projects are in urban areas, clients increasingly ask urban designers to take on projects such as revitalizing older town centers and suburban commercial districts; transforming failed suburban shopping centers into walkable, mixed-use developments; and creating higher-density housing proposals for mature suburbs.

## Planning and Design Guidelines

Public agencies, institutions, developers, and other clients sponsor a wide variety of projects that yield development or design guidelines. Traditionally, this work involves drawing up detailed, prescriptive guidelines that address all aspects of development—from building heights to the look of traffic signs—for a site or district. Urban designers affiliated with the Congress for the New Urbanism have come up with innovative approaches to development, including “form-based code,” in which a zoning code establishes appropriate scale, character, setback, and similar measures without dictating style. On a larger scale, urban designers have created smart-growth guidelines to shape growth and change across entire regions.

## Other Services

The kinds of projects urban designers work on change as our society changes. Clients, from cities to universities, ask urban designers to work with landscape architects and

► . . . form-based codes focus on the community’s design vision. Basic rules specify a range of acceptable building types and welcome mixed-use development. Modest regulations specify minimum and maximum height, avoiding big expanses of walls and requiring building out to the sidewalk to create a sense of place.

*Arlington County, Virginia,  
press release, February 10, 2004*

other professionals to plan and design innovative urban parks, environmental art, signage, and other aspects of the public realm. Elected officials, private developers, and other clients ask urban designers to organize and manage national and international planning and design competitions intended to spark innovative approaches to rebuilding older cities or whole new districts. Such competitions may focus on new town squares, redevelopment of obsolete industrial sites, or development of large mixed-use sites. As geographic information system (GIS) technology advances, environmental agencies, cities, and other clients ask urban designers to map and interpret the changing environmental, social, and economic conditions that shape changing communities.

## SKILLS

Urban design practitioners need a diverse set of skills: the ability to be generalists and integrators, listeners and educators, implementers and leaders, planners and designers. These dichotomous skills, essential to the interdisciplinary nature of urban design, make urban designers well suited to serve as leaders, partners, and valued contributors in many aspects of shaping the built environment.

## Roles Urban Designers Play

Urban designers enjoy a range of practice options as diverse as any available in architecture. An urban designer may head a public planning agency, collaborate with an interdisciplinary consultant team, practice in an urban design or architecture firm, teach, or work for a developer. In such roles, urban designers often serve as the face of the architecture profession in the larger community. They devote a substantial amount of time and intellectual energy to collaborating with numerous other professionals—from transportation planners and public officials to environmentalists and lawyers—and the larger community—from neighborhood leaders and local officials to preservation advocates and small business owners.

The work of urban designers is distinguished by three characteristics: First is the integration of design with planning and other disciplines, which requires a high degree of interdisciplinary collaboration. Second is a strong focus on community involvement and outreach. Third is a consistent focus on the public realm, which connects the components that make up the built environment.

With no specific certification for urban designers in the United States, it is hard to determine precisely how many practitioners there are. One rough gauge is the number of AIA members who affiliate themselves with the AIA's Regional and Urban Design Committee. This relatively small number (about 2,000 in 2004) might suggest that urban designers have generally found jobs outside of architecture firms in most parts of the country. In any case, urban design is more widely accepted as an area of architecture practice in larger cities. In smaller communities, urban design jobs are more likely to be in the public sector.

**Private firms.** Architecture firms, most of which also practice traditional architecture, represent a significant source of employment for urban designers. Four models for working with urban designers predominate:

*Urban designer as staff project team member.* Midsized and large architecture firms commonly hire urban designers to focus on master planning, project feasibility, conceptual design, and other activities that serve as precursors for architectural design. These individuals often work in the early stages of complex projects as part of a large project team. Urban designers working under this model are increasingly involved in overseas projects as well as domestic ones. In some cases, urban design firms have built substantial architecture practices.

*Urban design department in architecture firm.* A second model entails creation of an urban design division within an architecture firm. In some cases, urban designers work closely with architects, helping to create and shape significant architectural projects, for example, a large mixed-income, mixed-use development adjacent to a historic neighborhood. In other cases, urban designers work with planners, landscape architects, and others on specialized projects that can range from development of a regional smart-

► **The planning profession was founded by architects and has a legacy intertwined with the architecture profession . . .**

*Mark Straus, FAIA,  
principal and head of the  
planning studio, Fox and Fowle*

growth strategy to development of a vision for guiding revitalization of the area around a university. These projects rarely lead directly to designing a building.

*Urban designer-led architecture firm.* A third model, described by Pittsburgh-based Urban Design Associates (UDA) in its *Urban Design Handbook*, involves an architecture firm led by urban designers. The projects UDA discusses in their handbook grow out of a close connection between urban design and building design and involve urban designers at every stage in the process.

The fourth model involves small firms and single practitioners. These practitioners undertake projects by themselves but often ally with larger teams and serve as urban design specialists or advisers to developers and public agencies.

Within private firms, urban designers often spend their days very differently than most other architects. In contrast to many building design projects that entail a staff of at least four to ten, representing a wide range of experience and skills, a core urban design staff is generally smaller and has more senior staff members. Urban design project teams often comprise a single principal or senior urban designer working with a relatively experienced project designer and one or two additional staff members. This flat hierarchical structure reflects the high percentage of billable time spent in active collaboration, rather than performing technical document-related tasks such as production of construction documents. The urban designer's billable hours are more likely to include brainstorming with the client or internally, meeting with consultants from other disciplines, working with the community, and interacting with a variety of project participants in other ways.

While staffing for a particular urban design project may be small, the range of technical backgrounds and personal skills required to carry out the project is invariably much greater than that for a more traditional architectural project. An urban designer working on a particular project might bring expertise in site planning, conceptual architectural design, illustration and other forms of visual communication, design guidelines, zoning, and environmental and graphic design, as well as technical subjects ranging from green building and site design to the fundamentals of real estate economics. This expertise is best combined with personal skills such as the ability to frame broad visions, think analytically, work with people in community settings, be effective yet politically tactful, and above all, to collaborate. Because of the interdisciplinary nature of urban design, firms often employ people with backgrounds in landscape architecture, historic preservation, graphic design, and other fields to work with urban designers.

Urban designers also work for larger engineering firms, where they focus on community outreach, master planning, and similar activities; and for multidisciplinary firms that maintain active practices in landscape architecture, architecture, and planning and employ urban designers in all three disciplines.

**Public sector.** Many urban designers work for the public sector, often in leadership positions for planning agencies and redevelopment authorities. John Rahaim, AIA, executive director of CityDesign, Seattle's planning department, has worked for public agencies in Pittsburgh and Seattle on issues ranging from rebuilding public housing to transit-oriented development. Debra Smith, AIA, directed urban design for the City of Des Moines, reviewing development projects and working on neighborhood plans, and moved on to head an urban design division for Kansas City.

Two cities recently turned to urban designers to help lead agencies that conduct planning and oversee approval of major projects: Rebecca Barnes, FAIA, practiced urban design for public agencies and as a consultant before being selected as Boston's first chief planner. Chicago recently hired Sam Assefa, AIA, as its deputy planning commissioner to ensure that design plays an important role in planning initiatives. Anne Tate, AIA, followed a career as a teacher and consultant by signing on as Massachusetts's first smart-growth coordinator for the state's Office for Commonwealth Development, where she has spearheaded creation of the state's transit-oriented development initiative. Other city, state, and federal agencies, from local housing authorities to federal transportation agencies, employ urban designers.

**Academia.** More than thirty-five schools have specialized urban design programs. Urban designers are also involved in architecture, planning, and other academic programs. Lance Jay Brown, FAIA, chair of the School of Architecture, Landscape Architecture, and

► My design training—emphasizing creative problem-solving, big-picture thinking, and innovative thinking of many disciplines—enables me to contribute to the implementation of a wide range of public policies that otherwise might have been guided only by economics or politics.

Rebecca Barnes, FAIA,  
chief planner, City of Boston

►Public policy, along with public perceptions and misconceptions about the built environment, affect architecture in powerful ways . . . [W]riting and teaching give me an opportunity to educate the general public, developers, and policy makers.

*Roger K. Lewis, FAIA, professor, University of Maryland School of Architecture, Planning & Preservation*

Urban Design at the City University of New York, served as the professional adviser for the World Trade Center 9/11 Memorial Competition. Doug Kelbaugh, FAIA, dean of the University of Michigan's School of Architecture, writes and speaks frequently on urban design. Roger K. Lewis, FAIA, professor at the University of Maryland School of Architecture, writes a column about architecture and urban design for the *Washington Post*.

**Other settings.** Urban designers also work in a number of other venues. Development companies hire them for tasks ranging from in-house planning and feasibility studies to managing complex projects. Developer Roger Cassin studied architecture before becoming a developer and now heads a company that focuses on complex, mixed-use urban projects. Institutions, including hospitals and universities, hire urban designers to oversee facilities, direct consultants, and manage planning. An entrepreneurial spirit can lead to some unusual possibilities: Jay Wickersham, FAIA, operates a law practice that specializes in land-use law and frequently works with architects. Michael Kwartler, FAIA, is director of the Environment Simulation Center in New York City, which helps communities visualize alternative futures using sophisticated computer simulations.

## Urban Design Education

Urban design education begins with a strong foundation in design, most often in architecture but sometimes in landscape architecture. While many students enroll in undergraduate architecture programs, others begin with a degree in liberal arts or another field and study architecture at the graduate level. The next step is a graduate degree in urban design, which provides a background in environmental planning, land-use law, real estate finance, transportation, and similar fields.

Like the first two urban design graduate programs, the University of Pennsylvania (founded in 1957) and Harvard University (1960), programs today often ask students to apply the perspectives gained in class to urban-scale studio projects. Some programs sponsor interdisciplinary projects in which students of planning, civil engineering, business, and other fields work with those studying urban design.

Another common route to becoming an urban designer is earning a master's degree in city planning. Related graduate programs include real estate development, public administration, and public policy programs. Most graduate-level urban design, planning, and related programs require two years of study. Some individuals who want to practice urban design earn combined architecture and law degrees.

## PROCESS

The discussion of the urban design process in this piece focuses on professional firms offering urban design as a service. Urban designers in the public sector develop policy and often act as client representatives on urban design projects for government agencies and other public entities. Those in academia teach, conduct research, and write. By contrast, urban designers in private practice generally work in collaboration with interdisciplinary teams or an active community. In many cases, urban designers lead these teams; in other instances, they serve as team members representing design and planning disciplines. For all of these projects, urban designers assume significant responsibility for community outreach.

## The Structure of Urban Design Projects

Urban design projects are structured to accomplish particular goals. Four key tests measure the success of most urban design projects:

- Do the recommendations of the urban design team solve the problems that spawned the project? For example, do they map out a convincing path to achieving neighborhood revitalization or a more active waterfront?
- Do the urban design recommendations form a cohesive, compelling vision that offers convincing guidance for going forward?
- Are the recommendations feasible? Is there reliable funding and an agency or developer who will implement the project?

- Are the recommendations politically achievable? Is there sufficient buy-in from the community, elected officials, key property owners, or others whose support is essential to moving forward?

Clients occasionally ask urban designers to address only one or two of these questions. For example, an urban designer could be asked to craft a compelling vision without regard for how it could be implemented or gain acceptance from neighbors or elected officials. However, in most cases, urban designers pursue what Goody Clancy & Associates calls “achievable visions.” The firm coined this phrase to distinguish between wonderful ideas and wonderful ideas that can actually be funded, supported, and built. Most often, whether working for a client in the private or the public sector, this is what urban designers aim for.

The process of creating an achievable vision—which some urban designers liken to a political campaign, a sort of battle for the hearts and minds of participants—incorporates steps analogous to designing a building but with a very different emphasis. By the time an architect designs a building, decisions have been made about its size, use, and design character. Such decisions are the products of the urban design process, which is ultimately about creating ideas that will find expression in policy documents, reports, and drawings.

A note of caution is sounded by my colleague David Spillane, RIBA, who quotes various British statesmen as saying, “Anything worth doing is messy in the middle.” Applied to urban design, this comment reflects the fact that this type of design is an iterative process and participants often find themselves returning to earlier steps in light of subsequent observations and new ideas. In the end, however, the process of creating an achievable vision falls into four stages of exploration and resolution:

**Define the project.** A number of aspects need to be clarified in order to set the parameters of an urban design project:

Who are the key participants and what approaches will best integrate them into a collaborative process? a stakeholder task force? a series of community workshops? regular community meetings? a charrette? At Goody Clancy we interview as many stakeholders as possible at the start of each project to determine the most effective kinds of outreach and to build a foundation of mutual understanding and communication.

What are the key milestones? Does a public agency need to file legislation or does a developer have a financing deadline? What are the core opportunities and challenges—truly significant design, program, or other opportunities? What broader social, economic, or environmental goals can be achieved? For example, is there an opportunity to establish a neighborhood identity or call for green building and site planning?

What technical, political, or other challenges stand in the way?

What are the options for implementation? This last question might seem premature, but it is critical to start asking it at the outset and to keep it in mind at each stage of a project to ensure the final recommendations are achievable.

**Identify and analyze the key issues.** What technical issues are critical to producing meaningful recommendations? For a given project, transportation, real estate economics, environmental, or other issues will drive the study process.

What role should community values, history, and other subjective issues play? For example, in Boston tall buildings raise concerns, while in Chicago many people view height as a symbol of civic pride.

This step is really about education, and it should be highly interactive. The urban designer and other support staff work with the client and community to ensure all participants have an opportunity to learn from each other, usually through workshops and community meetings.

**Articulate a vision.** What qualities and aspirations should give shape and character to the urban design plans and recommendations that will result from a project? For example, if a new or revitalized neighborhood is to be walkable, this implies certain things about its density, mix of uses, and street pattern. Defining a vision also helps participants make difficult trade-offs. Nowhere is perfection more the enemy of progress than in urban design. Historic preservationists, advocates of affordable housing, environmentalists, and others can all enrich a vision. However, the urban designer must work with all stakeholders to find the balance that makes it possible to achieve much—though rarely all—of what they seek in an urban design process.

**Riverview Estates Redevelopment, Cleveland**

*Identifying key issues:* Analysis pinpointed site problems, such as geotechnically unstable areas and heavy truck traffic on nearby West 25th Street, as well as strengths of the location. The site provides both exceptional views of downtown and an opportunity to enliven and strengthen the adjacent neighborhood.

Goody Clancy



*Articulating a vision:* An ambitious vision that emerged from a charrette guided the redevelopment plan. The goals include providing housing opportunities that would create a vibrant community, protect existing tenants, and attract new residents of diverse incomes and backgrounds; investing in the public realm as a source of neighborhood and city identity; and remaking West 25th Street to reconnect the site to the neighborhood and turn it into a true community Main Street.

Goody Clancy



*Developing the plan:* Keeping the vision in mind, the planning team laid out alternatives for the project, working with stakeholders to evaluate and synthesize them and adding input from market research and city agencies. The principles that were developed became the framework for a final plan: Reduce the width of West 25th Street and make it more pedestrian-friendly; increase on-site housing density and expand the range of building types; create two small parks and an urban wild area in a neighborhood short on open space; mix uses and incomes; and build the plan around new signature features, including two dramatic “bookend” towers and a public promenade overlooking downtown.

Goody Clancy



**Develop a plan.** This last step usually begins by identifying the alternatives a project presents and working with participants to evaluate them. Gathering the best elements from each often forms the basis for a final product.

Urban design products tend to focus on materials that communicate ideas—planning concepts, conceptual site designs, or the scale and character of potential buildings and public spaces. The product may take the form of a printed document—a plan, guideline, or report—or it may involve conceptual and illustrative drawings, three-dimensional computer models, “fly-through” computer animations, PowerPoint or other presentation materials for public meetings, Web sites, posters, and other communication tools. While a well-conceived and -produced report can take three months to complete, and professionally rendered sketches can cost several thousand dollars, preparation of urban design products is far less time-intensive than preparing working drawings and other highly technical documents required for designing a building.

## Traditional vs. Charrette-Based Projects

A typical project schedule might last anywhere from four months to two years or more. The final step is often the most time-consuming—translating the concepts developed during the three previous steps into effective documents to guide future actions. Because so many urban design projects involve multiple stakeholders, charrettes—intensive visioning sessions that bring diverse stakeholders together to talk, plan, and design at the same table—have become increasingly popular. Projects that require conceptual recommendations lend themselves to accelerated schedules built around intensive community charrettes in which the urban designer, client, community, and other stakeholders jointly brainstorm for a number of days.

## The Dollars and Cents of Urban Design

Urban design fees are generally based on the number of hours required to complete the work. Even fixed-fee contracts reflect an assumption about how much labor will be involved (along with direct expenses). Fees for projects led by urban designers can range from as little as \$25,000 to as much as \$1 million. Charrette-based projects with multiple stakeholders often command fees of \$100,000 to \$250,000 or more.

Given the interdisciplinary nature of urban design projects, firms often dedicate one-third to one-half of their fee to environmental, real estate, transportation, and other types of subconsultants. When urban designers are members of a larger team, their fees generally range from less than \$25,000 to \$250,000 or more.

## NEW DIRECTIONS

As the world changes at an ever-quicken pace, new dynamics are shaping the kinds of projects urban designers work on and the visions and plans they create.

In response to pressures for economic and social change brought on by globalization, urban designers increasingly work around the world planning and designing new communities and rebuilding older cities. In the United States, as dramatic demographic shifts produce more younger and older households without children than at any point since World War II, urban designers are at the forefront of the trend to create new higher-density housing and urban neighborhoods.

As federal and state budgets shrink, urban designers are creating plans that enable public-private partnerships to pay for parks, transit, and other elements traditionally funded by the public sector. Cities hosting growing numbers of immigrants are turning to urban designers to create new public spaces that accommodate changing cultural values. Urban designers are playing a growing role in exploring regional approaches to economic, social, and environmental sustainability.

Finally, urban designers will continue to do what they do best—help clients and fellow architects give form and vision to a changing world. The ability of architects and urban designers to frame issues will be greatly enhanced if they collectively, as a profession, embrace politics and learn not only to appreciate it but to be nurtured and inspired by it.

**Park Heights Redevelopment, Baltimore:** Urban designers often must address challenging social issues. The redevelopment plan for this older Baltimore neighborhood required strategies designed to attract private investment, reflecting limited state and city resources. In addition, the plan had to respond to shifting market demographics by including a broad array of housing types.

*Goody Clancy*



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“Urban Design Services” was originally published in *The Architect’s Handbook of Professional Practice, Update 2005*, ©2005 by the American Institute of Architects, published by John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

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The AIA provides a contract document designed especially for these types of architectural services. The AIA suggests a two-part agreement:

**B102–2007, Standard Form of Agreement Between Owner and Architect without a Predefined Scope of Architect’s Services** provides terms and conditions only.

**B212–2010, Standard Form of Architect’s Services: Regional or Urban Planning** provides the architect’s scope of services only.

Together they equal a complete owner-architect agreement.

AIA Document B212™–2010 establishes duties and responsibilities where the architect provides the owner with regional or urban planning services. This scope provides a menu of choices of regional or urban planning services, grouped under four phases: Inventory and Data Gathering; Analysis and Judgment; Preparation of Design Alternatives; and Finalization of Preferred Plan. B212–2010 is a scope of services document only and may not be used as a stand-alone owner/architect agreement.

For more information about AIA Contract Documents, visit [www.aia.org/contractdocs/about](http://www.aia.org/contractdocs/about)

May 2011 *The American Institute of Architects*