INTRODUCTION

ERIC MUMFORD

Today the Barcelona-born architect Josep Lluís Sert (1902-1983) is remembered primarily for several reasons: his highly visible though sometimes still controversial work as an architect for Harvard and Boston Universities (1958-73) and for his mixed-income housing on Roosevelt Island in New York City (1970-75) and in Yonkers, New York (1970-73); his role as president of postwar CIAM (International Congresses for Modern Architecture) from 1947-56; and his position, from 1953-69, as dean of the Harvard Graduate School of Design, where he advocated and helped to found the profession of urban design. One could also add to all this his early involvement with the Spanish CIAM GATCPAC (Grup d'Arquitectes Catalans Per Una Arquitectura Contemporànea) group in Barcelona in the 1930s, before his immigration to the United States in 1939, and his subsequent, mostly unbuilt but widely published urban plans for Brazil, Peru, Colombia, Venezuela, and Cuba in the 1940s and 1950s.

Each of these aspects of his career has now been the subject of some scholarly work, but Sert remains a blurry and misunderstood figure in contemporary architectural culture.¹ As dean and Harvard campus architect, his work is still occasionally admired, but the linkages between this work and his various international activities—which included not only CIAM but also his involvement in United Nations' efforts on housing and urbanism from the 1950s to the 1970s—are often poorly understood and perhaps undervalued.

This may be because Sert himself never published much about his own work and ideas after his early collective CIAM publications, of which *Can Our Cities Survive?* (1942) and *CIAM 8: The*

Sert, Jackson & Associates, Roosevelt Island mixed-use housing for the New York State Urban Development Corporation, 1970-75. View of model.

Town Planning Associates (Paul Lester Wiener, Josep Lluís Sert, and Paul Schulz), Brazilian Motor City, near Rio de Janeiro, 1944–47, third version of the project. Aerial perspective of the proposed pedestrian civic center.

Aerial view of La Candelaria (Old City), Bogotá, used by Sert in the first overview of his work. From Knud Bastlund, José Luis Sert: *Architecture, City Planning, Urban Design* (New York: Praeger, 1967), 66.

Heart of the City (1952) are the best known. *Can Our Cities Survive?* was the first English-language publication of CIAM concepts of the Functional City, and it embodies the major ideas of prewar CIAM. *The Heart of the City* indicated the shift from the mechanistic socialist utopias of prewar CIAM to pedestrian urbanism and the cultural and democratic importance of urban centrality for modern architects in the context of postwar urban decentralization. Sert never published the book that would have indicated the third phase in his urbanistic thinking, *Balanced Habitat*, related to his United Nations work in the 1970s and indicating his engagement with issues of urban sustainability, housing typologies, and mixed use in ways that can still seem relevant today.²

This book is an effort to make some of Sert's previously unpublished writings available to a wider audience. This may change the usual image of him to some degree, showing that he was not simply a Corbusian campus and housing architect and CIAM administrator. It demonstrates through his own writings his articulation of the reasons for the CIAM focus on the heart of the city and his wide-ranging efforts to advance various aspects of urban design. As Sert defined it, this field was an effort to develop a new profession where architecture, landscape architecture, and city and regional planning all overlapped.³ These three previously separate professional fields had been linked by architecture dean Joseph Hudnut in 1936 to create the Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD), which Hudnut saw "as parts of a common field having processes and objectives which are and should be in many respects identical." In line with CIAM, by 1940 Hudnut saw all three disciplines as "inseparable . . . from the collective life, the smallest unit of which is the family, the largest the population of a city or a region." Hudnut also emphasized that all three shared a concern for the "expressive values of three-dimensional forms," and he understood "design" at the GSD to mean "first, an arrangement of ideas, and, second, an arrangement of visible forms which interpret those ideas."⁴

Hudnut's effort to link these professional fields has remained central to the GSD, despite Hudnut's own falling out with Walter Gropius several years after Hudnut had hired him as chair of architecture there in 1937.⁵ Taking over as dean on Gropius's recommendation in 1953 in the wake of the contentious resignations of both men, Sert continued the GSD focus on integrative three-dimensional design across these fields. But he also introduced the field of urban design as a linking element among them at the famous 1956 Harvard conference on the topic.⁶ In doing so, Sert put an unprecedented emphasis on design at the pedestrian heart of the city, distancing the GSD from the Gropius-era focus on designing Greenbelt town-like suburban settlements near express highways.

As some of these texts demonstrate, Sert instead was a strong and early advocate of the importance of pedestrian cities to contemporary politics and culture. Although he looked to the work of Louis Kahn and Edmund Bacon in Philadelphia as a partial model for urban design, his own work also makes evident what he thought design professionals should do in response to the growing complexity and confusions of postwar urban development in an era dominated by automobiles and the increasing appeal of suburbia. From his many mostly unbuilt South American and Cuban urban projects to highly visible built work such as Peabody Terrace student housing at Harvard and the housing on Roosevelt Island and in Yonkers, New York, Sert proposed and was occasionally able to build urban interventions that created varied outdoor and indoor

pedestrian circulation routes and urban plazas within complex mixed-use site organizations. These accommodated structured parking and urban landscaping, responding to specific urban and cultural contexts in ways that are still often not well understood, often because of the rejection of Corbusian modern architecture that began even as they were being completed.

The writings included here also help to counter persistent misunderstandings of Sert (and of the work and intentions of some of his CIAM colleagues) that have created a kind of intellectual void in how current approaches to urban design developed after 1956. In what had been, until recently, the widespread popular historical understanding of twentieth-century urban development, American cities were thought to have been vital pedestrian and mass-transit environments until misguided postwar modernist planners destroyed them with slum clearance, highways, and highrise housing like the Pruitt-Igoe complex in St. Louis. Recent scholarship has shown this model to be largely a New Urbanist myth, in that long-standing patterns of peripheral growth and a preference for automobiles over mass transit were evident in American cities as early as the 1920s. The advantages of centralized, pedestrian-oriented urban living were rarely valued until the late 1950s, at precisely the moment when these older urban patterns were beginning to disappear from many cities. It is in this context, one that also produced both the American interstate system and government funded efforts to “save” downtowns with urban renewal, that Sert began to advocate the advantages of pedestrian urbanism. It was also, of course, the point when issues of racial integration, alluded to by Charles Abrams at the first Harvard Urban Design Conference, began to reshape American life and politics.⁷

In the development of urban design as a professional field, Sert and parallel figures like his CIAM associate Ernesto Rogers in Italy, a partner in the Milan firm BBPR and a GSD visitor in 1954, had begun to substantially modify CIAM’s prewar urbanism based on the “four functions” of dwelling, work, transportation, and recreation before the 1954 challenge of Team 10 to CIAM over this issue.⁸ This may seem surprising, given Sert’s central role in CIAM at this time, but it was Sert’s postwar advocacy in CIAM of the importance of central pedestrian areas to progressive cultural and political life that helped define an entire generation of modernist urban preoccupations. These arguably had an effect on Team 10 and its successor groups’ preoccupations as well.

This collection of mostly unpublished Sert writings from 1951 to 1977 makes this less well-known side of Sert’s work accessible for the first time, and allows for a more balanced assessment of his historical importance to late twentieth-century urbanism. While there is no question that he was often assisted by Jaqueline Tyrwhitt (1905–1983) in his CIAM and Harvard Urban Design publications and activities, there is also no evidence that these texts were not Sert’s own work. The level of finish varies from text to text—some are more or less rough lecture transcriptions, while others show evidence of considerable editing for style—but the basic ideas and means of expression remain remarkably similar over the thirty-year period during which they were written.

Perhaps also surprising to those who see Sert’s urbanistic views as the same as those of prewar CIAM, Sert’s unpublished writings here indicate how his urbanistic proposals differ from those of Le Corbusier, whom he nonetheless often cited as his main inspiration throughout his career.⁹ They reveal that by the 1950s Sert had firmly rejected what he called the “functionalist

dream cities of the 1920s” and that he instead admired the active pedestrian street life of cities like Bogotá, Medellín, New York, Boston, and San Francisco.¹⁰ In his work with Le Corbusier around 1950 on planning for Bogotá, Sert and his partner Paul Lester Wiener produced their own version of the Bogotá masterplan, which differs significantly from Le Corbusier’s proposals for total urban clearance and rebuilding with highrise slab housing blocks. Instead of calling for the clearance of the old city, the district of La Candelaria, Sert and Wiener proposed its retention, and in their concept plans for new neighborhood sectors they proposed a range of pedestrian-oriented residential types and communal buildings that were more adapted to local culture than was Le Corbusier’s more familiar Unité model.¹¹ Yet Sert, like his CIAM colleagues, was by no means primarily an urban preservationist, and like other modern architects he saw the salvation of the pedestrian city to be in its modernist rebuilding, a position controversially quite evident in their proposed interventions for the old city in his and Wiener’s Havana Plan of 1955–58.¹² By 1961, related but more radical ideas about the importance of street life would soon be developed by Jane Jacobs (who had commented at the First Harvard Urban Design Conference) into a full-fledged rejection of urban renewal and modernism. Jacobs’s total rejection of master planning was a step that Sert himself was never willing to take.¹³

In 1960, Sert also launched the world’s first professional master of urban design program at Harvard. This was a joint degree program in which all the students were also professional master’s degree students in architecture, landscape architecture, or planning. To head this program, he hired Willo von Moltke in 1961, a planning associate of Edmund N. Bacon in Philadelphia in 1954–61. Von Moltke (1911–1987) had overseen the urban design plan for the Society Hill area and the housing work of I. M. Pei there, and was appointed tenured director of the Harvard program in 1964, a position he retained until 1977. Various other eminent faculty taught in Sert’s Urban Design program, including Tyrwhitt, the landscape architect Hideo Sasaki, the architectural historian Eduard Sekler, and Jerzy Soltan, the Polish Corbusian associate and peripheral Team 10 member who was also chair of architecture at GSD from 1967 to 1975. The GSD urban design program also included Tokyo architect Fumihiko Maki (1962–65) and various visitors, such as the Team 10 member Shadrach Woods. Sert also introduced the use of computers into urban design at the GSD at this time and chose the architect of its new building, John Andrews, before his retirement there as dean in 1969.

By then the modernist planning direction that Sert represented—however much modified in his version as pedestrian-oriented urban design—was under challenge from a variety of directions, and his efforts at GSD are still sometimes criticized. And in fact at this time he did want to tear down Harvard’s Memorial Hall and was indeed in close contact with advocates of urban renewal like Charles Abrams and government officials like Robert C. Weaver, the first African-American cabinet member and first secretary of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), who in a paternalistic, design-driven way were attempting to remake American metropolitan areas in what they thought were progressive directions. In the United States, of course, most of these efforts, which involved much displacement and demolition, became the focus of intense conflict and resentment during that era of Civil Rights and Vietnam War protests.

Among Sert’s last major works were two large projects commissioned by the New York State Urban Development Corporation (UDC) in 1970 for housing at the “new town in-town”

of Roosevelt Island, and one in Yonkers, New York. These works attempted to modify typical American public housing patterns by including more communal facilities within them. At about the same time Sert became active in efforts to promote the United Nations' focus on Human Settlements, which resulted in the Habitat II conference in Vancouver in 1976, where he advocated similar models for housing worldwide.

By this point Sert's focus was on the dangers to both the urban quality of life and the broader natural environment, and which he planned to offer some design solutions for in an unfinished book, *Balanced Habitat* (1977). He also continued to practice architecture in Boston and near his summer residence in Ibiza, Spain, until his death in 1983. In subsequent years much of his built work, and certainly his unbuilt Latin American urban plans, were not seen as very important to the field. Because they were commissioned by a variety of postwar governments, some quite authoritarian, under complicated circumstances that tied them to Cold War American foreign policy, the innovative nature of the design ideas contained in them is often overlooked. Many urban design ideas that Sert sought to turn into a set of principles, such as the use of the dense fabric of courtyard houses, the abstracted use of the organizational patterns of historical buildings and spaces, a sensitivity to existing urban contexts, and the use of systems of urban greenways and pedestrian paths are perhaps now better known in association with other figures within the same CIAM and post-CIAM orbit—such as Le Corbusier, Maxwell Fry & Jane Drew, and Pierre Jeanneret at Chandigarh, or the housing concepts of Serge Chermayeff, Fumihiko Maki, and some members of Team 10. Yet all of these ideas are present in Sert's mostly unbuilt plans from 1947 forward.

Until recently there has also been little awareness of how Sert's urbanistic ideas differed from Le Corbusier's, and of his important role in advancing his ideas in the context of trying to create "balanced habitat." This collection of writings is intended to change this perception, and to make clear Sert's importance as an early and talented advocate of ideas about the importance of pedestrian urbanism and of cities designed in relation to the natural environment that have in many cases become a part of mainstream design culture.