The origin of cities

Sir Terry Farrell introduces his new book *The City as a Tangled Bank: Urban Design versus Urban Evolution - AD Primer.*

Two hundred years ago the human world was an agricultural one. Today, city making and management are becoming the biggest 'mega-business' in the history of the planet. Many 20th-century writers have depicted early settlements as primitive because less designed; and the planning and design professions continue in a tradition that imposes order on nature, that recognises the mind of man as superior to what happens naturally. There is an assumption in architecture that the architect exists in order to elevate and improve people's taste or to capture the upper reaches of urbanity. My view, however, is that great architecture and particularly great urbanism reflect and respect the taste that is. Rather than being taste-aspirational, the aspiration is to understand existing taste. Context is key in successful place making.

 Urban design textbooks are repeatedly filled with designed solutions – Baron Haussmann in 1860s Paris, Le Corbusier's Chandigarh and Oscar Niemeyer's Brasilia from the 1950s – yet have little space for all the vast otherness of the surrounding city. So where does urban design sit within this overall picture? How can 'design', together with 'planning', make a contribution to modern shifts in city scale and complexity? I took the title for my new book, The City as a Tangled Bank, from the concluding passage of Darwin's great work of 1859 - On the Origin of Species.

As Darwin states there is a grandeur and a wonder in the interdependency and connectedness within nature. Much as the mind of man longs for rational order in a perceived and visual sense, the bank is nevertheless a tangled one; and to understand habitat with its time dimension, its spatial complexity and its interdependent nature with everything around it, one has then to deal with complexity theory and self-ordering systems, because that is how it all came about. In the light of this, then, the job of the urban designer or planner is to immerse themselves in complexity in order to understand it.

Should we not ask ourselves questions about the tangled bank and whether the beauty and grandeur of it is better than the 'designed' city? Is there a natural order at work in all the streets underlying most modern metropolises, from Shanghai to Rio, and from the neighbourhoods of New York to the villages of London? Is this where the hand of design really reveals itself? It is no big step then to ask whether the same hand is present in the orders of animals – the termites in their termite mound, the eagles in their rocky nesting habitats, the bees in their honeycomb. Do these colonies really operate in an inferior way to us? Are they the product of a deliberate designing hand or not? Darwin's arguments, and those of his followers such as Richard Dawkins, offer a convincing affirmation that these natural forms have occurred not through a grand design, but as a result of insect creatures acting in an instinctive evolutionary manner.

What does design mean for urbanism? Planning, at town,
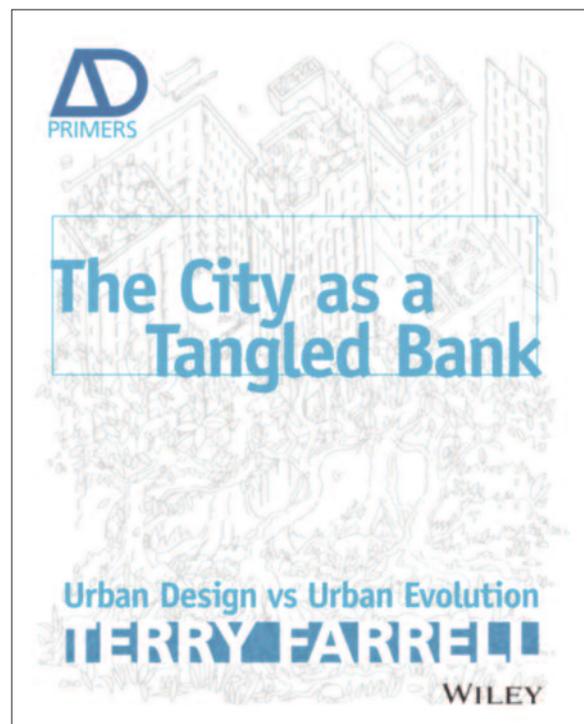
city and metropolitan scale is too big and too complex for design skills alone. What, then, is urban design? Here we enter murkier waters. Sitting as it does between architecture and planning, which are both established professions and generally recognised disciplines, urban design has never found a home, a safe set of accepted skills, or even a satisfactory, overarching definition of what it is. But that is also its strength – what are needed more and more today are overarching ways of thinking and acting that connect separate disciplines, that are more fluid and open and adaptable, and that link core values of the traditional and the contemporary.

 It is important to see the city as an accumulation of assemblies, each responding to different circumstances of location and culture. To attempt to ignore this by conceiving the city from the outset as one designed new artefact denies its natural underlying diversity, complexity and dynamism, as well as time and historical evolution; a denial which ultimately restricts future growth and change.

The true task of the planner, the urbanist architect is to look at urbiculture, to understand this layering and to see that buildings will change. The terraced house will morph from a Victorian single-family residence to a block of flats and perhaps then to offices, a school or some other type of institutional building. And then it might return to its original use, as has happened in many cases in Edinburgh. The essence of making good places is recognising and working with all these different strands, but doing it collectively. It is truly a work of evolution, where urbi-

Shenzhen

culture is the skill to encourage the growth and change.

There is often a view in Britain that there is too much pragmatism, too much reliance upon natural growth. On the other hand, the zoning system used in America, and followed in China and elsewhere, arguably does not allow enough for the natural urbicultural evolution of place. It has resulted in over-classification of areas – the form of downtowns and their occupation and use categories are not created by negotiation. The British way of negotiating is fraught with delays, fraught with a lack of resolution and drive; but London remains highly liveable. There is no doubt that city making is a slow process. It has to wait for everything to coalesce. Having said that, in the broader context of history, city making is fast when seen over the course of decades and centuries.

In the West, dealing with the urban scene as existing, layered by many hands over centuries (even cities in the US are 'old' now), the city is readily recognised as a complex organism requiring complex processes. But western cities as we know them are going to be overtaken by a global expansion of city making; and for cities in the developing world, this is much more about constructing the urban complexes in the first place – often from a cold standing start. Peking University's School of Urban Planning and Design, based at Shenzhen, refers in its website prospectus to the planning department's important role in assisting 'rapid urbanisation' – a phenomenon of which Shenzhen itself is an astonishing example, having grown from a border town of just over 30,000 people in 1979 to a metropolis of over 15 million people today.

But intense city-building endeavours will soon be caught up and gradually overtaken by city management, stewardship and urbicultural skills. Already Hong Kong and Singapore are second- and third-generation city making; and the dominant newness of other expanding cities such as Delhi, Mexico City, Tokyo and Shanghai is all grafted on to vestiges of older roots. So in time, for all these 'new' cities, adaptation and evolution, based on starting from what is there, will become the norm. Building anew may be the action now, but the urbicultural skills we in the West are now learning will be needed more and more throughout the world for the billions living in ever-expanding megacities. ■