



## The Largest Art.

REVIEW OF

Brent D. Ryan, *The Largest Art. A Measured Manifesto for a Plural Urbanism*.  
Cambridge-MA: MIT Press, 2017

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*Urban Design, Plural Urbanism, Building Arts, Plural Dimensions, The Largest Art*

### /Abstract

The book wants to introduce plural urbanism as the largest among the building arts. The author's aim is to write a "measured manifesto" of plural urbanism to declare its independence from architecture, landscape, sculpture and land art, that has always existed, through the description of its dimensions and qualities. The book suggests a new theoretical and practical understanding of the discipline and its difficulty both in its conception and possible realizations; it describes plural urbanism's present and future challenges to foster further and useful applications.

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Ilaria Cattabriga graduated in Architecture in 2016 at the University of Bologna with a Master Thesis in History of Architecture on Giovanni Michelucci, Ignazio Gardella, and Carlo Scarpa's museographic intervention in the exhibition halls of the Uffizi Gallery (1953-1956). At present, she is a Ph.D. student in History of Architecture at the Department of Architecture of the University of Bologna. Her main research topics concern architecture of the XX century and her Ph.D. project deals with the figure of the Italian architect Leonardo Ricci with a particular focus on his professional work and teaching experience in the United States.



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After years of working experience in New York City's Department of City Planning and in urban design education, the author's aim is to explain how plural urbanism can be considered "the largest art" among the building arts because it involves the largest plural entity: the city. More in detail, the book's main reasoning moves from Michael Sorkin's presentation of urban design as "ended discipline" in 2006 -in the era of the megalopolitan sprawl- when he declared that the discipline of urban design was at a "dead end."<sup>1</sup> "But within the discipline itself, the fundamental dilemma posed by Sorkin, of a discipline unable to reconcile 'theoretical debate' with 'human needs,' has remained unresolved. The 'end(s)' of urban design remain where they were ten years ago."<sup>2</sup>

The book provides a new theoretical and practical understanding of urban design by investigating its relationship to urban space and urban agents and conceiving it as a practice that accepts all those elements and forces of cities that are beyond the designers' direct control and which become part of the urban design project as well. This means to the author plural urbanism: to incorporate the city's plural elements and activate that kind of project belonging to a plural art, "more powerful and wide-ranging, more influential and beneficial, even as it becomes more democratic, participatory, open-ended, and infinite"<sup>3</sup>. This process could sound too theoretical but it is practical since it provides the solutions to current life problems and can't help including one or more plural elements. In this lies the clear distinction between plural and unitary urban design: in accepting the necessity to include one or more of the plural elements instead of considering a unitary site, a unique designer, one scale, one environment, and one owner with his individual needs. In pluralism consists the real nature of urban design, if not so, the risk is not to deal with urban design at all.

Because of its "plurality", in the book the term "urban design" is interchangeable with "urbanism", even though it broadens the meaning as the plural character of urban design. Therefore, plural urban design is also defined plural urbanism that results as the largest of the arts because of its relation to the largest and most changeable phenomenon: life, intended in general as the life of the city and, more in detail, as the functioning of life within the city.

The book wants firstly to differentiate urban design from scaled-up architecture, as it is often treated in urban planning education, and then from landscape design, sculpture, and land art. On one side plural urbanism contains the other building arts, while, on the other side, it is independent of them. It is presented as a discipline with unique qualities the author explains in the last chapter of the book, after the most important one: pluralism, deeply examined in the first chapter, in opposition to unitary architecture.

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1 Michael Sorkin, "The End(s) of Urban Design," in Alex Krieger, ed., *Urban Design* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 181.

2 Brent D. Ryan, *The largest Art. A Measured Manifesto for a Plural Urbanism* (Cambridge-MA: MIT Press, 2017), 15.

3 Ryan, *The largest Art*, 15.

According to the author, who had been working for years with the instruments of zoning, standards, diagrams, and codes to design the city of New York, by dealing with plural urbanism instead of unitary urbanism, designers would have discovered a new interesting a fascinating dimension, where zoning and any further planning instrument had no aesthetically interesting results. If these tools were not useful to translate the project of the city as a plural entity, not only codes, schemes, and zoning had to be blamed, but also urban designers who failed to understand and deal with the plural city.

The book tries to solve this *impasse* by broadening the art of urban design and demonstrates that it has own plural dimensions, usually unknown to the other building arts, which are precisely what enabled it to be an independent building art: urban design is plural in scale, time, property, agency, and form. Plural urbanism is indeed the only art with such a wide range of scale variety, which assures to it to become the largest art, its time is plural and affected by the shifting over time of men's skill to build. Property depends on the multiplicity of parcels cities are composed of, owners and agents, while the plural agency is the most connected dimension to the plural property of the city and the one that best gives urban design the character of a collective work of art. Finally, the plural form is the only possible result of a plural reality made of the previously mentioned features and is opposed to a unitary predetermined form.

Through the analysis of three pluralist projects (Constantin Brancusi's sculptural ensemble in Târgu Jiu, Romania in the 1930s, a social housing project at Twin Parks in New York City's Bronx in the 1970s, and Jože Plečnik's work in the Slovenian capital Ljubljana from 1928 and 1943) the book sets the five dimensions of plural urbanism in three different times and places in the twentieth century. Besides, thanks to the analysis of three plural urbanists' work the book shows how plural urbanism is not a new concept, even though the dominant tendency of the twentieth century saw unitary urbanism, both in modernist and in neotraditionalist<sup>4</sup> projects, as the best expression of urban design. David Crane, Edmund Bacon, and Kevin Lynch's work is introduced as the way the first plural urbanists acted in a different "third" way and grounded urbanism as not simply large-scale architecture in the late years of modernism, from 1960 to the 1980s.

David Crane published four articles in the early 1960s on a concept he called the "capital web.". To Crane, urban design had to incorporate a dynamic dimension to encounter the needs of the inhabitants in the "capital web", as he named his alternative solution to unitary urban design<sup>5</sup>. The "capital web" could also be realized in zoning areas, because to Crane the solution lied in infrastructures, in

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4 Modernist urbanism was that embodied by Le Corbusier and Joseph Lluís Sert, while neotraditionalism was the definition philosophy attributed to the postmodern urban design suggested as an alternative to modernist urban design whose purpose was the design of future cities as a variation on the design of historic cities.

5 In his essays, Crane used three terms: "the city of a thousand designers", the "dynamic city", and the "capital web" to refer to his particular conceptions of urbanism. The first two terms refer to the dimension of plural agency and time, while the third is a neologism Crane coined to define the approach to practice in plural urbanism. Brent D. Ryan, *The Largest Art. A Measured Manifesto for a Plural Urbanism* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2017), 141.

all those open spaces, streets, parks, and public buildings the state was responsible for in terms of improvement and maintenance.

Edmund Bacon was Philadelphia's chief planner for almost twenty years and a scholar as well; he was able to define his "third way" beyond the large-scale architectural projects of the Josep Lluís Sert's school and the regulations of the typical masterplans with the conceptual tool he named "movement system". Bacon inferred that the city was an entity that existed both in space and time that could have never been designed by a single individual as a single form for eternity as regulations imposed. Bacon expressed his ideas in urban design in the book *Design of Cities*<sup>6</sup>, in which he did not deny the spatial principles followed in the past for cities grounded in history of architecture, but he translated the different qualities of urbanism as elements that defined urban design a related spatial art.

Kevin Lynch both wrote and practiced a lot, and his ideas of "city design" mirrors the book's theory of plural urbanism. When in Manhattan zoning was created to resist just such destabilizing continuous change of the city, Lynch was the first one to postulate that static models of the city, such as that of Le Corbusier, were inaccurate because cities did grow and decay, their change happened despite the best efforts of those who wished to halt it. Kevin Lynch himself rearranged his idea of "city design"<sup>7</sup> and elaborated the model of the "polycentered net", a characteristic possessed by all cities. He went beyond the distinction between the traditional and modernist views opposing in the twentieth century and thought of several shapes of formal option before conceiving the last polycentered model for the "twentieth century-unfinished city".

Brent D. Ryan declares he was strongly influenced by Kevin Lynch's thought and, in particular, by his books *The Image of the City*<sup>8</sup> and *Good City Form*<sup>9</sup>. Therefore, it seems to him that all manifestoes had been written except for the disruptive one referring to Lynch's work. On the contrary, the importance of writing a "measured manifesto", as the book's subtitle anticipates, lied in the need to write one without formulating a formal declaration of urban design, but rather in writing a call for recognition of independence that has always existed, with its own five dimensions and three qualities of change, incompleteness, and flexible fidelity.

Through all the mentioned analysis of the plural urbanism's dimensions, projects, and designers the book implies the drawing of a clear distinction between the Beaux-Arts interventions that referred to the Platonic idea of finite form of

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6 Edmund N. Bacon, *Design of Cities* (New York: Viking Press, 1967).

7 "City design" represented for Lynch the alternative to the common practices of unitary urban design that composed late modernism. He widely published his studies on this concept and remained interested in it till the end of his life. He was always interested in the metropolitan form, finally published in his last book *A Theory of Good City Form* in 1981, then re-published with the shortened title *Good City Form* in 1984. Kevin Lynch, *A Theory of Good City Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981).

8 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge: M.I.T. Press, 1960).

9 Kevin Lynch, *A Theory of Good City Form* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1981), then re-published with the shortened title *Good City Form* in 1984.

the city and the plural urbanism's interventions that did not have as their first instance the achievement of a predetermined, finite, perfect form. That did not consist in a distinction between unitary urbanism results and plural urbanism projects, because even iconic examples of unitary urban design showed change, incompleteness, and flexible fidelity. Indeed, the reality of a city implies eternal change, and all the static representations of the city were not consistent with the real dynamic state of the city but rather with their ideal "finished" state. Cities are object of continuous growth, change, and shrinks and, therefore, urban design is far from static, it cannot be represented in static abstract drawings. On this purpose, the book offers a reflection on the representational traditions, deriving from Beaux-Arts methods, of famous urban design projects. These followed precise drawing codes of the nineteenth century and foresaw the elaboration of plans, elevations, sections, and perspectives: all finite abstractions that did not reflect the changing and relational character of the city. In this way the book singles out the contradiction between static representation (urban designs) and dynamic subjects (city spaces). The second feature of plural urbanism is incompleteness, seen as a positive one because it reflects an inevitable characteristic of the city, it is open-ended and avoids completion. Even iconic examples of unitary design suffered from incompleteness: the Plan of Chicago by Burnham and Bennett (1909) showed how its conception as a unitary ideal of perfection could instead include incompleteness without reducing its strong impact. The flexible fidelity to the general representation of urban design recalls both the representational problems connected to the qualities of change and incompleteness because an urban design scheme with a finished form might vary in its final results over time. In spite of the fact that urban designers aim at reaching as much fidelity as possible with their project, all cities are "patchworks of greater or lesser urban design fidelity"<sup>10</sup> and plural urbanism control over the form of the city can vary on different areas.

In conclusion, the book wants to introduce the problem of plural urbanism, but the goal is not to provide urban designers or architects with a list of application rules of plural urbanism nor to introduce any educational method for future urban designers. It wants to communicate the difficulty of the discipline both in its conception and possible realizations and, in addition, to present the new challenges the largest of the arts has to face: economic problems, the co-existence with social and political systems, and, most of all, the co-existence with the other building arts. Urban design's current problems lie within our current conceptual framework of urban design according to Ryan, whereas it would be worth reflecting on new conceptions of the largest of the arts, which could flourish and be usefully applied in many other fields and settings thanks to its inner dimensions and qualities. These new challenges can only foster creativity to be applied in the design of the largest of the arts.

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<sup>10</sup> Brent D. Ryan, *The largest Art. A Measured Manifesto for a Plural Urbanism* (Cambridge-MA: MIT Press, 2017), 243.