

A Review of *Rebuilding Urban Complexity: A Configurational Approach to Postindustrial Cities* (2024) by Francesca Froy

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Abstract

This review of Dr Francesca Froy’s book, *Rebuilding Urban Complexity: A Configurational Approach to Postindustrial Cities*, emphasizes the author’s innovative approach to bringing together urban space and urban economics, in ways that will be of interest both to professionals in urban economics and/or urban design, and to the non-professional reader who is interested in cities and urban complexity.

Keywords

cities; geography of manufacture; space syntax; systems theory; urban economics

Dr. Francesca Froy’s book, *Rebuilding Urban Complexity: A Configurational Approach to Postindustrial Cities* (Froy, 2025), brings together research in geography, urban design, urban economics, and the theory of complex systems. It provides an eminently readable—and long overdue—synthesis of these fields, in ways that will be useful to both the specialist and the novice. It allows everyday readers to connect with ideas that help explain the urban environment that surrounds them, but also shows planners and economists the ways through which their work is connected to the larger spatial and economic structure of the city itself.

The author’s varied background contributed to the intellectually and methodologically rich writing in the book. She has worked on issues of local economic development with the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), and then researched and taught at the Bartlett Schools of Architecture and Planning, University College London, bringing urban morphology together with local economic development. She is a lecturer on sustainable urban development and a fellow of Kellogg College at the University of Oxford.

The final chapter in Jane Jacobs' classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (hereafter *Death and Life*) is titled "The Kind of Problem a City Is" (Jacobs, 1961, 1973), and made the point that our understanding of the structure and complexity of cities was still only at an elementary level (the book was first published in 1961). Although Jacobs, as a writer and activist, is known mostly for her contributions to understanding the daily human experience of cities, including the physical and social attributes of streets, street patterns, and buildings, her theoretical insights about cities, their overall structure, and their economies remain profound.

Jacobs's principal interest was largely in the economic nature of cities, and subsequent books, including *The Economy of Cities*, published about 10 years after *Death and Life*, made that clear. And in that final chapter of *Death and Life*, she foresaw what were to be new fields of complexity theory in understanding cities, and the growing importance of scientists like Ludwig van Bertalanffy, Stuart Kauffman, Gregory Bateson, and others, as well as institutions like the Santa Fe Institute, all of which have helped break down boundaries between scientific fields by recognizing the similarities among entities like natural ecologies, human economies, and other large and complex systems. But although Jacobs understood these scientific needs, even she did not go as far as was necessary in the description of relationships between urban form and the urban economy, particularly when looking at a finer grain than the large-scale issues of geographic location.

The large-scale issues had been identified earlier by economists, one of whom, Alfred Marshall, saw the idea of "agglomeration," or the physical clustering of similar firms, as connected to three important economic needs: the availability of labor, the availability of materials, and the possibility of the exchange of ideas. "Agglomeration" was a step in the right direction, but it did not deal with the finer grain of urban structure—the pattern of streets, spatial relationships between different kinds of firms or between different kinds of functions, and the connections between urban space and the details of the urban economy.

While urban economics has dealt with phenomena such as overall location, density, and "agglomeration," and in the case of central place theory, distance from the center, it has not connected well with studies of urban form, which has largely grown as a specialization within geography, without strong links to economics. In her book, Francesca Froy has made these links. She writes that "In economic theory, cities are often described according to their size and density, with less attention paid to how the spatial 'parts' of a city (its streets and public spaces) fit together as a whole" (p. 47). Froy's book goes a long way toward solving this problem, using a considerably more detailed view to bring locally-focused economic geography into a clear discourse. The book is a highly readable, logical, and clear account of what can be a difficult group of subjects.

The word "rebuilding" in the title of the book correctly suggests that this is not an ordinary academic book but is intended as something directly useful for future practice. Indeed, although complexity theory can be written in ways that are dense and difficult to understand, Froy introduces its urban manifestation in a way that is clear, bringing the reader into it with straightforward ideas: "Complex systems are relational" (p. 11), "not all relationships are equal" (p. 12), "systems are mostly only partly ordered" (p. 14), for example. These clear statements entice the reader to go further into more detailed definitions—coming out at the end of an early chapter with enough knowledge of the fundamental nature of complex systems to be able to interpret more elaborate ideas later in the book. Froy's book contains ample references to a large variety of systems theorists, including Stuart Kauffman, Manuel deLanda, the team of Deleuze and Guattari, and others. These can all be quite dense in their own writing, but Froy carefully and selectively uses particular ideas of theirs to clearly define the major ideas of complex systems, while enticing the interested reader to go further with those thinkers themselves.

For scholars of the city, the ideas of self-organization and the potential dynamic nature of complex systems naturally lead to the question: Where do materiality and infrastructure fit in? Dr. Froy brings the theory and practice of space syntax into play, as one of the only theories/methodologies that sees spatial organization at an urban level as a dynamic entity that can help in the description of the city as a complex system. The most important focus in the book is the city of Manchester, which was central to the author's PhD dissertation. Manchester, which has gone through cycles of development and re-invention, provides ample ways of describing the different facets of dynamic urban structure.

The book's ideas are carefully developed, revealing how the complex systems of the economics of industry and its spatial manifestations are interrelated. The book is organized into three main parts. First, what is the nature of urban complexity, with respect to urban space and the urban economy? Second, how did cities develop (and diminish) that complexity? And third, what needs to happen to bring that complexity back?

The book begins with a chapter titled "Parts and Wholes: The Configuration of Urban Economies," describing the economic and human relationships among the different Manchester industries and how they are clustered together within the larger economy. Using available government datasets, distinctions are made between different kinds of relationships, the understanding of which is helped by diagrams developed by the author, that cluster firms together in different ways: according to their relationship to particular industries and supply-chain similarities, or the similarity of kind of material used in their manufacture, or the similarity of skills used in working with the material, or the prevalence of certain kinds of manufacturing processes in the city compared to the entire country.

That early chapter, on the economic distribution of businesses within the city but without dealing with the spatial component, sets the stage for the next chapter, "Parts and Wholes: The Configuration of Urban Space." The author begins with a quotation from *Death and Life*, in which Jane Jacobs makes a simple case for the importance of spatial connectivity in the city: "This partial influence of the park's design upon the park's use depends, in turn, on who is around to use the park, and when, and this in turn depends on uses of the city outside the park itself" (Jacobs, 1993, p. 565). The simplicity and obvious importance of this statement is a demonstration of not only the straightforwardness of Jane Jacobs, one of whose strengths was to say profound things in simple ways, but also, by using it at the start of the critical chapter concerning urban space, it shows a genuine respect for the reader, whom the author has smoothly brought into the realm of complex ideas.

The reader is now ready for the book to bring space syntax into the discussion. In simple terms, space syntax deals with the overall order of the city (or specified parts)—largely in the form of streets and clusters of streets at different scales. These together provide the armature for the location of buildings, and specific outdoor spaces like parks and squares. Space syntax provides an analytical tool that is itself a mathematical description of the city. But it is not overly abstract, and leads to an understanding of the city as "one thing"—as a large, complex system in which all the parts are related to each other, and in which those relationships can be explicitly described. Developed over several decades at the Bartlett School of Architecture at University College London by the late Professor Bill Hillier, with dozens of collaborators, space syntax has proved to be a valuable, descriptive tool that is unique in its applicability to understanding important aspects of urban complexity.

Froy helpfully points out that space syntax provides one way of understanding “the lived experience of people as they move through the urban system” (Froy, 2025, p. 38)—an attribute of cities that was also important to Jane Jacobs. This provides the principal methodology of the spatial analysis that turns out to be linked to the nature of the city’s economy.

In space syntax, an important difference is that between the “foreground network,” consisting of major streets that are essential to tying the whole city together, and may include businesses that have geographically farther connections, and the “background network,” consisting of more minor streets, that are often shorter, and experienced within individual neighborhoods or parts of the city. As with many aspects of the book, Froy brings such basic ideas into the discourse, all of which help make the book broader in its appeal.

Urban economics and urban space are now linked in a chapter titled “Bringing Together Configurational Analysis of Economies and Space.” In a way, this is the heart of the book, doing what neither economists nor urban geographers have done. The chapter begins with a comment on the “Manchester hive,” an understanding of the city that has existed since Victorian times. Froy elaborates on the lack of strong theoretical relationships between economics and urban form, and goes on to say:

Space syntax analysis has revealed a fine-grained structuring of economic activities in cities which is rooted in the network properties of street systems and which influences a number of economic outcomes including levels of productivity, incomes, patenting rates and house prices. (p. 49)

These are all attributes that can be measured with existing data—and the author describes several studies of Manchester and other cities that were based on available detailed information, and led to results that began to provide a more detailed view than usual of local characteristics in location.

Near the beginning of this chapter, the author reminds us that the central-place theory of geographers like Von Thunen is limited in geographic focus to single variables, such as rents relative to the distance from the center. Since space syntax is more complex, the salient diagrams describe different kinds of relationships between physical places in Manchester and nearby. Flows of commuters between places are used in one example, and the existence of busy clusters of “third spaces” and density of life on the street are seen as possible correlates with innovation and the sharing of knowledge, in another. The possible characteristic of areas defined by street grids is mentioned in a discussion of “pervasive centrality,” connected to the idea that different scales of the street network may focus on the accommodation of different functions, leading to a richness of different functions in the same place.

In the second part of the book, Froy discusses how the city changes over time, beginning with “beginning with a chapter titled “How local economies evolve and branch” (Froy, 2025, p. 65). This is a natural expansion of the overall theme, again done in a way that is available both to the specialist and to the casual reader. And again, the story starts with Jane Jacobs—now writing how industry gradually changes—using existing materials and technologies to solve new problems. The author applies this idea to Manchester, describing how “import replacement” helped the city become important in garment production during the 19th century and later. She writes about the importance of merchants, the role of warehouses, the role of chemicals, the importance of ingenuity and experimentation—and also immigration, along with a negative part of history, the use of the slave trade.

The clarity with which Froy describes the evolution of industry in Manchester is carried forward with a discussion of the relationship between urban space and the development of urban economies —again with a carefully structured explanation of urban space and its role in supporting the innovation that allowed the city to grow while remaining resilient.

The foreground network at the center of the city is seen as important in the city's success, cited as such by the important urban planner and scholar Peter Hall. This includes both the importance of the Royal Exchange, along with the existence of many "third places" which acted as loci of discussion and "technical literacy." When there is a grid, it may be important in providing an armature for diversity and different forms of workshops and factories, and providing the basis for "interrelated urban diversity"—a point made with a detailed map done for the purpose, that shows a diversity of industrial land uses. In another useful diagram, Froy shows how urban plots maintained their geometry while remaining useful for changing businesses that were associated with different industries.

One of the reasons for the likely wide appeal of the book is that Froy's explanations are well balanced between the theoretical idea and the historic and cartographic information that supports it. At the same time, the adage that "correlation does not imply causality" may come into play here. What Froy has hopefully done in several of these cases that seem so clear in their relationships is to entice the researcher to dig more deeply into the reasons that certain locations turned out to be where they are. Additional research might involve triangulating the study—perhaps through direct interaction in the form of interviews or information gained from news articles at the appropriate time in history—to confirm the reasons for some of the stated relationships.

Finally, if the book were purely an academic treatise on the complexity of cities, it could have ended after Part 2. But one of the author's intentions is for practical application toward the improvement of existing cities, many of which suffered greatly with wartime destruction during the Second World War—and with modernist reconstruction that was overly simplistic in the understanding of meaningful spatial relationships.

The rebuilding of European cities, American "urban renewal" that destroyed neighborhoods of immigrants, minorities, and the poor, the wholesale construction of American suburbs and English New Towns, the new capitals of Chandigarh and Brasilia that served as models for architects and physical planners—all had the effect of destroying (or preventing) the complex physical, social, and economic fabric of cities, and the possibilities of complex systems of growth that have been discussed in this book. Urban complexity, and the consequent richness and economic opportunity of a city's built environment, came to exist less and less.

So in the final chapter, "Rebuilding Urban Complexity: How Can Policy Makers Intervene?," Froy describes common-sense (but not necessarily easily carried out) actions of urban design. For example, "Make buildings and their facades permeable" (p. 146) speaks to the question of public space, the struggle to maintain it in an era of increasing privacy, and the importance of using the ground floor of buildings to provide spatial continuity with the public realm. Or "Bring economic diversity back to city centres" (p. 147) is based partly on earlier observations in the book of the richness of places where different patterns of street use overlap. This idea represents an important goal in bringing back the varied economic life of particular urban places. The reader who is involved with the revival of contemporary cities will find not only suggestions but also their theoretical validation.

So this is a book that is not only for the theorist or the activist or the employee of the urban planning office. It is for all of them, and because it is, those disparate players in the urban building culture have a common language and a common source of understanding, that can help them communicate with each other about issues that beforehand were likely in very different realms of scholarship.

This leads directly to what makes the book unique, and more than welcome. The author has insisted on the readability of a necessarily complex approach to the subject of urban complexity. The book becomes available to readers at different levels of experience in the subject—ranging from lay people who are interested in how cities work, to the systems theorist who wants to see how their field, which they already understand in detail, might connect to the city, to the urban planner who is looking for ways in which cities can accommodate more variety and the framework of a healthy economy.

Dr. Froy has respect for all these possible readers even when describing phenomena that might otherwise stay in the realm of advanced or difficult science. This book makes it clear not only that the city works in particular ways, but also about the idea, in the first place, that the city is not only what is seen. It has a complex spatial structure of people, buildings, and streets, along with the flows of money, materials that are in different places on supply chains, and knowledge. Within such an important and complex framework, the marvelous readability of this book cannot be over-emphasized.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Howard Davis is professor emeritus of architecture at the University of Oregon, and a writer. His books include *The Culture of Building*, *Living Over the Store: Architecture and Local Urban Life*, *Working Cities: Architecture, Place and Production*, and the recently published *Encounters With Architecture: Insights From a Hundred Places*.