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Urban Design and Planning

Editorial: Urban design as a platform for accessibility, environmental management, and cultural background for cities: bridging the gap between tangibles and intangible values in contemporary cities

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1. Preamble

The growing body of knowledge on the research (and practice) of urban design and planning has lately revolutionized the way we think and engage as scholars on collaborative planning approaches and engagement with local communities affected by our decision-making processes. This is in part because cities nowadays are exponentially exposed to several challenges related to environmental pressures, socio-economic disparities between global south and global north (Castaldo *et al*., 2025) and cultural preservation (Salama, 2025). On the other hand, the current landscape of research on the quality of life in urban areas is majorly affected by the socio-spatial implications of COVID-19 measures (Salama, 2023) in accessibility, amenities, grey-green-blue infrastructures, housing and residential services, among others.

This issue of *urban design and planning* builds on these multi-faceted urbanism challenges to examine and advance ways through innovative practices such as the use of artificial intelligence (AI) in developing tools and methods to respond to noise pollution problems (El-Bardisy, 2025). The issue features articles that commit to addressing questions related to context and shapes of American and European cases (Abusaada *et al*., 2025), as well as accessibility and residential complexities in the African context (Mugah *et al*., 2025).

2. Advancing the discourse on urban planning theory and practice

Within the scope of this journal, the scientific discourse on urban design theory and practice encompasses the inheritability of the city's various tangible components such as the provision of green and blue infrastructures in different urban morphologies and socio-cultural contexts (Mahmoud, 2024), mobility (Ravazzoli and Torricelli, 2017), housing affordability (Seidman *et al*., 2016), and infrastructure services. However, the intangible values that shape the city's boundaries may extend beyond the mere physical environment such as the climate governance (Hegger *et al*., 2022), accessibility within 15–20 min cities (AlWaer and Cooper, 2023), biodiversity (Bulkeley *et al*., 2022), and natural environment.

Several concepts on the gaps between these tangible and intangible values within our built environment have roots in the historical planning of cities as a medium with mixed services since Whyte (1980, 1990). Nonetheless, few of these concepts surfaced back again with more dynamism in cities planning whether through digital planning methods and tools or with a more in depth understanding of how citizens' needs and preferences could (or should) affect their built environment, such as the concepts of co-creation and co-production (Mahmoud *et al*., 2021).

In the current debate the urban design aiming to make people's lives "**better**" is a claim that stems from a forward utopian approach to make cities provide more accessible services, facilities, and amenities within a walking distance of where they live and work (Cooper, 2024). That utopic debate is, however, not usually attainable throughout the practical domain, since the gap between the urban planning regulations and their policy-making process are more often slow and path-dependent on economic growth (von Schönfeld and Ferreira, 2021), municipal boundaries and clearly hindered by several environmental challenges such as urban heat island, loss of biodiversity (Núñez Rodríguez *et al*., 2024), and increasing heatwaves (Connop *et al*., 2016). Nonetheless, the theoretical approach to urban planning has clearly developed more quickly with the current use of digital tools and methods, such as citizens' participation methods on several scales (Bradley *et al*., 2022; Mahmoud *et al*., 2025), as well as the use of VR (Virtual reality) or Augmented reality in urban planning simulations that rely on users' virtual experiences, see more (Boffi *et al*., 2022; Mahmoud *et al*., 2024; Piga *et al*., 2021; Rainisio *et al*., 2024).

In this editorial, the perspective is navigating around how the urban design is used as a "**platform**" in different contexts and for different purposive topics; for instance, the possibility of discussing accessibility, housing, history as well as challenges of built environment all under the lenses of urban design methods and tools.

3. Urban design as a platform for accessibility

The contribution by Mugah *et al*. (2025) discusses the crucial challenges of increased access to amenities in different low-medium-high density residential neighbourhoods as tangible value of urban design. The article uptakes a turn on the quality-of-life indicator by providing empirical evidence of spatial and social inequalities in accessing amenities within Nairobi, the capital city of Kenya. The authors investigated in-depth the impact of COVID-19 and local governments restrictions on the accessibility to spatial equity and its assessment towards helping policymakers and authorities' abilities to create more livable neighbourhoods. Through a mixed methods approach, they develop an adequacy of amenities index using GIS maps investigating the accessibility catchment areas as determined by distance, time, and location from residential plots using near analysis. The findings underscore the need for addressing disparities in residential neighbourhoods regardless of accessibility to essential amenities.

4. Urban design as a platform for built environment management

El-Bardisy (2025) explores methods and tools for tackling noise pollution as an intangible value of the built environment in Sheraton Heliopolis case study area in Cairo, Egypt. The author argues lengthily the value of using AI and machine learning (ML) in reading and analysing the citizens' satisfaction with noise pollution in their urban environments. Even though it is comprehensive from a literature review point, the author emphasises the role of mapping tools for validating the precision of an online survey carried with Cairo residents to measure their sensibility to visual and noise pollution. The research in its entirety presents a valid perspective of using AI and ML for the assessment of built environment management, especially when using the digital surveys, or other methods of data collection to read through literature and its results. Summing up, it is cautious to consider a possible integration of AI in acoustics capping policies in order to allow a timely intervention as per the authors, nonetheless, the experts work focusing on establishing research laboratories and testing diverse alternative designs are still majorly reliable in acquiring sensor-based data and validating its place-based truthfulness.

5. Urban design as a platform for cultural and social background life in cities

Abusaada and Elshater (2024) in their editorial piece on "*Beyond superficial readings*" pick up on the integration of authentic context in urban studies and how is this notion then shaped by cultural and social background for cities from the literature review point of view. In addition, the authors in a more developed piece (Abusaada *et al*., 2025) revisit examples from American and European urban design towards providing more background to context-shape interplay. They divide the timeline into two sub marked phases related to the rise of social sciences in urban contexts, which is, then, followed by urban design paradigms in context-text interplays from detailed literature review. In sum, the authors reflect on how the American and European urban design paradigms – intangibly – differ on their trajectory especially related to the concepts, theories, approaches, and key principles. This article is a great read to scholars interested in historical development in comparison between the American and European urban regeneration contexts.

6. Bridging the gap between tangibles and intangible values in contemporary cities

Across the communalities in the collection of articles developed in this issue, we can unveil the clear utility of urban design as an evidence-based and experimental platform within different contexts and with different methods and tools. There is still a need to close the gap between the tangible and intangible values generated from legacy and historical theories of urban planning and how we can, then, measure, assess and advocate for a more socially oriented urban planning and design (Romice *et al*., 2022). My personal intake on this journal issue is lacking to see how these research articles miss the interconnection with the **Urban design as a platform to promote biodiversity, green spaces and ecology,** especially in our contemporary cities nowadays.

The latest body of scientific literature easily point-out the urgency of climate change challenges and how urban design can hodgepodge a variety of aspects especially those related to environmental (in)justice and public health problems (Mohr-Stockinger *et al*., 2023). Although green (and public) spaces have proven several biodiversity and ecological benefits, the current debate and policies on urban planning needs to mainstream their inclusivity, accessibility and quality, particularly in cities whereas inequalities have exacerbated (Lazzarini *et al*., 2024). Nonetheless, this debate has deeper roots in policy and practice of urban design rather than in theories, which then entails providing more policy entrepreneurship and new forward-thinking approaches for a more desirable urban future (Lemes de Oliveira and Mahmoud, 2024).

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