Essential Urban Design
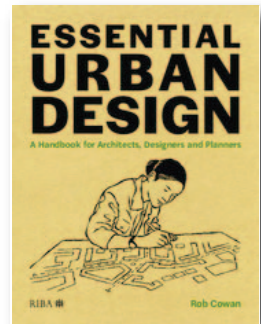
Essential Urban Design is for all urban designers, says author Rob Cowan

RIBA Publishing £28

OPPOSITE, portraits of urban design heroes clockwise from top left: Bill Hillier, Christopher Alexander, Gordon Cullen and Peter Calthorpe

Rob Cowan is a writer, editor, speaker, cartoonist and illustrator. He is editor of Context, the journal of the Institute of Historic Building Conservation. His many books include The Dictionary of Urbanism and By Design (the UK government's ground-breaking urban design guidance). See www.robcowan.co.uk

Are you bored with seeing the same photos of urban design projects, good or bad, in every book on the subject? Me too, which is why Essential Urban Design does not have any photographs. Instead it is lavishly illustrated with drawings (some by leading urban designers, others by me). I find that drawings convey much more about the processes of analysing and designing places, and communicating ideas.
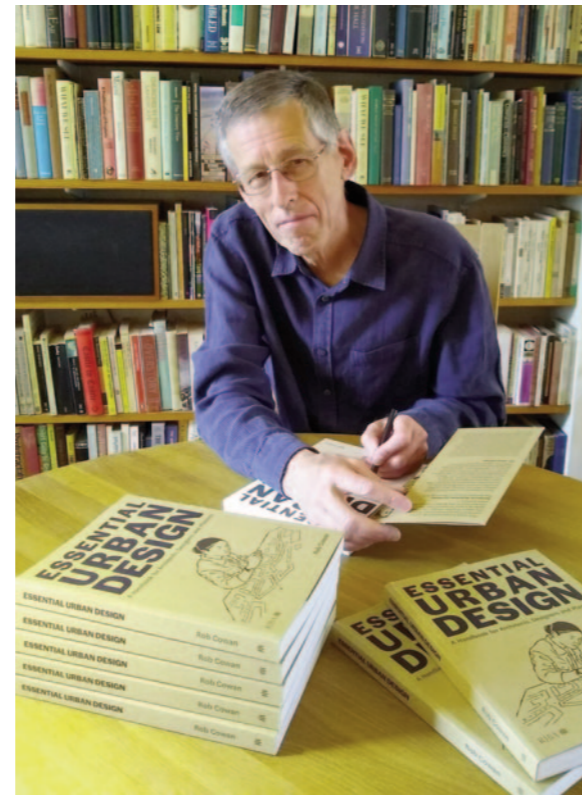
A book called Essential Urban Design should explain how to do some useful things. Here are some of what it explains:

• How eight design objectives for development can be used to create plans, policies, guidance documents, masterplans, development briefs and development schemes.

• How to put context and local character at the heart of urban design, treating 'character' as shorthand for every aspect of a place considered in its context, rather than looking for a couple of locally distinctive building materials or stylistic elements to copy.

• How to treat masterplanning as a process, of which the masterplan is one part. This approach recognises that when a masterplan fails (as most do), it is often because it failed to resolve conflicts between a wide variety of duties, regulations, policies, guidance, standards, codes of practice, funding regimes, assessment requirements, audits, values and practices.

• How to move beyond traditional, end-state masterplanning, and find new ways of enabling many different people and organisations to take relatively small steps in developing an area. After all, that is how much urban development came about until the second half of the twentieth century.

• How to use design codes (which range from a simple set of design principles to a detailed set of precise and prescriptive specifications).

• How to think about density by starting, not with a number, but with the qualities we want the place to achieve.

• The book's case studies show a step-by-step process for assessing the urban design qualities of a completed development. They review three well-known developments: the Bloomberg office building in the City of London; housing at McGrath Road in the London Borough of Newham; and an urban extension at Upton, Northampton.

Urban design involves a wide range of people. They include local authority planning officers, who prepare local planning policy and guidance, and assess the quality of planning applications; councillors, who provide political leadership and make planning decisions; applicants and their design teams, who prepare applications for planning permission; people in local communities and their representatives; and a wide range of other professionals (urban designers, architects, planners, landscape architects, surveyors, highway engineers and building conservationists among them) who are, in the widest sense of the term, urban designers. Essential Urban Design is for all of them. ■

The book also discusses:

• What urban design is, and why rebranding it as 'placemaking', or some such, does not help.

• How the professional practice of urban design can perpetuate or reduce social inequities.

• The fact that we can reduce our impact on the planet by changing our diet, putting an end to single-use plastic or flying less, but car-based development is building carbon dependency into our way of life for generations.

• How to ask of any participative process: in whose interests is it being run, and who is in control?