Reconnecting Planning Theory with Urban Design: Public Space as a Social and Architectural Concern

Jarre Parkatti

University of Helsinki (Aalto University)

postgraduate student

The author has graduated from the University of Helsinki (practical philosophy) and worked as a researcher at Aalto University.

Reconnecting Planning Theory with Urban Design: Public Space as a Social and Architectural Concern

Abstract

Today's planning theory is largely procedural and remains abstract in urban design terms even when formally content-oriented, as when treating the just city. The theory reflects Anglo-Saxon weak planning conditions. While this explains the felt need to reinvent the role of planning and its theory, it threatens to break planning theory's tie to *town* planning. Especially, it becomes inadequate for comprehending the workings of architect-led, still powerful and proactive planning organisations. Such exist even where academics contribute to mainstream theory, producing a gap in the understanding of real-world planning among students, practitioners and non-practising researchers. My purpose is to help reintroduce an urban design focus into planning theory, integrating the latter's social scientific interests with an understanding of the social significance of urban design traits.

Key words: planning theory, public space, urban design

1 Introduction

Planning theory, despite its all-inclusive designation and its often procedural or abstract nature, usually refers to town planning (urban planning or city planning) or regional planning (Beauregard, 2020, p.3). The field is dominated by Anglo-Saxon academia, non-Anglo-Saxon planning often being neglected (eg, by Fainstein and DeFilippis (2016, pp.5f)). Along with the professionalisation of the theory and the transformations in planning practice since the rise of neoliberalism, the theory has metamorphosised. Yet, the traditional sense of its research object as involving a professional (rather than just a politically-economically defined) physical-functional aspect should be taken seriously, inter alia, for planning theory to be generally relevant for European planning systems (cf. Newman and Thornley, 1996; ARL, 2024). From this viewpoint, it is problematic that planning theorists tend to restrict their treatment to the planning procedure, focusing on communication and participation, and to abstract or radical social thinking. Nonetheless, despite the changes, planning theory does retain a tie to traditional town planning, helping to distinguish the discipline from, for example, political economy, history and philosophy, at whose crossroads Fainstein and DeFilippis (2016, p.4) situate it. They quite reasonably note that planning is not *only* (rather than not at all) about planning places as it also involves communication et cetera. In any case, many de facto difficulties with the theory's idealism, partisanship and vague generality in respect of urban issues relate to its unclear research object and concomitant unclarities regarding its fundamental research interests.

Nonetheless, there is hardly any return to traditional town planning theory, for example of the British post-war kind (Taylor 1998). Its concreteness and straightforward applicability could not compensate for its lacking comprehension of the socio-economic presuppositions and consequences of suggested solutions. Yet, such naïve technocratic theory coupled with a rationalistic understanding of the planning procedure is not the only possible kind of substantial

planning theory. Already in the 19th century, Ildefons Cerdà presented an elaborate alternative to the separation of societal and design thinking (cf Dovey and Pafka, 2016). Jane Jacobs (1961), for her part, advanced a socially based criticism of the technocratic planning of the time, with far-reaching implications for how to design urban environments. She did this without prescribing the architectural realisation of her planning rules in any detailed manner. Presumably, neither kind of thinking needs to be anachronistically categorised as either planning theory or urban design theory. Could the kind of synthesis they represent, instead, be re-effected today?

While there is no reason to oppose a pragmatic division of work between researchers closer to urban design and those more abstractly engaged in urban issues, for planning theory to preserve its tie to town planning – with an emphasis on both *town* and *planning* –, some noteworthy architectural effects should in most cases, as with Jacobs, follow from theorisation. This seems natural, if the task of planning theory is to 'find a leeway within the larger social structure to pursue the good city' (Fainstein and DeFilippis, 2016, p.4). A lack in the theory's applicability has been perceived by observers (Goosen and Cilliers, 2020). Also, the sordid reflections from the inside on the future of planning theory (Beauregard, 2020, pp.115ff), makes a re-evaluation of its focus urgent. Nonetheless, tying social theorising to design is not trivial. As a gap easily appears between urban design practice and academic reflection on urban conditions due to the nature of the tasks and the highly differing education required, it is particularly important to take *this* challenge, internal to the academic project, seriously in theoretical reflection. Planning theory, however, guarding its social scientific credibility, makes few concessions to the practical interests of urban design. On the other hand, urban design theory, although more down-to-earth, contains societal references in line with planning theory, making a reintegration possible.

There are at least two reasons for the need of a rapprochement between abstractly procedural theory and theory studying or guiding urban design. First, in some countries where theoreticians deal with mainstream planning theory, as in Finland, planning still works in the traditional way, planners being experts in physical planning rather than facilitators. This is hidden from view, inter alia, as researchers currently seldom cite studies done by their Scandinavian colleagues if not available in English (this was not the case only a few decades ago). In any case, for this region, to put it starkly, planning theory does not in fact theorise planning. Instead, it treats the occupationally unestablished and rather marginal domain of (non-architect) facilitators ('interaction planners').[1] This easily results in confusion as students, practitioners and, at least, researchers not practising or lacking a background in architecturally focused town planning may get a false understanding of the nature of local real-world town planning.

Second, even where planning conditions have changed to the point of justifying a new professional identity for planners, the question how urban design solutions affect social life remains. As neoliberalism, with its deregulation and larger space for private initiative, has largely shifted responsibility for urban design to consultants, it has become more difficult to

[1] Such officials were hired for the once ambitious participatory endeavour initiated by the powerful architect-led town planning of Helsinki. Its purpose, to be sure, was to increase the communicative competence and responsiveness of the planning organisation, yet doubtless also to let architect-planners concentrate on their key responsibility, namely town planning (in its long-established sense).

steer planning in a democratically desirable direction. Planning theorists have therefore extended their research into domains like governance, and called for even more radical, participatory forms of democracy to regain control. In contrast, the role of urban design and planning expertise in forming a socially well-working environment has been downplayed to a surprising degree, sometimes even being dismissed as 'expert ideology' (Beauregard, 2020, pp.21, 26). After having lost their trust in the omniscient maestro planner, planning theorists today instead seem convinced of the infallibility of laypeople's views (individual strivings apparently being coordinated by an invisible hand). The impression is that urban design knowledge is regarded as irrelevant for grasping complex, perhaps futile, issues such as how legibility affects the urban experience or how physical-functional and symbolical architectural traits condition daily life and social relations. Here planning theory joins hands with libertarianism.

As a response to the problems of planning theory's one-sided attention to the planning procedure, abstractions and the lacking tie to urban design, the intention here is, first, to explore how planning theoretical concerns may be concretised by connecting them to urban design.[2] Second, to suggest how urban design theory might be more closely brought together with planning theoretical reflection. Tying planning theory to urban design with the help of the concept of public space facilitates the clarification of the existence, status and significance of the urban design problems and knowledge that needs to be confronted. The urban design literature used is P. Panerai et al.'s *Urban Forms: The death and life of the urban block* (2004 [1975]), M. Carmona et al.'s *Urban Places, Public Spaces* (2010), J. and C. S. Tarbatt's *The Urban Block* (2020).

2 Back to Basics: What Kind of an Urban Environment do we Want?

Assuming that planning theorists are still, after all, interested in how to achieve a socially well-working and ecologically sustainable urban environment (rather than just in its political-administrative conditions, in popular planning intervention or in planners' action as facilitators), the burden of proof seems to be on those holding urban design to be irrelevant for planning theory. How could the breaking of the tie between procedural and social theorising, on the one hand, and concrete planning goals, on the other, possibly be justified within this practice-oriented domain? The move taken by those denying the importance of urban design

[2] Texts explicitly containing both viewpoints are not quite as readily available as one might think considering general reflections on the tasks of planning theory in standard introductions. These may mention public space as a key goal 'that planners hold dear' (Fainstein and DeFilippis, 2016, p.12). Yet, eg, Philip Allmendinger (2017) touches on public space only abstractly in relation to politics. In Gunder et al. (2018), it is mentioned in a treatment of the public interest; in an article on justice (by Fainstein) in relation to diversity and favouring the poor; as pertaining to ethnic and racial diversity; finally, in the context of complexity, as a task for actors. In Beauregard (2020), it is brought up once, again in relation to justice. In Fainstein and DeFilippis's *Reader*, public space figures in relation to global uncertainties, the planning procedure and justice. In none of these contexts is it more than fleetingly mentioned nor tangibly related to urban design concerns. A Scopus search (09/05/2024) with the keywords 'planning theory' and 'public space' resulted in 29 hits.

focused planning is essentially one from an interest in expertise to an interest in politics, following from changed assumptions about their respective significance for planning and its results. Communicative theorists suppose that optimal planning results can be achieved by considering all relevant needs and viewpoints, which is secured by the involvement of all interested parties in a procedure ideally approaching an unconstrained dialogue. Post-structuralists find such a belief in open exchange of ideas unrealistic, instead presupposing an agonistic constellation, where it should be acknowledged that actors have fundamentally conflicting interests and unequal resources. In both cases, planners become facilitators (or even, in the latter case, political activists), while substantial planning knowledge, especially urban design related knowledge, is devalued.

Instead of criticising these current planning theoretical standpoints, I shall go straight to a positive defence of the possibility of rejoining planning theory with urban design with respect to social goals. The basic question then is: what kind of a built environment do we want? Disregarding, consequently, the currently popular planning theoretical view that the 'we' is misplaced in the context and that common goals cannot exist, except as meaningless empty signifiers, different levels on which consensus and dissensus can be identified may instead be discerned. One should also be clear about what disagreement means. If a deliberatively democratic ideal is accepted, a common understanding should be based on the best available arguments and knowledge. To present a dissenting opinion, it is not enough, then, just simply to say no.

A problem – here planning theorists' worries must be taken seriously – is that this not only concerns resourceful actors, who need to make their strivings transparent and commonly acceptable, partly by making concessions to what (contra a 'post' view) may, at least in clear-cut cases, be described as the public interest, but also by presenting valid arguments. The same goes for weak actors, whose needs, 'fragile knowledge' and viewpoints must be teased out by benevolent but non-patronising planners or mediators and translated into expert language. Real betterments for marginalised people may still basically require the application of valid urban design knowledge in the face of possible resistance by powerful interests, which seems to be conceded by Susan Fainstein (2018, p.139) in her contribution to the *Handbook*, where, in the context, popular initiative and political struggle is otherwise emphasised.

What, then, are the key characteristics of a commonly desired urban environment? The answer must be conventional not to be controversial: at least, it should be ecologically sustainable and socio-economically well-working, as well as of high aesthetic quality. These purposes are non-distributive in the sense of being general and meant for all. This does not mean that justice would not need special attention, only that before pondering on how to distribute urban goods, one should be clear on what they are. Possibly, though, starting out from the above obvious planning purposes might be held only to postpone the real issue, as planning theorists of a post bent will be quick to point out. Nevertheless, as a starting point for planning and urban design, it is not insignificant to identify such goals as basic. It already outlines what may be conceived as a public interest, thereby refuting the view that everything is contestable. What is further needed is a more precise description of the key goals as well as their status in relation to each other and other possible goals.

As to the first task, 'ecologically sustainable' must certainly mean, at least, an environment that helps mitigate climate change and counteract the reduction of *global* biodiversity (eg, by lessening urban sprawl). To be socio-economically well-working, the built environment must, at least, enable users to be and feel safe, offer different kinds of spaces, both commercial and non-commercial, organised in a functionally and symbolically sensible way, satisfying varying needs and enabling the regulation of social relations (implying a hierarchy of privateness–publicness). An aesthetic environment not only carries artistic intrinsic value but also satisfies the needs for beauty and environmental experiential stimulation of users. As to the second task, the fundamental characteristics of the urban environment must not be regarded as just any goals to be considered but, instead, as forming boundary conditions for each other and further objectives. This does not necessarily mean that the key goals should be satisfied completely, only to a reasonable degree. Again, both the specification of the desired environmental characteristics and the exact extent to which they should be realised leaves space for argument. The point is that there in fact is some political-professional agreement on the prioritisation of planning aims.

The omnipresence of politics and agonistic struggle is not necessarily refuted by conceding such a hierarchical view. At each step of the concretisation of ends and means, there is space for reasoning and, in practice, for bargaining. One should note that conflicts may remain on a basic level. Thus, eco-fundamentalists might, coherently in view of their background understanding, hold that urban development should be halted and society reorganised in a work-intensive rather than energy-intensive manner. Radical critics of capitalism may as consistently claim that the unsustainability of urban development, like socio-economic development generally, stems from capitalistic contradictions that need to be solved before other measures can have any effect. In such cases, academic and political discussion is to be solved on a 'more fundamental' or general level, or one must accept that not all involved may be part of an agreement. This should not leave content-oriented professional action by urban designers or planners without any guidelines. True, part of the political struggle takes place in the theoretical sphere. In any case, advances in theory, even of social, planning and urban design theory, more contestable than natural science backing up requirements to act in an ecologically sustainable way, creates an onus of proof for those challenging it.

3 Public Space and Urbanity

While the focus of and the themes treated by urban design theory vary, public space is central to all the sources used. It is a suitable starting point for reconciling planning theoretical concerns with those of urban design and its theorisation since its vulnerable position in current urban development equally worries planning theorists (cf. Fainstein and DeFilippis, 2016, p.4). A discussion of urbanity, which is both tightly interwoven with public space and central to urban designers, then easily follows. To play a mediating role between the two lately separated theoretical realms, public space should be specified in relation to both its design features and its social properties. As there are many kinds of urban space with variable publicness and other features, threatening to make one particular characterisation appear idiosyncratic, it is appropriate to aim at an exemplar. The street (or square) space in (the centre of) the traditional European city is such an instance, defining a standard recognised by all. It may at the same time

be conceived as the paramount example of the urban in the architectural sense and as the archetypal setting of the urban in the social sense.

In fact, public space has simply been conceived as *the* object of urban design (eg, Cuthbert 2007). This, however, is certainly not literally true, as urban design includes various opposites of the definitively public, namely private spaces, suburban environments and other areas, such as parks and even forests, with varying degrees of publicness. More credibly, the design of urban environments may be contrasted with the architectural task of designing individual buildings or situating them in a rural setting, or in the wilderness, as well as planning on an abstract enough level, which may possibly justify a (partial) disregard of urban design features, even if no such delimitations can be sharp.

As to planning theory, which primarily focuses on urban issues in a more general sense and with varying relevance to urban design and architecture,[3] public space is still a central issue, relating to many social issues such as equal access and freedom of use of the city, or to the privatisation and commercialisation of urban space. There is not only a need to concretise planning theorisation and make it more readily applicable, as pointed out above. Urban designers, often working pragmatically in the crossfire of various needs and demands, may in their turn profit from a theory that systematically reflects on questions of equality, justice, sustainability, et cetera, in relation to specific types of solutions.

To elaborate on the cross-fertilisation of urban design and planning theory, with the prototypical public space of the traditional city serving as a mediator, the essential architectural and social traits of the latter should first briefly be outlined. Architecturally, this public space is formed by its strict delimitation by building walls, ground floors communicating with the street, numerous plots making for small building units, and detailed façades that contribute to a rich architectural impression. In social terms, public space makes up a theatre for various social occurrences that play a symbolic, political and socially integrative role. Although in modern society, political and social life is not wholly dependent on common physical locations, places where people can meet in person still form a backbone of it, as testified by the recent anaemic human existence in forced isolation under a pandemia.

4 Planning Theoretical Concerns: Justice, Plurality and Public Space

Several, perhaps most, of the content-oriented planning theoretical concerns thus require urban design measures to be fully met even when town planning is not (tautologically, in the context) understood in its traditional sense as architecturally focused. Sometimes, however, these actions are trivial from a design perspective in being immediately comprehensible and realisable without any genuine architectural effort despite formally containing a design aspect (eg, the demand to secure spaces for businesses and other activities on the ground floor). Yet in other cases, the link between the goals proposed in the abstract and their architectural realisation is not inconsequential. Everything may then depend on exactly how the physical interventions called for are carried out as to their dimensioning, their detailed architectural-symbolic

[3] Fainstein and DeFilippis (2016, 1) mention characterisations according to its object, that is, ‘producing and regulating the relations of people and structures in space’ and according to its method, namely, ‘the process of decision making as it relates to spatial development’.

properties and their functional coordination with other environmental traits. For this link to be theoretically catered for, an urban design theoretical extension of what today is the preserve of planning theory is needed.

Depending on the viewpoint, this vital connection to urban design holds for both justice and pluralism (or difference), which are both prominent themes in planning theory. Undeniably, in the manner justice is treated in planning theory, the urban design aspect may sometimes be justifiably avoided. For example, the issue whether there is enough subsidised housing to provide for poor people's needs seems a political-administrative question, which might not be an issue for the old-style town planning office. This changes once attention is turned to environmental features, for instance relating to needs specific to less resourceful people (or more important to them), to be spatially integrated with other functions. In her treatment of justice, Susan Fainstein (2018) thus, in her practice-oriented conclusions, touches on design-related aspects of a just urban environment, such as provision of basic amenities in the ground floors of subsidised housing.

The currently salient theme of avoiding segregation, also treated by Fainstein, likewise relates to justice and, at the same time, to pluralism. Non-segregation is brought to the fore on several levels of urban development. Flagrant segregation should be avoided not the least on a regional and district level. Segregation may easily arise under conditions of unequal distribution of income and wealth as some urban areas are generally more valued than others, for example due to assets such as a seashore or lakeshore, parks or architecturally interesting historical surroundings. Once such 'natural' segregation occurs, it may easily take on a self-enforcing character since people who can choose, often prefer to live not only at a location with favourable environmental qualities as such but also at addresses with high status. (Hence, homes with a less attractive location within a valued area might be overpriced from the 'objective' point of view.)[4]

On the micro level, on the other hand, a clearcut form of counteracting segregation, which does not necessarily involve urban design measures, is to mix the forms of tenure of a building, an urban block or a district. (Such methods are also relevant on the level of the whole city, as inserting subsidised housing at least somewhere within affluent areas lessens the extreme one-sidedness of supply.) As environmental psychologists have pointed out, however, it matters in what way different socio-economic, age or ethnic groups are mixed on the micro level of the urban block, as differences in lifestyles might cause tensions, whereas possibilities to meet on 'neutral ground' may enrich local life and benefit everybody. Again, sociologically informed building architecture and urban design might be decisive for non-segregating but diversity-generating planning to be realised.

These points are elucidated by Mokarram Abbas and Bas van Heur (2014), whose research is situated in the context of Palestinian urbanity. It emphasises the importance of spatial organisation for both the persistence of and the possibilities to intervene in perceived social and political problems in town planning by urban design means. The theoretical perspective is that

[4] It is important to note, though, that not all people have the same environmental preferences (not even if the notion of preference is not mixed up with the ability to pay). This calls for balancing the planning objective of levelling differences of a segregating kind with that of creating precondition for urban diversity on the meso-level by a differentiation of districts.

of feminism in relation to women and planning, while the object of study are the socio-spatial features of women's urban life in the town of Nablus, where attitudes towards women's presence in society are conservative. A central issue raised by the authors is what line to take to a culture that is discriminating in some sense, when these features will have an even more oppressing effect if not taken into account (whether out of principle or due to naïve generalisation of Western standards) in designing the environment. In the investigated town, where women prefer small semi-public spaces in which they are better tolerated and less exposed to male control and incivilities, the case studies for the research (including both interviews and observation of the sites) indicate that design features of such spaces, such as walls and vegetation limiting the view from the outside, notably complement formal (not strictly enforced) rules restricting the access of men into the area.

Again, the proposed means, as such, are not especially demanding from an urban design viewpoint once comprehended, although sophisticated architectural thinking in the realisation may add to the success of the spaces. A suitable further planning undertaking might be to provide for such small-scale semi-public spaces all over a city, while one may imagine – without knowledge of the cultural conditions – urban design complementing with the use of feminine symbolism and other traits, perhaps in the end even making female, neutral and male dominated spaces meet to secure the female world ever more safe visibility and influence. Here, of course, the danger of architectural naivety lurks as soon as one deceives oneself with an exaggerated belief in the capacity of environmental traits as such to change social behaviour, thus ignoring its structural conditioned nature. Therefore, any efforts of further integrating women into society with design means should certainly be done parallel with non-architectural policy measures and inclusive democratic deliberation.

Another case, where even the nature of the issue depends on urban design related clarification, is that of gated communities or (the possibly less strictly fenced off areas) enclosed residential domains. David Hamers and Joost Tennekes (2015) discuss the effects of the latter on the public realm in the Netherlands in relation to the invigorated debate about gated communities. At the same time as their study, in a most ambitious planning theoretical manner, is based on analysing how alternative positions in social theory and philosophy affect the perception of the empirical case studied, they observe that taking up a stand to the issue requires a detailed analysis of the morphology of the developments making up the research object.

Hence, it seems necessary to clarify what the research object is. The city, its districts and urban blocks consists of a pattern of stepwise or clearly differentiated private and public spaces, which may be so either formally in terms of law or visually-functionally, depending on legibility and factual use. For example, perimeter blocks articulate the difference between public and private space in a rather definite way, while such differentiation is often more difficult in suburban areas, such as in a 'buildings in a park' settlement. There, signs frequently appear to mark out boundaries that urban design has left diffuse. Now, few people would criticise the enclosing of courtyard areas of private houses or reserving perimeter block courtyards for the residents, even when such urban blocks are large and thus lessen the permeability of a district. The situation changes dramatically if a whole network of streets, seemingly forming an integrated part of the city, are suddenly fenced off by cast iron gates across the street, as can be observed in, for instance, the 16th arrondissement in Paris. The reason has to do with the legibility of the city, more precisely with breaches against what we have learnt to expect in an urban environment.

Functionally, it also means that some people are not possible to reach without an appointment, which is certainly part of the plot but somewhat foreign to the traditional functioning of a city.

5 Urban Design Concerns

Most urban design, at least in principle, aims at producing a good urban environment for all, as if architectural town planning were carried out from behind a veil of ignorance, rather than being tailored for some specific social group. Not the least in welfare societies such as the Nordic, more or less the same recipe is applied in all cases, the planners not necessarily knowing what groups will move in. Variation instead stems from the location of the site and environmental values specific to it. When planning for decisive urbanity and well-working public spaces, the purpose is exactly the synergetic integration of different activities, social groups and urban functions (which should not, of course, exclude directing special attention to special needs). Nevertheless, for marginalised or vulnerable groups, an urban environment that is socially well-working in general terms may be particularly important (cf. Fainstein, 2018, p.139) since such groups may not be as self-sufficient as to space and equipment or have the resources to reach services at distant locations.

The urban design literature treated varies as to its concreteness and social or societal references. As the urban design task intrinsically involves the social, the issue is whether broader social goals, preconditions and consequences are discussed and whether the literature accounts for conflicting interests and political views on the preferred design solutions. The need for social engagement varies depending on the specificity of the themes treated. The danger in the urban design context are textbooks and handbooks that neglect the relevance of interests and political awareness, favouring instead a conventional pragmatic approach serving the status quo, even though for example the climate crisis would demand radical action.

Tarbatt and Tarbatt's *The Urban Block*, to a great extent restricts itself to a systematic classification and characterisation of different urban block types, explaining morphology and dimensioning by needs that have produced them (eg, large depths of buildings being tied to, inter alia, the requirements of a parking garage). The book often mentions the pros and cons of different solutions in terms of properties such as legibility (eg, relating to the private or public character of the space). Differing expert views that ultimately might take a political shape may then possibly be overlooked. Still, the comments provided should mostly be taken to reflect the professional ability to see the consequences of specific solutions produced by specific needs or aesthetic preferences for the urban whole. The primary need in the context is not to criticise urban development or to politicise the treatment in other respects. Still, in drawing attention to properties that according to a certain professional consensus make for a good built environment, the authors provide planners with well-grounded arguments as against private interests in profit. At the same time, the explicit formulation of the knowledge behind often pragmatic design may contribute to avoiding haphazard results of democratic decision-making ignoring the best available arguments and knowledge.

Panerai et al.'s *Urban Forms* also treats the theme of the urban block, yet from an even more specific viewpoint. The two foci of the book are, first, the urban block as a building block for the city, forming a critical mediating meso-level structure between the separate buildings and plots, on the one hand, and the district and larger urban structure, on the other. The second is

the traditional morphology of this entity as such: its perimetral character, division into plots, clearcut separation of private and public spaces as well as its multifunctionality. The classical perimeter block is then compared to modern developments of it. For the authors, the social uses and patterns that the traditional urban block enables are as important as its architectural features. They are critical of critics of modernity, including post-modernists, for ignoring the social dimension in instead focusing on formal architectural features. Thus, while architects have tried to reinvent the city after a period of suburban growth, according to the authors, they have often failed as they have not paid enough attention to the classical urban fabric on the level of urban block.

Carmona et al.'s *Urban Places, Public Spaces*, is the most general discussion of city building from the viewpoint of public space. Yet, like *The Urban Block*, its aim is to provide a comprehensive overview of the broad theme treated rather than, as *Urban Forms* does, take a definite stand to a neglected a problem. A background is provided of the meaning of and traditions within urban design (visual-artistic, social usage, place-making) as well as of writing focusing on it since Jane Jacobs. In justifying the endeavour, the authors use examples to illustrate cases where a holistic view on the urban environment is lacking and where an uncoordinated provision for pragmatic needs, not the least of parking spaces, may result in a clearly unattractive urban environment. They discuss urban development both as to its results and to its drivers and situate newly arisen ideals, such as various urbanisms, in this societal context. Also, they account for how governmental organisation and action affects the preconditions of urban design. Here, there are obvious shared interests with present-day planning theory.

In covering dimensions of urban design, first of all urban morphology, including the urban block structure and plot division, Carmona et al. take a critical stand to the development, in line with Panerai et al., without therefore advancing a definite thesis. The critical stance rather follows from what today is commonly regarded as the basic tasks of urban design as well as from contemporary strivings, for example towards decisive urbanity. In this way, again, the importance of the treatment lies, except for the vital task of providing students, practitioners and researchers with a comprehensive understanding of the field, in enabling them to argue for the urban design perspective as such (rather than for specific solutions) in various contexts of urban development.

Whereas the aim of *The Urban Block* is to introduce, in an easily graspable if comprehensive form, the urban block alternatives at the disposal for the urban designer/town planner architect in developing different parts of the city, *Urban Forms* more clearly articulates a consistent critical perspective, favouring one type of urban block structure, largely for social reasons. The approach of *Urban Places, Public Spaces* can be situated in between these as its scope is broad, bringing societal aspects to the fore, but still aims at a balanced viewpoint, acceptable to most actors within the field. (This may have come true for *Urban Forms* as well since the mainstream has moved in the direction recommended by the authors, if not, perhaps, heeding its detailed prescriptions, making all the difference for them.) If the urban design literature treated, and comparable literature, provides a substantial knowledge basis for actors involved in urban development (cf. Moudon 1992), there are several aspects in which the ideas may be developed in a planning theoretically pertinent fashion.

For example, a nuanced discussion is called for about whether the urban block structure favoured by Panerai et al. might be enrich in a way partly accommodating post-modernist and contemporary ideas about semi-private and semi-public space by manipulating rigid divisions effected by classical spatial arrangements within and adjacent to the perimeter block. Such may be the provision of a semi-public courtyard as well as semi-private forecourts, when suitable in view of the urban environment. This does not depend on breaking down the morphological features of the perimeter block. The discussion may be tied to basic interests of planning theory, as regards the integration of various social groups defined by age, gender, class, ethnicity et cetera.

Also, once understanding the critical features of the classical block and its contemporary variants, a main urban design endeavour should be to coordinate the urban development, allowing for morphological and associated social diversity, simultaneously restricting the ecologically disastrous effects of urban sprawl. Could New Urbanist ideas about a Transect logic be employed without necessarily accepting their detailed design principles? A main benefit would be an increased legibility and identity as well as possibilities of enjoying public space and neighbourhood services in suburban environments containing small town qualities.

6 Discussion

In my treatment, I have pointed to ambiguities in the core of planning theory concerning its research object and research interests. As to the first, there is the division into procedural and content-oriented theory, where procedural theory has come to deal with participatory democracy (rather than the technical planning process) and content-oriented theory focuses on relatively abstract social goals, where the connection to specific spatial-architectural traits of the built environment at best remains vague. In addition, the theorising is often partisan, rather than building on consensual starting points. Although radical theory is not reprehensible as such, one might expect the primary question to be why nominally consensual objectives, such as mitigation of climate change or a socially-economically well-working urban environment, are not reached, for example, by means of currently favoured decisive urbanity. If, for some theorists, the answer seems clear (eg, due to capitalist interests), to be able to understand the causal and structural mechanisms, it would be necessary to clarify the goals. What is, for example, a socially well-working city? Switching for a moment to a deeper theoretical level, one may suspect some power/knowledge mechanisms producing conceptual muddle even in cases where the needed action should be relatively easy to grasp, such as in relation to ecological sustainability. Anyhow, specification of goals regarding the built environment is not easy without studying how architectural traits interact with social interaction on different levels, from that of the home to the urban region. Therefore, the missing link between planning theory and urban design theory is problematic.

The treatment is partly based on looking more closely [if definitely not closely enough] at both planning theory and urban design theory. One intersection between their interests is in public space. Although this may be both more or less public and inclusive, depending on its qualities and location, it is clearly one of the main urban qualities for planning theorists, enabling free social interaction, integration, political activism and lingering in the city without necessarily consuming. It is relevant from both a justice and pluralism (difference)

perspective. Yet again, it remains a vague notion without a description in urban design terms. It also admits for interesting discussions from the viewpoint of other cultures and current important theoretical perspectives, such as feminism. It is at centre stage in topical debates, such as that of gated communities. Again, however, one should specify the morphological properties of the urban structure for wholly comprehending what is at stake from a social viewpoint and what is common for contextually varying developments.

It is admitted that there are different levels of urban design relevant treatment of planning issues. In some cases, the issue is abstract enough not to necessitate any architectural dimension. The problem is if one is left with the impression of a missing link to urban design, which might make a highly abstract treatment both comprehensible and implementable. There is therefore no problem with abstract theory as such: the structurationism of both Bourdieu and Giddens, or the architectural thinking of Foucault, to mention a couple of eminent social theorists whose main interest is not town planning, may help comprehend the spatial dimension of social life and applying a fruitful theoretical perspective.

Acknowledgement

The University of Helsinki provided a travelling allowance for the AESOP conference in Paris 2024.

Literature

Abbas, Mokarram and Bas van Heur (2014) Thinking Arab women's spatiality: the case of ‘mutanazahat’ in Nablus, Palestine. *Gender, Place & Culture*, 21(10), pp.1214–1229. DOI: 10.1080/0966369X.2013.817969

Allmendinger, Philip (2017) *Planning Theory*. 3rd ed. London: Palgrave.

ARL. Academy for Territorial Development in the Leibniz Association (2024) Available from: https://www.arl-international.com/knowledge/country-profiles Accessed [08/05/2024]

Beauregard, Robert (2020) *Advanced Introduction to Planning Theory*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Carmona, Matthew, Tim Heath, Taner Oc and Steve Tiesdell (2010) *Public Places – Urban Spaces: The Dimensions of Urban Design*. 2nd ed. London: Routledge.

Cuthbert, Alexander (2007) Urban Design: Requiem for an Era: Review and Critique of the Last 50 Years. *Urban Design International*, 12, pp.177–223.

Dovey, Kim and Elek Pafka (2016) The Science of Urban Design? *Urban Design International*, 21, pp.1–10. DOI:10.1057/udi.2015.28

Fainstein, Susan (2018) Urban Planning and Social Justice. In Gunder, Michael, Ali Madanipour and Vanessa Watson: *The Routledge Handbook of Planning Theory*. New York and London: Routledge, pp.130–142.

Fainstein, Susan and James DeFilippis (eds.) (2016) *Readings in Planning Theory*. 4th ed. Chichester: Wiley Blackwell.

Goosen, Zhan and Elizelle J. Cilliers (2020) Enhancing Social Sustainability through the Planning of Third Places: A theory-based framework. *Social Indicators Research*, 150, pp.835–866. DOI: 10.1007/s11205-020-02350-7

Gunder, Michael, Ali Madanipour and Vanessa Watson (2018) *The Routledge Handbook of Planning Theory*. New York and London: Routledge.

Hamers, D. and Tennekes, J. (2015). Will enclosed residential domains affect the public realm of Dutch cities? Three theoretical perspectives. Planning Theory, 14(3). pp. 227–247 DOI: 10.1177/1473095213519985

Jacobs, J. (1961). *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. New York: Random House.

Moudon, Anne V. (1992): A Catholic Approach to Organizing What All Urban Designers Should Know. *Journal of Planning Literature*, 6(4), pp.331–349.

Newman, Peter and Andy Thornley (1996) *Urban Planning in Europe: International Competition, National Systems and Planning Prospects*. London: Routledge.

Panerai, Philippe, Jean Castex, Jean Charles Depaule and Ivor Samuels (2004) *Urban Forms: The Death and Life of the Urban Block*. English edition and additional material by Ivor Samuels. Translated by Olga Vitale Samuels. Abingdon: Routledge. Translated from French 1997 ed: *Formes urbaines : de l'îlot à la barre*. [French original: Castex, Jean, Jean-Charles Depaule, Philippe Panerai (1975) *De l'îlot à la barre: contribution à une définition de l'architecture urbaine*]

Tarbatt, Jonathan and Chloe S. Tarbatt (2020) *The Urban Block: A guide for urban designers, architects and town planners*. London: RIBA.

Taylor, Nigel (1998) *Urban Planning Theory since 1945*. London: Sage.