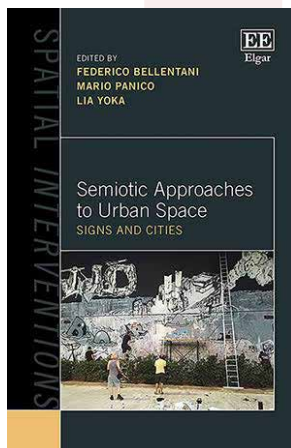


Signposts for a renovated urban semiotics

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BY: Ilias G. Spyridonidis



Federico Bellentani, Mario Panico and Lia Yoka

Semiotic Approaches to Urban Space

Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2025, 306 pp., £110.70 (hbk, ISBN 9781800887213), £25.00 (ebook, ISBN 9781800887220).

This engrossing collection of studies edited by Federico Bellentani, Mario Panico and Lia Yoka, is dedicated to Pierre Pellegrino (1947–2022), a pioneering figure of the semiotics of space and long-time President of the Association Internationale de Sémiotique de l'Espace. Right from the beginning, the editors clarify that this book 'is not a handbook of urban semiotics. It does not intend to fill in the gaps of some neatly circumscribed debate, nor to comprehensively define every aspect of urban semiotic theory and methodology and their applications.' They propose it, instead, as a volume 'aspir[ing] to capture the echo of the current polyphony' of different approaches in urban and space semiotics and to reposition urban semiotics as an interdisciplinary field. The editors emphasize correctly that studying the city from a semiotic point of view 'entails confronting space as a *syncretic text*, in which multiple languages interact,' producing more than a 'single correct signification' as a result of different perceptions. The volume has a tripartite structure, dividing its contents into concepts, models, and activations. This functional organization reflects each contribution's 'primary emphasis on semiotic theory, methodology or application techniques' thus providing a solid framework to conceptualize the diverse approaches to urban semiotics.

ARTICLE INFO:

Volume: 12

Issue: 01

Summer 2026

ISSN: 2459-2943

DOI: 10.18680/hss.2026.0017

Pages: 293-296

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In their introduction, the editors review the rise and evolution of urban semiotics and discuss at length its most recent trends and developments. Most usefully, they accompany this with an up to date and comprehensive bibliographical documentation of the field. The specific field of *urban semiotics* was inaugurated by Gottdiener and Lagopoulos (1986) and subsequently enriched by Umberto Eco (1986, 1997), Lotman (1987), Lagopoulos and Boklund-Lagopoulou (2014) and Pellegrino (2010, 2020).

The first, relatively more theoretical part, dedicated to ‘concepts,’ opens with Alexandros Lagopoulos’ study on the semiotics of settlement places, which elucidates the crucial terminological difference between the notion of the geographical material space and the semiotic place. Gianfranco Marrone in “Ten theses for a semiotic study of the city: notes, observations, proposals,” circumscribes the semiotic study of the city by defining its precise object and proposing a compelling list of theoretical theses. In “Devices for the representation and the spectacularisation of urban space: views, landscapes and logo-monuments,” Isabella Pezzini examines how the map representations of the city form a kind of “portrait of the city.” Olga Lavrenova in “Urban landscape as text,” considers the urban and cultural landscape as text that can be studied as a sign system offering an interdisciplinary perspective for reading the city. Francesco Mazzucchelli in “The complexity of cities and the semiotic gaze: keeping the ‘thickness’ of urban spaces” illustrates how this ‘thickness’ is dealt with through Gianfranco Marrone’s sociosemiotic and discursive approach and by Francesco Marsciani’s ethnosemiotic approach.

The second part is dedicated to “models.” Revisiting settlement spaces, Alexandros Lagopoulos discusses the semiotic modeling of space in three precapitalist societies – ancient India, ancient Greece and the Dogon of southern Mali – as well as in contemporary modernist and the postmodern societies. In “Dynamics of madrasa learning institutions in the Ayyubid and Mamluk capital cities” Manar Hammad explores the contemporary resemanticizations of the Islamic madrasa schools across the Arabic world. Leonid Tchertov analyses the “Mental models of urban space and their semiotic means,” highlighting the interaction of spatial codes with other semiotic systems. Charikleia Pantelidou in “Reworking boundaries: from gates to the architecture of openness” discusses how architectural theory can move beyond conceptual dualisms like the boundedness/openness opposition. Finally, in “Semiotic space for native biota in the City,” Riin Magnus, Tiit Remm and Kalevi Kull explore the semiotic significance of native biodiversity in an urban environment

The third part of the book, dedicated to ‘activations,’ opens with Massimo Leone’s “Envisaging the city: roadmap for an interdisciplinary study of urban ‘facescapes,’” which offers a qualitative methodology to analyse ‘the faces with which a city presents itself.’ Both Pierluigi Cervelli’s “Spatial practices: convergences and

dialogues between semiotics and urban planning” and Mariusz Czepczyński’s “Resemiotisation of urban landscapes: relational geographies and signification processes in post-socialist cities,” offer powerful evidence of the need to understand spatial practices through an ethnosemiotic lens that prioritizes ‘incorporated knowledges’ and the ‘relationality of space.’ In “When schools intersect the everyday world of the city: educational space as a dialogical-transformative quality of the urban,” Kyriaki Tsoukala relates school design with the city in a socially transformative perspective. A similar perspective infuses Nikolaos-Ion Terzoglou’s study of the semiotics of socially responsible design in “Urban activated public spaces in the contemporary city.” Finally, Mattia Thibault, Vincenzo Idone Cassone and Gabriele Ferri in “*Metropoesis*: semiotics, fictional cities and speculative urban design” discuss three case studies of cities that serve as the basis for a typology of the ways we envisage our urban futures.

This collection of studies constitutes a major intervention in Urban Semiotics by synthesizing Saussurean, Greimasian, Tartu–Moscow School, Peircean, sociosemiotic, ecosemiotic, and biosemiotic traditions. Comprising a balanced combination of theoretical elaborations and empirical case studies, it opens new horizons for urban semiotics by advancing its interdisciplinary collaboration with urban studies, architecture, geography, planning, memory studies and cultural studies. In this way, it marks a significant milestone for future research in this field.

Semiotic Approaches to Urban Space represents the most comprehensive attempt in nearly four decades to consolidate Urban Semiotics as a mature, pluralistic, and interdisciplinary research field, enriched with the problematics of ecosemiotics, biosemiotics, digital urbanism, and spatial practices. It effectively reflects the transition of urban semiotics into a new phase of disciplinary maturity, whereby it converses not only with architecture and planning, but also with urban culture, city identity, public memory, digital mediation, ecology and urban futures. In this sense, the volume offers both a synthesis of four decades of scholarship and a compelling agenda for future research.

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