



***The Routledge Handbook of Urban Design Research Methods*, Hesam Kamalipour, Patricia Aelbrecht, and Nastaran Peimani (eds.), Routledge, 2023, £205.00, 578pp, ISBN: 9780367768058 and *Research Handbook on Urban Design*, Marion Roberts and Suzy Nelson (eds.), Edward Elgar, 2024, £210.00, 432pp, ISBN: 9781800373464**

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Like proverbial buses, two urban design research handbooks have arrived at the same time. Together, the *Routledge Handbook of Urban Design Research Methods* (edited by Kamalipour, Aelbrecht, and Peimani) and the *Research Handbook on Urban Design* (edited by Roberts and Nelson) provide a comprehensive overview of the state of contemporary urban design research. The timing of their publication signals growing momentum and conviction behind the field's distinctive contribution.

As its title suggests, the *Routledge Handbook of Urban Design Research Methods* devotes the greater focus on methods of the two books. This responds to a “research turn” (p. 11) in urban design, also following rapidly increasing student numbers and growing interest in specialisation. The book's introductory chapter foregrounds the following contributions by identifying several key characteristics or tendencies of urban design research. These include: use of case study; mixed methods; multiscalar approach; production and application of spatial knowledge; ethics; sensitivity to context; impact; multidimensional relations; production and application of local/global knowledge and ordinary/expert knowledge; and focus on place and relations. These are presented in the context of an ever-evolving field—which the remainder of the book demonstrates.

The book's structure reflects this sharp focus on research practice and is laid out across five sections according to key research topics, which themselves represent an advancement of design thinking: agency; affordance; place; informality; and performance. Each of the 51 contributed chapters is

typically structured (with differing emphasis) around a current topic or line of inquiry, before the author(s) discuss the methods through which they have explored this, often with a case study to demonstrate. For example, Madanipour (pp. 23–32) proposes the theoretical and methodological approach of ‘dynamic multiplicity’—to analyse spaces, timeframes, perspectives, and contexts—and applies this framework through a case study of a temporary residential development called Place/Ladywell. This format supports an accessible discussion of methods—which is not easy to do—although it could be argued that the book's overall structure by key research topic hides this methodological detail at times.

The book covers wide-ranging urban design research foci and approaches, which reflects growing attention on how the design of places can support responses to generation-defining policy challenges, including climate change and inequality. Peimani, for example, identifies Transit-Oriented Development as a contributor to sustainable city development and design (pp. 160–167), while Lehmann considers how urban design research can assess the ‘green’ performance of urban areas (pp. 505–514). The book also engages with finer-grained examples just as effectively. This includes research at smaller spatial scales, and different aspects of the nuanced relationship between people and places—such as the role of streets as public spaces (Mehta, pp. 135–150), and the importance of understanding place identity (Davison and Woodcock pp. 252–261).

Given the diversity of approaches within the book's contributions, the implications for urban design research could have been teased out further. The book may, for example, have benefited from a distinct conclusion, to take stock of how the chapters collectively define or inform the field today. This could also have proposed an agenda

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for how urban design research can take advantage of this momentum and further develop as a cohesive applied field.

The *Research Handbook on Urban Design*, in comparison, devotes less space to the direct consideration of research methods. Instead, its distinctive contribution is to showcase the state of urban design as a field, through a series of cutting-edge foci and applications within urban design research. The *Research Handbook* therefore includes informative chapters on a series of important topics within urban design research, including shaping smart cities (Pomeroy and Lim, pp. 56–77), informal settlements (Kalimpour, pp. 107–124), and the emergence of temporary public spaces in response to the pandemic (Kamvasinou, pp. 367–389).

The *Research Handbook* adopts what could be described as a more ‘traditional’ structure, according to the primary spatial scale at which the chapters focus. After an opening set of chapters which discuss approaches to urban design research in academia and practice, including within education (Black and Mell, pp. 40–55), the remaining contributions are grouped according to whether they concern work at the scale of settlement, neighbourhood, or public space. The structure is clear and easily navigable, and still allows for areas of overlap and interrelationships between the spatial scales to be acknowledged.

The editors explain that the main guiding feature for the selection of contributions was their interest in a “certain degree of spatial ordering”, and in the physicality of space (p. 4). Compared to the *Routledge Handbook*, the contributions are therefore perhaps more applied and less methodological. This leaves space within the 20 chapters for rich detail on diverse case studies from across the globe, including of indigenous urbanism in Jaipur (Hemani et al., pp. 79–106), heritage-led revitalisation in Shenzhen (Heath et al., pp. 225–247), and walkability in southern Chile (Zumelzu et al., pp. 266–282).

The book concludes strongly with the editors identifying a series of themes for emerging avenues of urban design research. While some have long been present—such as the seemingly intractable challenge of firmly defining the field—others identify newer and exciting developments for researchers to address. For example, the editors identify the lack of a common language for urban design research across different communities and geographies as an important consideration for the field’s diversity and impact, given the prescience of colloquial terms, such as when describing streets and public spaces. Likewise, the practical context for much urban design research—where academics continually move between projects according to funding requirements, and where much ‘hands on’ research is carried out by private practices—provides plenty for urban design researchers to consider.

Urban design research today

The publication of both volumes at a similar time provides the opportunity to consider what they reveal about the current state of urban design research. Both sets of editors identify that they are responding to an important moment for the field, as design-based solutions provide increasingly influential responses to global policy challenges, and as the institutional landscapes of higher education and urban design practice continue to evolve. Perhaps unsurprisingly, therefore, a degree of overlap exists between the topics covered by the two books—both in their overall framing and within the focus of individual chapters. Indeed, several authors have contributed to both books, as might be expected given the existence of several long-established avenues of urban design research. Likewise, the *Routledge Handbook* and the *Research Handbook* also share authors and topics with previous similar publications (e.g. Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris 2019; Carmona 2014a).

It could be asked, therefore, what makes these books distinctive in comparison to previous contributions, and what this means for the future of urban design research. While many of the debates raised are not new, when reading the books it nonetheless feels that urban design research has a more confident sense of itself than has previously been the case. The contributors are typically demonstrating the effectiveness and application of their work, rather than persuading readers that urban design warrants attention—which it has already captured.

The editors of each book state their corresponding hope of informing both theory and practice, highlighting the tight relationship between each. The make-up (and cost) of each book means the primary audience is likely to be academic. Broadly, academics seeking critique and reflection on methods would gain most from the *Routledge Handbook*, while those more focused on education or practice would likely be drawn to the *Research Handbook*. The audiences will undoubtedly overlap, however, and this combined audience is likely to keep growing given increasing interest in urban design among academics and students, and the closer links being developed between universities and practitioners.

A striking message from both books is the sheer diversity of urban design research being carried out—not just in terms of theory, approach, and method, but also in the geographic coverage of the case studies. The perspectives and approaches this brings is to be celebrated, but still reflects long-running tensions within urban design research. The multi-disciplinary nature of urban design has always been both a key strength and a weakness—its mixed theoretical underpinnings and close relationships to



several other disciplines have often led to questions over the distinctiveness of its contributions (Carmona 2014b). The diversity captured by both books is undeniably exciting for the field's future but suggests there is still work to do in order to decisively resolve these underlying tensions. It appears unlikely that a common methodological approach or agenda will achieve this, but increased focus on research practice and methods reveals important progress and momentum.

On methods, both books convincingly demonstrate the importance of case studies to urban design research. The majority of chapters in each hinge on case study evidence, and both books effectively utilise photographs, illustrations, and diagrams to help convey the detail and identity of the places they cover. This reassertion of case study research provides an interesting counterpoint to a broader tilt towards urban analytics within urban research, drawing on 'big data' and large sample sizes (Kandt and Batty 2021). In showcasing the full spectrum of contemporary urban design research, however, both books include several informative examples of quantitative approaches too.

Both books highlight growing government interest in design-based responses to major policy challenges such as climate change and pandemic responses, which is helping to cement urban design research within the work of academic and policy communities. The implications of this relationship for urban design research could have been developed more explicitly by both books, including through a greater focus on related research methods, such as policy analysis. Carmona's chapter on researching urban design governance in the *Routledge Handbook* (pp. 15–22) highlights content analysis of policy as a tool for exploring these processes, but otherwise, governance and policy at times felt under-explored by both books.

Closely related planning scholarship, meanwhile, has increasingly engaged with these ideas. In the UK context, this reflects the growth of high-profile national policy agendas such as 'levelling-up', and growing academic interest in 'left-behind places' (e.g. Fiorentino et al. 2024; Nurse 2023). Urban design research will surely need to grapple with relevant policy and governance processes more closely if its potential impact on practice is to be fulfilled—although it is accepted that the global coverage and breadth of the *Routledge Handbook* and the *Research Handbook* would have made a full analysis of the policy landscapes in each case study context practically difficult. For Cuthbert and Suartika in their contribution to the *Research Handbook* (pp. 12–23), embedding urban design research within socioeconomic and political systems like this will also require a more robust theoretical approach.

Central to this must be an understanding of power relations within both urban design processes and outcomes, and the implications this has for inequalities. Both books

reviewed here respond to this challenge well. In particular, the conclusion of the *Research Handbook* identifies how, given that urban design is contingent upon land ownership and property development, "researchers have more freedom as critics and commentators to record and highlight the inequalities produced through the drive towards profit and capital accumulation" (p. 408). Exercising this voice will be as urgent as ever as the highly inequitable impacts of the climate crisis continue to be felt around the world.

In sum, the *Routledge Handbook* and the *Research Handbook* evidence both the breadth and depth of urban design research globally. Critics might argue that the combined over 1000 pages reveal the somewhat unwieldy nature of a discipline still striving to bridge a series of gaps between different sets of people and ideas. Yet, the diversity and strength of the work on offer provides great hope—for an increasingly recognised academic field whose robust knowledge base supports the delivery of more successful, sustainable, and equitable places in wide-ranging contexts. Taking forward this important challenge is a compelling prospect for those of us working within urban design research.

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