

**Transnational Architecture and Urbanism. Rethinking how Cities Plan, Transform and Learn**, by Davide Ponzini, Routledge, 2020, 305 pp., ISBN 978-0-415-78792-5

Davide Ponzini's *Transnational Architecture and Urbanism* (TAAU) presents an in-depth analysis of the increasingly transnational setting in which urban planning and design takes place. Throughout the book, the author calls for contextual, place-based, and project-oriented approaches to understanding contemporary urban transformations. This is not the most provocative of starting points, and I therefore suspect that few readers will take issue with TAAU's storyline. However, the book's relatively modest theoretical ambitions are more than made up for by living up to its actual objectives. In my reading, two contributions stand out. First, drawing on a remarkably diverse array of urban projects (in terms of their geographies, functions, and types), the book enlivens and specifies the often-trivial notion of 'a place-based perspective'. And second, in doing so, the book also coherently reflects on what can be done with the ensuing insights and knowledge, whence the book's subtitle *Rethinking How Cities Plan, Transform and Learn*. Taken together, this makes for a thought-provoking and empirically rich book that invites the reader to (re)consider the implications of their own research focus and praxis.

TAAU is organized in three main parts, each of which consist of fairly short and well-illustrated chapters. In the first part, Ponzini lays out his conceptual framework and vision on key policy issues. The discussion in the four chapters in this part combines fairly straightforward and functional discussions of key terms and ideas with the development of the notion of 'usable knowledge'. Although a clearer theoretical consideration and operational definition of the latter would have been welcome, overall, the introduction is effective in laying the groundwork for

the six chapters in the second part. Each of these chapters deals with a specific topic: spectacularization of the urban environment, urban personification and the mobilities of global experts, decontextualization of design, plan circulation and transfers, transfers of megastructures and buildings, and the homogenization of central places and urban landscapes. It is above all in this second part that the book's empirical prowess comes to the fore. From Milan to Dubai, from Chongqing to Barcelona; from museums to skyscrapers, from marinas to plazas: the geographical, functional, and typological diversity that is woven into both the sub-arguments and the overall argument makes for compelling reading. In the third part, drawing on the preceding discussions, the two final chapters offer more systematic reflections on the potential of a contextual, place-based, and project-oriented approach to our understanding of cities, as well as on how the ensuing urban knowledge can inform designers, planners and policymakers.

TAAU can be read as an (interim) overview of Ponzini's ongoing research into transnational architecture and urbanism: much of the material in the book pulls from his earlier and ongoing projects, fieldwork, and papers. However, this does not mean the book is a mere summary of earlier research, and this for two reasons. First, the book shows the added value of bringing together a variety of ideas and examples in a comprehensive narrative: the approach advanced in TAAU works exactly because of the cogent discussion of a very diverse set of examples. And second, there is the self-reflective nature of the book: Ponzini challenges the reader to join him in considering the implications of 'urban knowledge' (in an academic vein) for education, planning, and policy. In the process, he laments both researchers claiming the moral high ground and the often-simplistic narratives of policy transfer and homogeneity. However, rather than resorting to a sterile middle ground, Ponzini explores what a critical, yet engaged and productive stance could look like.

Writing a book implies making choices, and as a consequence there are – inevitably – roads not taken in TAAU. One of these struck me as a missed opportunity. Ponzini's frames his call for contextual thinking against naive readings of 'globalization' as a homogenizing force. An example of this is offered in first chapter, in which he dissects an article in *The Financial Times*. Although this certainly works as an opening pitch, in my view the subsequent conceptual discussion could have been enriched by better tying it into the lively debates in urban studies on the opportunities and limitations of comparison, debates that are of course imbued with considerations about the nature of urban similarity and difference that are so central to TAAU (e.g., Peck, 2015; Robinson 2016). There are nods here and there (for example in the fourth chapter), but a more systematic consideration of these debates could have made for an even more solid and topical framing. Furthermore, and as already suggested, the central concept of 'usable knowledge' remains somewhat elusive. This did not really bother me as Ponzini's take on the concept's remit becomes implicitly clear when reading the book, but in hindsight I found it difficult to get a clear handle on what would make knowledge 'usable' (or not).

Overall, however, these are minor issues that may simply reflect my own interests and in no way detract from the book's qualities: TAAU invites readers to (re)consider what (they think) they know about the transnational context in which urban transformation, design and planning is embedded, and how this might inform urban debate, planning, and praxis. When reading this book, I was reminded of Anthony King's *Spaces of Global Cultures*. In that book, King (2004) explored global and postcolonial theoretical approaches to the built environment drawing on a remarkable wealth of empirical material. TAAU deals with the same kinds of questions and uses a similar approach, but today it is of course the more topical book because it deals with contemporary conceptual and empirical puzzles. Irrespective, I vividly remember the

transformative impact King's (2004) book had on me during my PhD studies, as it made me look differently and more coherently at things; the fact that TTaU reminds me of this is therefore quite the compliment.

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#### References

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