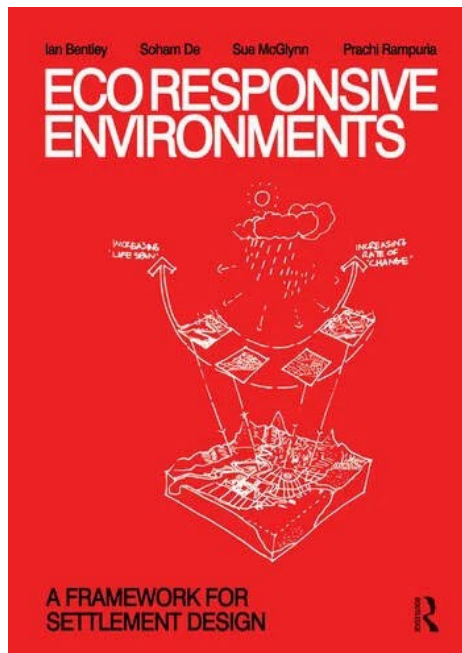

Book Review



EcoResponsive Environments: A Framework for Settlement Design

Ian Bentley, Sue McGlynn, Soham De and Prachi Rampuria, *Routledge, 2024, 256pp, 410 color illustrations, ISBN 9780415818766*

EcoResponsive Environments: A Framework for Settlement Design innovatively proposes the integration of design thinking and skills across different scales. It extends the lucidity of the 'Responsive Environments' urban design approach beyond cities to include the design of wider settlements. It thus goes beyond human needs to embrace the topographical and ecological features of natural systems.

More than 13 years in the making, this striking and important new book has been very much a 'labor of love' for its team of co-authors. De and Rampuria, as former students and then colleagues of Bentley and McGlynn at Oxford Brookes university, now lead their own award-winning consultancy, while lecturing at their alma mater. Much of their competition/policy-related success arises from these talented designers' applying the innovative principles developed in this, their latest book.

Bentley and McGlynn were part of the five-author team that produced the seminal 1985 publication 'Responsive Environments', which was widely adopted by architects,

urban designers and planners who often cut their teeth on it during introductory urban design modules or postgraduate Courses in UK and international institutions. If you look on their bookshelves, you will likely find that most still have a well-thumbed copy of this now classic urban design manual for reference. Consulted when educating students or developing their practice, its language and principles have influenced UK design policy and guidance, as well as much further afield, particularly in Asia and Latin America.

I recall suggesting to Bentley in 2010 that a 25th anniversary edition would be most welcome and could provide an opportunity for its authors to address more recent issues and critiques. Bentley expressed the view that though it was of its time, seemed to remain useful, and had been widely adopted around the world, it might benefit from an update; an additional element was needed to broaden the perspective it had initiated. Clearly, his sights were set on more than just the 'know-how' of design (mode 2 knowledge). Bentley sought to link this approach more closely with the scope and processes of urban design,

especially its natural context, and to the professional cultures of the design teams who are required to meet the complex sustainability challenges that built-environment professionals face today. Indeed, explorations of related scope and process had been a key feature of Bentley's book, *Urban Transformations; People Power and Urban design* (1999). Around the same time, McGlynn and Ivor Samuels co-authored an article in *Urban Morphology*, "The funnel, the sieve and the template: towards an operational urban morphology" (2000). This revelatory study highlighted the changing patterns of distinctiveness across morphological scales and the need to operationalize these levels. McGlynn and Samuels advocated going beyond their then use, which was mainly for historical characterizations, towards specifying design operations.

EcoResponsive Environments is the outcome of these trajectories and aspirations. Its strap line, "A Framework for Settlement Design" indicates the key elements that differ from the earlier choice-maximizing format of responsive-design "to (...) correct the things designers did badly..." (Bentley et al, 1985). This new book is more than "a manual" however. While it will clearly serve as one, given its highly user-friendly structure and layout, the framework it develops highlights new ways of thinking and working for built environment professionals, as well as stakeholders. This is a key strength of the book and a major aspect of its contribution to the field.

The book itself, as to be expected from this team, is beautifully presented, copiously illustrated, and highly accessible to busy architectural, landscape, transport, urban design and planning professionals. It is also likely to capture the attention of interested clients and lay people. The text is organized into seven parts; an introductory context for 'new ways of thinking, designing and practicing', a five-part discussion of design process, and a 'new ways of practicing' conclusion. Taking each part in turn, I ask: What exactly are the bases for, and underlying premises of, this new EcoResponsive environments approach?

In the introductory part, 'New ways of thinking, designing and practicing', the reader is taken on a concise, whistle-stop tour of the unintended consequences generated by built-environment systems and design and their resulting challenges. Focusing on the 'great acceleration' occurring within the Anthropocene, human-driven crises of consumption, pollution, species extinction, and ozone depletion are introduced among other issues. These problems visually highlight the links between the current settlement impacts and their drivers. Such dynamics result in ecosystem services being compromised, and a reduction in the level of support (aka 'affordances') available for people to meet their needs. Importantly, the authors define needs according to an updated version of Maslow's set of human needs; one that treats them as being interwoven rather than hierarchical.

The EcoResponsive design framework presented posits settlements and their ecosystem supports as constituting a 'complex system' of subsystems, scales and interdependencies. Urban morphology is referenced in relation to both the evolution and structure of settlements, which the authors condense into four layered and multi-

scalar subsystems that are holistically experienced through the senses by users as places. The authors lean into the current implications of the fragmentation in design disciplines which are siloed within these subsystems and scales. The articulated framework thus aims to be inclusive, enabling professional boundaries to be less crisp and fuzzier with the potential to afford them a wider vision and to be connected and working across disciplines, involving the architectural, landscape, transport, urban design and planning professions; while not excluding other domains involved in the built environment. Informed by Kate Raworth's *Doughnut economics* (2017), the framework sets 'limits' bounded by short-term human needs for wellbeing; positing a social 'foundation' at one end and an ecological 'ceiling' for collective long-term survival at the other.

In the five chapters that follow, the reader is taken on a more leisurely, detailed, and highly-visual step-by-step journey. Chapter 1 begins with how to couple settlement design with the largest 'foundational' subsystem of 'natural infrastructure' parameters by identifying and/or creating a blue-green network linking the settlement with its regional matrix of scalar landscape 'patches'. Chapter 2 discusses ensuring energy-efficient movement networks linked with public space that encourage the use of more healthy travel modes. Chapter 3 addresses how to generate resilient plot structures for diverse and convivial activities within the subsystem of public spaces, and chapter 4 discusses how to secure resource-efficiency in the design, construction and occupation of buildings integrated within the subsystem of plots by designing for 'slow architecture'. And finally, in Chapter 5, the question of how to synthesize outcomes of the earlier parameters for fine-tuning the larger subsystem forms and detailing their scalar components is discussed in relation to ecological philosopher Gernot Bohme's (2018) concept, 'atmosphere' which evokes a perceptual configuration of sensory affordances that is responsive to the human sensorium.

Each of these chapters uses the multiple award-winning Heath Park, Runcorn to great effect, as a worked example to clarify and apply the design parameters. Here, I particularly appreciated the inclusion of cross-cultural considerations and examples that were missing from *Responsive Environments* - though it was not alone in this at that period and trans-cultural sensitivities are a more recent development. The final part, 'New ways of practicing' features a brief call to action, which was also welcome, though it leaves the reader wanting more.

Going through all these chapters, the long gestation period needed for this book becomes understandable. There is much guidance here; and it is offered with a deceptive simplicity belying the depth of evidence and conceptual syntheses involved in the development of the framework and its translation into actionable steps, along with the reassurance of a well presented live-brief.

For those already familiar with *Responsive Environments*, its principles are woven into the parameters developed here; featuring, as a starting point, in chapters two to four, but also in chapter one's natural landscape scale where they are partly echoed. Consequently, the reader will feel both at ease and extended in an exciting and



transformative way, as they realize the potential of this approach to not only take your skills to the next level, through its multi-scalar integrations - but also, should one be open to it – help in facilitating a reaching out towards, and potential rapprochement with, the fellow members of our built-environment teams that we all sometimes ‘love-to-hate’ from our professional siloes. It may even foster a greater appreciation for the local expertise and values of residents and other stakeholders.

More guidance on new ways of practicing, and the needs of other species explicitly highlighted within the framework would have been appreciated. The text could have gone beyond features such as green patches, corridors, and bridges in the natural infrastructure chapter such that the approach would have been not only ‘more-than-urban’, but also explicitly ‘more-than-human’. This way it could promote embracing other species even within the urban. Nonetheless, the parameters do take such needs into account, and this is an issue which, as advocated by the authors, creative practice could potentially build upon, while taking the EcoResponsive framework as a starting point.

Overall, this is a beautifully presented, lucidly written, well-argued and immensely practical book. It is much needed at this critical period in the ongoing climate emergency, and you will want to make space for *EcoResponsive Environments* on your bookshelf or in your digital library, as it will likely become as much-loved and influential a classic, in educational and practice studios, as its predecessor.

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NezHapi-Delle Odeleye, PhD MRTPI

Associate Professor, Urban Design & Planning,
Course Director, MSc Town Planning
Anglia Ruskin University
Chelmsford, UK