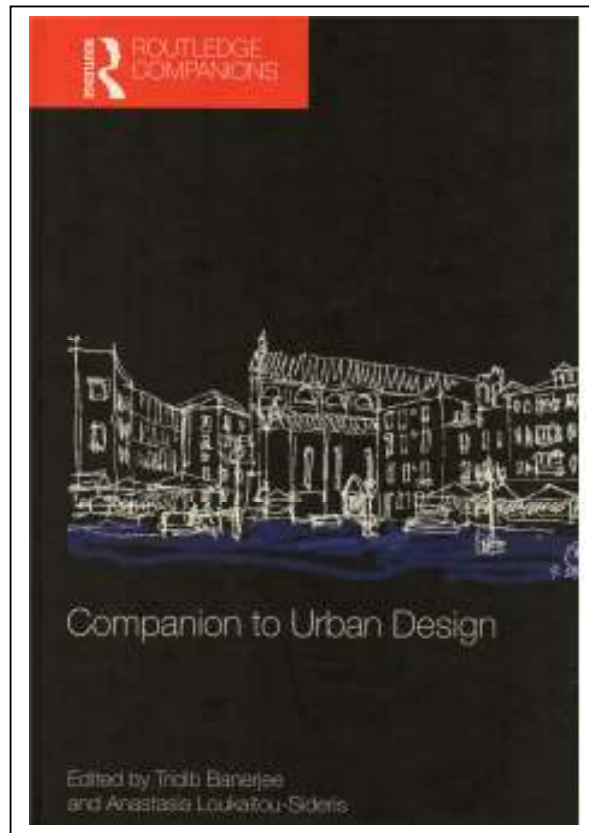




## BOOK REVIEW

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Editors : Prof. Tridib Banerjee and Prof. Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris  
Year of Publication : 2010  
Title : Companion to Urban Design  
Publisher : Routledge  
Pages : 709  
ISBN : 978-0-415-55364-3



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Urban design compendia (readers) are a useful method of explaining ‘the state of the art’ at any point in time, and we can see from various texts that the discipline has undergone significant change in the last 15 years (Cuthbert 2003, Moor 2006, Larice and Macdonald 2006, Carmona, and Tiesdell 2007, Haas 2008, Krieger and Saunders, 2009). With the exception of the first, which is social science based, each would be unambiguously accepted by most architects as ‘urban design.’ But there are other closely related readers where there is a morphing of urban design, planning and landscape architecture (Fainstein and Campbell 1996, Mandelbaum, Mazza and Burchell 1996, Legates and Stout 2000, Campbell and Fainstein 2003, Waldheim 2006). So there are at least ten readers available, with the current reader bringing the total to eleven. Arguably the market is close to exhausted.

The latest of these noted above is the best to date and it encompasses many of the points of view that attempt to define urban design. Tridib Bannerjee and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris are both well-known figures in the field, Bannerjee has the chair in urban and regional planning at the University of Southern California (USC), Los Angeles and Loukaitou Sideris is Professor of Urban Design at the University of California (UCLA), Los Angeles. So we know we are in good hands. This edited collection is a massive tome some 700 pages long and it is beautifully produced by a major international press. Of course the big question in editing a reader of this kind is ‘*how should I do it?* – by scale, typology, content, discipline, theoretical position, or subject matter? Clearly there are many methods, all of which are to a degree equally acceptable. This is demonstrated in some of the quoted texts (above). Carmona and Tiesdell for example use the concept of ‘dimensions’ e.g. the Morphological Dimension, the Perceptual Dimension, the Social Dimension, the Visual Dimension etc. Moor uses themes such as ‘Urban design comes of age;’ ‘Connecting social spaces;’ ‘Sustainability through technology;’ ‘New frameworks for urbanism’ etc. In my reader I chose to follow a logic of my own that adopted ten irreducible elements for urban design knowledge – Theory, History, Philosophy, Politics, Culture, Gender, Environment, Aesthetics, Typologies, and Pragmatics (Cuthbert 2003). Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris categorise sections into Roots, Theoretical Perspectives, Influences, Technologies and Methods, Process, Components, Debates, Global Trends, and New Directions. Overall, readers have a range of between ten to fifty chapters, with the current review topping out at 52 Chapters. So before assessing Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris, we must first ask by which criteria should such compendia be judged? How are we to evaluate them?

From my own perspective a reader must *go beyond* merely being a collection of articles that the editor feels are valuable, however interesting these might be. In a very real sense, what the editor thinks is unimportant. Or in order not to be misunderstood, it may be better to ask *how is this discipline/subject/field to be analysed? What are its component parts? What available theory do we have to understand it?* We must look for a more enduring logic than personal preferences. So we intuitively search for some underlying structure, principle, or philosophy that will unite chapters into a coherent text. Herein lays the heart of the problem, since it is clear that few editors have a real grasp of any substantial theoretical foundation that justifies the subject matter in the first place. This principle can also be taken further. We can argue that urban design has no substantial theory of its own – therefore editors cannot be blamed for not adopting a generally held set of coherent principles such as those that pervade scientific enquiry within the natural

or social sciences. So before investigating the current compendium in greater detail, I must digress somewhat in order to bring certain important issues to the surface.

We may begin by asking the seminal question *where did urban design come from?* For the answer we must look to history. It is self-evident that urbanisation and the growth of cities involved the *practice* of urban design in some form, albeit unselfconsciously. Even putting these two words together creates an enormous dilemma since there is no generally accepted definition of *urban* or *design*. For example planners, architects, landscape architects, and engineers all have their own concepts, understandably based on their own limited knowledge and ideological bias. This is in effect the core of the problem – has ‘urban design’ always existed or is it a relatively recent invention? If we could talk to the ancient Greeks, and asked them ‘what do you understand by urban design?’ would they have an answer? History tells us that the first recognisable city is that of Catal Huyuk in Anatolia (Turkey), built in 7000 BC. For the next 9000 years, cities evolved without any generally accepted concept of urban design, and many flourished in its absence. With the coming of modernity new forms of social organisation evolved such as *professions*. The Institute of British Architects was founded in London in 1832, and later we had the birth of the Town Planning Institute in 1914. Each was subject to a Royal charter in 1898 and 1959 respectively. The first program to legitimate urban design as an extension of architecture was called *Civic Design*, originating in 1908 at Liverpool University. But it was not until 1953 that the new Dean of Harvard Graduate School of Design (GSD), Jose Lluís Sert defined *urban design* as *project design*, one that prevails today. The normal practice is that urban design is shared between the architectural and planning professions, with architects commanding the physical design process with planners in charge of development control and design briefs.

Problematically, the deterministic nature of practice in both professions frequently resulted in ‘great planning disasters’ such as the Pruitt Igoe housing complex in St Louis, Basil Spence’s Gorbals project in Glasgow, and to a large extent the entire British New Town fiasco (Hall 1982). Over time it became increasingly clear that architects in particular had no understanding of social dynamics, and that physical design principles were devoid of social content. Even to the uninitiated this was clearly a disastrous formula to base the design of town and cities. Pruitt Igoe was such a social disaster that it had to be dynamited, with no resolution of the behavioural sink it represented. Charles Jencks named the moment as the beginning of postmodernity (3.32 pm July 15<sup>TH</sup> 1972), or alternatively the date where it was finally recognised that urban design had to be completely rethought. Architects and planners would never again be fully trusted to carry out complex social projects unsupervised. But it was not until the turn of the millennium that a major challenge to Sert’s definition of urban design took place. In essence the argument is that Sert’s use of the term *urban design* was misplaced. What he named *project design* should be called exactly that, giving the term *urban design* a much larger social context - the design of cities in the context of historic patterns of urbanisation. Following from this I renamed Sert’s approach *mainstream urban design* (i.e. Kevin Lynch, Christopher Alexander, Gordon Cullen, Lincoln Barnett, Roger Trancik etc.) I then suggested an entirely new paradigm based in Spatial Political Economy called *the New Urban Design* (Cuthbert 2003, 2007, 2006, 2010) with the criticism that overall:

‘The mainstream remains an anarchistic assembly of ideas. It is comprised of a series of narrow and uncoordinated ideologies based in individual experience with no shared ground rules or objectives. Hence no generalisation of concepts is possible in order that

some foundation for science, social or otherwise might evolve..... Hence the physical determinism of the mainstream does not directly translate into the reality of socio-spatial structures and needs, and therefore it cannot justify the inherent causality of 'the design process' (Cuthbert 2014:4).

Given that we now have two models of urban design to choose from in our assessment of the above reader, we can clearly see the consequences of our actions for analysis. If we go with the mainstream, we then choose to define urban design as an endless series of projects with a potential history of one hundred years or thereabout. The compendium would then be judged by its capacity to analyse project design. Any analytical system would then be clearly limited by the nature of the project, with difficulties that would then include problems of comparison in terms of scale, location, architectural position, cost etc. If we choose to adopt the principles inherent to the new urban design, we would be able to encompass urban development in its entirety, including the forms and spaces that have evolved over historical time. Clearly the focus would not be on projects but would involve the public realm as the real object of investigation, and civil society as the foundation for theoretical analysis. These two objects, one real and one theoretical imply origins in social science, and not in the aesthetics of architecture or the practices of urban planning.

With these ideas in mind it is clear that *the Companion to Urban Design* recognises the transition from one form of urban design to another. But the text focuses on the new urban design both in terms of its content and structure. While projects are mentioned, and this is necessary, they do not dominate in terms of how urban design should be conceived. None of the section headings have projects as a major focus. The first section struggles with history, arguably due to the mainstream having a time span dictated by Sert in 1953. In section two *Theoretical Perspectives* the very first article proposes that urban design is 'an incompletely theorised project' and suggests cybernetics, spatial political economy and critical urbanism as notable. Section three *Influences* indicates certain perspectives that are sufficient to give most architects a heart attack as their preconceptions regarding project based urban design are rapidly demolished. This task is elaborated with viewpoints from geography, sociology, anthropology, feminism, environmental psychology, law, political theory and public health. It would seem that there is some confusion between sections two and three, since presumably influences would include the theories behind them, so my feeling is that these sections should have been better edited. *Technologies and Methods* are limited to four articles, and *Process* as one might expect deals with some basis norms, design guidance, competitions and citizen participation. Chapter six, *Components* is as close as this volume gets to the mainstream, basically the geography of urban typologies – downtown, suburbs, new communities, neighbourhoods etc., with chapter seven dealing with debates over sprawl, placelessness, identity, design guides and other issues. The last two chapters are excellent, addressing *Globalisation* and *New Directions*. Globalisation only has four chapters and covers a rather diffuse if interesting series of articles on branding, urbanisation, ethnoscaapes and informal cities. The final section has eight chapters that combine somewhat unrelated topics such as postmodernism, ecology, transit-oriented development and passive surveillance.

There is no doubt that this compendium makes an excellent contribution to the available stock of readers. Indeed it is definitely a product of its time in that it could never have

been edited in this manner twenty years ago. The concept of the *New Urban Design* inhabits the entire volume, and in so doing it necessarily generates some confusion as to what urban design is. After all we cannot expect to receive a totally coherent new paradigm that can give form to such a diversity of questions such as are raised in this text in a single book. But one thing is certain, that the new urban design has taken over from the old project design based ideology. This heralds exciting new debates over the next few years, when the new urban design will come to the fore as the dominant paradigm, one based in spatial political economy as its source.

Criticisms of the text are few. Despite the fact that the compendium is developmental, the main headings are somewhat elastic in content, and open to question as to why they take the form they have. Some entries are still reluctant to give up on the old ways, that project design and urban design is not the same thing. This in some manner may be desirable, since the mainstream still performs useful functions. Nonetheless no dominant paradigm emerges from the volume and this is to be expected given the state of flux affecting urban design today. Despite these issues, this current volume will remain the standard of reference for some time to come. Tridib Banerjee and Anastasia Loukaitou-Sideris have performed an invaluable service, ground breaking, courageous and above all curious as to the path we should take forward in understanding cities.

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