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When I began my doctoral studies at MIT after working as a municipal urban designer in New York City, I was struck by my academic program’s emphasis on planning theory. Innocently, I inquired why theory was important when professional planners neither used nor even knew much theory. “We don’t study theory to help planners understand what they do,” replied one of the faculty. “We study it to help us understand what we do.”

Much the same observation could be made about Alexander Cuthbert’s book _The Form of Cities: Political Economy and Urban Design_. Advanced master’s and doctoral students will likely find this informative and detailed book, as I did, to be a helpful exploration of urban design’s complex and conflicting relationships with the diverse discipline of political economy and a fruitful starting point for investigations into these many relationships. However, this book may not appeal to practicing urban designers, whom I suspect are likely to remain more interested in “how to do” urban design, as Cuthbert says, than in “how to understand” it.

For those that are interested in the latter, however, this book is a fine place to begin. Cuthbert states that the book explores urban design’s connection to the field of political economy, but I found the book’s investigations to be much more diverse in reach. _The Form of Cities_ is structured as a series of extended bibliographic essays, each of which introduces major works in a discipline before describing selected studies in urban design, architecture, planning, and urban studies with relevance to the discipline.

Cuthbert’s intellectual reach is both broad and deep. I have never before encountered an urban design text that systematically investigated links to fields as diverse as history, philosophy, politics, culture, gender, environment, aesthetics, typologies, and pragmatics. Yet all of these relationships are discussed at length in _The Form of Cities_. Urban design researchers investigating fields as diverse as feminist theory, phenomenology, or postcolonial discourse will all find extended treatment of these topics, tied to Cuthbert’s helpful speculations about their role in urban design. Each chapter is also packed with extensive references, many of which were new to me.

Understanding urban design’s relationships to political economy is important to urban design researchers, as it has been important for scholars of literature, philosophy, history, architecture, urban planning, and urban studies during the last two decades. Cuthbert performs academic urban designers an essential service by making the relational case so strongly for urban design and by supporting it with the detailed, well-thought-out information contained in _The Form of Cities_.

Reading this book, however, I had to repeatedly remind myself not to overvalue urban design’s relationships to these fields. Cuthbert states that he is “promoting” Peter Dickens’s (1981) caution to architects and planners to avoid “plundering” the social sciences, thereby risking their own fields’ integrity. Yet the overall message of the book struck me as being precisely the opposite: plunder away! Certainly researchers seeking to situate their work in the context of better-established fields should always engage in some degree of plundering. _The Form of Cities_ seems to argue that urban designers can, and should, plunder as deeply as the other design and planning fields.

But I would take this approach with caution. Urban design is not (yet) considered to be an autonomous profession, and its intellectual corpus is still small, though growing rapidly. At this early stage in the field’s development, it could be argued that basic urban design research is more important than extensive explorations of urban design through the theoretical lenses of other social sciences. Basic research will illustrate the relevance of theory to urban design, rather than the other way around, performing the beneficial service of making social science theory both more accessible and more relevant to a wider body of urban designers (see Campo’s [2002] discussion of Foucault’s [1993] heterotopia in the context of the Brooklyn, New York, waterfront). Basic research will also enhance the intellectual autonomy of the field, which Cuthbert sees as currently being under threat (p. 4). Uncovering laws and principles unique to urban design will provide the field with additional conceptual independence from the older and better-established design and social science professions.


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I did have some minor quibbles with the organization and structure of *The Form of Cities*. The use of references was so extensive at times as to disrupt readability, and the overall organization of the book as bibliographic essays tended to give the work a lexicographic quality, to be consulted at intervals, rather than one of consistent narrative. Some tables, such as that showing the structural components of Joyce’s *Ulysses* (p. 36), seemed superfluous, and others, such as those on pp. 19 and 20 and 214 and 215, would have required extensive explanation to understand completely.

Cuthbert notes that *The Form of Cities* follows an edited volume on urban design titled *Designing Cities* (2003). A third volume, contextualizing the diverse discourse of *The Form of Cities* within a normatively structured theory of urban design, would be a welcome complement to these two books and an essential addition to the growing discipline of urban design.

REFERENCES


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In *Measuring Landscapes: A Planner’s Handbook*, Andre Botequilha Leitao, Joseph Miller, Jack Ahern, and Kevin McGarigal (referred to herein as “authors”) attempt to provide land planners with information that will help “mold the land through planning and design so nature and people both thrive long-term.” In his foreword to the book, Richard Forman notes, “The gaping lacuna in wise planning is not more knowledge, but rather the scarcity of accessible, informative and (especially) compelling synthesis and handbooks” (p. vii). This laudable notion that we already possess the knowledge and information needed to become a more sustainable society is worthy of a lengthy discussion unto itself (although perhaps not here). The authors’ goal of providing some of this needed knowledge and information in the form of calculating and using landscape metrics that will help planners improve their understanding of sustainable land use approaches is achieved in this book. It provides a valuable reference, and demonstrates approaches and applications to developing and using landscape metrics.

The book starts (chapters 1 and 2) with an excellent primer on landscape ecology and its application to landscape metrics and planning. Chapter 1 culminates with a discussion of the three principle quantification metrics of landscape structure that will be used throughout the book—patch-, class-, and landscape-scaled metrics. *Patch-scaled metrics* are defined as subareas that are relatively homogeneous, a similar land cover type. They are seen as the basis for computing characteristics of a landscape or class of patches, and generally are not analyzed as a stand-alone entity. Classes are a set of similarly typed patches and typically the primary focus of metric calculation and evaluation. *Class-scaled metrics* quantify the character or configuration of the class (i.e., fragmentation) and are typically used for comparison purposes. *Landscape-scaled metrics* are also a set of patches, but in this instance they represent a spatial construct and not a class-based construction. So the familiar patch mosaic is best represented by landscape metrics. They characterize the overall composition and configuration of the mosaic without reference to specific patches.

These scales are then used to describe a core set of landscape metrics: patch richness, class area proportion, patch number, patch size, patch shape, edge contrast, patch compaction, nearest neighbor, proximity, and contagion. The authors work to present this complex information in understandable ways with each metric described in terms of its conceptual framework, calculation, applications, limitations, and recommendations for use and related metrics. There is also a selected readings list for each metric, so that the reader can follow up references and perhaps explore alternate ways of viewing the information.

The book concludes with a discussion of a detailed application of the metrics to the Amherst area of western Massachusetts and a broader discussion of the use of these metrics to planning for sustainable landscapes. The Amherst study area is chosen for its watershed analysis–friendly and assumed convenient location (for several of the authors). It is also described as a classic sprawling metro area. Two scenarios, a base case (trend) and an alternative (smart growth), are quantified and