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Applied Urban Design: A Contextually Responsive. Philip Black, Michael Martin, Robert Phillips, and Taki Sonbli. Routledge, 2025, £30.39 (paperback), 344 Pages, ISBN 9780367897543

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This recent volume, *Applied Urban Design: A Contextually Responsive Approach*, presents a carefully structured and clearly written contribution to contemporary urban design scholarship. Building on previous academic discourse and professional practice experience by the authors, this exemplary new book positions itself as both a pedagogical and professional resource, offering a cohesive framework for understanding how context—spatial, cultural, historical, and environmental—can shape the design and delivery of urban form. Aimed primarily at students, practitioners, and academics engaged in urban design and planning, it articulates an accessible and methodical approach to design thinking that successfully links theoretical ideas with practical application.

The central aim of the book is to define and elaborate upon what it calls a “contextually responsive” model of urban design. This is achieved through a set of guiding principles and an iterative process that emphasises sensitivity to place, comprehensive stakeholder engagement, and methodological rigour in contextual analysis and design. The chapters are logically sequenced, moving from conceptual foundations and

methodological framing through to illustrated case studies. The clarity of structure and presentation is a significant strength, making the text particularly valuable as a teaching aid. The quality of synthesis and the transparent design process provide a valuable contribution to the field, building on foundational texts that have defined urban design's focus on quality of place, process, and form, such as Matthew Carmona's work on public space (2010) and Kim Dovey's morphological studies (2016). The clarity and focus of the practical design approach presented is especially notable at a time when the field's wider methodological scope continues to be expanded (e.g., Carmona 2014; Kamalipour, Aelbrecht, and Peimani 2023). In contrast to approaches that more overtly frame design and research as interconnected, this book's explicit intention to define the vocational identity of the field makes it a strong contemporary resource for educators and students focusing on the specifics of practical design skills and complex iterative interconnected processes.

In response to a concern that the profession is at times considered a “magpie” of other skills and fields, the authors explicitly call for a “clear vocational consolidation” of urban design as an applied discipline (p. 12). However, this ambition, while pedagogically valuable, inevitably leaves little space for a sustained exploration of the ethical and political implications of practice. The tight framing helps to position urban design as an applied and reflective discipline, but its effort to define the field's vocational identity must inevitably come at the cost of a more critical unpacking of professional ethics and the power relations embedded within design processes. The book's opening chapters include brief notes on “blurred realities” and “professional challenges,” which are used to frame the scope and intent of the text by offering a notably ‘light touch’ summation of these issues. The question the authors themselves ask - how to “strike the right balance and whose interests and values does urban design safeguard?” (p.11) is palpable. But whilst the authors' discussion of “urban design's identity crisis” (p. 11) could have provided a sharper point of entry for exploring how professional legitimacy and ethical accountability interact in contemporary practice, this tension—

between clarity of purpose and critical depth—marks both a strength and a constraint of the book’s approach to contextual responsiveness.

The book’s core design content—centred on two major European case studies, Manchester and Aalborg—forms the heart of its pedagogical and methodological contribution. The decision to develop these case studies in exceptional depth provides a rare and valuable insight into how a full design process can be articulated across conceptual, analytical, and spatial stages, making this structural framework one of the book’s greatest strengths. The case studies demonstrate how their Applied Urban Design Framework operates in practice through iterative cycles of analysis, synthesis, and design refinement, with each stage linked to context-responsive decision-making. This choice allows the reader to follow the logic and application of contextual responsiveness applied by the designers with clarity, demonstrating the authors’ commitment to the vocational application of theory to real-world, practice-based exemplars. The practical depth of these studies distinguishes *Applied Urban Design* from many other design manuals and exemplifies its claim to define the applied, vocational character of the field.

Yet, while this structure gives the book its distinctive coherence, the narrow focus on these Western European contexts limits the universality of its claims. The authors openly acknowledging that the AUD framework was developed and tested in European settings but assert that Manchester and Aalborg were “carefully chosen to maximise our ability to illustrate the frameworks flexibility” (p.28) and that the overall AUD approach retains a “transferability internationally” (p. 23); however, this remains more a reasonable aspiration and assumption than a demonstrated capacity. The clarity and consistency that make the case studies so effective pedagogically thus also risks reinforcing a geographically bounded conception of professional practice. Opportunities are missed here to more thoroughly engage differently with the ongoing work of urban design theorists working outside and beyond the Western design canon, such as Chen and Thwaites (2013), Shatkin

(2017), and Wu (2022) who demonstrate how urban design processes in China articulate local morphological and socio-political contexts; with the with inequity, political informality, and economic disparity at the design scale (Robinson 2006; Roy 2011); or Holston's (2008) work on the grounded complexities of design, space, and citizenship in Latin America. Moreover, even within its chosen Western settings, the text similarly somewhat sidesteps the profound socio-economic inequalities that persist, which are all too often obscured by tokenistic participatory or placemaking processes that are ultimately overwhelmed by the structural power of capital and neoliberal redevelopment agendas (Smith 2002; Minton 2017).

These specific vocational and geographical framings connect to the greater question raised by this book: its core intention and contribution to the continuing effort to define and canonise urban design's core concerns. As a definitional and methodologically focused work, the text seeks to implicitly draw clear practicable boundaries around the profession, but in consolidating such a vocational canon, certain themes—particularly the iniquitous political economy of urban development and the deeper ethical dimensions of sustainability—receive less sustained attention than in perhaps warranted. The various engagements with environmental performance and expectations of urban design practice, for example, presents sustainability primarily as a dimension of design quality and policy expectation rather than a site of ethical or systemic interrogation across local and global scales.

In the current era of accelerating climate change and rapid non-Western global urbanisation, a failure to foreground these wider urban challenges—especially ecological and regenerative urban design processes (Palazzo and Steiner 2017) and the political economy of cities beyond the Western-European context (Harvey 2009; Harvey 2012)—results in the presentation of a professional vocational identity that risks being critiqued as both geographically narrow and ethically apolitical, and thus perhaps insufficiently equipped for the most pressing contemporary urban challenges that exist beyond the relative safety of the

prevailing neoliberal capitalist urban schema and the Western morphological canon. This omission is felt keenly at a time when questions of equity, climate justice, and systemic change are inseparable from urban development and, by extension, the professional ethics of urban design (Fainstein 2011; Tonkiss 2013). Similarly, engagement with the broader perspectives of Global South urbanism—including Simone (2004), Pieterse (2014), and Holston (2008)—could progressively demonstrate how plural urban practices and contested governance arrangements reflect back on the limitations of Westernised design principles, demanding we rethink both our sense of context and professional responsibility to a truly global scale. The final chapter, which briefly frames “future challenges” through themes of climate adaptation, resilience, and social equity, shows that the authors are aware of these broader discourses even if they are constrained by the book’s chosen pedagogical structure.

Yet despite the critical reflections outlined above, the great strength of *Applied Urban Design* undoubtedly lies in the same explicit coherence and pedagogical clarity which opens it up to critique. The book does a remarkable job of articulating urban design as an applied, iterative process that connects ideas, places, and people in meaningful ways. For educators, it provides an adaptable structure for teaching contextual analysis and design thinking; for practitioners, it offers a reflective lens through which to assess and refine their own approaches. And perhaps one of the book’s quiet achievements is that the very coherence of the disciplinary processes it presents creates a powerful, if perhaps unintended, space for ongoing critical reflection—reminding readers that responsiveness to context inevitably implies the ability for urban design to be responsive to the multiplicity of urban realities that exceed the Western canon. A provocative idea for a future edition or wider project would be a collection of real-world examples of this AUD process undertaken by practitioners around the world, which would provide a much richer and more complicated depiction—warts and all—of both the professional responsibility and the creativity of vocational urban design practices. For *Urban Design International’s* audience—academics, practitioners, and policymakers alike—this volume

thus stands as both a unequivocally strong design guidebook and a thoughtful provocation on how the question of a global, pluriversal urban design professional might offer a different, and wider, perspective on contemporary practice (Escobar 2018).

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