Advance Reviews, and Excerpts from Preface

Advance Reviews

In this thoughtful, hopeful and truly illuminating book, Aseem Inam combines a profound critique of urban design theory with a thorough examination of an impressively global range of projects from Barcelona's Olympic Village to Al-Azhar Park in Cairo, from the favelas of Brazil to the villages of India, from the Pompidou Center to Boston's Big Dig. Inam draws on his own extensive design experience and an original reading of Pragmatic philosophy to re-orient urban design toward social and economic empowerment. Not since Kevin Lynch's *Good Urban Form* has there been a book so constructively critical of conventional practice and so hopeful for urban design's proper role and future.

Robert Fishman, Professor of Architecture and Urban Planning, University of Michigan.

Aseem Inam has written a wise and thoughtful challenge to those who believe in static models of the city, and the developers, politicians and professionals who hold power over its material form.   Insisting on the priority of the public realm, Inam presents urban design as a broad moral vision rather than a set of narrow, technical choices.   This book is a stunning manifesto for critical global urbanism in the 21st century.

Sharon Zukin, author, *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*

Inam's excellent treatise vests urban design in its larger socio-political context, using the lenses of pragmatism to understand its transformative potential. Instead of looking into the past, the author is more interested in exploring how urbanism can be a positive force in the ever-changing context of the contemporary and future 21st century city. Solidly grounded in theory, Inam expertly makes his message tangible by presenting a series of design initiatives or "case studies" from different parts of the world. This is a thought-provoking contribution to the field of urbanism!

Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris, Professor of Urban Design, University of California at Los Angeles.

Though many claim to do so, few books actually succeed in capturing the symbiosis of urban theory and praxis as convincingly as this. Rich, erudite, practical and robust, it compels us to reconsider our very relationship with cities – whether as inhabitants, decision-makers or consumers.   It reminds us that the art of urbanism is a constant negotiation between personal biases and socio-political realities, and that cities are evolving repositories of complex decisions, whims and choices, all in constant flux. This outstanding re-evaluation of contemporary urbanism will serve to expand and enrich the worlds of both academia and practice.

Vinayak Bharne, Director of Design, Moule & Polyzoides Architects & Urbanists.

Drawing on examples ranging in size from a museum to an Olympic village, and from around the world, Aseem Inam demonstrates how urban design can be transformative by being more inclusive and more political, and by abandoning its traditional commitment to a city fixed in time in an ostensibly ideal state. Simultaneously critical and practical, Inam has made a bold statement.

Robert Beauregard, Professor of Urban Planning, Columbia University in the City of New York.

Excerpts from Preface

I have wrestled passionately with the ideas of *Designing Urban Transformation* for many years. These ideas were formed, challenged, tested, and refined through the writing process and will continue to evolve even after the book is published. Even when I started studying architecture in college at the age of 16, I combined a keen interest in design with a perhaps equally keen skepticism of the overly narrow range of its practice. Further, as a lifelong student of urbanism, I brainstormed and tested my ideas in classes and studios as a student, through formal projects and design strategies as a practitioner, through experimental pedagogies as a professor, through serious theoretical and empirical research as a scholar, and through first-hand experiences as a resident and visitor of cities all over the world. These realms of urban investigation continue to intertwine and enrich each other.

Rather than focusing on how we can make urbanism somewhat better, or cataloging and imitating so-called best practices, or articulating how a singular approach such as a focus on sustainability and technology will supposedly save our cities, this book makes a seemingly simple yet profound meta-argument: How we think about cities absolutely impacts how we design them. The most fundamental shifts in transforming cities do not happen by tinkering around the edges, but by fundamentally rethinking processes,

methods, and outcomes of urbanism. From this perspective, some readers may view this book as largely theoretical or even polemical; rather, I apply the philosophy of Pragmatism to inspire a framework for crafting this fundamental re-thinking. The book's ten case studies of urban interventions demonstrate the different ways and widely varying contexts in which this new approach can work—all with extremely impressive results.

The book is the result of a rigorously researched project that begins with a clear yet thoughtful critique of the ways in which urbanism is currently conceived and practiced. What follows is a compelling argument about the conceptual shifts that can transform cities, with a wide range of built case studies illustrating these shifts. The book is primarily about the practice of what I call urbanism, and what most may refer to as urban design. Conventional pedagogies and practices of urbanism tend to focus primarily on the design of cities as the production of static three-dimensional finished objects such as building complexes, open spaces, neighborhoods, new towns, and infrastructures. In the book, I argue for conceptual shifts towards city as flux, with consequences of design and urbanism as creative political act. This way of thinking leads to practices of critical engagement and urban transformation.

I came to these conceptual ideas and the philosophy of Pragmatism through my own extensive professional practice. Prior to completing my Ph.D., I found the actual practice of urbanism to be far more messy and complicated than anything we were taught at the university or anything that theorists of urbanism were writing about. As I demonstrate in the book, I tested the thinking inspired by Pragmatism in professional projects (e.g., Uptown Whittier Specific Plan in Los Angeles), pedagogical experiments (e.g., MIT Experimental Design Studio in Boston), and through scholarly research and writing. Ultimately, this book is a marriage of conceptual thinking derived from Pragmatism and case studies of actual projects from all over the world. This marriage accomplishes two things: It emphasizes the significance of the underlying conceptual framework derived from the philosophy of Pragmatism as a powerful force in rethinking urbanism for designing transformation, and it illustrates how these conceptual shifts operate in the vastly different historical, geographical, and political contexts of cities all over the world.

What do I hope to accomplish with *Designing Urban Transformation*? The conventional fields that engage most directly with what I call the city-design-and-building processes (the hyphens indicate continuous, evolving, and ongoing phenomena) such as urban design, architecture, landscape architecture and even city planning are involved with one of the most critical tasks of the 21st century: to imagine the cities of tomorrow, starting tomorrow morning. These fields possess many unique strengths: they are inherently creative, visionary, interdisciplinary, and action-oriented. Yet, they are also among the most ineffectual fields when it comes to actually shaping cities in ways that make a genuine difference in people's live. This lacuna derives from an often-singular obsession with form and space and from a willful indifference to the deeper political

economic structures that actually shape cities. With this book, I hope to inspire such urbanists to more critically engage with these power structures so they can have a genuine impact on the city. I also hope to offer a much broader view of design and urbanism for activists, urban scholars, artists, social scientists, policy makers, and engaged citizens to realize that they too can engage with cities in creative, visionary, interdisciplinary, and ultimately transformative ways through the kinds of conceptual rethinking and design strategies described in the book.