



Talking Cities
The Micropolitics of Urban Space

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Overview

Good design has a key role to play in the development of environments and processes which contribute fundamentally to human flourishing. In addition to learning from all the efforts which have been made to use good design to date, we must add the element of transformation design. If human beings are to be comfortable in the spaces they inhabit and the services they use in the public realm then we must find ways to make the design of the public realm inclusive and life enhancing. Examples of efforts to achieve this are highlighted.

Key ideas

The Public Realm: In addition to being applied to space freely available to the public, this concept was also used more widely to include public services: health care, libraries, social work and education for example.

Transformation Design: A process for design which, by using concepts like a fluid brief, multidisciplinary collaboration, participatory techniques and going beyond the usual boundaries, changes the fundamental outcome rather than arriving at outcomes limited by the existing design framework.

Summary

Professor MacDonald began by using the final scene from the newly released film 'Slumdog Millionaire' to locate his thesis about the relationships between design and the public realm, within the debate started in the western tradition by Aristotle about what constitutes the good life.

He went on to suggest that the current context for this debate was established, as for the National Health Service, in the post second world war settlement of the welfare state. This could be seen, for example, in new town developments which many now consider to promote the opposite of the good life. He suggested that a major shortcoming of this type of design and development was that it tended to treat people as a homogenous group, which hollowed out the original intention to provide engaging, vital places that promoted happiness and wellbeing. He suggested that a key task now facing the design community was how to move its profession and skills out of the professional ghetto in which it too easily rests, and engage in vital debates about democratisation for the design process in a language which engages rather than alienates more people in the debate about 'what makes for a good place?'

Professor MacDonald suggested that answers to this question lie in human centred processes, in which stakeholders co-design a shared public realm, more than the sum of its individual parts, and intended to promote the public good in an inclusive and equitable manner simultaneously and across diverse needs.

To illustrate some of the issues involved he used two examples: Union Street Terrace Gardens in Aberdeen and The Waterfalls in New York designed by Olafur Eliasson.

Union Terrace Gardens in Aberdeen is a well established five acre park in the city centre, for which a new design, including an architect designed arts centre, has recently been approved after public consultation and competition for public funds (slides 10 & 11 in the accompanying set). At the 11th hour a local businessman offered a plan to deck over the gardens in concrete with car parking and a shopping mall underneath, putting up 350 million pounds of his own money. Professor MacDonald suggested that this was more than a local controversy since it highlighted the way in which a rich person can divert local planning processes, interposing his own vision and interests for a public space.

Professor MacDonald also used the example of installation of waterfalls along the Hudson River in New York by artist Olafur Eliasson, supported by Mayor Bloomberg. He described the installation as an aggressive pro development intrusion on an area which is composed of mixed use working class communities. This, he said, was the latest in a series of activities, the selling of community gardens, involving disguised subsidy for development designed to privatise and commodify previously public space for private gain in one of the largest developments ever seen in any city.

The examples served to raise some more universal questions about how the wider public can become more fully engaged in decisions about the public realm, the skills and capacities to enable meaningful involvement and effect change, and from where these might come.

In moving forward, reference was made to the work of Ian Borden, Professor of Architecture at Bartlett School of Architecture, University College London, who has listed 13 tactics for the good life (see Slide 14 in the accompanying set). Borden considers these to be an antidote to the architect's usual tools of drawings, plans and geometry. Professor MacDonald suggested that the last three items on the list: active health, active thinking and emotions were of particular interest in the field of health.

Susan Clutteridge and Lucy Musgrave in "Design and Landscape for People" suggest that awareness of symbolic value and the significance of meaning in place are important starting points for this type of approach and suggest three aspects which require attention:

- Belief in the effectiveness of small action
- An emphasis on local distinctiveness and values
- An interdisciplinary approach

Professor MacDonald added a fourth aspect, that of transformation design. This concept, developed by the Red group at the Design Council, has six characteristics:

- Defining and redefining the brief
- Collaborating between disciplines
- Employing participatory design techniques
- Building capacity, not dependency
- Designing beyond traditional boundaries
- Creating fundamental change

A further set of perspectives, the five high priorities developed by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) as guidelines for local authorities in England, can be added. These are:

- Exceed your legal responsibilities
- Consult; build a track record of involvement and listening
- Use imaginative methods of involvement
- Use accessible, plain language
- Promote environmental quality and cohesive, sustainable communities

Professor MacDonald stated that while there were many and varied tools by which the design community was attempting to engage, without the element of transformation design, the necessary impetus for a new more convivial paradigm is unlikely to be achieved.

He cited four examples which illustrated this point. These were:

- the transformation role of the work on the Cranhill water tower in Easterhouse (slide 20),
- the process of redesign of the harbour front in Girvan, a town on the Ayrshire coast (slide 21),
- *Picture this Plan that*, a Lighthouse project which supported local people to become engaged in design processes, and
- *Fieldtrip* in which multidisciplinary groups visited different parts of Scotland and in the process of doing so curated the materials for an exhibition.

A key dimension of each of these projects is that they call into question ideas about how, where and what we learn and with whom. This reframing of learning is crucial as a route to transcending the limitations of existing methods. Most importantly, it offers the possibility of an inclusive process of co-designing the Public Realm to contribute more fully to public wellbeing and the Good Life.

The views expressed in this paper are those of the speaker and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.

Summary prepared by the Glasgow Centre for Population Health.