



# Minding the Gap

A Review by: Mohamed Radwan



Hooman Foroughmand Araabi

# The Author

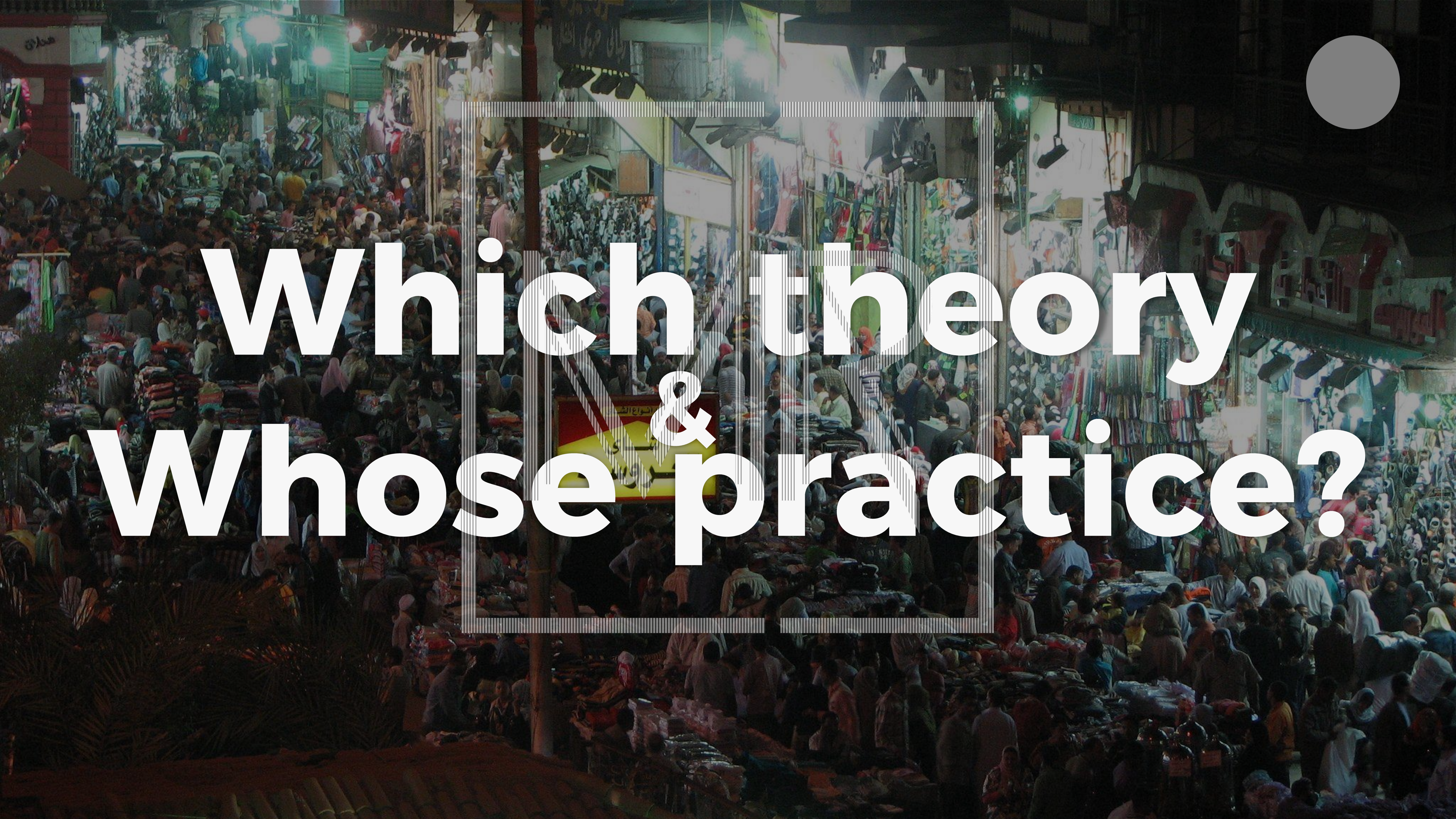
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Know the writer



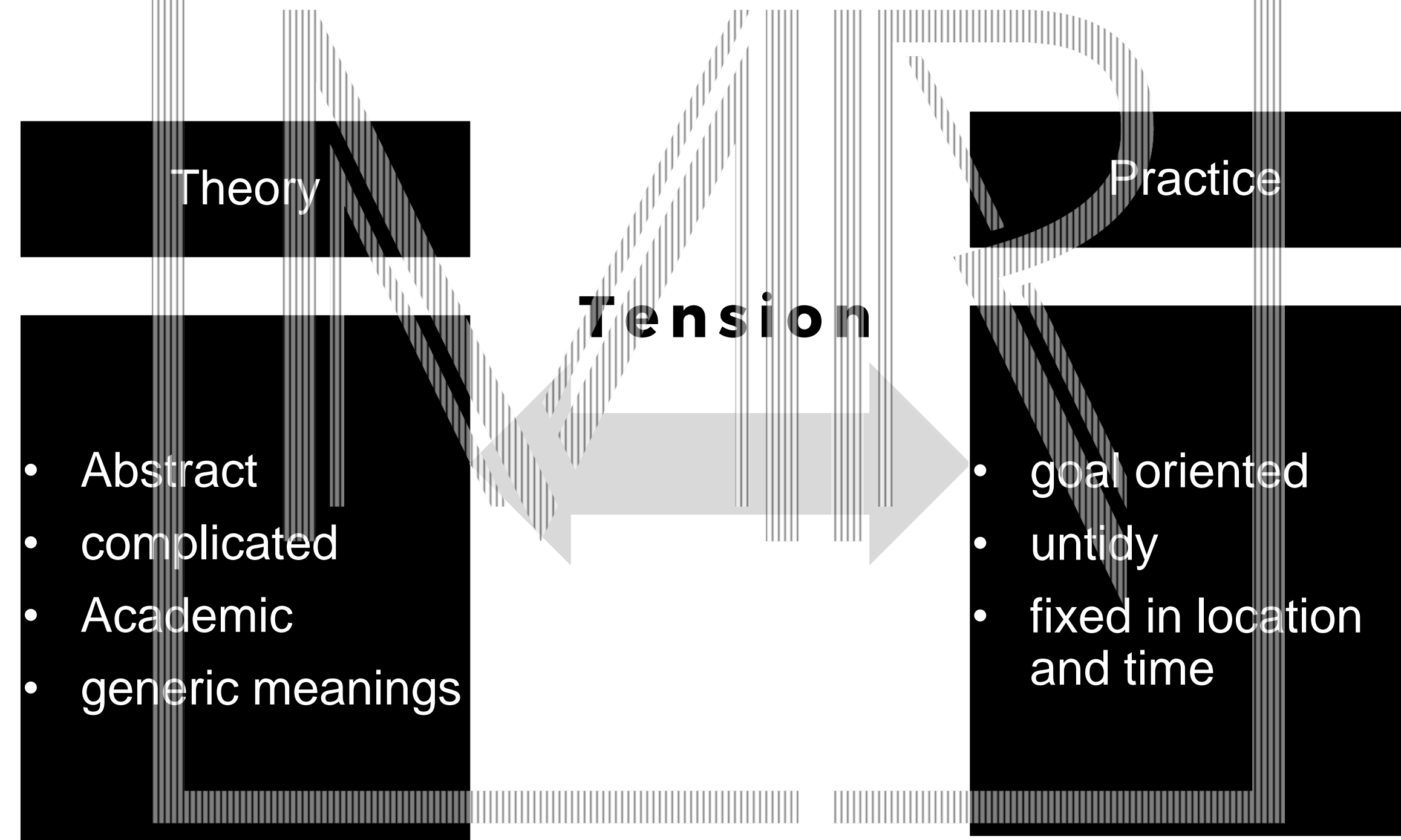


**Which theory  
& whose practice?**



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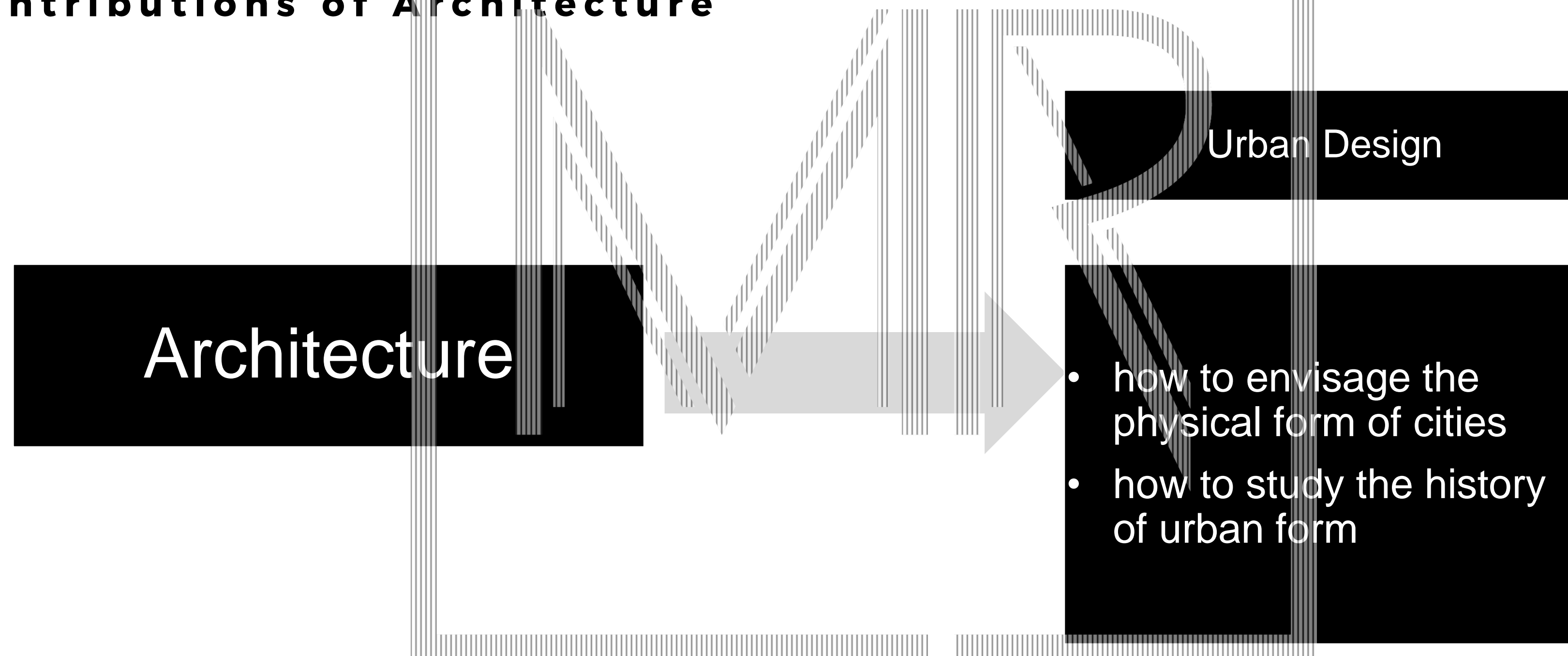
# The problem of differing conceptions



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# The problem of differing conceptions

Contributions of Architecture



urban design practice is a creative process giving physical form to public spaces and is mainly, if not solely, done by the designer

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# The problem of differing conceptions

Contributions of Planning

Urban Planning

Urban Design

Theoretical arguments:

- urban design as a process
- classification of theory into the descriptive and the prescriptive
- critical debates in urban design

urban design practice is closer to systematically following the procedure of decision making and therefore the role of the designer becomes that of a collaborator and researcher.

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# The problem of differing conceptions

Contributions of sociology

Sociological theories

Urban Design

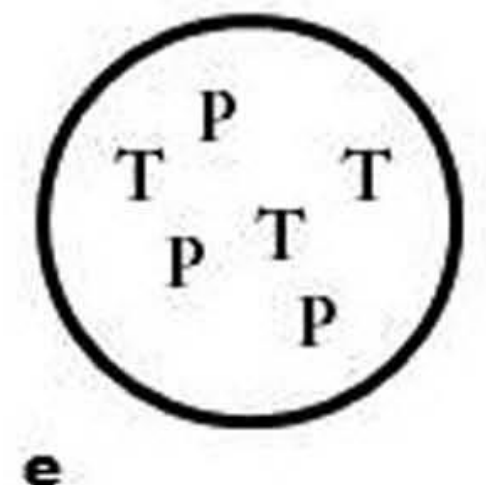
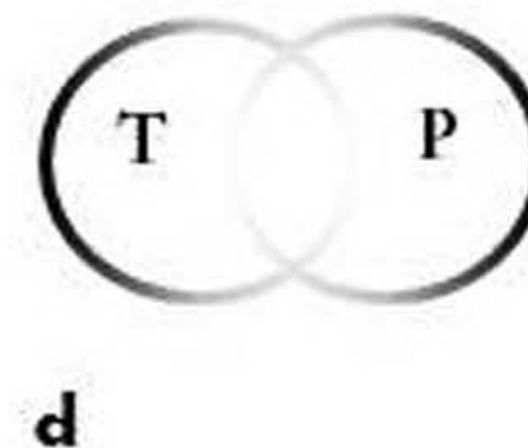
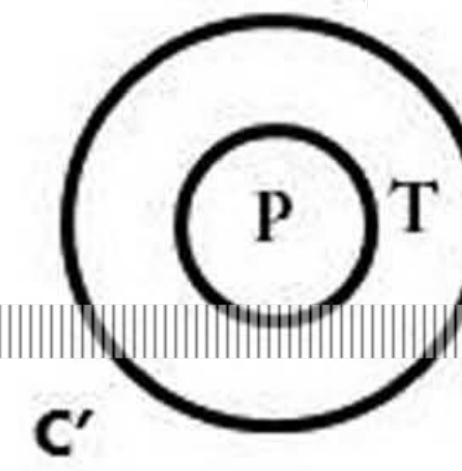
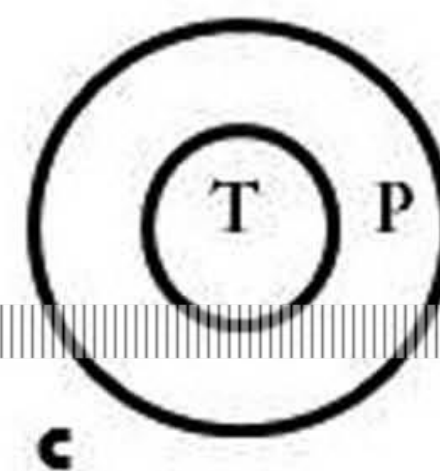
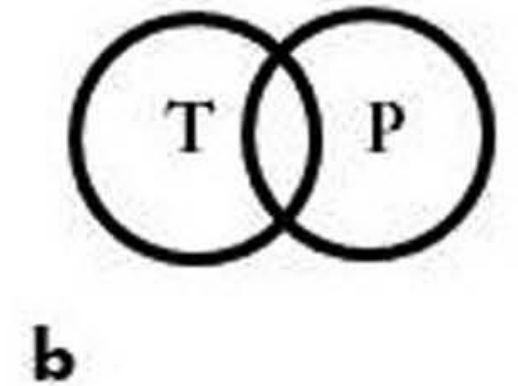
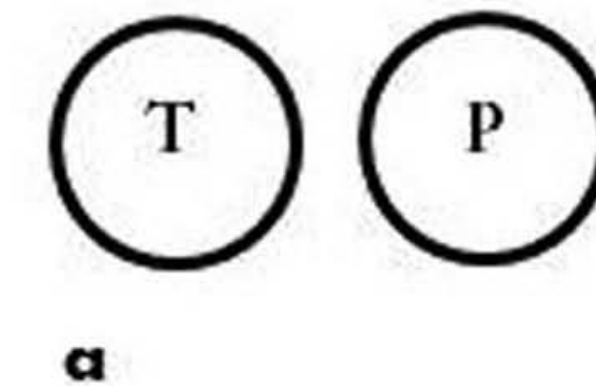
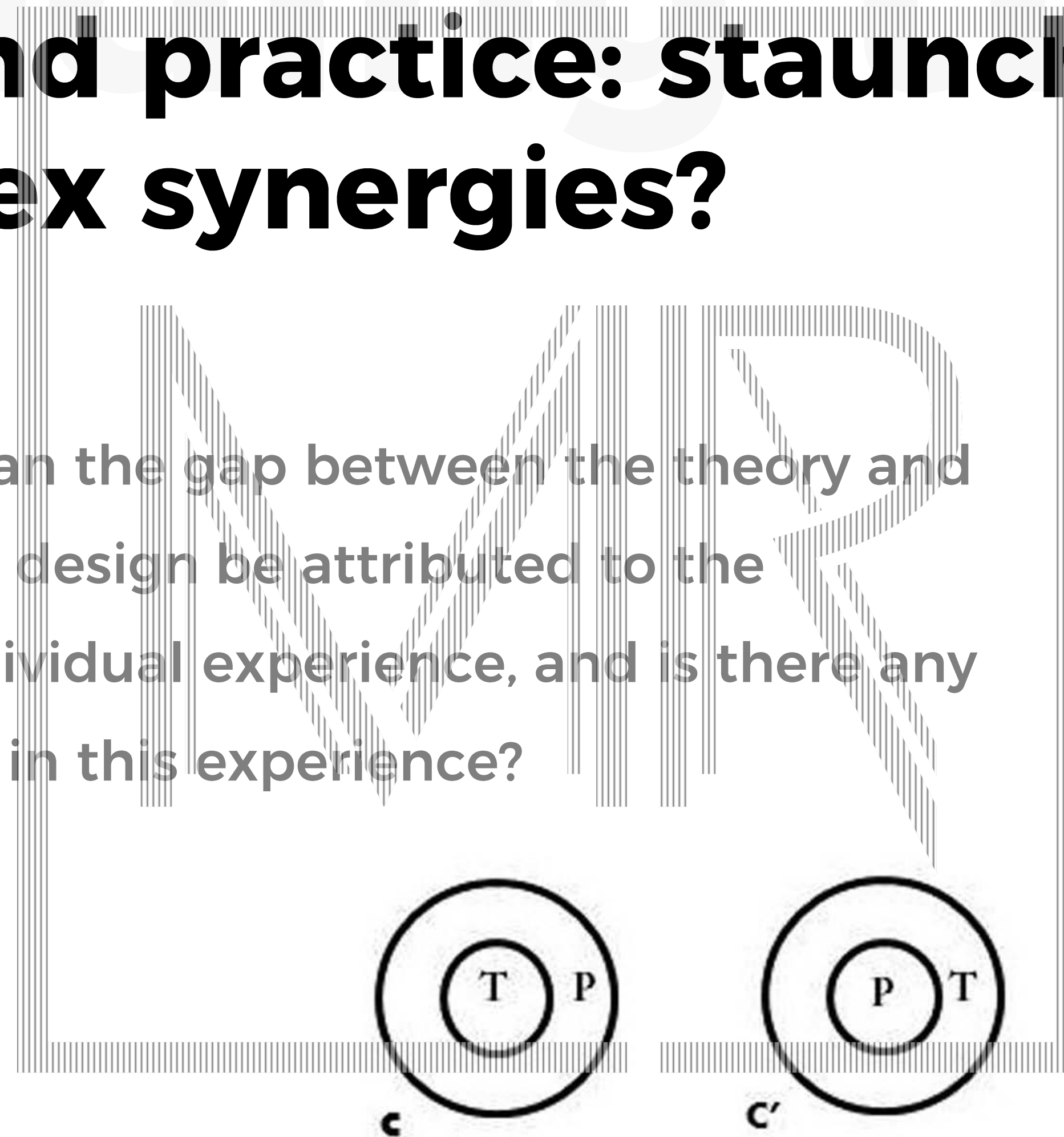
- Manifesting urban design theory as a way of understanding the social meaning of urban form
- studying people's behaviors
- designing in accordance with everyday life

Theory, is relevant to understanding the specific characteristics of a society and the ways in which it produces and adapts space. Theory is more descriptive than prescriptive. Practice is seen as embodying power and imposing a certain set of interests over others.

# Theory and practice: staunch allies or complex synergies?

## The question!

- To what extent can the gap between the theory and practice of urban design be attributed to the professionals' individual experience, and is there any common ground in this experience?



Models of interaction between theory and practice



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# Identifying influential urban designers

## Study participants

- Nine writers were interviewed, all of whom were involved with academia at a professorship level. Five were from the UK, two from the US and two from Australian universities.
- Thirteen practitioners were interviewed from a sample of those urban designers whose work appears inspiring to urban design academics.



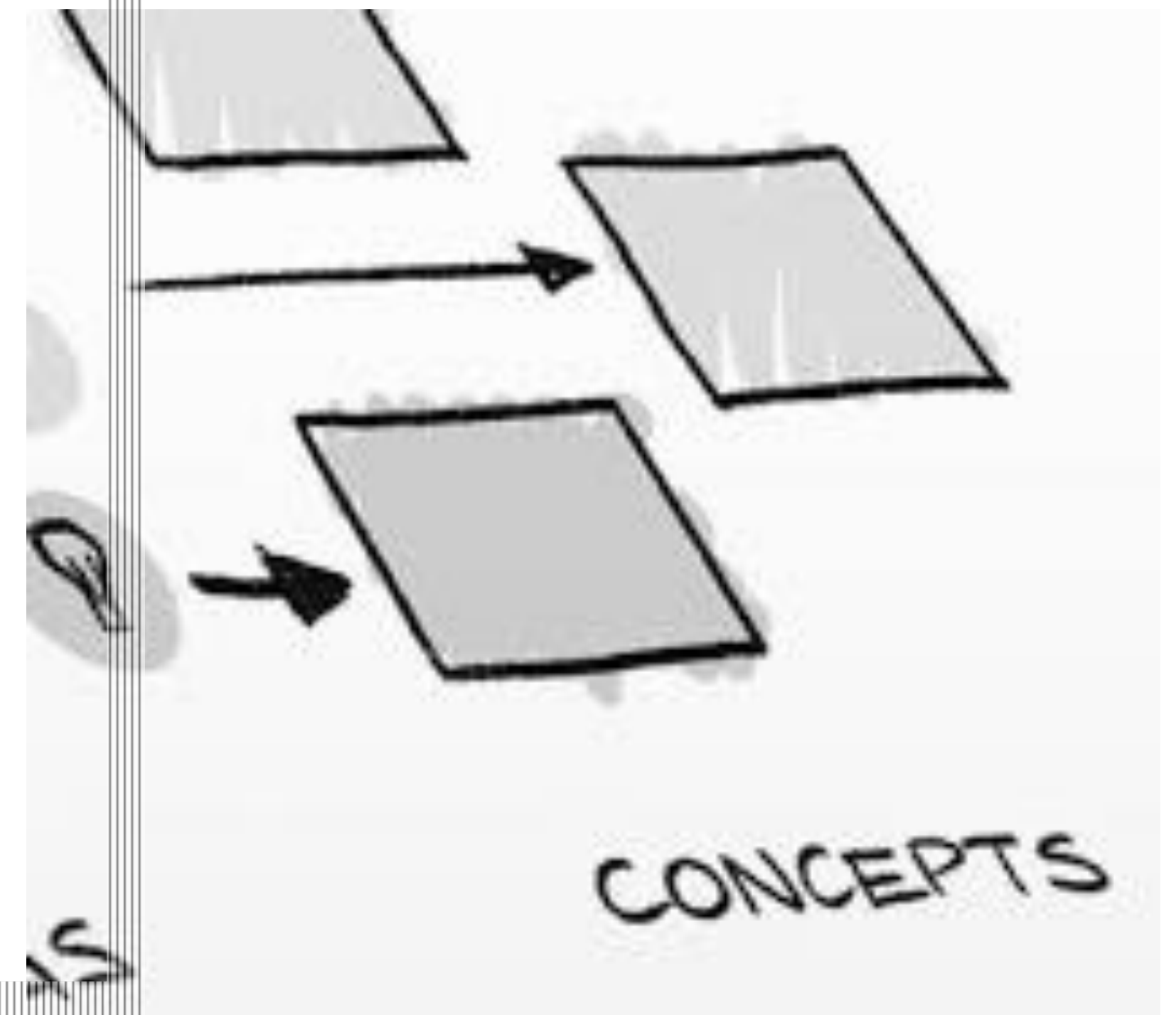


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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Concept!

- A set of concepts appeared to be important in forming the context in which the interaction between theory and practice occurs.
- Most of these concepts comprise subjective factors that professionals use in order to explain how they work – to make sense of their experience.





# Common concepts from the interviews

## Government

- Governments and their policies directly influence the production of urban design both in academia and in practice.
- For academics, government finance for research was paramount. For the practitioners, government policies and projects were found to be more important.
- For both practitioners and academics, governmental support of institutions, was crucial in making better interaction between theory and practice.



**Findings: both widened and narrowed the gap  
Depending on occasion**



# Common concepts from the interviews

## Personal choice

- What practitioners do is not necessarily informed by the best and most recent research conducted in academia
- Practitioners repeatedly mentioned that academics do not understand the complexities of real projects
- Many successful practitioners and academics decided to find ways to benefit from such interaction, This type of interaction is not the dominant model for either group of professionals.



Findings: widened the gap

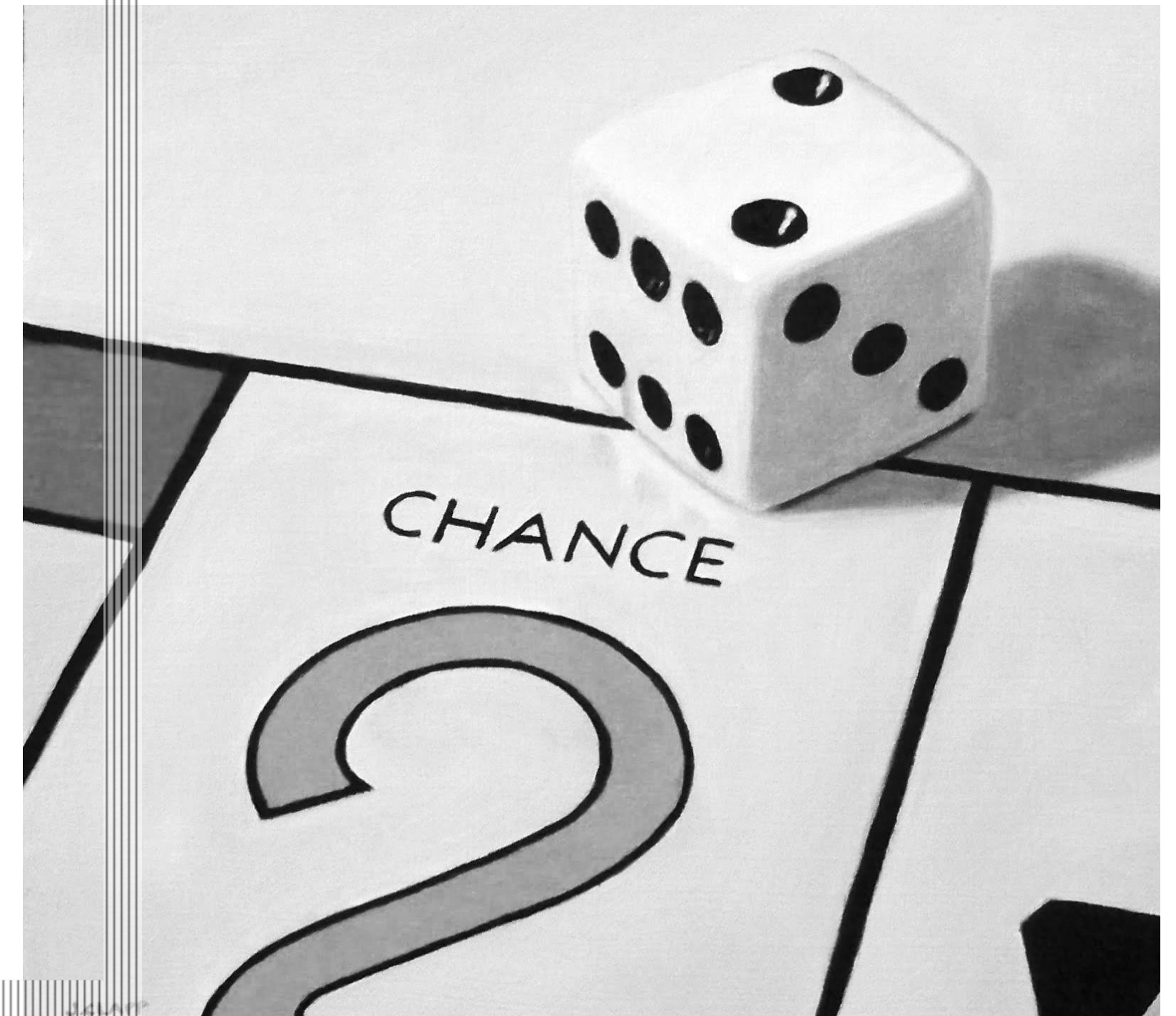


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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Chance

- As is the case with all human knowledge, many great contributions to both theory and practice have happened through unforeseen incidents.
- chance can be seen as a key element in the production of successful theory and practice.



Findings: narrowed  
the gap



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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Education and professionalisation

- Some interviewees think that, it is possible to lessen the gap between theory and practice through education.
- Others argued that education causes the separation between the theory and practice of urban design



**Findings: widened the gap  
But by changing the expectations  
of the professional, the gap can be  
diminished in the future**



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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Clients

- The interviewees saw the tension between client and the professional as a limitation imposed on their ideal solutions
- Many influential works would never have come into being without a client's generous support
- the designer needs to establish a mutual understanding of the value of design and research



**Findings: negotiation skills should be taught as an academic part of urban design**



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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Being proactive

- Practitioners felt this to be inspiring and a better way of making their influence felt, as this method is more focused on the problem and less limited by regulations.
- Not available to all professionals



**Findings: dealing with urban problems through regulated processes limits innovative solutions.**



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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Communication

- a fundamental skill for urban designers in disseminating ideas and working with other professionals.
- individuals expressed concern about the lack of communication amongst their fellow professionals.



**Findings: Communication,  
along with negotiation, can lessen  
the gap.**



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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Site Visits

- A principal source of learning and helpful in developing understanding.
- Successful built environments are places in which theory and practice interface or even merge.
- Visiting successful sites inspires both practitioners and theorists and visiting bad environments has a similarly important influence.



**Findings: Narrows the gap**

# Common concepts from the interviews

## History

- history is theory and practice at the same time.
- Some of the interviewees think it is possible to test new ideas against the lessons of history.
- It is impossible to think about history without theory
- In many societies, taking action against history raises resistance



**Findings: Narrows the gap in most cases**



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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Location

- The actual location of professionals forms their network.
- increased access to knowledge and professional events in bigger cities compared to places where the professional community is more scattered
- clients are also affected by the culture of their region.



Findings: Narrows the gap

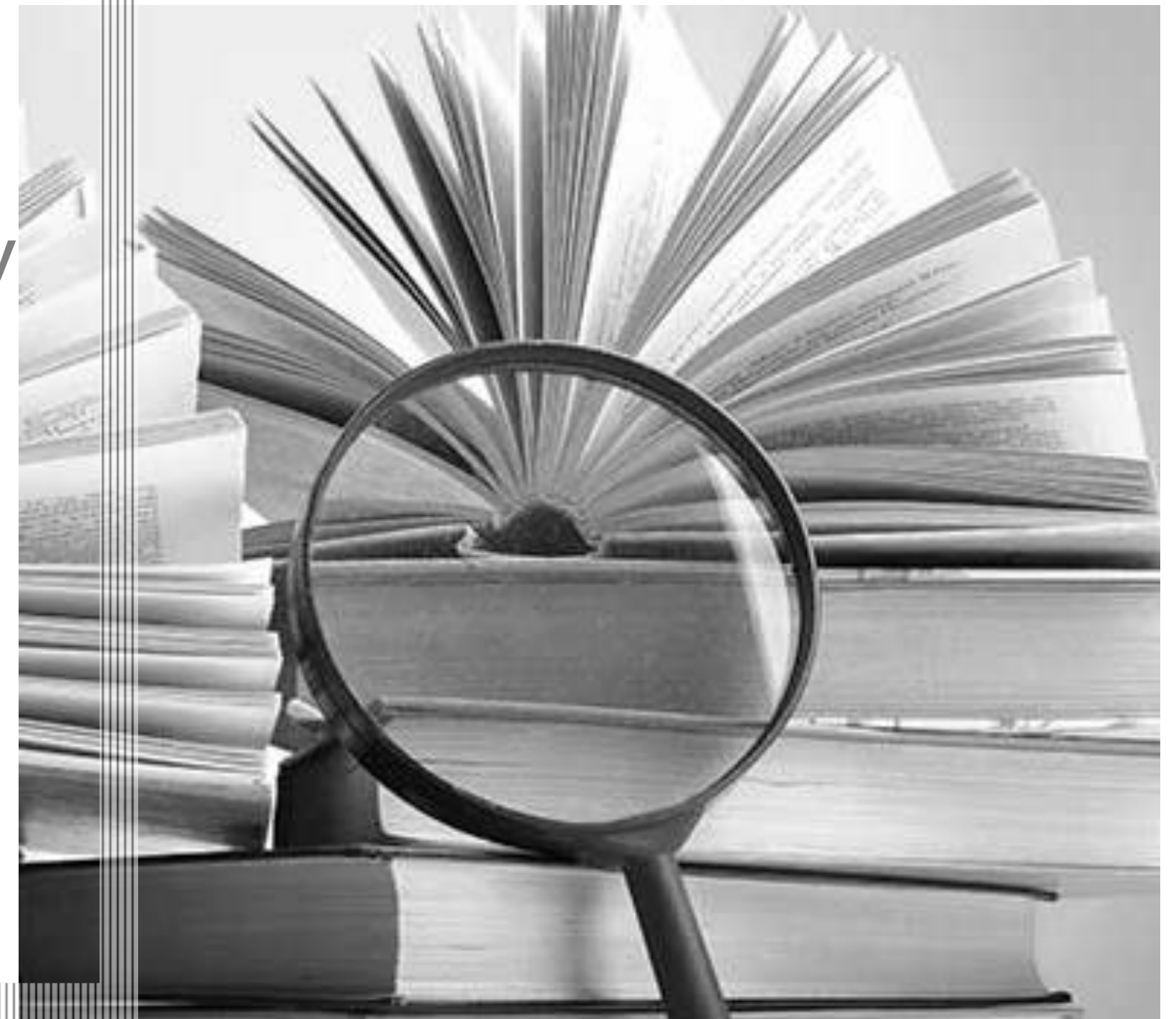
# Common concepts from the interviews

## Research

- research is a key concept in the interaction between theory and practice
- research is responsible for developing knowledge, which, enhances the experience of cities

Nine interviewees mentioned that research can lessen the gap between theory and practice (what they mean by research varies significantly)

- Research can be seen as a way to expand existing theories or be informative for new ones.



**Findings: Narrows the gap but needs support**



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# Common concepts from the interviews

## A comprehensive view

- The professionalisation of related fields in the built environment gave the practitioners a focused theoretical debate about the need for a comprehensive framework.
- Some interviewees regarded a comprehensive view as a necessity for an urban designer and cited it as a reason for their own success.



**Findings: Establishing a comprehensive view has the potential, to narrow the gap**

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# Common concepts from the interviews

## Orthodoxies of urban design

- Urban design is an applied field. Therefore there is a demand for guidelines and how-to-do texts. This amplifies the potential for employing a solution without fully understanding the problem.
- Having established a set of ideas as urban design orthodoxies, broaden the gap between theory and practice, and neutralizes the effectiveness of urban design thinking.



Findings: widens the gap



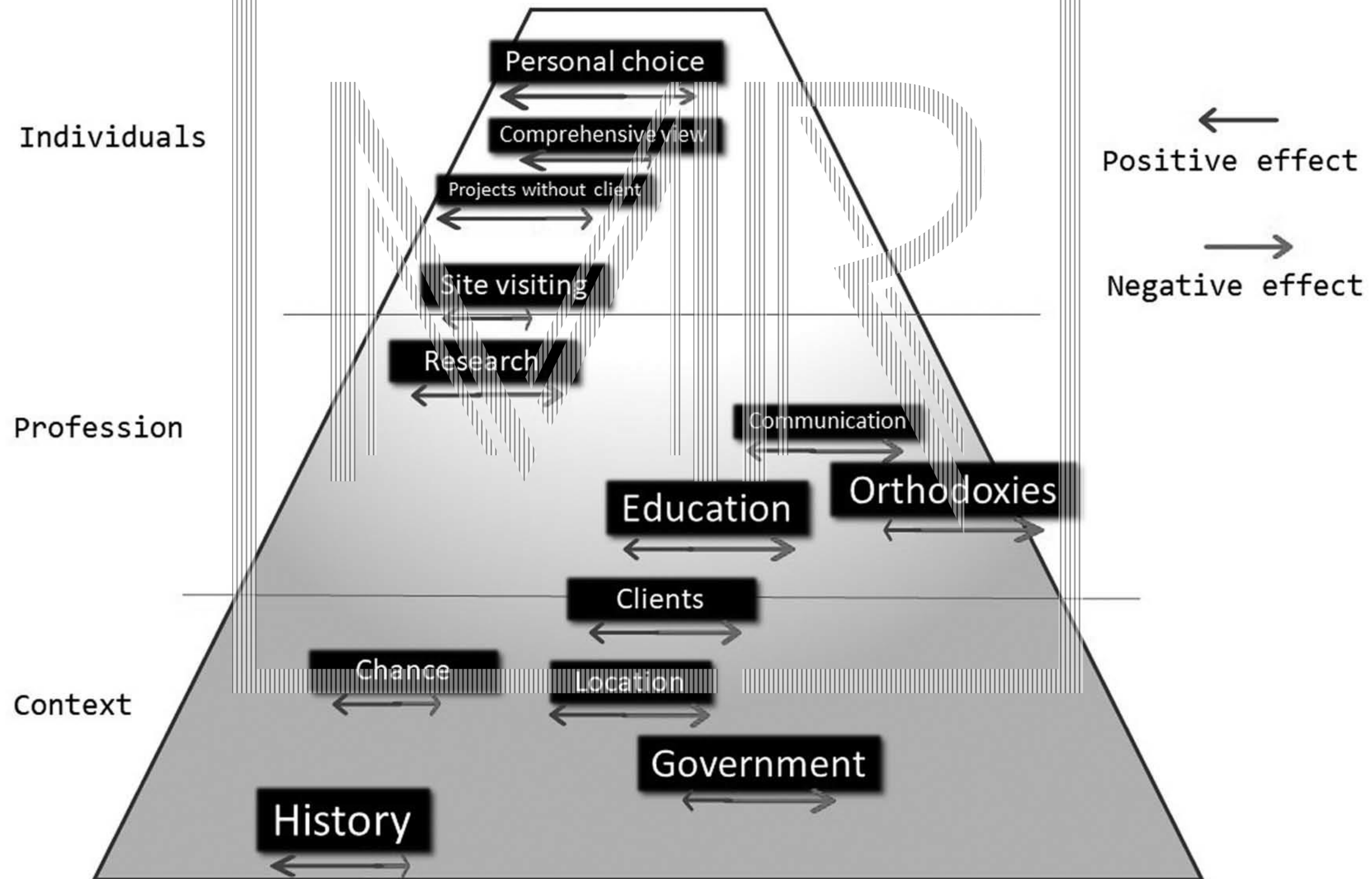
# Analyzing the key concepts

- The concepts identified are of a disparate nature. (factual, approaches or activities). Yet many of them overlap and influence each other.
- These factors can be divided into three groups:
  1. those that belong to the bigger context in which urban design operates;
  2. those belonging to the domain of the profession;
  3. those belonging to the individual domain.
- Identified factors were seen to have negative or positive influences on the interaction between theory and practice



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# Analyzing the key concepts



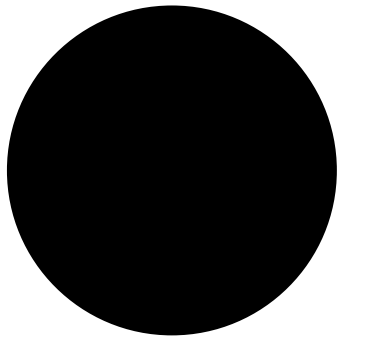


The Topic

# Conclusions

The Takeout

- Theory and practice are not entirely separate processes, they have similar aims, they move from one group to another,
- This context can be best described by using the set of concepts they both identify and explained.
- Having a better understanding of these concepts would be helpful in making a better future for urban design
- knowledge is not passing seamlessly from one party to the other.
- Theory and practice are generated through dynamic mechanisms
- The mechanisms for renewing an understanding are highly flexible.
- There are not processes set up to generate new theories or practices
- communication is important but is happening in an untidy way and cannot be fully presented in any list of channels. Key channels are ways of transferring knowledge.
- research and education are important solutions for lessening the divide.



# Thank You

The End!

*"A theory is not a theory at all, until it has been used in practice over a considerable period of time"*

-Reade, 1987