



# Emerging knowledge on the social dimension of urban design

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Since its establishment as a discipline, urban design has continuously faced heated debates. This is partly explained because of its interdisciplinarity and allegiance with architecture and planning, and shared body of knowledge with other disciplines including engineering, anthropology, sociology, to mention a few, and the gamut of social, cultural, political issues and questions that it raises (Knack 1984; Rowley 1994). Who are we designing for? What constitutes an appropriate or inappropriate use of space? Who decides what is good or bad? And, who, essentially, has a voice in all those decisions? All these questions, one way or another, continue to shape the urban design profession (Fig. 1).

The role of urban designers has also become increasingly complex and ambitious, as they are often encouraged to target bolder social goals such as the creation of communities or the promotion of collective health and social wellbeing. Indeed, these goals have become somewhat inevitable signalling important priorities in the global urban agendas. But these new priorities, in turn, demand urban designers to develop a lot more skills than typically provisioned in their education. Besides pushing them to acquire the necessary design skills, urban designers increasingly find themselves to have to surpass their social competencies and working with a wide range of public and private stakeholders, not least to understand the diverse needs of different user groups, if they need to deliver the promised social benefits.

This issue brings together six articles that offer new perspectives on some of these issues with a particular focus on the social dimension of urban design. It intends to stimulate a discussion on the ongoing and future practice, research and policy debates and agendas and open new avenues of enquiry in several areas including: urban design education,

designing with disability in mind, human-centered design, urban design's impact on social life, and behavioural design.

To address a movement from universities for having a stronger civic mission, Seyed Mahdi Khatami, Pouria Boujari and Ehsan Ranjbar's article 'Toward a social responsibility-based model for urban design Education', as the title implies, advocates a social responsibility-based model for urban design education. Drawing on an overview of the literature on social responsibility and urban design pedagogy and discussions with experts, the authors develop a useful framework for urban design education consisting of four steps including values, management, practices and impacts, and 22 components which they considered catalysts to create more responsive urban design departments, academics, students and future professionals.

Kevin Thwaites, James Simpson, Philippa Heath, Alice Mathers, Ian Simkins' article 'Microenvironments: towards a socio-spatial understanding of territorial expression for urban design' develops a new concept of microenvironments building on research focused on the territorial perceptions of people with learning disabilities, which promises to become an important theoretical contribution to socio-spatial discourse in urban design. This paper builds on a territorially focused communication framework (mine, yours, theirs, ours: MYTO) empirically grounded and tested. Using a range of participatory methodologies, it investigates territorial experiences of people with learning disabilities in different urban settings.

Liu Yang, Yuan Zhu, Mikela Chatzimichailidou and Xiaoyun Liu's 'Assessing human emotional responses to the design of public spaces around subway stations: a human factors research' develops a novel experiment to examine human emotional reactions to outdoor public spaces surrounding transit stations using a comprehensive mixed-methods approach combining physiological assessments with subjective self-reports. This article provides several insightful design and policy recommendations that can assist practitioners and researchers in selecting relevant approaches for human-oriented and place-based TOD designs.

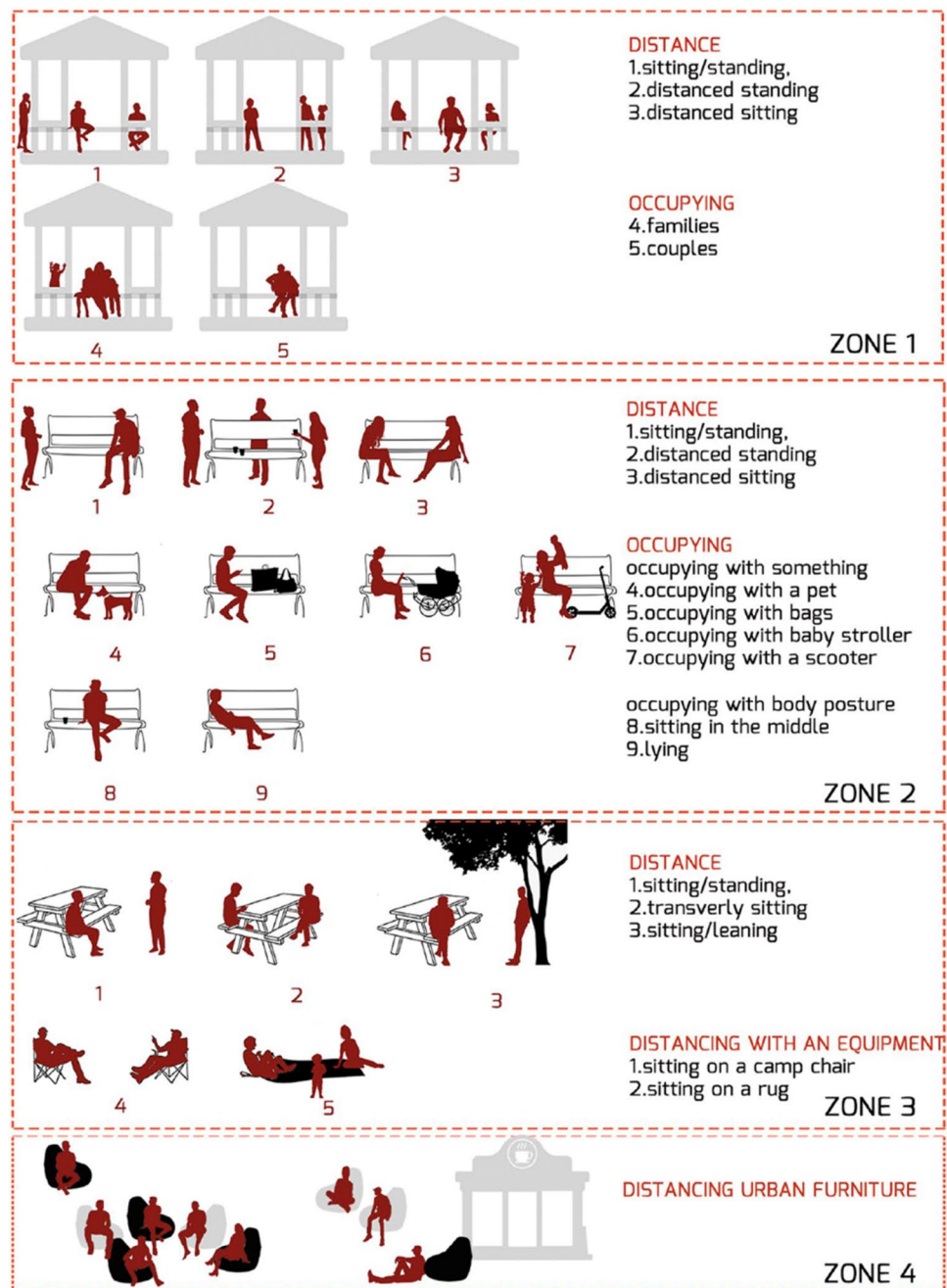
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**Fig. 1** Sketches of emerging zone patterns (Source Ersoz and Yildirim 2023)



Derya Oktay’s article ‘Influences of urban design on perceived social attributes and quality of life: a comparative study in two English neighbourhoods’ provides a pertinent study on the influence of features of urban design on perceived social attributes and quality of life—an area still largely under-researched—particularly when it comes to neighbourhood design. By comparing and assessing two neighbourhoods in the UK and using a set of robust site subjective assessments of the situational, morphological, spatial, and aesthetic features of such environments, it concludes that the residents’ satisfaction, attachment, and quality of life of the neighbourhoods studied are strongly linked

to their urban design and physical environment characteristic. In doing so, it provides a set of useful recommendations for research and practice on housing environments.

Nazli Deniz Ersoz and Yalcin Yildirim’s article ‘Sociopetality or sociofugality? The effects of post-pandemic on public open space’ explores the changing characteristics of public space users’ behaviour after the Covid-19 pandemic’. It examines whether social distancing precautions during the pandemic has caused changes in user’s behaviours and transformed the character of the used public spaces. Based on an in-depth empirical study in Uc Fidan, a neighbourhood park without any design intervention during the pandemic,



it concludes that the need for social distancing has led to the creation not only of new behaviour typologies in public spaces but also new types of spaces with ‘sociopetal’ characteristics which strengthen the communication between people, or that instead show restricting ‘sociofugal’ characteristics, setting the stage for new understandings on the behavioural affordances of public space.

Finally, Karl Fine Licht’s article ‘Behavioural designs defined: how to understand and why it is important to differentiate between “defensive,” “hostile,” “disciplinary”, and other designs in the urban landscape”’ examines in an empirical and philosophical way a range of concepts and terms associated with hostile designs. By doing so it uncovers a “complex variety in the phenomena of behavioural design than previously acknowledged” which require “distinct justifications, accentuating their practical and moral importance”. Furthermore, it prompts new research to fully operationalize the practical application of those definitions, and understanding the underlying moral reasons that justify their use in contemporary designs.

## Selected articles

Seyed Mahdi Khatami, Pouria Boujari and Ehsan Ranjbar, ‘Toward a social responsibility-based model for urban design Education’.

Kevin Thwaites, James Simpson, Philippa Heath, Alice Mathers, Ian Simkins, ‘Microenvironments: towards a socio-spatial understanding of territorial expression for urban design’.

Liu Yang, Yuan Zhu, Mikela Chatzimichailidou and Xiaoyun Liu, ‘Assessing human emotional responses to the design of public spaces around subway stations: a human factors research’.

Derya Oktay, ‘Influences of urban design on perceived social attributes and quality of life: a comparative study in two English neighbourhoods’.

Nazli Deniz Ersoz and Yalcin Yildirim’s article ‘Sociopetality or sociofugality? The effects of post-pandemic on public open space’ explores the changing characteristics of public space users’ behavior after the Covid-19 pandemic’.

Karl Fine Licht, ‘Behavioral designs defined: how to understand and why it is important to keep “defensive,” “hostile,” and “disciplinary” designs apart.’

**Data availability** Data sharing not applicable to this editorial as no data sets were generated or analysed.

## References

- Knack, R.E. 1984. Staking a claim on urban design. *Planning* 50: 4–11.  
Rowley, A. 1994. Definitions of urban design: The nature and concerns of urban design. *Planning Practice and Research* 9: 179–197.

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