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**Research Article**

# The City as Design Agency: Integrating Design Thinking with the Political Form of Architecture

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## Abstract

This study investigates the political dimension of architecture and urban design, focusing on their potential to act as instruments of critical resistance within contemporary governance structures. The research problem centers on the tendency of architects and planners to operate within neoliberal frameworks, which reduces design to a technical and managerial function, limiting its capacity to foster solidarity, social justice, and environmental responsibility. In response, this study examines how design agencies -emerging institutional actors in urban governance- can reposition architecture as a form of political action rather than merely delivering projects. To address this problem, the study hypothesizes that architectural and urban design practices must be reframed through principles of ethics, solidarity, and social repair. It argues that design agencies can develop transformative models that prioritize public benefit and spatial quality, thereby challenging the homogenizing logic of neoliberal urbanization. Methodologically, the research adopts a qualitative and comparative approach, analyzing global examples of design agencies to examine the relationship between spatial form production and modes of political representation. The theoretical framework draws on Ungers's "City within the City" and Pier Vittorio Aureli's notion of "absolute architecture." These theories provide a lens for understanding how formal autonomy and antagonistic resistance can be institutionalized through design agencies. Ultimately, the study interprets these agencies not as administrative instruments but as urban apparatuses capable of generating political consciousness through spatial form.

**Keywords:** Absolute Architecture, Design Agency, Design Thinking, Dialectic City, Urban Design.

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## INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, architecture has been concerned with the shaping of social relations as well as the aesthetic organization of space. In today's urban political economy, this shaping power largely occurs within the framework of neoliberal boundaries. The disciplines of architecture and planning serve the rule sets of the capitalist logic that create these boundaries. Within this framework, the role of architects and planners has often been considered merely as technical consultants, while their forms of political production have been overlooked. This study focuses on design agencies due to their role in representing emerging institutional mechanisms that bridge design thinking and governance. Unlike traditional planning bodies, these agencies operationalize collaborative and iterative approaches, enabling architecture and urban design to regain their political and ethical roles. By mediating between policy-making and spatial production, design agencies provide a platform for challenging neoliberal urbanization and fostering public benefit, solidarity, and spatial justice. This study examines the disciplinary potential of architecture in terms of the production of political action, connecting the theories of Ungers and Aureli with contemporary structures such as design agencies.

According to Aureli (2011), Ungers addressed the city as a mosaic of differences and a system of formally autonomous yet structurally related "islands." Ungers's understanding of "rational form" positions architecture not as a means of political representation, but as a formal framework organizing decision-making mechanisms (Aureli, 2011). Drawing inspiration from Ungers's approach, Aureli, in his work "The Possibility of an Absolute Architecture" (2011), defines the political aspect of architecture through a formal antagonism. For Aureli, urban space should be the material ground of resistance against hegemonic modes of production. In this sense, Aureli's concept of "absolute architecture" demonstrates architecture's potential to resist the system by remaining within it (Aureli, 2011). When these two approaches are brought together, this study argues that design agencies today have the potential to, on the one hand, continue Ungers' formal system rationality and typo-morphological approaches in urban interventions and on the other hand, transform these intervention spaces into a political production field framed by Aureli's concept of "absolute architecture.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to examine how structures such as design agencies that exist in various global cities mediate policy-making processes through the production of urban form. The study hypothesizes that these institutions are not merely structures that oversee spatial quality, but rather actors that represent contemporary equivalents of Ungers's concepts of formal autonomy and Aureli's concepts of political antagonism. Furthermore, the study argues that through the actions of these structures, architecture can gain a critical and public position within governance mechanisms. The research questions guiding the study are as follows:

- How do design agencies function as political actors in today's cities and can these agencies re-establish architecture's capacity for political representation through this function?
- Can architects, urban designers and stakeholders, through structures such as design agencies, move towards an ethical and responsible approach towards the communities they work in?
- How can these structures develop opposition or critique of existing power relations through Aureli's theory of "absolute architecture" in the context of today's political, social and environmental crises in spatial decision-making processes?

The research is based on a policy approach that combines theoretical analysis with comparative examples. In the first stage, the theories of Ungers and Aureli were examined, defining the formal and ethical dimensions of the architecture-politics relationship. In the second stage, the institutional structures, political status, and spatial production modes of design agencies across different world cities were compared. In the third stage, these datas were read in conjunction with Ungers's "form as strategy" and Aureli's "form as resistance."

This method extends the political meaning of formality to the institutional scale, demonstrating how architecture can serve as both a tool of power and a form of critique through structures such as design agencies in contemporary cities. Ultimately, this study conceptualizes design agencies not as administrative structures but as institutional forms that produce policy through spatial form. Linking these structures to the theories of Ungers and Aureli transforms these structures into sites of political consciousness production in contemporary architecture. Therefore, design agencies are considered contemporary actors remaking the political form of architecture.

## URBAN DESIGN AS A SCALE OF TRANSFORMATION BETWEEN ARCHITECTURE AND PLANNING

Lefebvre (2009) argued that the modern individual fears uncontrolled spaces and tends to suppress the spontaneous and unpredictable aspects of life in their quest for rationality and order. This demonstrates that modernity is not freedom, but rather an order that produces control through abstract systems and norms. Architecture and urban planning practices, as an extension of this approach transform policies aimed at social order into normative systems at the spatial level. Cities, as a reflection of both individual interventions and collective relations, constantly experience the tension between individual freedom and social control (Tatlıć, 2019). The physical structures of modern and contemporary cities have a practice that restricts individual freedoms and increases social constraints and democratic discourses that theoretically recognize differences paradoxically lead to spatial homogenization in cities (Tatlıć, 2019). Consequently, diversity transforms into a regulated homogeneity. Modern architecture is often implemented as a closed system where all decisions are made by politicians and designers with a holistic and comprehensive design approach (Tatlıć, 2019).

Sennett in 2007 (as cited in Tatlıć, 2019), identified modern planning's greatest problem as its production of "predetermined forms," and argued that when experimental possibilities are suppressed in the name of "order," urban imagination and vitality are lost. Similarly, Jacobs (1961) argued that rigid control in urban planning conflicts with life and vitality, but rather urban order should emerge from people's own experiences and perspectives. Within this framework, the "open" design approach, which emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as a reaction to authoritarian planning and functionalism, granted users the right to make decisions, placing user freedom at the center of architectural decision-making processes. Freedom and participation in architecture are political and social issues related to the social meaning of space. Participatory approaches which make architecture a "continuously negotiated process," demonstrate that architecture has the potential to transform not only the form of the built environment but also the form of social life (Tatlıć, 2019).

This potential offers the opportunity to mitigate contemporary problems such as the climate crisis, rising inequality, and the commodification of urban space. Under the influence of neoliberal policies, cities have been instrumentalized for

capital accumulation and value extraction, deepening social injustices and ecological destruction (Kline, 2023). Urban design has evolved significiantly since the mid-20th century incorporating methods such as formal analysis, public space experimentation, infrastructure systems, and regulatory frameworks. However, these methods, integrated into neoliberal urbanization processes have often served capital-driven transformations. This limits urban design's capacity to produce social and ecological justice (Kline, 2023). Because cities are shaped by political decisions and an economy based on resource exploitation, considering their future requires not only physical but also political and ethical redesign (Kaput, 2022). In this context, urban design must be reoriented to support "commoning" processes that defend citizens' collective rights and access to resources against the controlling tendencies of the state and the privatizing tendencies of the market (Kaput, 2022; Kline, 2023).

Within the framework of neoliberal policies, the private sector generally operates with the primary aim of generating short-term profits in urban interventions. Bento and Laopoulou (2019), argue that the market alone cannot produce high-quality urban environments. Public intervention is a legitimate response to market imperfections. However, public interventions in design have been criticized as subjective and restrictive. Bento and Laopoulou (2019) counter this criticism by arguing that design approaches should be evaluated from the perspective of the quality of public life and these approaches should be grounded in the principle of public benefit. Therefore, despite the decline in state authority in the neoliberal era, this approach suggests that the state should maintain its role as a leader and create a culture that promotes quality (Bento & Laopoulou, 2019). In this context, the changes in participatory political theory that occurred during the transition from government to governance also necessitated the renewal of the means of producing urban space. During this transition, the state shifted its approach from direct control role to a management style based on negotiation, persuasion, and collaboration (Bento & Laopoulou, 2019). In this policy shift, urban design, as a scale operating at the intersection of planning and architecture transfers the intervention of political decisions to urban space. During this transfer process, the level of relationship between governance policies and design directly affects the quality of space.

Urban design governance is a multilayered, multi-actor governance process in which public and private actors collaborate to jointly make and implement decisions about designing cities' public spaces, transformation areas, and the built environment. After the 1980s, the rise of critical knowledge and communicative rationality within governance networks to understand the growing citizen opposition to urban interventions implemented through neoliberal policies and to address the profound inequalities in access to decision-making processes and the complex nature of these interventions has steered representative democracy toward a deliberative arena (Legacy, 2010; Tekeli, 2023).

According to Habermas (2001), the crucial point is that decisions be made through transparent public discussion. His theory of communicative rationality frames this discussion as a deliberative arena where rational discourse among diverse actors legitimizes governance. Public space, in this sense, is not only physical but also discursive, a medium for democratic participation and the negotiation of power asymmetries. This perspective is crucial for urban design because it positions spatial interventions as tools for fostering dialogue and inclusivity, rather than reinforcing hierarchical control. Design agencies operationalize this principle by institutionalizing communicative rationality into governance structures. Through participatory workshops, iterative design

processes, and cross-sector collaboration, they transform Habermas abstract ideal of the public sphere into tangible mechanisms for shaping urban form. Habermas's understanding of communicative rationality is based on the formation of intersubjective consensus and the agreements reached by different stakeholders within society within the planning and design processes (Tekeli, 2023). This process of consensus aims to democratize planning practice, ensure the empowerment and sharing of discourse communities, modes of reasoning, value systems and modes of action that have been excluded from planning practice (Healey, 1997; McGuirk, 2001). This approach has been criticized for legitimizing neoliberal goals under the guise of public participation, for its decision-making practices that fail to fundamentally challenge existing power relations, for masking power asymmetries by depoliticizing conflict and for reinforcing dominant power structures rather than challenging them (McGuirk, 2001; Gunder, 2010). However, this process provides an opportunity to establish creative deliberative environments and develop decisions within them by considering a wide range of ideas, opinions, and information, and requires incorporating a community's settlement experience (Caspary, 2000; Raynor et al., 2018).

These deliberative and collaborative approaches expand our perception about environment from using the dominant tools of economic interest, science, and technology, toward affect, connections, and encounters. This expansion creates the opportunity to open up spaces for planning and design by increasing the number of actors seeking innovation. Therefore, this process involves expanding the innovative space (Tekeli, 2023). Although occurring in different contexts and conditions, transformation practices shaped by the dominant, economically focused logic of neoliberal policies often produce homogeneous spatial morphologies. However, this innovative space shifts toward urban design, where the scope of design intervention expands (Figure 1).

The effort to introduce a completely new socio-spatial order under the guise of urban transformation is essentially a reconstruction activity. Within these construction activities, urban design is an organizing tool that utilizes multidimensional and dynamic perspectives is part of the broader context of the urban development process and is an indicator of social status and aesthetic taste. Establishing connections, establishing common ground and creating a socially integrative and environmentally sensitive urban form is the vision of urban design theory (Madanipour, 2006). However, analyzing the nature of this vision, who it serves, and through whom it is implemented is essential for the harmony

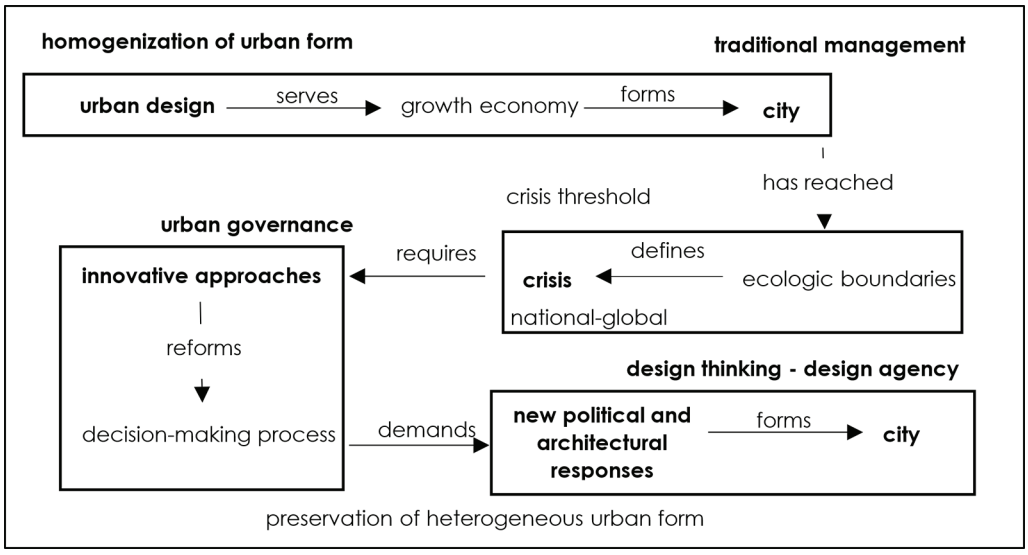



**Figure 1.** Traditional Management and Urban Design Governance Approaches (Produced by the authors).

between theory and practice. According to Madanipour (2006), visions are developed based on global trends rather than reflecting local differences and decisions and are imposed from above rather than made through consultation with the people. Consequently, the theoretical "beauties" of urban design create contradictions in practice, transforming into a tool of intervention that capital can achieve rapid results

Urban design is often chosen at a scale for economic gain. The prioritization of certain sectors, images, conditions, and elements over others stratifies societies making it difficult to reach a consensus on a singular vision (Madanipour, 2006). Americans, Europeans, and Asians discuss urban problems within their own frameworks, however in practice, spatial homogeneity often emerges in cities. Globalization has significiantly altered the architectural perspective, and countries often implement their architectural practices without considering their own unique circumstances. Globalization would systematically leave everyone rootless (Koolhaas & Kwinter, 1996). This view reveals a situation in which local contexts of cities are bypassed and homogeneous approaches to urban morphology prevail within the framework of globalization's conditions.

However, architecture can create an interdisciplinary policy through an alternative urban design approach that utilizes the potential and footprint of existing spatial structures. In this context, the "demolished-densified-rebuilt-changing social fabric" spiral of most urban transformation practice, which serves the collaboration between bureaucracy and investors can acquire a new character operating with internal socio-spatial dynamics. The most important component of this character is to bring the potential of differences and internal dynamics to the surface through urban design shifting the existing dominant transformation approach to a social basis. Throughout history, post-war devastation has presented an opportunity for urban replanning and design, prompting architects to develop alternative theories in response. Theories such as Ungers's "green archipelago," "grossform," and "dialectic city," and Aureli's "absolute architecture" approach, informed by these theories are alternative moments that can be pursued in urban transformation and reconstruction.

## URBAN THEORIES OF UNGERS AND AURELI: "GREEN ARCHIPELAGO", "GROSSFORM" AND "ABSOLUTE ARCHITECTURE"

Urban transformation is both the intended purpose and the tool used in urban space interventions regarding what will be transformed. On the other hand, urban design is the method that determines the quality and aesthetics of the built environment and how it will be transformed. Therefore, urban transformation and urban design complement each other. By integrating urban design into the transformation process, physical, social, economic and aesthetic objectives are simultaneously pursued. Urban design is the design governance mechanism that ensures public quality in transformation projects. Implementing urban transformation without established urban design strategies can lead to socio-spatial problems (Heath & Tiesdell, 2013; Carmona, 2021). In this context, the morphology of the city and the user perspective are two crucial elements to be discussed in the process of transformation through urban design. From the second half of the 20th century, critical inquiries and new alternatives began to be developed regarding the relationship between architecture, the city and planning in the post-war urban reconstruction and transformation processes.

One of these is Ungers's theory, which develops ideas aimed at transforming quantity into quality at the urban design level and analyzes the architecture-city relationship through a morphological lens opposing the quantity-based,

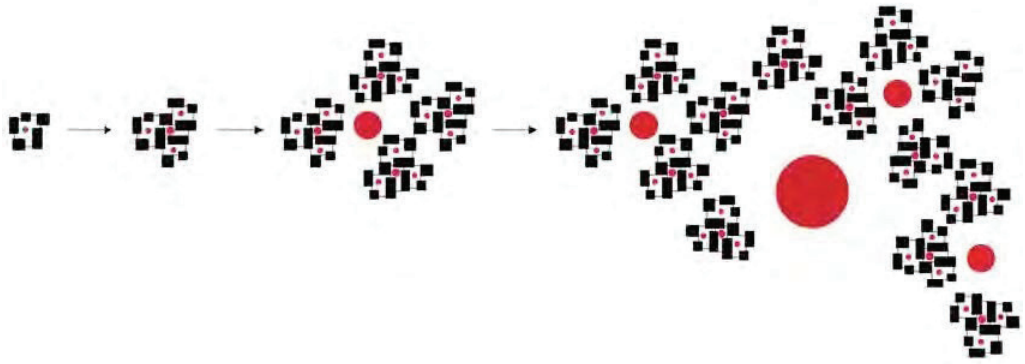


**Figure 2.** Diagram of negative and positive (public) spaces (indicated in red) and their incremental order in the proposal for Neue Stadt Köln-Chorweiler by O. M. Ungers. Klaus Platzgummer, Tianyi Shu and Benedict Wahlbrink (Jacoby, 2018).

infrastructure-expansion, and homogeneous spatial-production processes of urbanization. In this theory, Ungers emphasized that, as a response to the dynamics of post-war urbanization in Europe, architecture needed to engage with the city from a perspective different from that of urbanization in the production of space. Ungers's work pointed to the need for architectural thought to develop a rational approach that balances formal and socio-cultural aspects during the post-war reconstruction process.

Ungers has enriched this approach with a theory that produces urban morphology and typology, contrary to urbanization dynamics at the scale of urban design within the framework of architectural formalism, with conceptualizations such as "city within the city", "dialectical object", "dialectical city", "city as a layer" and "grossform" (Figure 2).
The conceptualization of the "city within a city" intensified typological characteristics by emphasizing the autonomy and complementarity of places within the urban context. Thus, by developing a morphological gap between opposing and identifiable areas, it utilized complementary contradictions for a dynamic design framework that emphasized transformation as a process of synthesis. In this process, Berlin was viewed not as a homogeneous metropolis but as a collection of distinct urban islands, each with its own identity. Conceptualized as a "Green Archipelago" (Figure 3), this collection was envisioned as a fragmented urban landscape comprising self-sufficient development islands within a green matrix (Jacoby, 2018).

Ungers developed the concept of the grossform as the structural element of these islands and argued that large-scale architectural forms could serve as stable markers of identity in increasingly formless urban environments. The grossform functions as an urban agency for recreating a system of thought in urban conditions where traditional planning tools have become ineffective. Koolhaas (1995) argued that the 20th century had lost the struggle against quantity and urbanization produced and proliferated flows rather than form. Ungers, on this point, proposed the grossform as an organizing principle between flows and form, resisting the dissolution of form. In his "Green Archipelago" project, Ungers applied the grossform to fragmented urban conditions, idealizing a single grossform as a "dialectical object" containing multiple opposing elements (Figure 4). The dialectical object highlighted how grossform could accommodate and negotiate urban contradictions within a single unity (Hättasch, 2016).

This idea later evolved into the dialectical city conceptualization, focusing on the importance of defining and strengthening contrasting urban identities within a city. Conceptions of the "city within a city" and the "dialectical city" imply formality, heterogeneity, and the architecture-city relationship through typological and morphological explorations. Complementing this approach

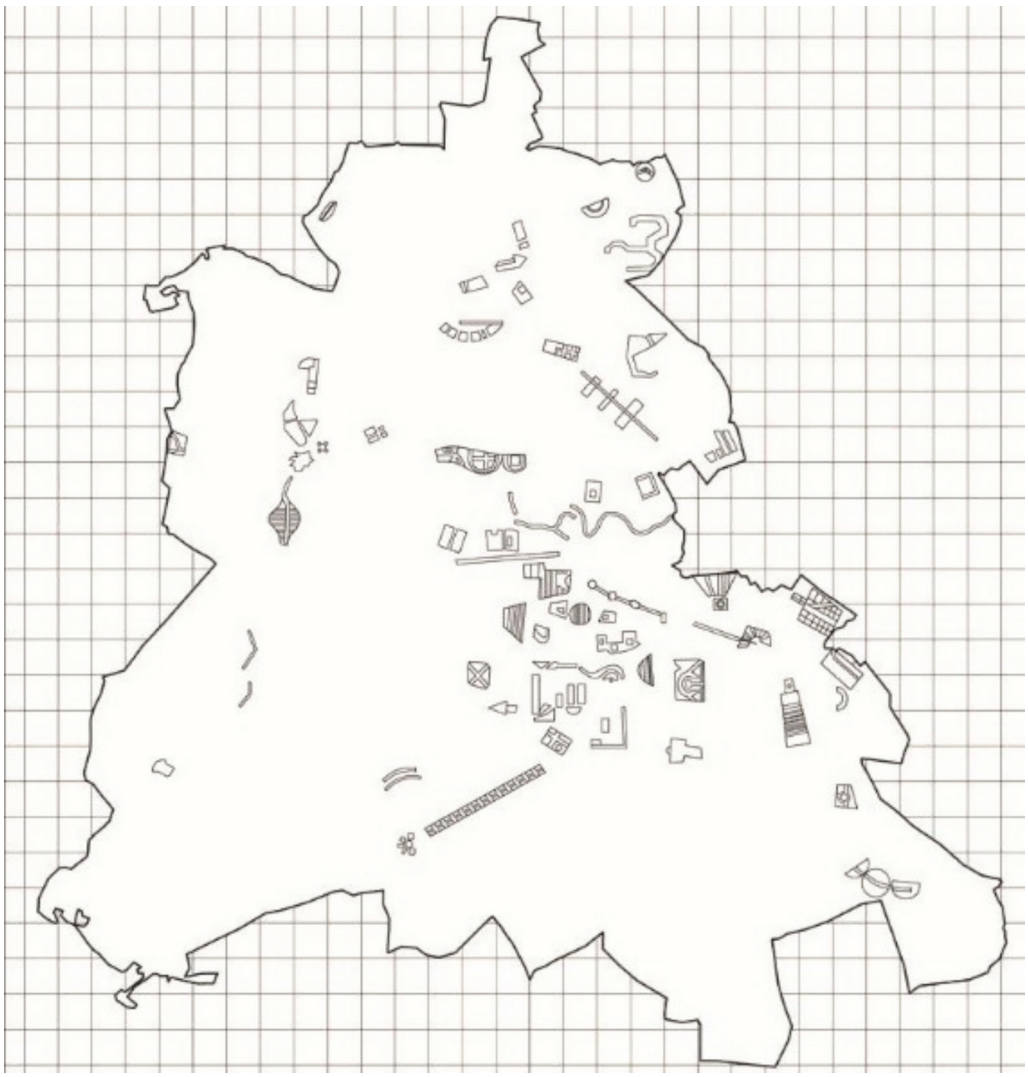


**Figure 3.** Where the Green Archipelago forms a federation of parts, Grossform suggest both a model for multiplicity-within-unity of each island and the reading of West-Berlin as a single "dialectic object." (Hättasch, 2016).

through urbanization dynamics, urban strategy, as a layer, is also considered in Ungers's approaches as a planning tool that brings order to the heterogeneous city, utilizing layers of infrastructure, amenities, and buildings as a contributing system and exerting control over form (Hättasch, 2016) (Figure 5).

Ungers's urban design philosophy viewed transformation as a process in which architecture, history and historical foresight coexisted, shaping it dialectically as both a tool and a design object. In this approach, architectural design created a "morphological grammar" through repetition, scaling and juxtaposition, a constant reinvention and reinterpretation of existing typological themes that reflected a deeper engagement with the social context and realities of each site. Ungers's dialectical approach viewed architecture and urbanism as dynamic, ever-evolving fields, embracing contradictions and shaped by historical forces,

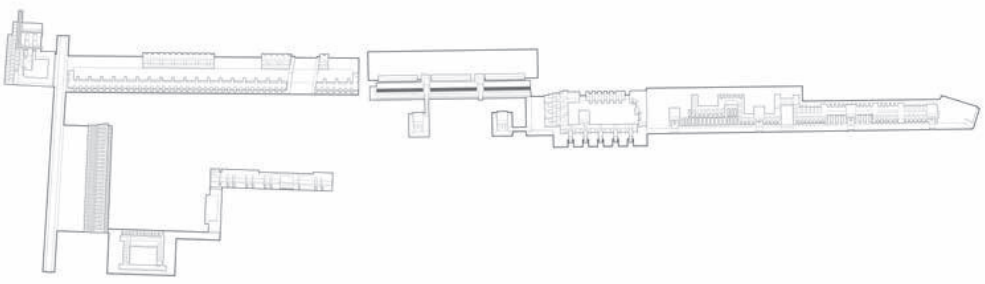


**Figure 4.** Grossform as "Almost-Object": Ungers' Project for the Grünzug Süd in Cologneoscillates between part and whole. (Hättasch, 2016).

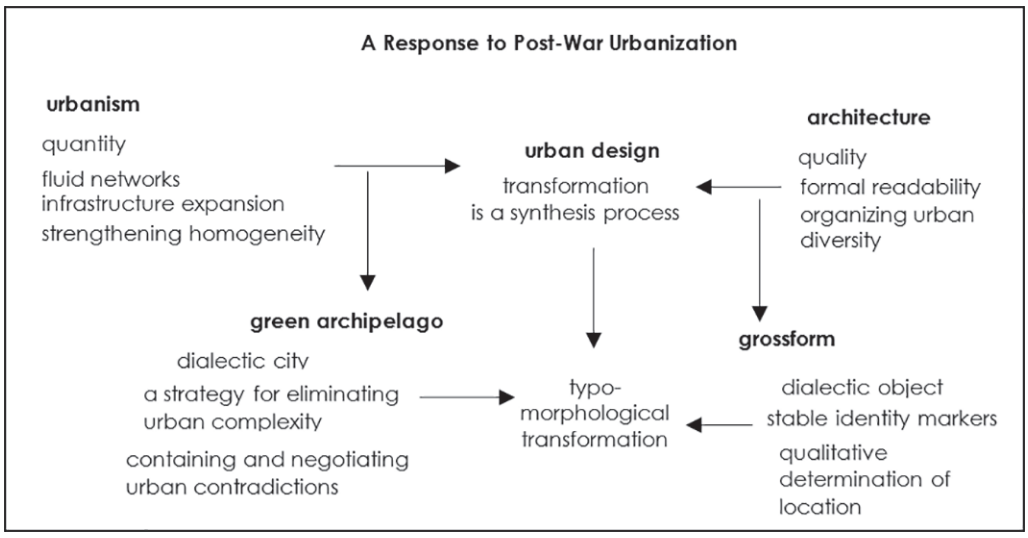



**Figure 5.** Ungers' Design Theory as a Response to Post-World War II Urbanization (Produced by the authors).

typological precedents, and spatial dialectics. According to Ungers, architecture should adopt an approach that fosters proactive interactions with the city and its inhabitants, rather than merely reflecting the systemic, deterministic dynamics of urbanization. (Hättasch, 2016; Jacoby, 2018).

Influenced by Ungers's theories, Aureli (2011) proposed the theory of "absolute architecture" and discussed it as a possibility. Comparing the concepts of city and urbanization, he considered urbanization as a process that erodes and disperses the concept of the city. Urbanization focuses on continuous expansion and integration, however, a city is a formation with specific boundaries and defined spatial structures. (Aureli, 2011). According to Aureli (2011) cities should adopt an "island" model, prioritizing form and boundaries, as in Ungers's approach. Architecture should create an environment of resistance at the urban design scale against the routine flow of urbanization and that architectural form, with its political character, can contribute to urban morphology within the flow of urbanization. Architecture is a political act that defines urban form through its thoughts and practices (Aureli, 2011).

"Absolute architecture" rediscovers the possibility of political formalization of the city through architectural form within the "sea of urbanization." It opposes the ever-expanding, all-encompassing logic of capital urbanization, where the social dimension is assimilated into the economy (Aureli, 2011). According to absolute architecture, urban components, unlike urbanization's integrative apparatus, offer the potential for redefinition by framing the sea of urbanization with their finite formal boundaries (Aureli, 2011). Heterotopic formations in the city that remain outside of capital urbanization are subject to approaches to incorporation into the system through exchange value under the guise of formalization. However, these areas resist this pressure with their socio-spatial potential centered on use value.

These urban fragments embody a distinct ideology shaped by the construction conditions that have prevailed since the triumph of economic optimization over political judgement within the framework of urbanization logic. Their formation is not achieved through visionary general planning, but through the elaboration of specific and strategic architectural forms and site-specific interventions (Aureli, 2011). "Absolute architecture" represents a concept of the city that, in opposition to the ubiquitous and institutionalized complexity of design, reveals the political principle of design through the material form of architecture and articulates a distinct attitude toward the urban realm (Aureli, 2011). Against

the pressures exerted by the dynamics of urbanization upon the city, "absolute architecture" opens a critical window of inquiry into the architecture of the city itself. Contrary to the contemporary "packaging" role assigned to design by the logic of urbanization, an alternative approach at the scale of urban design is required to establish a renewed political and formal understanding of the city and its architecture (Table 1). In this way, it becomes possible to expand the discursive and performative scope of architecture. It is a matter of debate what role architecture should play in the process of space production at the scale of urban design in combating the side effects accumulated by today's conditions reached with the motto of continuous progress and growth of urbanization.

**Table 1.** Comparison of Neoliberal Urbanization and Absolute Architecture-City Relationship (Produced by the authors).

| Neoliberal Urbanization | The Absolute Architecture-City Relationship |
|---|---|
| **Economic-Centered** (socio-political arguments are assimilated into economic logic) | **Socio-political and Formal** (focusing on the question of the relational unity of parts and pointing to the possibility of this unity) |
| **Integrative and Homogeneous** (societal and community behaviors are managed by a single, holistic system that blurs the distinction between public and private) | **Fragmented and Heterogeneous** (composition of different city parts) |
| **A General Vision and Plan** (demand for the city to function well) | **The Elaboration of Specific and Strategic Architectural Forms** (archipelago of site-specific interventions, scale of architectural form) |
| **Architecture's Affirmation of the Conditions of Urbanization** (a design approach that serves the functioning of urbanization dynamics) | **The Possibility of Architecture to Offer an Alternative City** Idea (the possibility of both shaping the city and understanding the city and urbanization through the limited nature of architectural form) |
| **Administrative Praxis** (the suppression of the socio-spatial character of the city in favor of a market-driven system)) | **Ontological Strategy** (a strategy that must be produced and implemented based on something) |

Organizing urban diversity without reinforcing homogeneity, creating a spatial foundation in an increasingly fluid and unstable urban environment, paving the way for a transition from rigid planning to a more participatory urban model and negotiating institutional frameworks for bottom-up, self-organizing urban initiatives are areas that require intensifying the relationship between design and politics under current circumstances. In this context, considering Ungers and Aureli's pioneering theories, design-focused structures such as "design agencies" have been established in some cities worldwide to facilitate collaboration and coordination among actors to facilitate the implementation of transformation processes through urban design and the production of quality spaces.

## INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF DESIGN THINKING AT THE URBAN SCALE: STRUCTURES SUCH AS DESIGN AGENCIES

Design thinking and design agencies are conceptually intertwined through their shared emphasis on collaboration, contextual awareness and iterative innovation within urban governance. While design thinking provides the methodological framework that redefines problem-solving in policymaking—from linear, top-down processes to user-centered, adaptive, and co-creative approaches—design agencies serve as the institutional embodiment of this mindset. They

operationalize design thinking principles at the urban scale, transforming abstract ideas of participation, experimentation, and cross-sectoral learning into spatial and organizational practices. Through this integration, design agencies act as mediators between political decision-making and urban form, using design thinking not merely as a creative process but as a strategic governance tool. In this sense, design agencies can be seen as catalysts that institutionalize the values of design thinking—empathy, iteration, and inclusivity—into the everyday mechanisms of urban transformation, enabling cities to respond to complex social, environmental, and spatial challenges with agility and reflection.

**The Framework of Design Thinking**

Design thinking is a key component of the governance network that shapes the policies of urban restructuring and transformation processes, within the context of the socio-spatial environment. Design thinking has a high potential for improving problem definition and mechanism design in governance-based policymaking processes. Design thinking has extensive experience in diversifying criteria, such as completing a project on time and within budget and focusing solely on the final value to be achieved. According to Dorst (2011) the term "design thinking" has been part of the collective consciousness of design researchers since Peter G. Rowe (1987) used it as the title of his book "Design Thinking".

Design thinking's contribution to policymaking is its increased emphasis on the user perspective. By examining users' experiences, observing their behavior and drawing conclusions about their wants and needs, design thinking encourages policy designers, central departments and relevant institutions to work collaboratively and iteratively (Table 2). In this respect, design thinking holds the promise of assisting policymakers in creating interventions and services that improve user experience and enhance public value (Dorst, 2011; Kolko, 2015; Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016; Dijksterhuis & Silvius, 2017).

In contexts where power relations are often unequal, questions arise about how to foster an effective local culture of collaboration, create capacities to interact with the market and create local alternatives for the production and consumption of services based on shared needs. These are challenges that design attempts to address in various ways. Design collaboration can be associated with co-creation which involves stakeholders from different disciplines in the design process. It challenges top-down decision-making structures and associated power hierarchies by paving the way for mutual learning processes to discover and solve social problems (Di Salvo, 2009; Markussen, 2013; Barbossa & Wiltse, 2017).

In governments where policy and practice are inevitably structured in departmental silos, design thinking can facilitate broader discussions beyond day-to-day operational concerns, bringing together competencies and common ground at the local level. Embedding a design strategy is often about making cultural changes in an organization's thinking. This requires a gradual process. Short-term political goals neglect the maturation of this process. Effective urban interventions often involve reframing the design debate in terms of broader government (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016; Bishop & Williams, 2020).

**Table 2.** Comparison of Rational Project Management and Design Thinking-Oriented Project Management, (Reproduced by the authors from Dijksterhuis, E., & Silvius, G., 2017).

| Aspect | Rational Project Management | Design Thinking Project Management |
|---|---|---|
| problem formulation | well-defined objectives | goal setting through dialogue |
| criteria | fixed and objective | subjective and user-centered |
| method | linear and analytical | iterative |
| information processing | verbal and quantitative | visual, experimental |
| solution process | predefined and controlled | interactive learning |
| logic | "Get it right and do it right" | good solutions through iteration |
| output | optimal solution | goal setting through dialogue |

Within this mechanism, designing collaboration for commoning moves between the roles of articulating problems, establishing the infrastructure of socio-material associations, and negotiating power relations (Barbossa & Wiltse, 2017). This cyclical process explores the limits of design work's interaction with communities and offers a theoretical framework that can contribute to providing solutions to problems and deficiencies encountered at every scale from an industrial product to a single building or urban fabric. To overcome the adverse conditions created by global crises, governments worldwide are establishing innovation laboratories where design methods and principles are researched and applied to complex policy issues. The role of these laboratories is to create motivation and commitment to design thinking in policymaking. Structures such as "design agencies" are design-based versions of these laboratories, focused on finding solutions to urban problems by following the theories of Ungers and Aureli.

**Structures such as Design Agency**

As traditional public administration gives way to governance, structures like design agencies are assuming new roles in urban policymaking and implementation. These agencies are positioned as strategic facilitators, aiming to create the conditions that enable change and its spatial nature. Design agencies, operating within or outside government undertake functions such as policymaking, consulting, capacity building, and inter-institutional coordination (Bento & Laopoulou, 2019; Bishop & Williams, 2020).

These structures are less interested in urban spatial planning and more in shaping the environment and creating conditions for positive change through complex interventions (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016; Bento & Laopoulou, 2019; Bishop & Williams, 2020). Their primary roles and goals are to help city governments increase their effectiveness and expand the potential of design-based spaces (Mintrom & Luetjens 2016; Bishop & Williams, 2020) to investigate how good design can promote governance and improve the quality of public spaces and to identify how state-led design roles can shift development processes toward more sustainable and equitable outcomes (Bento & Laopoulou, 2019). Structures such as design agencies can facilitate broader discussions beyond daily operational concerns, bringing together local competencies and common ground in design governance (Mintrom & Luetjens, 2016; Bishop & Williams, 2020). Design operates through formal tools such as regulations, incentives, and permits and informal tools such as knowledge production, evaluation, support, dissemination and research, competitions, public advocacy, vision documents, and cultural frameworks. Consequently, the scale of influence extends from technical and project-based consulting to strategic and culture-shaping change agents. Design governance is shaped by a multitude of actors and conflicting objectives and is dependent on policy decisions (Bento & Laopoulou, 2019).

As a thought leader, the design agency opens up space for reflection by asking broader, probing questions and engaging government departments and users

in the discussion. To ensure that design agencies are not merely approving bodies but also avoid ambiguity in their actions, they must be neither fully independent nor entirely government departments. Therefore, the interplay between government objectives, professional design communities, and civil society expectations makes these organizations effective, but not always authoritative, depending on the political context and circumstances within which they operate (Bento & Laopoulou, 2019).

In recent years, various cities around the world have demonstrated their political will to embrace design as a central approach in urban interventions, using architecture as a tool for this purpose. Within this framework, since the 1990s, as European cities grappled with urban decline, economic transformation, and changes in transportation systems, strong local governance traditions in Europe, through the agency of mayors and urban architecture units, have enabled the transformation of cities through architecture and urban design (Bishop & Williams, 2020) (Table 3).

The urban renewal process initiated in Barcelona prior to the 1992 Olympics was shaped by goals such as strengthening the connection between the historic center and the coast as well as increasing public spaces. The human-scale, block-based, and public space-focused planning approach, which had been inherited since Cerdà's 1856 plan was revitalized in the 1980s. Design studios and strategic architecture panels such as "Twelve Golden Pens" were established to carry out the renewal process in a design-focused manner (Bishop & Williams, 2020).

For many years, Paris has used architecture and urban design as tools to define the city's identity and promote it internationally. This approach has been particularly embodied in the large-scale architectural projects implemented since the 1970s. Design-driven transformation has not been limited to individual projects but has also been supported by institutional structures. In this context, institutions such as the Pavillon de l'Arsenal have played important roles in researching, exhibiting, and sharing urban design with the public. Today, Dominique Alba, in collaboration with the municipality, continues this tradition by ensuring the continuity of design-focused policies. The Parisian example demonstrates that architecture and urban design can transform not only the physical environment but also the cultural, social, and economic fabric of a city. This approach demonstrates that design is not a luxury but a fundamental component of urban development (Bishop & Williams, 2020).

Copenhagen's urban renewal process, spearheaded by architect Jan Gehl, was a reaction against the car-centric approach of modernist urban planning. Gehl's work, "Life Between Buildings: Using Public Space", formed the theoretical basis for this transformation, emphasizing the impact of public spaces on social interaction and human behavior. Under Gehl's influence, Copenhagen transformed from a car-centric city to a pedestrian- and bicycle-friendly one. This transformation involved enhancing the the quality of public spaces, strengthening pedestrian paths and bicycle infrastructure, and encouraging people to spend more time in these areas (Bishop & Williams, 2020).

London's experience with design agencies in urban policy and practice provides an exemplary platform for exploring the potential of these agencies in urban interventions. In 1997, architecture and urban design were reconsidered as part of the "Cool Britannia" vision. The Urban Task Force, chaired by Richard Rogers, adopted principles such as a compact city, the reuse of brownfield sites, pedestrian and bicycle-oriented transportation as part of its vision for a

sustainable, human-scale, and public-space-focused city. To implement these principles in urban space, the Architecture and Urbanism Unit (A+UU) was established as a design agency within the Greater London Authority (GLA) in 2000. Despite lacking a formal mandate, its flexibility and strategic thinking have led to significant projects. This potential led to A+UU's transformation into Design for London (DFL) in 2006. DfL with its stronger structure thanks to effective communication with other departments, has produced designs with a broader impact than A+UU in terms of political influence, implementation skills, and public engagement. DfL aimed to create major transformations through small-scale interventions by prioritizing inter-institutional collaboration, data-driven decision-making, and politically conscious action, while seeking to understand the local context and enhance the existing urban fabric without altering it. In this context, Design for London has implemented strategies such as catching and steering opportunities, implementing big ideas through small, actionable projects, conducting detailed mapping and analysis to understand the city, ensuring continuity through trust-based interagency relationships and generating political influence through informal means (Bishop & Williams, 2020). Edi Rama, the former mayor and later prime minister of Tirana in Albania, viewed architecture and urban design as a transformative tool in urban governance influenced by Design for London. A new design agency, "Atelier Albania," was established in 2014. This agency was structured within the National Planning Office which is affiliated with the Albanian Ministry of Urban Development. Atelier Albania was defined as a tool and environment for integrating design-based methods into national urban policy and development processes. Atelier Albania undertook roles such as developing spatial strategies at the national level, providing consultancy to regional urban teams and mayors, and creating a "space to think" for design thinking. Therefore, it functioned not as a technical planning unit, but as a strategic design platform that fostered creative thinking (Bishop & Williams, 2020).

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Outside of Europe, similar design agency structures have also utilized architecture and urban design as spatial policy tools in New South Wales (NSW), Bogota, and Seoul. The Government Architect for New South Wales (GANSW), operating in the Australian state of New South Wales, constitutes a significant example of design-led urban regeneration. GANSW is positioned as a formal and strategic agency directly within the government structure. In this respect, it distinguishes itself from more flexible and semi-independent agencies such as Design for London (DfL). GANSW is particularly well-known for its success in enhancing design quality in the Sydney metropolitan area and is generally regarded as a respected institution within the government. This respect facilitates the consideration of the agency's recommendations by policymakers and practitioners (Bishop & Williams, 2020).

Bogotá, under the leadership of reformist mayor Enrique Peñalosa, demonstrated strong political will and became a prominent example of an "urban renaissance." Bogotá's transformation was shaped by the goal of reducing social and spatial inequalities in response to widespread displacement, infrastructural depletion and segregated urban areas. At the core of this transformation lies the idea of reconstructing public life through political will and architecture (Castro & Echeverri, 2011).

**Table 3.** Examples Of Structures Like Design Agencies from Different Cities (Reproduced by Authors from Bishop & Williams, 2020).

| Country/City | Institutional Structure | Political Status and Institutional Affiliation | Properties and Effects of the Model |
|---|---|---|---|
| United Kingdom/ London | Design for London | Strategic design office within the municipality, directly reporting to the mayor | Integration of policy and design; "opportunity-based" urban transformation; international reference model |
| Spain/Barcelona | Twelve Golden Pens | Autonomous architectural planning unit within the local government | Public space, human scale, "urban acupuncture" approach; post-Olympic transformation example |
| France/Paris | Ville de Paris – Atelier Parisien d'Urbanisme | Coordination between the municipal planning agency and the mayor's office | A model that continues the "Grands Projects" tradition and manages aesthetics and public quality |
| Denmark/ Copenhagen | City Architect / Jan Gehl Architects effect | Semi-independent expert team advising the municipality | Pedestrian and bicycle-oriented planning model with the principle of "Life Between Buildings" |
| Australia/Sydney | Government Architect of New South Wales (GANSW) | Official state architectural institution at the state level | A consultancy-focused structure that oversees public policy and design quality |
| Albania/Tiran | Atelier Albania | Design laboratory within the central government, under the Prime Ministry | Policy-focused national design agency inspired by the DfL model |
| Colombia/Bogota | Urbanismo Cívico | Social urbanism program run by the municipality | Participatory planning, public space and transport integration |
| South Korea/Seoul | City Architect Office | Semi-autonomous architectural unit under the mayor | A new city identity vision based on the principle of "Ordinariness" |

Peñalosa went beyond traditional planning approaches, making urban mobility more sustainable through the expansion of a network of bicycle paths and public parks, promoting social equity and transforming the city's physical and social fabric. During this period, architects re-engaged in urban production, taking on an ethical responsibility and utilizing it as a tool for social dialogue in the public interest. Under Peñalosa's leadership, urban renewal evolved into an integrated vision encompassing participatory planning, architectural quality, transportation, and ecological policies. These policies not only improved physical infrastructure but also enhanced the quality of urban life and social participation. Peñalosa's approach demonstrated that urban design could be integrated with social justice and public interest. While Bogotá lacked an institutional design agency

under Peñalosa's leadership, the mayor's office functioned as a de facto design agency. This demonstrates that strong political will can have an impact beyond institutional structures (Castro & Echeverri, 2011).

Seoul undertook large-scale architectural projects during its rapid urbanization process in the late 20th century, however, these projects were primarily driven by engineering and lacked effective design coordination. This led to the weakening of the city's architectural identity and a fragmented urban development model. In 2014, the position of city architect was established within the municipality to rebuild the city's architectural identity, drawing inspiration from urban architecture models in Europe. The fundamental principles of this new structure include grounding urban strategies in local culture and morphology, prioritizing narrative over visual imagery and celebrating "ordinariness." These principles align with the "everyday urbanism" and "local context-oriented planning" approaches that have developed in the West over the past 30 years. Thus, improving the quality of public projects is crucial for redefining urban identity and transforming design from a technical process into a cultural and social tool (Bishop & Williams, 2020).

Examples of design agencies and similar structures seen in cities around the world demonstrate the potential for design thinking as a political tool and prove that urban design can be effective not only in aesthetics but also in areas such as social justice, environmental sustainability and economic inclusion. They also demonstrate that these structures can provide intellectual leadership and strategic direction in urban management. In this context, these examples introduce that design is a political act that local context and user perspective are the foundation of effective design and significant transformations can be achieved through small interventions. In this process, inter-institutional collaboration is key to transformation and design teams are essential to it.

**DISCUSSION**

This study demonstrates that the roles of architecture and urban design in neoliberal urbanization processes are not limited to technical and aesthetic dimensions; they can also serve as political tools. Ungers's typo-morphological and formal autonomy-focused approaches at the urban design scale and Aureli's theory of "absolute architecture" which contradicts the neoliberal dynamics of urbanization clearly indicate that formal design decisions cannot be independent of social, economic, and political relations. Ungers's urban theories enriched by the concepts of grossform, green archipelago, dialectical object, and dialectical city address the rational shaping of space as a political strategy while Aureli emphasizes the potential of this formalism to generate anti-systemic resistance. Consequently, these two approaches demonstrate that architectural form can simultaneously be both order-building and critical.

Within this theoretical framework, design agencies are contemporary actors who translate both Ungers's formal systems strategy and Auréli's antagonistic conception of autonomy into concrete institutional structures. Examples from cities such as London, Paris, Barcelona, Copenhagen, Sydney, Tirana, Bogotá, and Seoul demonstrate that design agencies can generate political consciousness and social responsibility through the production of spatial form. These institutions function as mediating devices that renegotiate power relations between the state, the market, and the citizens. However, the impact of agencies varies depending on their political context. For example, Design for London and Atelier Albania establish a strategic sphere of influence based on flexible, innovative and intellectual leadership, while Government Architect

NSW or Seoul Metropolitan Architect operate as a more hierarchical, intra-governmental body. Bogota, on the other hand, has demonstrated how architecture can be used as a medium for the reconstruction of public life by the political will of a president. This diversity indicates that the capacity of design agencies to generate direct political action depends not only on their institutional status but also on the cities' democratic culture, planning traditions, and the relationship between architecture and the public.

The dialectic between Ungers's "rational organization of urban form" and Aureli's "resistance of form" transforms design agencies not only into tools of governance but also into "formal laboratories for generating political consciousness." In this context, architecture and urban design cease to be passive instruments of governance processes and become re-politicized based on the principles of spatial justice, solidarity, and ethical responsibility. This analysis fills two important gaps in the literature:

• Explains how design agencies operate not only as tools of "institutional innovation" but also as tools of political form production.

• Reinterprets the political theory of architecture on an institutional scale by relating the theoretical frameworks of Ungers and Aureli to contemporary forms of governance.

## CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that structures such as design agencies are transformative actors in the contemporary city, both formally and politically. The repositioning of architecture and urban design within governance structures can be interpreted as a contemporary counterpart to Ungers's concepts of "formal autonomy" and Aureli's "absolute architecture." In this context, design agencies possess the capacity to "produce political form" as an alternative to the technical logic of neoliberal planning systems. The study's findings demonstrate that design agencies are not only tools for improving the quality of public space but also platforms for generating political critique and democratic debate. By redefining the spatial relationships between the state, the market and communities these structures revive the social responsibility of architecture. Thus, design agencies are contemporary actors who remind us that urban space is not only an aesthetic but also an ethical and political product. In terms of contribution to the literature, the study presents three important innovations:

• Offers an interdisciplinary synthesis by interpreting Ungers and Aureli's architectural theories through institutional design practices and governance networks,

• Brings a new political approach to urban design literature by conceptualizing design agencies not only as administrative organizations but also as formal and political production areas,

• By comparatively evaluating examples from different countries, the positive impact of design agencies on democratization, social participation and spatial justice processes was suggested as an innovation, especially for administrations where policy and practice are structured in departmental silos.

Consequently, design agencies constitute the spatial and institutional basis for the re-politicization of architecture. The tension between Ungers's systematic formalism and Auréli's antagonistic autonomy reveals these institutions' potential to generate both public value and critical resistance. From this perspective, design agencies are contemporary urban actors transforming not only the appearance of cities but also architecture's political consciousness and ethical remit of architecture. Within this perspective, future research could examine the long-term impact of design agencies on democratic

governance and spatial justice through empirical case studies. Comparative analyses across different political systems and cultural contexts would deepen understanding of their adaptability. Additionally, exploring the integration of digital participatory tools within design agencies could reveal new opportunities for enhancing transparency and inclusivity in urban governance. These findings also have significant implications for design thinking in urban governance. By demonstrating how design agencies institutionalize collaborative and iterative processes, the study extends design thinking beyond project-level innovation to the scale of policy-making and spatial governance. This integration suggests that design thinking can serve not only as a creative methodology but as a strategic tool for democratizing urban transformation and fostering ethical, inclusive decision-making.

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