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Book Review: Soft City by David Sim, 2019, Island Press

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a place offers, and how to develop it in a way that someone less talented, or less experienced, would never have thought possible.

Other capabilities that urban designers need to have relate to the specific processes of creating places. They include assessing design quality; preparing urban design policy, guidance and statements; masterplanning; and communicating in two and three dimensions (by hand and computer).

The last of these, as *Graphics for Urban Design* shows, has become much easier in the past few years. At the same time, as *Design Drawing* shows, the creative art of designing, and of drawing for design, is as difficult as ever. But drawing is a key to creativity in urban design, so it is time to get our pencils out.

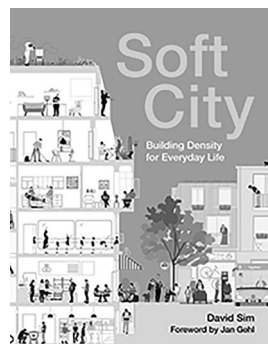
Two final things to mention. Ching's is an American book, so the units he quotes are Imperial. And there are no colour illustrations, which makes some of the illustrations of issues relating to colour a little odd, though on balance it leads to *Design Drawing* successfully concentrating on line alone.

Rob Cowan
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Where Density has a Human Dimension

Soft City: Building Density for Everyday Life, by David Sim, 2019, Island Press

Soft City by David Sim of Gehl Architects continues a half-century long advocacy by Jan Gehl and partners for people-centred design, this time with a focus on the perimeter block. The book is an enjoyable soft read, beautifully illustrated



with diagrams, cross-sections and photographs – capturing life in-between buildings, on streets and in backyards. Particularly appealing are the street–building–courtyard

cross-sections, as on the cover, depicting a diversity of people and activities. Inspired by Texier's classic drawing of the nineteenth-century Parisian apartment and the social mix of its occupants, these cross-sections illustrate how built form mediates connections between people, in public, communal and private spaces.

This manifesto-like book is advocating the benefits of the five-storey perimeter block type. It shows how it can produce relatively high densities while 20 per cent of the total floor area is at ground level supporting street activities. Sim's ideal urban blocks are short, subdivided in many lots and containing a vertical mix of functions, or a mix of apartment types. They have diverse forms and create a diversity of open spaces. They incorporate a multiplicity of communal spaces: staircases, shared terraces and courtyards, where children can play safely, and neighbours socialize in wind protected environments. A strength of the book lies in the systematic and detailed description of how the various parts of the block relate to each other and work together spatially, functionally and environmentally, and how these impact on everyday life.

Streetlife is described as contingent on walking, sustained by the perimeter block morphology, but also linked to a range of micro-morphological features: sidewalks, pavements, public-private interfaces, entries, awnings, medians. Mobility beyond the neighbourhood scale is acknowledged as well. Besides cycling, for which the 'Copenhagen model' of segregated lanes

is advocated, Sim argues for 'street-based' public transport: light-rail and buses. Taking a strong stance, underground metro, elevators, and high-rise Transit Oriented Developments (TODs) are summarily dismissed, and newer technologies disregarded. This makes *Soft City* a provocative counterpoint to the naïve high-tech enthusiasm of 'smart city' discourses, but it risks falling into a similarly misguided low-tech enthusiasm. The challenge is not to choose one technology over the other, but of finding ways of using existing technologies to enable rather than hinder social encounter in public space. Certainly, the underground metros of Paris or London contribute to the diversity of connections within the city, enabling short-cuts and fast links between distant parts that street-based transport cannot achieve. Surely, taller buildings enabled by elevator access can enrich the diversity of dwelling types.

The urban theory that is underlying *Soft City* (but seldom made explicit) can be traced to Jane Jacobs, and her four preconditions for streetlife vitality: high density, short blocks, functional mix and fine grain. However, apart from a few fleeting sentences, it avoids mention of conflicting forces that are part of urban life and shape cities. While saturated with calls for diversity, it depicts this as frictionless. Neither is there much appetite to take on the ideological and institutional barriers to good urban design as Jacobs did so vigorously. This conflict-avoidance is also reflected in the use of cautious positive language, which does mean that the 'soft' of the title stands for everything that is advocated for, including strong demarcations between public and private property, and between various modes of transport. The concluding 'Nine Criteria for Livable Urban Density' include seven neighbourhood- and micro-scale built form attributes derived from Jacobs and Gehl, and two global environmental factors:

'smaller carbon footprint' and 'greater biodiversity', to which small-scale design can contribute.

Sim converges with Jacobs in affirming that density is not a sufficient condition to enable streetlife vitality and he is right not to set a minimum residential density target as high as her gross 525 p/ha. Of the examples shown, Donningensgade in Copenhagen has a gross residential density of 190 p/ha and floor area ratio (FAR) of 1.5, within a 16 ha reference area. For the other examples no population densities are provided but the gross FARs range from 0.8 to 1.9. That almost sixty years after Jacobs's call for broader and more detailed density data, we still lack measures of the various densities of residents, jobs, visitors, floor areas and open spaces we study, illustrates how little progress has been made, and how much scope there still is to advance urban research. While well informed by the vast collective experience of Gehl Architects, *Soft City* does not provide much empirical evidence of the social and environmental success of the case studies it presents. This is curious because the Gehl office has long been research-based and has published *How to Study Public Life* (by Gehl and Svarre) listing a broad spectrum of empirical research methods.

To some extent *Soft City* aligns with the attempts of the New Urbanism movement to raise interest in the pre-modernist city, its walking-based fine-grained mixed-use urban forms, as an alternative to the mass-production of car-dependent mono-functional suburbia. Like common New Urbanist practices, this is a Jacobs-light approach that largely avoids critique of the forces that lead to the production of large-grain spatial structures under conditions of neoliberal governance. A few exceptions to this are the pages discussing how co-housing models in Freiburg and Tübingen have enabled the production of neighbourhoods with a fine-grained property structure, and how functions

that require larger floorplates such as supermarkets can be integrated without reducing diversity at ground level.

Soft City will help readers to understand better a key urban building type – the perimeter block – that is less well known outside Europe. While for urban designers there will not be many surprises, many will find the high-quality visual communication

and plain language useful. More broadly, the book may prove an effective entry point to urban design for anyone unfamiliar with this highly contested field.

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