Exploring the Many Cities in the City

Seeing the City: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Study of the Urban, edited by Nanke Verloo and Luca Bertolini, 2020, Amsterdam University Press

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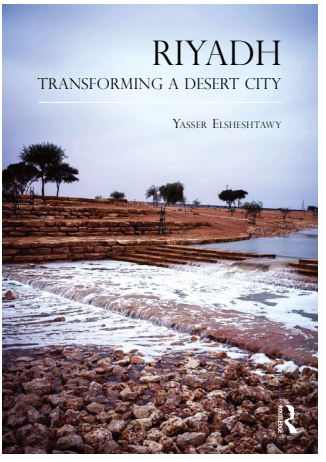
Publication Reviews

Humanizing the City

Riyadh: Transforming a Desert City *by Yasser Elsheshtawy*, 2021, Routledge



Through his sustained commitment to analysing the cities of the Arabian Peninsula, and via a formidable collection of scholarly contributions that now span more than two decades, Yasser Elsheshtawy has emerged as the leading scholar and foremost urbanist of cities and urban life on the Arabian Peninsula. No longer are these cities apprehended as faulty facsimiles of an urban form generated in the West, except, of course, by those who still feel compelled to castigate 'the West' for past transgressions. Nor are these still framed as peripheral urban backwaters that perhaps merit a footnote, at best, in our expanding global discussions of the city and its nature. Instead, the cities of the Arabian Peninsula have emerged as central reference points in our understanding of contemporary urbanism and everything entailed therein. Much of this has to do with Yasser Elsheshtawy's research, his teaching, and his publications. Elsheshtawy's work has helped frame the cities of the Arabian Peninsula as important reference points in the increasingly global conversations about contemporary urbanism and its diverse manifestations.

His latest book – entitled *Riyadh: Transforming a Desert City* – is a welcome and noteworthy addition to this legacy. Indeed, one might frame this book as a worthy and capable expansion to that legacy: through a sequence of articles, edited collections, and monographs, Elsheshtawy's analytic lens has gradually expanded, beginning with Dubai, then adding Abu Dhabi, Doha, and nearby cities on the Arabian littoral. Now Riyadh has been placed on that list. But we might also understand this book as a departure for Elsheshtawy. Where his past works were, for the most part, erudite and well-evidenced critical assessments of the cities that have arisen so rapidly on the Arabian Peninsula, this book finds its footing on more constructive and optimistic ground. In my estimation, the most resonant thread of this work is Elsheshtawy's concern with how planners, leaders, and the many and diverse inhabitants of Riyadh have made the city more liveable, and how the city might continue to evolve in this direction. It is that emphasis, in my estimation, that felt like a departure from his previous work.

Comprising ten chapters, and replete with photographs, diagrams, and maps, the book is divided into three sections. After a preface and useful introduction, Elsheshtawy turns to the first section, entitled *City Governance for the People*. The pair of chapters in this section explore the role that mayors and their initiatives have played in improving the liveability of cities and the urban spaces therein. Here, Elsheshtawy draws on his experiences and his knowledge of not only the cities of the Arabian Peninsula, but also of numerous other cities around the world, some of which are familiar to him. The

second section, entitled *Contextualizing Riyadh*, uses photography and archival research to carry the reader into the nuances of the story of Riyadh, past and present. One of the two chapters here is primarily a photographic engagement with the city, and incorporates his own street photography, other photographers' visual engagements with the city, and a variety of archival and historical images. The third and final section, entitled *Humanizing Riyadh*, comprises nearly half of the book: five chapters concern various efforts and projects that have sought to make Riyadh a more liveable and more humane city. Elsheshtawy sees some success in these various efforts. These chapters conclude with policy recommendations for urban planners, and with assessments of the best practices we might glean from these urban projects.

Like Elsheshtawy's previous work, his methodological prowess is noteworthy, and remains a realm of impressive creativity. And the presentation of evidence remains foundational in his analytic strategies. In this book, the plethora of images help readers visualize the city he describes, a city that many of those readers will likely never see. The framework and literature review he assembles around the flâneur, and around the strategy of engaging the city via *urban drifting* – or what the Situationists referred to as the dérive – seemed particularly illuminating and useful. Those discussions helped reinforce the value of his presence in Riyadh and his experiential engagement with the spaces and places that he discusses in the text. Notably, Elsheshtawy also spent a portion of his childhood in Riyadh, and his lifelong connection to the city percolates in his analysis. I remain curious as to how this life-long connection to the city might have shaped the perspective on Riyadh that he develops in this book.

One of the principal threads woven through the entire book is Elsheshtawy's assessment of the efforts to make Riyadh a more humane city. He devotes an entire chapter to the legacy of 'people-centred approaches' to the urban form, and frames those approaches with the familiar urbanist touchstones of Jane Jacobs, Christopher Alexander, Amos Rappaport, Kevin Lynch, William H. Whyte, and Jan Gehl. This thread continues with Elsheshtawy's discussion of the 'humanization initiative' instigated by Riyadh's former mayor, Abdulaziz bin Ayyaf. The latter half of the book essentially consists of Elsheshtawy's on-the-ground evaluation of the results of this initiative. In summary, then, the author helps readers see where the aspirations for a more humane city were forged in the urban theorizations of the twentieth century; he facilitates our understanding of how those aspirations were implemented by Riyadh's mayor more than a decade ago; and with his signature creativity and methodological prowess, Elsheshtawy helps readers take measure of specific urban projects and policies that were implemented under the banner of this humanization initiative. With the abundance of data that he presents throughout these chapters, the lessons and takeaways that he articulates in the conclusion to the book are even more resonant.

I do have one minor qualm pertaining to this theme, however. As Elsheshtawy makes clear, perhaps no urban planner had more of an impact on the contemporary shape of Riyadh than Greek architect Costantinos A. Doxiadis. His master plan for the city, implemented in the early 1970s, is woven into the very structure of the urban form that one still encounters today. Doxiadis died in 1975,

but one of the final books he published – *Anthropolis: City for Human Development* – commences with this sentence: 'The subject of this study is to conceive, define, specify and give shape to the realization of the humane city that we need.' Perhaps Elsheshtawy's exploration of the legacy of 'people-centred urbanism', as well as the humanization initiatives in Riyadh that grew from those aspirations, might have revisited Doxiadis's thinking on the humane city, and the solutions that Doxiadis sought to implement in his plan for Riyadh. I count this as a missed opportunity.

Another principal thread woven through the entire book is the vital and integral role of plans, planning, and human agency in shaping the urban landscapes of our cities. For decades now, the analytic emphasis pervading much of academia has sought to describe the structural and infrastructural forces that constrain or delimit human action. Of course there has been great value in this shift in focus, and to the sustained emphasis on the forces that constrain human action. But is it a coincidence that decades of inattention to the possibilities of human agency have left us intellectually disconsolate and anxiously hesitant? Perhaps we should better investigate that link, but no matter: in this book, Elsheshtawy helps readers see how mayors and the policies they implement can make cities better places to live, and can call forth our better qualities as humans. The central role of Abdulaziz bin Ayyaf in reshaping Riyadh – and his agency as mayor – is only one facet of this theme. Altogether, the book describes numerous policies and plans that speak to an urban optimism, and to our potential success in retrofitting our cities and addressing the many mistakes of the past.

In conclusion, there is quite a bit more of value to this book, much of it unmentioned here. In *Riyadh: Transforming a Desert City*, Elsheshtawy helps usher the cities of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia into the vibrant conversations about cities, urban planning, and urban life on the Arabian Peninsula. These very same conversations were, for the most part, previously constructed around the dearth of information about these cities, their histories, and the people therein. While I found this book entirely captivating, upon concluding the book I found myself musing over this thought: as the doyen of Arabian urbanism, with a lifetime of experience in many of the different cities on the Arabian Peninsula, perhaps Elsheshtawy's next book might leverage the notable vantage point that he's established through his life's work. How does urbanization on the Arabian Peninsula speak to the global condition? And what does it portend for humankind's future, which seems certainly urban? It seems to me that no one is better positioned to address these grandiose questions than Elsheshtawy himself.

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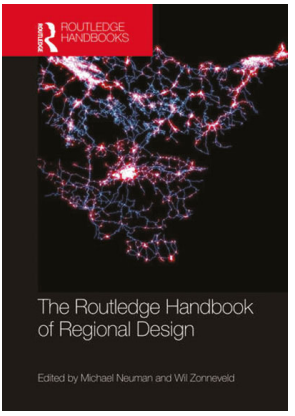
A Focus on Regional Form

The Routledge Handbook of Regional Design *edited by Michael Neuman and Wil Zonneveld*, 2021, Routledge

Co-edited by Neuman and Zonneveld, *The Routledge Handbook of Regional Design* brings together thirty-three authors across twenty-five chapters, to present critical reflections on the past, present and future of regional design. The first thing to strike me was the contents were not what I was



expecting. On seeing or hearing the word 'design' I immediately think of architecture, creativity, and artistry, and work which is heavily skewed towards being forward-looking and futures oriented. As a geographer interested in regions, planning, and governance, I have always considered regional design therefore to be complementary but somewhat peripheral to my own work. It came as a surprise to open this collection and see something so close to home. If this is regional design, then I have been researching it for the past two decades without ever thinking it was regional design! This is important because if you are looking for what I imagined regional design to be you will not find it here; however, if you are interested in all things regional, spatial, planning, and governance then this is a book for you.

The book itself is divided into four parts. After a foreword and introduction, Part I contains four chapters exploring the *Intellectual Underpinning and Practices* of regional design. Part II contains twelve *City Region Case Studies*, covering for the most part classic examples such as New York, Paris, Barcelona, and Sydney. Part III is a much smaller group of four *Hydraulic, Ecological, and Bioregional Design Case Studies* which precedes five chapters exploring broader *Education, Management and Governance* concerns in Part IV, and a final epilogue.

A clear indication of the aims, scope, and contents of the book only comes when you delve into the opening pages of the book itself. What becomes apparent is how the book is framed by the editors through a very particular lens. Evidently the inspiration is Jean Gottmann who is referred to extensively by Neuman and Zonneveld, including the opening quotations in both the Introduction and Chapter 1. This then translates into a particular take on the region involving an almost magnetic pull towards the notion of megaregions. Other regional concepts are present throughout the book, however there is an unmistakable pull towards examples emphasizing megaregions over other equally applicable regional imaginaries and to namechecking the Boston-Washington megaregion famously associated with Gottmann. Indeed, this emphasis extends to the final Epilogue by Catherine Ross, author of works on megaregions and sustainability most notably.

Evidently, the book is also shaped by a framing which is underpinned by strong connections to Delft in the Netherlands. Part of the Randstad polycentric metropolis, the Delft influence can be seen in the opening chapters where Zonneveld (Editor and Introduction), Faludi (Chapter 2), and Balz (Chapter 4) lay the foundations. This influence also extends to the narrow section of chapters examining 'hydraulic, ecological and bioregional design' given the reimagining of the Randstad as the Dutch Deltametropolis (Chapter 17 – van Duinen). This does not limit the scope of the book, because there are numerous international examples and regional imaginaries throughout, but it does give a strong indication of the agenda the editors are keen to push.

A third point of emphasis in the book is regional form which I find particularly interesting. Gary Hack's prologue alerts us to this, and co-editor

Michael Neuman's opening chapter leave us in no doubt: 'Regional design shapes the physical form of regions' (p. 20). Neuman's acknowledgements also provide a revealing insight: 'In my view, place knowledge is the baseline for any practice of design at any scale. "Research by walking", "being there", and "local knowledge" have no substitute' (p. xix). Specialist knowledge of local and regional contexts is indeed vital, but the emphasis on regional form is constraining. For readers of this journal the focus will be appealing but for some readers and the wider audience the emphasis must surely be on regional form *and* regional function. A consequence of focusing on regional form is that a big part of the regional design story is missing from this collection. For all that is covered within the *Handbook*, a striking observation is that you will not find the words 'technology', 'smart' or 'digital' in the Index of key terms. In an era of real-time data modelling and visualization, and where the twenty-first century is dominated by the likes of Microsoft, Apple, Google, IBM, Facebook, and Amazon, this central tenet of current and future regional design is notably absent from any discussion.

If this is what remains absent, where the *Handbook* excels is with the light it shines on something all too often absent more generally in regional planning and governance work. The only frustration is that it takes until page 425 for Neumann to say it explicitly in his chapter 'Mapping for regions': 'Any sort of analysis of a planning process where plan maps are simply used as illustrations in a journal paper or book chapter without any sort of clarification will most likely miss some critical issues'. I wholeheartedly agree because this is one big frustration for many. So, I would go further. This should say, 'will most likely miss *the* critical issues', and for this reason alone, *The Routledge Handbook of Regional Design* is important for the way it emphasizes to academics, practitioners and students that the oftentimes taken-for-grantedness of spatial visions remains deeply problematic.

In this way, what you get from *The Routledge Handbook of Regional Design* is at times what you might expect, and in other ways it is different or perhaps does not deliver to expectation. In conclusion, I return to my opening comments because when this collection was published my immediate reaction was that the emphasis on regional design made for a distinctive contribution among the other 'regional' handbooks currently on the market. This market is crowded, with Handbooks on regional development (Pike *et al*., 2010), regional growth (Capello and Nijkamp, 2019), regional resilience (Bristow and Healy, 2020), regional competitiveness (Huggins and Thompson, 2017), regional geographies (Paasi *et al*., 2018) and most recently megaregions (Labbé and Sorensen, 2020) published by Routledge and Edward Elgar. The emphasis on regional design is distinctive within this market but overlaps in more ways than might first meet the eye.

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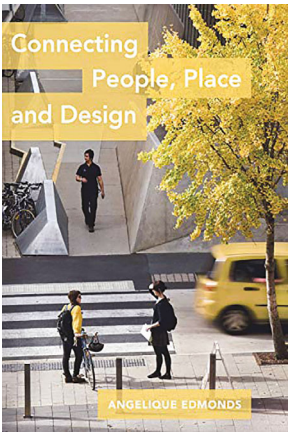
Urban Design with Lessons for Australian Aboriginals

Connecting People, Place and Design *by Angelique Edmonds*, 2020, Intellect



It is hard to start reading a new urban design book without presuming that it is yet another book on the importance of placemaking and designing cities to be more desirable for people, repeating what has been around for the last sixty years. I must confess that *Connecting People, Place and Design* surprised me; it has much more to offer. At the heart of the book lies an exploration of the ontological contradictions between Australian aboriginals and modern urban design. These contradictions are highlighted in a few chapters to help us find new ways of thinking about what we have previously left unquestioned. This better enables us to critically evaluate urban design.

For aboriginal Australians, space, place, heritage and the very concepts of life and death are fundamentally different from the Western intellectual roots of urban design. In mainstream urban design, property is used as a proxy for managing space; heritage is reduced to physical objects, people to numbers. The writer's first-hand experience of aboriginal Australians reminds us of the possibility of different ways of life and entirely different ways of constructing such concepts. Indeed, this book presents a refreshing way of developing an intellectual argument. In this case, there is a lot to learn from this way of life, which would possibly contribute to more sustainable and peaceful management of people in their settlements. But by no means should one limit alternative ontologies to the specific one of the Australian aboriginals. Many alternative ways of life are readily available and are not necessarily ancient or exotic. Unfortunately, our intellectual frameworks often fail to engage with them. Many of such alternative ontologies can hold a mirror to reflect on the existing condition of urban design, as is done in this book. Collectively they might act like a carnival hall of mirrors; each one holding a mirror to reflect us differently.

A challenge here is whether to *absorb* individual lessons from these alternative ways of understanding problems and finding solutions or to shift our fundamental thinking to another framework altogether. I guess the writer does not suggest the latter, but it is tempting to think about such a dramatic shift that could challenge the capitalist, Western and modern foundations of urban design in order to respond to urban problems such as inequality, exclusion, climate change, violence.

The book has three parts: Place; People; and Participation. In each part, phenomenological philosophy is used with examples from Australian aboriginals, which add to the critical

tone of the book. Nevertheless, the two concepts of *connecting* and *people* could have been more thoroughly explored. Human beings are connected: one person having a soup in 2019 resulted in a global pandemic. We have experienced being connected in this sense, but connection cannot be reduced to this, nor could it be reduced to being in one location or even having one conversation. People are in *spatial interaction* (the term used in the book) with one another but what exactly *connects* them together cannot be taken for granted. *People* is also a tricky word that we use in day-to-day conversation. But what is *people*? Sociologists have, for a long time, discussed the characteristics of societies and communities, but what exactly is *people* and how do urban scholars engage with them? Perhaps more importantly, when can the concept of *people* mislead us in understanding individuals and groups? The concept of people has been used as a means for political projects and been abused for specific purposes (Olson, 2016). Often in urban design, the word people is used to present the needs and demands of the majority of participants. Now in 2021, we know how certain groups (that we have difficulties finding acceptable terminology to address) are underrepresented: women, people of colour, and many other groups and individuals. Reducing the diversity of individuals and the multiplicity of groups (their *cultural citizenship)* to one common narration of the people could be an oppressive act.

Roy Andersson, the Swedish surrealist film director in many of his films, especially *You, the Living* (2007), put people in *spatial encounters*, they talk to each other, but by no means are they connected. Andersson's films are urban and provocative, not dissimilar to Edmond's *Connecting People, Place and Design*; both with phenomenological lenses. The book, like the film, made me think what does it mean to understand someone else; are we living in cities with many strangers who most of the time do not really communicate? The tragicomic visions of the film make us wonder why all these people talk when they are not connected? What can make us happy in such a grey city? What Edmonds suggests is, however, very different from the film. The book defines and suggests more meaningful participation as the strategy to connect people. Some suggestions are good and practical for urban designers. Perhaps the writer's experience in practice was well served in offering practical guidance.

Robert Putnam sees a pendulum of increase and decrease of social capital (Putman, 2020). What links us together is political economy, but it has its own pattern of rising and falling. He concludes that, at least, currently in America, social capital is at its lowest, but the good news is that from now on, for a period of time, it should get better. If the connection between individuals is a matter of political economy, then how can designers connect people by good participation? Can this then result in an illusion of connection?

Connecting People, Place and Design, is a different urban design book, a valuable contribution. It engages more deeply with concepts used in urban design. More importantly, it not only poses theoretical challenges but also proposes a set of responses. However, if it had been more radical in its explorations and proposals, it may have better prepared us for the fast-approaching urban problems.

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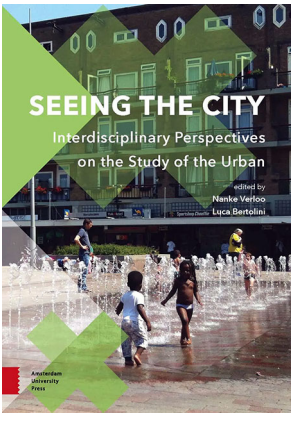
Exploring the Many Cities in the City

Seeing the City: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Study of the Urban, *edited by Nanke Verloo and Luca Bertolini*, 2020, Amsterdam University Press



How should we study the city? While there is diverse literature on research methodology, it is not easy to find a book that addresses the increasingly complex urban context and provides a comprehensive overview of current research methods applied in urban studies. *Seeing the City: Interdisciplinary Perspectives on the Study of the Urban* goes a long way to meet that need. The book presents a variety of research methods that help in understanding the complexity of the urban environment, from space, people, environment, and housing to institutions, co-creative process, and data use.

Seeing the City provides four interesting aspects regarding research methods to understand the city.

First, the book includes a variety of research methods to understand the people in cities and their interactions. Chapter 3 *Urban ethnography and participant observations: studying the city from within* examines various skills, strategies, and underlying knowledge/tools to study participants in cities. The author highlights the validation and ethical challenges involved in this research method. Chapter 13 *Action research in the city: developing collaborative governance arrangements for the urban commons* looks at the use of action research. The challenges in this approach lie in how to demarcate tasks and responsibilities and how to report and reflect proceedings while remaining impartial when interpreting the opinions of different stakeholders. Chapter 14 *Streetlabs as a co-creative approach to 'research through design'* goes one step further to understand people's behaviours and motives through the co-creation process, using visual tools to 'concentrate the exchange on the local situation' (p. 218), sharing the results with the local community.

Second, the book pays special attention to technological advances and explores the research methods on data use to understand cities in both historical and contemporary contexts. Chapter 2 *Quantitative data collection: a meta view* discusses the method used for quantitative data, the sources of the data, and the types of data that can be explored. Interestingly, the author highlights the rise of big data that help in understanding cities. Chapter 4 *Seeing the city through new forms of urban data* concentrates on the emerging urban data generated through technology embedded in the urban fabric or is by-product of the urban citizens' online activities. Chapter 10 *Urban research in another dimension: methods for modelling historical cities* introduces a new mapping approach to reconstruct urban change. Digital mapping can help researchers

analyse cities at different scales or simulate different growth and planning scenarios. Chapter 11 *Mapping the city: geographic information Systems and science in urban research* explains geographic information systems (GIS) and how the GIS toolbox can help analyse spatial data for quantitative and qualitative research.

Third, the book stresses the importance of forging an interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary view to understand cities. Chapter 15 *Too many cities in the city? Interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary city research methods and the challenge of integration* stresses the need to examine urban issues such as the lock down in the pandemic through the lens of interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary perspectives. Chapter 16 *Exploring city science* suggests addressing city challenges by integrating science, policy, and design. It also investigates the strategies for disseminating knowledge, including the close collaboration between cities and universities, agenda-setting, and methodology to present the transdisciplinary research results.

Fourth, to provide alternative views of cities, the book discusses social-ecological problems that cities face using the institutional approach (chapter 8), via a historical trace (chapter 6), or cultural approach (chapter 7). Chapter 6 *Digging in the crates: archival research and historical primary sources* focuses on archival research. It discusses why archives are essential to investigate, the kinds of archives that should be investigated and how we should understand their context and bias while determining what information can be extracted from the historical sources. What is interesting is the limitation or bias highlighted by the author. While historical research can add context information and provide interesting insight into a specific research topic, the authors also point out the bias of the archive origin and the bias in interpreting historical sources. Chapter 7 *Reading spaces: a cultural analysis approach* explores cultural analysis tools: semiotics and discourse analysis. Semiotics decode the messages based on a selection of elements from within the space, while discourse analysis enables 'a broader overview of the rhetorical shaping of the space' (p. 97). What is less convincing regarding this method is that the results of the cultural analysis approach may largely depend on the researcher's background, experience, and bias in terms of observing, selecting, and interpreting. Chapter 8 *The practice of institutional analysis in urban contexts* focuses on the institutional approach. The author highlights the importance of the institutional approach in urban studies and how analysis of the institution can identify the tensions and collisions between actors' goals and norms. The author shows how the institutional approach can be operationalized but also warns that it has limitations, such as being too anthropocentric. The suggestion to combine different approaches is meaningful but needs further elaboration on how to proceed.

There are some chapters in book that seem rather far removed from the other research methods included. Chapter 9 *Housing preferences and hedonic pricing* is the only chapter presenting a specific quantitative method in economics. It would have been more appropriate to include a chapter that provided an overview of the significant quantitative methods used to study cities, how they are applied and in what circumstance, and how the hedonic pricing method is positioned. Chapter 12 *Methods for studying urban biodiversity* focuses too much on biodiversity rather than on appropriate

methods. It is accurate that the editors are correct in suggesting in their Conclusion that there is no chapter showing readers how to study emerging urban focuses, such as metabolism, circularity, climate change, or energy neutral in the cities (p. 269).

Overall, Seeing the City provides good insight into the interdisciplinary perspectives on investigating the cities. It offers academics a diverse choice of research methods to observe people and space in cities. It also challenges researchers to develop innovative, hybrid, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary approaches to understand the complexity of cities.

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And to close this Micromobility issue: ...

... 'A Californian kid with an electric scooter', 2011.
(*Photo*: CC AngryJulieMonday)