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Special Issue Developing Theories of the Built Environment

by

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Introduction

Would a theory (or set of theories) for the built environment be useful to inform our thinking, our shared sense of purpose and serve to focus the goals for both the built environment and the industries that create and maintain it?

This BRI special issue initiates this discussion and investigates whether, why and how greater unity and more rapid renewal of broadly-based explanatory frameworks related to the built environment could provide new insights and understanding for application in practice, education, and policy development. Three more specific purposes are identified:

- to deepen our sensitivity towards the theoretical in our field
- to promote a re-evaluation of the theoretical in research on the built environment
- to address the issues of requisite coverage and cohesion of theory for the diverse aspects of the built environment

Editorial

The editorial contains an initial consideration of these purposes. It is acknowledged that a call for theory of the built environment should not be understood in a predetermined or narrow manner but rather in a contextual way: theoretical progress comes in many forms. The need for re-evaluation of theory is justified by referring to the situation where a lack of explicit theories hinders a field from deriving the benefits commonly associated to theory: prediction, explanation, validity testing, direction for research, as
well as facilitation of teaching, learning and professional communication.

Papers

The papers in this issue explore theories of the built environment from different angles. The complex relationship between the built environment and the human beings is explored in two papers. Bill Hillier critically examines the existing theoretical bases for the links between the social and the spatial realms. Jacqueline Vischer explores a user centred theory of the built environment, oriented around the concepts of the building user’s experience and the user-environment relationship.

The next two papers are inspired by the sustainability debate. Giles Atkinson considers new economic developments related to the capital approach to sustainability from the viewpoint of the built environment. In turn, Sebastian Moffatt and Niklaus Kohler provide a historically based analysis to develop the concept of the built environment as a hybrid social and ecological system.

The creation of theory of the built environment is addressed in the last two papers. Andrew Rabeneck proposes a transactional framework of building activity in terms of demand and supply, moderated by regulation. George Cairns proposes an ambivalent approach to theorizing the built environment, informed by modern interpretation of the Aristotelian concept of phronesis.

The publication of this special issue has, for its part, endeavoured to promote an interdisciplinary discussion on theory in the built environment, but is merely the beginning of a longer intellectual process. Further commentaries and other articles will be published in future issues. Colleagues are invited to engage with this topic, explore its many dimensions and assist its construction. Several papers from the special issue are currently freely available from the BRI website.

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