

Book Review

A Review of *The Routledge Handbook of Urban Design Research Methods*

Aminreza Iranmanesh

Faculty of Architecture and Fine Arts, Final International University, Turkey; aminreza.iranmanesh@final.edu.tr

Submitted: 9 November 2023 | Accepted: 17 November 2023 | Published: 26 December 2023

Abstract

This book review critically examines *The Routledge Handbook of Urban Design Research Methods*, edited by Hesam Kamalipour, Patricia Aelbrecht, and Nastaran Peimani (2023, 1st edition). The book offers an extensive exploration of urban design research, organized under five thematic parts: “agency,” “affordance,” “place,” “informality,” and “performance.” Each part delves into the complexities and nuances of urban design research, integrating a diverse range of methodologies and case studies from different perspectives. This review explores the book’s comprehensive approach, noting its efforts to combine theoretical frameworks with methodological insights and its inclusion of a wide range of topics while highlighting the book’s strengths in addressing current issues in urban design research. The review maintains a critical approach, providing a balanced overview of the book’s contribution to urban design literature.

Keywords

affordance; agency; handbook; informality; methodology; performance; place; research methods; urban design

Issue

This book review is part of the issue “Between the ‘Structural’ and the ‘Everyday’: Bridging Macro and Micro Perspectives in Comparative Urban Research” edited by Nadine Appelhans (TU Berlin) and Sophie Schramm (TU Dortmund).

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Being involved in scholarship, teaching, and practice of urban design, I have often been tasked with recommending a comprehensive methodological overview to colleagues and students alike. This need arises from the interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary nature of urban discourse, which encompasses a wide range of spatial, social, economic, cultural, environmental, and other dimensions, each with myriad methodological and theoretical approaches. Consequently, sources offering a comprehensive overview of urban design research and the related methods are scarce, making it especially challenging for students, emerging academics, and practitioners to delve into urban design studies. Kamalipour et al. (2023a) have undertaken a challenging endeavour to address some of these gaps in their edited handbook.

Urban design faces challenges in making connections between theory and practice while integrating studies from both the Global North and South. This handbook aims to address these challenges through the collaboration of notable scholars from around the globe aiming to explore possibilities for enhancing urban design’s theoretical and methodological foundations. From this perspective, the underlying theme of the book is exploring

possibilities and potentials for advancing urban design as an emerging field in the “process of becoming” (Kamalipour et al., 2023b, p. 1). The importance of this book emerges from the growing and dynamic nature of urban design, a field becoming increasingly complex to fully comprehend. This complexity may incite a persistent yet unproductive search for causality. Many seek to pinpoint the origins of various issues, neglecting the fact that urban problems are part of an intricate, interconnected web that calls for more sophisticated and adaptive solutions. The central issue is not the absence of theories, but rather the lack of an encompassing framework that effectively unites theory and practice. The evolution of urban design into a specialised field, characterised by distinct expertise and an emphasis on research, underscores the pressing need for collaborative initiatives to navigate its complexities. This handbook, crafted in response to urban design’s continuous evolution and emerging challenges, serves as a primary resource to unravel and address these intricate issues.

Rejecting a linear, hierarchical format, the book offers a creative layout, enabling readers to directly access chapters related to their research area, while also

exploring broader topics, methodologies, challenges, ethics, data collection methods, and visualisation techniques. Each chapter—in most cases—provides a brief introduction to the author(s)' works and journeys in relation to urban design research and/or practice, followed by an overview of the studied topic, and then draws on case studies, previous works, or explorations. This handbook is based on a core principle that urban design research is rooted in inquiry, emphasising the integral link between research questions, design, methodologies, and outcomes. The handbook is divided into five thematic parts: “agency” (10 chapters), “affordance” (9 chapters), “place” (11 chapters), “informality” (10 chapters), and “performance” (12 chapters). In this review, I will attempt to succinctly detail the focus of each part and some chapters that I found particularly interesting.

The first part of the book, centred on the theme of “agency”, offers a multi-faceted exploration of how urban spaces are designed, developed, managed, and by/for whom. Throughout the chapters, the idea of *agency* has been explored through the perspectives of individual and collective action, design and planning, empowerment and participation, socio-political, anthropological, stakeholders, and spatial agency/agencies. Matthew Carmona's chapter, “Researching Urban Design Governance,” initiates the discussion, delving into ways of exploring regulatory and organisational structures steering urban design. Ali Madanipour's chapter, “Dynamic Multiplicity,” then widens the lens, discussing the varying contexts, perspectives, and timeframes influencing urban environments. This part then expands to analyse how diverse contexts, perspectives, and temporal factors play a pivotal role in shaping urban environments. It also puts emphasis on the narrative elements of urban design and addresses more complex topics like the impact of urban design activism in housing markets and the role of financial forces in neoliberal urban environments. It presents original perspectives rooted in anthropology, shedding light on urban design methodologies within diverse cultural and geographical settings. The importance of communal approaches, collaboration, and collective engagement and their role in the creation and management of urban spaces are among the common issues highlighted by the authors in this part.

The second part of the book focuses on the concept of “affordance” represented via the inherent potential and functionalities of urban spaces, especially in terms of how the built environment can either enable or restrict different types of use and interaction. The concept of “affordance,” originating from the field of ecological psychology, was first introduced by Gibson (1979). The reflection and adaptation of the term “affordance” in urban design research has been explored from a variety of perspectives in this book. The contributions in this part employ a diverse array of data collection methods including mental mapping, photography, videography, sketching, surveys, and social, spatial, and temporal observa-

tions. As discussed in some of the chapters, mapping techniques are particularly critical in exploring cities and contexts where official data is lacking, not publicly available, or unreliable.

Several chapters in part two stand out for their innovative approaches. They explore a variety of urban experiences, from cognitive mapping of childhood urban experiences, investigating urban spaces as venues for play and social exchange, the application of body language analysis in urban design, and mapping urban transit morphologies to the spatial possibilities for negotiation in refugee camps and the feminist co-production methods in urban design. One particularly notable chapter that caught my eye was “Putting People in Place” by Shilpa Ranade and Shilpa Phadke. They use urban mapping to delve into gendered perceptions and their impact on space usage. Their study highlights the broader potentials of mapping in uncovering hidden narratives and affordances in urban design. The chapters in this part collectively enhance our understanding of how urban design can be a powerful tool in uncovering and harnessing the hidden potentials and capacities of urban spaces.

Part three is centred around the notion of “place” as a central discourse of urban design, examining how places are created, deconstructed, and reconstructed across various scales and settings. This part explores *place* as a complex, multilayered, dynamic, and ongoing phenomenon, not frozen in time, and thus not entirely comprehensible through deductive processes focused on individual elements. Through this perspective, *place* is a dynamic and emerging concept that cannot be separated from other themes of the book. This part opens with Kim Dovey's chapter, “From Place to Assemblage,” highlighting the importance of asking the right question. Dovey looks at urban space through the lens of assemblage, which seems in line with the broader framing of the handbook. This part examines the intricate layers of “place,” stretching from the tangible aspects of morphology and soundscapes to the more intangible realms of memory, attachment, and identity. It highlights the diversity of methodologies and approaches used in studying urban spaces, advocating for a more nuanced understanding that incorporates multiple dimensions. The contributions in this section reveal the deep, often unexplored connections between urban design, placemaking, and the diverse experiences and perceptions that shape our understanding of urban spaces.

In part four, the theme of developing a deeper understanding of “informality” is presented as crucial for shaping more nuanced urban design theories and methods. This part begins with Vinit Mukhija's chapter, “The Spatial Form and Built Environment of Urban Informality,” which explores urban informality in cities of the Global North. This contrasts with the general trend in urban informality literature that primarily focuses on the Global South. This deliberate choice for opening a chapter into “informality” fights against assuming

the Global South as the only place of “informality” and the common conflation of “informality” with poverty. In this part, a variety of research methods and mapping techniques have been employed. Data collection has always been a challenging endeavour in exploring urban informalities, as they are often overlooked by the governing bodies and lack proper representation in the official datasets. Several data collection methods are also explored, including historical satellite imagery, photography, audio-visual recordings, observations, historic cartographic analyses, interviews, and surveys. Each of these methods comes with its own set of challenges. These challenges highlight the difficulties in achieving systematic and reliable data collection, which is a major hurdle in conducting comprehensive studies on informal urbanism.

The examination of the capacities and challenges associated with informal urbanism has often been overlooked in urban design studies. The collection of chapters in part four illustrates the broad spectrum and significance of exploring forms of informal urbanism in different contexts. Stefan Al investigates urban villages, Gabriela Quintana Vigiola examines barrios settlements, Gordon C. C. Douglas discusses non-traditional research methods in the context of the Global North, Jota Samper proposes a morphological framework for informal settlements, and Hesam Kamalipour reflects on researching informal urbanism. Other contributors, including Francesca Piazzoni, Lautaro Ojeda Ledesma, Kiran Keswani, and Banashree Banerjee, provide insights into various aspects and methodologies for studying street vending.

Part five includes a collection of chapters exploring “performance” in urban design. The underlying question here is about how we might be able to evaluate the quality of urban spaces, from which perspectives, and based on what criteria. This part opens with a chapter by Jon Lang and Nancy Marshall where they challenge traditional methods for exploring urban squares while highlighting the importance of integrating new technologies. This opening is followed by a number of other chapters embracing nuanced and technology-oriented analytical techniques, methods, and/or tools such as metaverse, augmented reality, geographic information systems (GIS), eye-tracking, thermal camera imaging, and syntax 1.0. This is not to say all chapters under this theme are analytical and technology-oriented; for instance, the chapter “Post-occupancy Evaluation” by Mike Biddulph opens a window into the relevance and importance of mapping and observation in evaluating the performance of urban spaces. Overall, part five highlights the necessity of embracing a multitude of research methods to address the diverse challenges in exploring what “good” urban design might entail and how it could be consistently achieved.

In conclusion, this insightful volume puts a spotlight on the evolving landscape of urban design research, presenting a collection of methodologies, perspectives, and explorations from notable scholars across the globe. Each chapter serves as a testament to the complexity and dynamism inherent in urban spaces, challenging readers to think beyond conventional boundaries and engage with the multifaceted dimensions of “agency,” “affordance,” “place,” “informality,” and “performance”. As the authors explore the nuanced layers of urban design through a variety of case studies and research approaches, the book stands as a critical resource for academics, practitioners, and students alike—encouraging a dialogue that is both reflective and forward-thinking. By confronting the challenges of urban design with a rich diversity of analytical tools and theoretical frameworks, this volume not only contributes to the academic discourse but also serves as a catalyst for practical innovation in shaping the future of urban environments.

In the end, I must mention that although the book is organised into five thematic parts, most chapters can be considered related to other parts. This, perhaps, is more in line with the original presupposition of the book, rejecting the rigidity of hierarchical structuring and causality thinking. I would definitely recommend this book as a source of inspiration to my colleagues and students, especially those who are looking for a solid window into urban design research.

Acknowledgments

I wish to extend my thanks to Hesam Kamalipour for providing me with a copy of the book and for his swift responses to the many inquiries I had while writing this review. I would also like to thank Tiago Cardoso and the editors of the thematic issue for accepting this review.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares no conflict of interests.

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About the Author



Aminreza Iranmanesh (PhD) is an associate professor of architecture and urbanism, currently teaching at Final International University. His research delves into urban network analytics, social media, GIS science, urban geography, informal urbanism, and architectural pedagogy. Currently, he is examining the emerging relationships between digital communication mediums and both urban form and design education.