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Pluralising Urban Design Theory through Institutional Practice: Agonistic Design Infrastructure in Ankara, 2019–2024

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Abstract

Urban design theory is examined as a body of propositions. This article asks how it is enacted through institutions that decide who may define, evaluate and contest design knowledge. A case study of five competitions and Ankara Citizen Council (Ankara Kent Konseyi, AKK) processes in Ankara (2019–2024) combines documentary process tracing, analysis and a relational database. The findings identify partial pluralisation: civic and academic actors framed problems; interdisciplinary juries widened authorised knowledge; exhibitions, forums and question–answer archives exposed disagreement; and public votes followed expert evaluation. Yet public choice appeared after expert shortlisting, advisory recommendations lacked binding force, and representation and implementation remained weakly documented. The article develops *agonistic design infrastructure* as a portable model comprising plural problem framing, knowledge translation, staged disagreement, hybrid judgement, institutional relay and reflexive learning. It argues that pluralising urban design theory requires pluralising the institutional production—not only the scholarly references—of legitimate design knowledge.

1 Introduction

Urban design theory has repeatedly been asked to account for its objects, methods and public relevance. Cuthbert's critique of the field's professional self-reference, Marshall's distinction between science and pseudo-science, Dovey and Pafka's relational account of urban form, and Foroughmand Araabi's typology of theories all address a persistent difficulty: urban design borrows widely but does not always make clear how knowledge is constituted, validated or connected to urban transformation (Cuthbert, 2007; Marshall, 2012; Dovey and Pafka, 2016; Foroughmand Araabi, 2016). The problem is not only whether the field possesses a coherent scholarly canon. It is also whether its theories become consequential beyond academic discourse and whose accounts of the city are authorised when they do.

This second problem is particularly visible in public design competitions. Competitions ostensibly open design to comparison: they articulate a problem, solicit alternatives and expose proposals to judgement. Yet each stage is also an epistemic settlement. The commissioning authority decides what counts as the problem; eligibility rules identify legitimate producers; the brief determines admissible evidence; and the jury establishes the criteria through which urban futures become credible. Even an open competition may therefore reproduce a closed theory of design if residents and other affected actors enter only after the brief, alternatives and evaluative categories have been fixed. From a design-governance perspective, the relevant question is not simply whether participation occurred, but how professional, regulatory, civic and political instruments distributed authority across the process (Carmona, 2016; Nisha and Nelson, 2012).

Participation is often offered as the corrective, although the term covers very different relations of power. Information, consultation, shared problem definition, co-production, public choice and citizen control are not equivalent (Arnstein, 1969; Quick and Feldman, 2011; Lee, Feiertag *et al*, 2024). Nor is a public vote on jury-selected schemes equivalent to public involvement in defining the design problem. Research on co-production has similarly shown that both the identity of the "co" and the stage of "production" must be specified (Lee and Scholten, 2024). The theoretical significance of participation therefore lies less in its normative desirability than in whether it changes what urban design is understood to be, which knowledges it can use and whose judgements can have consequences.

This article examines that proposition through the design-competition ecology developed by Ankara Metropolitan Municipality (Ankara Büyükşehir Belediyesi, ABB) and Ankara Citizen Council (AKK) between 2019 and 2024. AKK was reorganised on 29 June 2019 as a statutory but advisory civic platform comprising assemblies and working groups. Its remit, like that of Turkish citizen councils generally, is to connect local government with professional organisations, universities, civil society and urban residents; the municipal council, however, retains formal decision authority under national legislation (Republic of Türkiye, 2005; Republic of Türkiye, 2006; Ankara Citizen Council, n.d.[a]). The institutional capacity of such councils depends not merely on attendance but on representation, resources, organisational culture and links to municipal authority (Şahin, 2015; Şahin, 2024b). AKK's first five years have been interpreted as an experiment in participatory and resilient governance in which voluntary networks and cross-sector trust increased civic problem-solving capacity (Şahin, 2023). The present study narrows that wider account to the production and governance of urban design knowledge.

Between 2021 and 2022 ABB completed five competitions documented in its *Yarışmayla Ankara* archive: a place of gratitude and remembrance for healthcare workers; Ulus Modern Culture and Art Centre; *Sokaktaki Ankara* street signs and typeface; a centenary monument for the Republic; and 100th Year Bazaar and its surroundings (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, n.d.[b]). Across and around these competitions, AKK working groups, an academic advisory board, interdisciplinary juries, exhibitions, colloquia, a workshop, a forum, question–answer archives and two forms of public voting produced multiple interfaces between professional expertise, municipal competence and civic knowledge. The configuration is theoretically productive because advisory and binding authority remained institutionally separated. It permits close examination of where participation changed the formulation or assessment of design and where it became consultative display.

The article asks: *What does the Ankara case reveal about how urban design theory can be pluralised through institutional practices that redistribute the authority to define, evaluate and contest design knowledge?* It argues that the case supports a qualified concept of *agonistic design infrastructure*: a connected arrangement of rules, organisations, artefacts and public interfaces that (1) pluralises problem definition, (2) translates heterogeneous knowledges, (3) stages rather than suppresses disagreement, (4) hybridises judgement, (5) relays civic claims towards authoritative decisions and (6) makes institutional learning possible. Ankara did not complete this sequence. It generated a partial and reversible pluralisation characterised by

a *timing–authority inversion*: front-end participation was relatively generative but advisory, whereas more direct public choice appeared downstream, after professional judgement had narrowed the available alternatives.

This argument contributes to urban design theory in three ways. First, it treats theory not only as published propositions but as enacted in briefs, rules, juries, interfaces and records. Second, it connects the pluralisation of theoretical references to the pluralisation of the institutional sites in which legitimate design knowledge is produced. Third, it specifies the conditions under which participatory design governance can retain disagreement while still reaching decisions. The next section develops this framework. The methodology then distinguishes documented facts from institutional accounts, researcher coding and theoretical inference. The findings analyse mechanisms rather than narrating competitions chronologically, before the discussion evaluates the scope and limits of agonistic design infrastructure.

2 Urban design theory as institutional and epistemic practice

2.1 From a body of knowledge to the production of knowledge

Debates about urban design theory have often been organised around the field's disciplinary status. Cuthbert linked the fragmentation of urban design knowledge to its weak engagement with the social processes and political economy that produce the built environment (Cuthbert, 2007). Marshall distinguished testable explanation from persuasive doctrine, arguing that the field must be clearer about the status of its claims (Marshall, 2012). Dovey and Pafka, in turn, rejected the search for deterministic laws while retaining the possibility of a relational science attentive to assemblage, emergence and spatial effects (Dovey and Pafka, 2016). Foroughmand Araabi's distinction between theories of urban design's subjects, objects and knowledge clarifies why apparently similar design propositions may rest on different understandings of agency, urban form and evidence (Foroughmand Araabi, 2016). His later analysis of the assumed roles of theory further differentiates explanation, prediction, prescription and critique rather than treating theory as a single kind of intellectual product (Foroughmand Araabi, 2017).

These interventions improve the explicit architecture of the field, but a further question remains: where is urban design theory made operative? A scholarly account may describe desirable relations between street form, public life and governance, yet public institutions convert those relations into action through procurement rules, briefs, evaluation criteria, approvals, budgets and maintenance regimes. Theory is consequently both propositional and performative. A brief that defines a market as obsolete commercial fabric enacts a different theory of urban value from one that treats it as a social infrastructure containing livelihoods, memories and heritage claims. A jury composed only of architects enacts a different theory of relevant knowledge from one that includes landscape, social science, public health or civic experience. A binary poll assumes a different account of democratic judgement from an iterative workshop.

This institutional view does not dissolve scholarship into practice. Rather, it distinguishes the production of explicit theory from the practical enactment of assumptions about urban subjects, objects and knowledge. Design devices select what can be seen, who can speak authoritatively and which consequences remain outside the frame. They are therefore sites at which urban design theory can be reproduced, contested or revised. Recent work in *URBAN DESIGN International* reinforces this movement from bounded objects to relational processes. Studies of urban design leadership emphasise the integration of professional, sectoral and power contexts; analyses of co-production differentiate actors and project phases; and relational accounts of practice retain indeterminacy rather than treating the designed object as a closed outcome (Carmona and Bento, 2025; Lee and Scholten, 2024; Stevens $_{et\ al}$, 2024).

Pluralising urban design theory thus cannot mean diversity of citation alone. It requires scrutiny of the institutional conditions through which certain urban realities become knowledge. This is not an argument for replacing professional expertise with unfiltered preference. Architecture, planning, landscape and engineering contain accountable forms of judgement that cannot be reproduced by a vote. The issue is whether those forms remain answerable to knowledge of everyday use, cultural attachment, social vulnerability, public memory and political conflict, and whether those knowledges can alter a problem before design alternatives close around it. Pluralisation is achieved when multiple epistemic claims can affect the definition, production, evaluation and subsequent governance of urban design.

2.2 Participation, agonism and stage-specific authority

Participatory design provides a vocabulary for redistributing creative agency. It treats people affected by design as more than sources of preferences and recognises their situated capacities to frame problems, generate alternatives and evaluate consequences (Sanoff, 2000; Sanders and Stappers, 2008). Co-design similarly contests a linear separation between expert production and user response, but its usage ranges from brief workshops to durable arrangements of co-production (Manzini and Rizzo, 2011; Blomkamp, 2018). The concept of infrastructuring is important because collective design frequently produces an ongoing socio-material capacity—relationships, artefacts, routines and issue publics—rather than a final object alone (Björgvinsson $_{et\ al}$, 2012).

These approaches can nevertheless overstate collaboration if they do not specify authority. Participation may increase the number of voices while leaving agenda-setting unchanged; co-design may name an event without establishing co-authorship; and an open digital interface may provide access without deliberation. Distinguishing participation from inclusion is therefore essential: an invitation to contribute does not guarantee that diverse experiences are recognised or consequential (Quick and Feldman, 2011). A stage-specific analysis asks where participation enters: problem

framing, brief preparation, design production, jury evaluation, post-jury choice, exhibition and deliberation, implementation or institutional reflection. It then asks what each mechanism can change.

Mouffe's agonistic pluralism sharpens this analysis by refusing the premise that legitimate urban values can always be reconciled through better communication. Agonism transforms antagonists into adversaries who contest incompatible projects within a shared democratic field; agreement on the rules of contest does not erase disagreement over outcomes (Mouffe, 2000; Mouffe, 2005). In planning, this insight has been used to expose how consensus can hide exclusion and to examine the institutional conditions under which conflict becomes publicly answerable (Hillier, 2003; Bond, 2011; Kühn, 2021). Yet agonism is not automatically produced whenever conflict is visible. A controversy can remain polarised, be reduced to spectacle or disappear into an advisory process without consequence. The missing analytical step is the institutional passage between the articulation of a claim and an authoritative design decision (Mäntysalo $_{et\ al}$, 2023).

Competitions make that passage inspectable. They stage alternatives, but they also delimit who creates them and how they are compared. Agonistic pluralisation requires more than competing schemes: the definition of the problem must remain contestable; minority positions must be recorded; different forms of evidence must be translated without being collapsed into one metric; and the relationship between civic input and formal judgement must be traceable. Public disagreement is democratically productive only if institutions protect legitimate difference while establishing a route to provisional decision.

2.3 Agonistic design infrastructure

This article uses *agonistic design infrastructure* as a middle-range analytical concept. It refers to a durable-enough arrangement of organisations, rules, artefacts and interfaces through which heterogeneous actors can contest the definition and evaluation of urban design and through which that contestation may reach authoritative decisions and later institutional learning. It is not synonymous with a citizen council, workshop or competition. No single organisation constitutes the infrastructure; it exists in the connections among civic arenas, municipal powers, professional procedures and public records.

The concept has six components. $_{Plural\ problem\ framing}$ opens the diagnosis of a site or issue before a brief becomes fixed. $_{Knowledge\ translation}$ brings professional, academic, administrative, experiential and political claims into relation without assuming their equivalence. $_{Staged\ disagreement}$ gives competing accounts public form through alternatives, objections, reports or deliberative events. $_{Hybrid\ judgement}$ connects professional responsibility with civic and interdisciplinary evaluation while specifying which actor decides what. $_{Institutional}$ *relay* carries claims from advisory arenas to juries, elected bodies, procurement units, budgets and implementation. *Reflexive learning* preserves records and feeds experience back into subsequent rules and projects. The sequence is iterative rather than linear: implementation or a failed relay may reopen the problem frame.

This formulation is narrower than collaborative governance, which concerns sustained cross-boundary public action generally, and broader than co-design, which centres shared creative production. It differs from ordinary participation because it requires a connected decision pathway rather than isolated opportunities to speak. It extends design governance by specifying how disagreement and epistemic difference are organised within the instruments through which public authorities shape design (Carmona, 2016). It also qualifies infrastructuring: relations and capacities are not sufficient unless they remain connected to legally and materially consequential systems.

The adjective $_{agonistic}$ imposes demanding conditions. Differences must remain visible; actors must be treated as legitimate adversaries; the rules and allocation of authority must be public; and minority or unresolved positions must be traceable. Failure occurs when a brief is closed before civic engagement, inclusion is tokenistic, dissent is suppressed, judgement is reduced to an unreasoned metric, advice reaches no competent authority, or implementation generates no feedback. The framework is therefore diagnostic, not celebratory. It permits an assessment of partial infrastructures and of the points at which pluralisation is interrupted.

3 Methodology

3.1 Case design and unit of analysis

The research uses a qualitative single-case study with embedded institutional episodes (Yin, 2018). Ankara was selected as an information-rich case because a newly reorganised citizen council and a metropolitan municipality revived design competitions while retaining a clear separation between civic advice and formal municipal competence. The temporal boundary begins in June 2019, when AKK was reorganised, and ends in December 2024, allowing the study to include AKK's first term, ABB's completed 2021–2022 competition cycle and subsequent reflective and advisory processes. A competition announced on 27 January 2025 was excluded even though it appeared in the supplied database (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2025).

The unit of analysis is a *competition-linked institutional episode*: a bounded process in which an urban design problem, its admissible knowledge and its judgement were organised through connected municipal, professional and civic mechanisms. Five completed ABB competitions form the empirical core. Cross-cutting processes were included when records demonstrated a direct role in framing, reviewing or learning from the competition ecology: AKK working groups; the Academic Advisory Board; the May 2022 Celebration Spaces Workshop; the December 2022 Panel

and Forum on Competitions; and relevant AKK advisory decisions. The analysis does not treat all AKK activity as design evidence and does not attribute a municipal process to AKK without documentary support.

Table 1. Case corpus, formal responsibilities and evidence base

Competitionlinked episode	Year	Formal author- Documented civic/advisory relation ity		Principal records analysed	Boundary of inference
Healthcare Workers' Place of Gratitude and Remembrance	2021	Ankara Metro- Academic volunteers, AKK Architecture politanMuni- Culture and Planning Working Group and cipality (ABB)Academic Advisory Board contributed to upstream framing; advisory-board members were separated from principal jury roles		Competition page and attachments; account of advisory process; jury and award material	Collective professional/academic framing is documented; co-authorship by healthcare workers, bereaved families or local users is not established
Ulus Modern Culture and Art Centre	2021	ABB	No equivalent AKK-led front-end process documented in the audited corpus	Brief and attachments; 59 submitted proposals; published jury and dissenting records; exhibition/colloquium material where available	Interdisciplinary and socially aware problem content is documented; resident co-production and an AKK facilitation role are not established
Sokaktaki Ankara: street signs and typeface	2021	ABB	AKK working group helped frame urban identity, legibility and street-design issues; public mobile vote applied to the sign category	Competition page; working-group description; results; municipal public-vote record	The sign vote followed professional shortlisting; the typeface remained jury-selected; AKK was an advisory interface, not the formal organiser
Centenaryofthe RepublicMonument Ideas Competition	2022	ABB	Interdisciplinary design and evaluation were documented at competition level; no equivalent local-user co-framing process was found	Brief and attachments; jury, award and project records	Interdisciplinary expertise should not be treated as evidence of civic co-design or an AKK role without additional records
100th Year Bazaar and Surroundings Ideas Competition	2022	ABB	Public questions exposed disputes over conservation, demolition, heritage and social evidence; a later citywide poll asked whether to retain or demolish the Bazaar	Brief; questions and answers; three equal awards; municipal poll announcement; project records	The poll was downstream and binary; a requested socioeconomic profile of current users was not documented; implementation effects are not established

Note: The unit of analysis is a competition-linked institutional episode. A sixth database record announced in January 2025 falls outside the 2019–2024 study period and is excluded. AKK = Ankara Citizen Council (Ankara Kent Konseyi). *Source*: Author's validated documentary database and the primary records cited in the article.

3.2 Document corpus and database construction

The corpus comprises competition briefs and attachments, calendars, questions and answers, jury and rapporteur materials, award records, project pages, exhibitions and colloquia where documented, municipal news releases, AKK institutional and working-group pages, workshop and forum records, advisory decisions, national legislation and ABB's 2020–2024 strategic plan. Primary records from ABB and the *Yarışmayla Ankara* platform were used for competition dates, organisers, formal procedures and outcomes. AKK sources were used for documented civic activities and institutional self-descriptions. The author's relational research database supplied an initial map of six competitions, seven participatory mechanisms, seven stakeholder categories, three analytical dynamics and four relay propositions.

The database was used as an analytical organisation device, not as a computational network model. Its tables were normalised around stable identifiers for competitions, mechanisms, stakeholder roles, dynamics and relay claims. Many-to-many links made it possible to compare which actors and mechanisms entered which stages. During validation, each row was checked against the underlying source where available. The database was then corrected to exclude the 2025 case, distinguish formal organisers from advisory contributors, restrict the *Sokaktaki Ankara* public vote to the sign category, and label dynamic and relay fields as researcher coding rather than official classifications. The validated tables and codebook are supplied as Supplementary Data S1.

3.3 Documentary process tracing, coding and evidentiary status

Documentary process tracing reconstructed the sequence from initial issue articulation to brief, competition, evaluation, public interface and subsequent reflection (Beach and Pedersen, 2019). The purpose was not to claim a singular causal effect of participation on design outcomes, which the evidence cannot establish, but to identify institutional mechanisms and points at which authority moved or stopped. Documentary content

analysis combined theory-led codes—problem framing, knowledge inclusion, disagreement, judgement, relay and learning—with emergent codes, notably the timing–authority inversion and selective hybridisation of evaluation (Mayring, 2022). Cross-case comparison then assessed variation by process stage rather than assigning one overall participation score to each competition.

Five evidentiary statuses were maintained. First, *documented facts* are verifiable dates, rules, roles or published decisions. Second, *institutional self-descriptions* are claims made by ABB or AKK about the purpose or value of their own processes. Third, *researcher coding* classifies mechanisms and relationships in the database. Fourth, *theoretical interpretation* connects observed arrangements to pluralisation or agonism. Fifth, *inference* identifies a plausible implication not directly stated in a source. The findings use institutional sources to establish procedures, not to validate those institutions' claims of democratic success. Interpretive claims are presented as analysis rather than fact.

The study contains no interview transcripts, participant-observation records or personal data. It therefore cannot determine how participants experienced influence, measure demographic representativeness, reconstruct informal negotiation or establish the causal effect of a consultation on a jury or municipal decision. Official archives disclose procedures while advancing organisational narratives, and their uneven survival may make documentedmechanismsappearmoreimportantthaninformalones. Implementation, budgetsandpost-occupancy performance are not consistently recorded. These limitations constrain the analysis to institutional design and documented process; they also make absence of a recorded relay an uncertainty rather than proof that no influence occurred.

4 Findings: mechanisms of epistemic pluralisation

4.1 Pluralising problem definition

The five competitions did not begin from an equivalent distribution of problem-defining authority. The clearest front-end pluralisation occurred where civic or academic organisation preceded the formal brief. ABB's official account situates the healthcare-workers memorial in public and political demands to acknowledge labour and loss during the COVID-19 pandemic. The same competition record documents that more than forty academics volunteered, an Architecture Culture and Planning Working Group formed in December 2019, and an Academic Advisory Board met regularly online from autumn 2020. The board worked with municipal staff and other institutional actors on site, scope and process and recommended combining fine art with urban-design knowledge (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021d). These records support a claim of collective professional and academic framing. They do not establish that healthcare workers, bereaved families or nearby users co-authored the brief. The process widened expertise, but affected publics remain weakly documented.

The *Sokaktaki Ankara* process similarly converted diffuse urban concerns into a designable public problem through an AKK working group. Visual clutter, inconsistent signage and the lack of a shared typographic language were framed not simply as graphic defects but as matters of urban identity, legibility and street experience (Ankara Citizen Council, n.d.[b]; Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021b). The formal competition organiser was ABB; AKK provided a working-group and advisory interface rather than co-procurement authority. This distinction matters because plural problem framing can occur without transferring the legal power to commission or select.

The remaining cases were more conventionally commissioned. The Ulus Modern brief articulated relationships among cultural use, Ankara's historic centre, surrounding public space and social change. It acknowledged questions of class and potential displacement, thereby broadening the object beyond a freestanding building (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021f). Yet the available documentation does not show residents or current users co-producing that diagnosis. In the centenary monument competition, an interdisciplinary treatment of commemoration and public space was embedded in the competition's framing, but no equivalent pre-brief civic process is documented (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2022c). The 100th Year Bazaar brief and question–answer stage kept conservation, transformation and demolition open as competing propositions, although requests for a dedicated socioeconomic profile of users were not met with a documented study (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2022a; Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2022b). The alternatives were plural, but the evidentiary base for everyday livelihoods remained thinner than that for physical and professional analysis.

These contrasts show why participation counts cannot indicate theoretical pluralisation. In the memorial and street-identity cases, actors outside the commissioning department helped formulate the object and relevant knowledge before design production. In Ulus, the centenary monument and the Bazaar, pluralisation occurred more through the content of briefs, interdisciplinary evaluation or later contestation than through documented civic co-authorship. Problem definition remained the stage at which the greatest epistemic leverage coincided

with the weakest binding public authority.

4.2 Pluralising design knowledge

Knowledge was widened principally through interdisciplinary composition, advisory relations and public documentation. The healthcare-workers process brought architecture and urban design into relation with public health, medicine, social science, fine art and commemoration. The Academic Advisory Board also established a procedural separation between upstream advice and principal jury membership: documented contributors to framing did not simply become the final decision-makers (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021d). This separation reduced one form of role concentration, although it did not eliminate the municipality's power to define the institutional architecture.

Ulus Modern and the centenary monument likewise enrolled knowledge beyond architectural form. The Ulus brief situated design within historic urban fabric, culture and social change, while its published jury material disclosed professional argument over competing interpretations (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021f; Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021e). The centenary competition required monument, landscape and public-space reasoning to encounter historical and political meanings of the Republic (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2022c). Interdisciplinary juries pluralised expert knowledge, but they should not be confused with public participation: adding disciplines changes the range of authorised expertise without necessarily adding the situated knowledge of current users.

The competition archive expanded epistemic access in a different way. Across the five cases, ABB published briefs or attachments, jury information, award records and selected proposals, with questions and answers, exhibitions, colloquia, reports or videos available unevenly by case (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, n.d.[b]; Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, n.d.[a]). These materials allowed designers, professional organisations and publics to inspect the assumptions and arguments of a process that conventional procurement may leave internal. The 100th Year Bazaar questions are especially revealing. They clarified site access, missing survey files, professional eligibility and how students or non-registered contributors could join teams; they also preserved gaps that were not resolved, including the absence of a dedicated social study of users (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2022b). Documentation did not itself redistribute decision power, but it made the epistemic selectivity of the brief contestable.

Eligibility rules also exposed limits. Professional competitions necessarily allocate responsibility, yet requirements tied authorship to registered professional status. Students could generally join as assistants or advisers rather than lead competitors. Residents, traders and civic groups could supply knowledge through consultations or public interfaces, but they were not recognised as design authors in the same way as eligible teams. The system therefore pluralised inputs more readily than authorship. This is not a reason to erase professional accountability; it is a reason to distinguish the legal authorship of a scheme from the broader authorship of the problem and evaluative criteria.

The case consequently reveals three layers of design knowledge: licensed professional judgement, extended expert and academic knowledge, and civic or experiential knowledge. Ankara connected the first two relatively consistently in selected competitions. It connected the third intermittently through working groups, workshop practices, exhibitions, questions and votes. What remained underdeveloped was a public trace of how a civic claim changed a criterion, brief clause, proposal or implementation decision. Plural knowledge was admitted, but its consequence was rarely documented through an explicit response matrix.

4.3 Staging disagreement and hybridising judgement

Competitions stage disagreement by placing alternative spatial futures beside one another, but the Ankara evidence shows that the democratic quality of this staging depended on how alternatives, reasons and authority

were organised. Ulus Modern received 59 proposals and published jury records that included majority reasoning and dissenting positions (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021f; Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021e). The significance is not that the process produced conflict; juries routinely disagree. It is that disagreement survived in an inspectable record rather than being concealed behind an undifferentiated institutional verdict.

This created an agonistic trace while final authority remained professional.

The 100th Year Bazaar competition staged a broader conflict over heritage, public value and municipal authority. The brief allowed conservation, transformation and replacement propositions, and the question–answer archive kept their assumptions open to challenge. The jury made three equivalent awards rather than designating one winner (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2022a). A later citywide poll asked residents to choose between retaining or demolishing the Bazaar (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2022d). This public interface offered citizens a direct choice over a politically salient direction, but it compressed a complex field of design, heritage, economic and social propositions into a binary choice. It also appeared after expert production and evaluation. The poll therefore increased the formal directness of public input while reducing the dimensionality of the problem; the available records do not establish its binding status or implementation effect.

Sokaktaki Ankara used a more selective hybrid. The jury assigned three equal awards in the sign category, after which residents chose among those alternatives through a municipal mobile application; the typeface category remained a jury decision (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021a; Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021c). The distinction corrects any account of a public vote over the entire competition. It also demonstrates that expert and public authority can be distributed by object: a visible street-sign system was opened to popular choice, while typographic judgement was retained professionally. The process did not explain a general theory of why one object was suitable for public selection and the other was not, leaving the hybrid as a pragmatic arrangement rather than an institutionalised rule.

Exhibitions and colloquia provided deliberative possibilities after evaluation, but the evidence does not show a formal revision stage in which public arguments required changes to a selected proposal. Similarly, the Celebration Spaces Workshop in May 2022 used walks, mapping, historical interpretation, scenario work and discussion to surface different meanings of public celebration (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2022e). This format opened the problem and allowed multiplicity without forcing selection, while its relation to a binding project remained indirect. The December 2022 Panel and Forum on Competitions shifted the object of disagreement again: participants considered the strengths and problems of competition practice itself (Arkitera, 2022). It was an arena of institutional critique, not a jury.

Table 2. Participation mechanisms by design-process stage and authority

Mechanism	Problem framing	Brief preparation	Design production	Jury evaluation	Post-jury choice	Exhibition / deliberation	Implementation / learning	Authority and main limit
AKK working groups	H	M	–	–	–	L	L	Advisory; uptake depended on municipal action
AcademicAdvisory Board	H	H	–	–	–	M	M	Advisory; no principal jury role
Competition questions and answers	L	M	L	–	–	L	L	Clarificatory; responsiveness varied
Interdisciplinary jury	–	–	–	H	–	L	L	Binding expert decision; not civic inclusion
Exhibitionandcolloquium	–	–	–	–	L	H	L	Downstream; no required revision stage
Mobile/public vote	–	–	–	–	H	L	L	Direct but post-filter or binary
CelebrationSpaces Workshop and Competitions Forum	H	L	L	–	–	H	M	Advisory;binding link variable

Coding: H/M/L are qualitative analytical classifications derived from documentary evidence, not numerical measurements or scores. H = substantial documented role; M = moderate or indirect documented role; L = limited role; – = no role established in the audited evidence. The matrix evaluates where a mechanism entered, not whether an institution described it as participatory. Its principal cross-cutting pattern is a timing–authority inversion: early mechanisms were relatively generative but advisory, while direct public choice entered after the design field had narrowed. AKK = Ankara Citizen Council (Ankara Kent Konseyi). *Source*: Author's analysis of the validated documentary database.

Cross-tabulating these mechanisms produces the timing–authority inversion. Working groups, advisory boards and workshops entered early enough to generate issues or knowledge, but their status was advisory. Professional juries occupied the decisive middle stage. More direct citizen choice appeared only after a jury had reduced the alternatives or after a competition had concluded. As the mode of public choice became more direct, the design space became less open. This inversion is not inevitable; it is an institutional result. It explains how a process may be participatory yet only partially pluralise the production of design knowledge.

4.4 Institutional relay and reflexive learning

AKK's distinctive role lay less in replacing formal actors than in linking arenas that ordinarily remain separate. Working groups convened academics, professional organisations, civic actors and municipal interlocutors; the advisory board translated an initial commemorative intention into competition principles; exhibitions and digital archives made proposals public; workshops produced new problem frames; and the forum made competition governance itself discussable. These arrangements accord with the wider account of AKK as a resilience-building civic network based on initiative, trust and cross-sector collaboration (Şahin, 2023). In design terms, however, their value depended on whether civic work travelled into briefs, juries, municipal decisions and implementation.

The strongest documented relay occurred when an advisory process was visibly connected to a formal competition. The healthcare-workers Academic Advisory Board influenced the preparation of the competition and its interdisciplinary scope; the *Sokaktaki Ankara* working group was connected to a municipal competition and its public interface (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021d; Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, 2021b). In both cases, the municipality retained procurement and decision competence. The arrangement was therefore neither civic autonomy nor municipal consultation alone; it was a differentiated relationship in which advice shaped an official instrument.

Later relay is less certain. AKK's compilation of 110 advisory decisions includes proposals for a competition action plan, an urban aesthetics and design advisory body, a modern-heritage conservation action plan and an Atatürk Forest Farm action plan (Ankara Citizen Council, 2023). These records establish civic articulation and transmission as recommendations. They do not establish adoption in a municipal strategic plan, budget allocation, implementation or long-term effect. Treating recommendation as outcome would convert an institutional claim into a fact not supported by the available evidence.

Documentation and reflection nevertheless generated a form of institutional learning. The *Yarışmayla*

Ankara archive assembled cases within a common platform, making procedural comparison possible (Ankara Metropolitan Municipality, n.d.[b]). The Celebration Spaces Workshop expanded the repertoire beyond conventional briefing, and the Panel and Forum asked how future competitions should be governed. Together, these mechanisms shifted attention from isolated winning objects to the rules, relationships and knowledge practices of design. The archive remains incomplete as a learning infrastructure because it does not systematically report participant composition, response to input, implementation status, budget pathways or post-occupancy outcomes.

Case	Problem definition and knowledge	Staging disagreement	Judgement	Relay and learning	Analytical assessment
Healthcare Workers' memorial	Voluntary academic mobilisation and advisory-board work widened the memorial from an object to a public-health, social, artistic and urban-design problem	Alternatives and interdisciplinary argument were staged through the competition	Interdisciplinary professional jury; upstream advisers separated from principal jury membership	Advisory framing demonstrably entered a formal ABB competition; later implementation not assessed	Strongest front-end pluralisation; affected publics and downstream feedback weakly documented
Ulus Modern	Brief connected architecture to historic fabric, culture and social change; civic co-authorship not documented	59 proposals; majority and dissenting jury reasoning remained public	Professional jury	Archive and colloquium supported scrutiny; no documented civic-to-municipal relay beyond the competition	Plural expert interpretation and traceable dissent, but limited public epistemic authority
Sokaktaki Ankara	AKK working-group process framed signs and typeface as urban identity, legibility and street-experience issues	Competing design languages made visible	Jury plus public mobile selection among three equal sign awards; typeface remained jury-selected	Working-group issue became an ABB competition and public interface	Selective hybridisation: relatively strong framing and narrow downstream public choice
Centenary monument	Interdisciplinary treatment of commemoration, landscape, history and public space	Alternative commemorative futures staged through projects	Interdisciplinary professional jury	Public archive documented process; civic relay and implementation effects not established	Expert pluralisation without documented participatory depth
100th Year Bazaar	Competing conservation, transformation and demolition positions remained admissible; dedicated social baseline absent	Questions, three equal awards and later public controversy exposed heritage and public-value conflict	Professional jury followed by binary citywide poll on retention/demolition	Strong public visibility; relationship to design revision and implementation not established	Most explicit documented conflict and most direct bounded public choice, but late participation compressed complex alternatives

Note: Assessments are researcher interpretations derived from validated documentary relations; they are not official classifications by ABB or AKK. AKK = Ankara Citizen Council (Ankara Kent Konseyi). *Source*: Author's analysis.

The empirical pattern is thus neither a transition from top-down design to co-design nor evidence that an advisory council democratised municipal authority. It is a partial institutional layering. Civic and academic arenas sometimes changed problem framing; interdisciplinary expertise widened evaluation; disagreement gained public form; selected decisions were hybridised; and reflective events accumulated lessons. At each step, however, pluralisation could stop. The non-binding status of AKK protected its civic character from becoming a municipal department, but it also made relay dependent on the willingness and capacity of authoritative bodies. Experimentation remained reversible because it was not consistently secured through response duties, implementation protocols or feedback requirements.

5 Discussion

5.1 What Ankara changes in urban design theory

The Ankara case makes visible a dimension that accounts of urban design theory organised chiefly around scholarly propositions can overlook. Urban design knowledge is not only generated by theorists and applied by practitioners; it is institutionally selected and transformed at multiple points. Briefs establish urban objects, eligibility rules establish subjects, and juries and public interfaces establish relevant knowledge and valid judgement. In Foroughmand Araabi's terms, the subjects, objects and knowledge of urban design are not merely categories within literature; they are repeatedly constituted through governance (Foroughmand Araabi, 2016). The case thus extends the critique that urban design theory must connect material intervention to societal process (Cuthbert, 2007): the connection is made, or prevented, by concrete institutional devices.

This matters to the special collection's concern with the influence of theory beyond academia. The Ankara processes did not simply apply Mouffe, participatory design or a scholarly model of design governance. They generated practical propositions about urban design: that commemoration requires medical, social and artistic knowledge; that street identity can be framed through a civic group; that jury dissent should be recorded; that some professional judgements can be layered with public choice; and that competitions themselves should become objects of civic reflection. These propositions are uneven and sometimes contradictory, but they constitute institutionally enacted theoretical assumptions because they specify relevant actors, relations, values and procedures.

The central proposition can now be qualified. Pluralising urban design theory does require more than diversifying its references: it requires pluralising the institutional sites and actors through which legitimate design knowledge is produced. Yet participation does not guarantee that pluralisation. It becomes theoretically consequential only when it can alter at least one of four things: the definition of the design problem, the composition or relation of knowledge, the terms of judgement, or the pathway from judgement to action. Attendance, transparency and public display may enable these changes, but they are not substitutes for them.

Stage and authority must therefore be treated together. The timing–authority inversion in Ankara shows why downstream direct democracy may pluralise less of the design problem than upstream advice. A binary public process can be presented as decisive within a narrow choice, while a working group can be generative across a wider field but institutionally weak; in Ankara, the implementation effect of the polls is not established by the audited records. This finding develops stage-sensitive co-production analysis (Lee and Scholten, 2024) by adding a second axis: the openness of the design space and the authority claimed for the participant do not necessarily increase together.

Greater apparent decision authority therefore does not necessarily produce greater epistemic pluralisation: timing, openness of the design space and authority must be assessed together. This proposition is derived from a single institutional case and is offered as a comparative hypothesis rather than a general law.

5.2 A portable model and its failure conditions

Agonistic design infrastructure names the institutional work required to make epistemic difference consequential without promising final consensus. The Ankara evidence is relevant to all six components, although their institutional development and empirical support are highly uneven. Problem framing was pluralised in the memorial and street-identity processes; knowledge translation occurred through working groups and interdisciplinary arrangements; disagreement was staged through alternatives, question archives, jury reports,

workshops and forums; judgement was selectively hybridised through bounded public choice; relay was documented where civic advice entered a municipal competition; and learning occurred through archives and reflective events. The weakest components were representative inclusion, binding relay, implementation evidence and feedback.

The concept differs from ordinary participation because an invitation or event is insufficient. It differs from co-design because shared creative production may form one component without organising formal judgement or municipal relay. It differs from collaborative governance because consensus or joint delivery is not its defining purpose. It sits within design governance but foregrounds the politics of epistemic authority: which claims can define and evaluate urban design, how they remain contestable and where they acquire consequence. It is agonistic when institutions protect the legitimacy and traceability of disagreement rather than converting all positions into a manufactured common voice.

The model is portable as a set of diagnostic questions, not as an Ankara template. For any competition, design review, masterplan or public-realm programme, researchers can ask: Was the problem open when affected knowledge entered? Which forms of knowledge were translated and which remained outside? Were conflicts recorded with reasons? How were professional and civic judgements allocated? What competent body received the result? What evidence shows implementation or learning? These questions allow comparison across different legal and political settings without assuming that a citizen council is the necessary intermediary.

Failure conditions are equally important. A process fails at plural problem framing when consultation begins after the brief is fixed. It fails at translation when actors are present but their knowledge is reduced to preferences. It fails agonistically when dissent is suppressed or displayed without response. It fails at hybrid judgement when authority is ambiguous or complex alternatives are compressed without deliberation. It fails at relay when advice has no named recipient, response duty, budget or implementation route. It fails at learning when records end with an award. Because each connection can weaken, pluralisation is partial, institutionally mediated and reversible.

5.3 International relevance through institutional specificity

Ankara should not be universalised as a model or positioned merely as a non-Western example. Its theoretical value comes from a specific configuration: a national legal framework creates citizen councils as participatory advisory bodies; metropolitan government retains binding competence; professional chambers and universities possess established public roles; and municipal competitions remain regulated expert instruments. Turkish urban governance has also been shaped by centralisation and uneven local democratic capacity (Şahin, 2019; Şahin, 2024a). These conditions explain both AKK's intermediary productivity and its limited authority.

That specificity exposes a general problem. Participatory urban design frequently occurs in institutions that can convene but not decide, while agencies that decide may be constrained by procurement, professional liability and political mandate. Dominant theories often describe participation, expertise and governance separately; Ankara shows how their interfaces determine which knowledge travels. The case invites international comparison not through assumed similarity but through the recurring institutional gap between civic arenas and authoritative design systems.

Recent UDI research similarly demonstrates that participatory governance does not dissolve conflicts between process and spatial outcome and that urban design leadership operates across fragmented professional and political contexts (Vallance *et al*, 2025; Carmona and Bento, 2025). Ankara adds the proposition that the infrastructure connecting those contexts is itself a site of urban design theory. The field becomes more relevant beyond academia when it explains and improves the rules by which knowledge is authorised, contested, translated and acted upon.

6 Conclusion

This article asked what the Ankara competition ecology reveals about pluralising urban design theory through institutional practice. It found neither a fully co-designed system nor participation added cosmetically to unchanged procurement. Instead, AKK and ABB assembled a partial agonistic design infrastructure. Civic and academic actors sometimes entered problem framing; interdisciplinary arrangements widened expert knowledge; alternatives and records staged disagreement; selected public votes hybridised judgement; and archives, workshops and forums enabled reflection. The process nevertheless retained a timing–authority inversion: generative participation was predominantly advisory, whereas more direct citizen choice appeared after the field of alternatives had narrowed.

The theoretical implication is that urban design theory is enacted as well as written. Briefs, eligibility rules, jury compositions, consultation formats, public interfaces and response procedures embed claims about legitimate urban subjects, objects and knowledge. Pluralising the field consequently requires changes to these epistemic institutions, not only a more diverse canon. Agonistic design infrastructure provides a portable framework for evaluating those changes through six connected functions: plural problem framing, knowledge translation, staged disagreement, hybrid judgement, institutional relay and reflexive learning.

For practice, participation should begin before briefs close, and every stage should identify both the scope and limits of participant authority. Juries should retain accountable professional judgement while recording minority reasons and responding to civic and interdisciplinary evidence. Public choice should follow deliberation rather than substitute a binary metric for it. Advisory recommendations should have a named recipient and a published response, and competition archives should extend through revision, implementation and post-occupancy learning. These measures would not abolish conflict; they would make its treatment traceable.

The study is limited to documentary evidence and cannot establish demographic inclusion, informal bargaining, participant experience, causal influence or built performance. Future research should combine the validated database with interviews, meeting observation, budget and decision tracking, and post-occupancy evaluation. Comparative research could test when intermediary arenas become effective relays and when they remain symbolic. The Ankara case nevertheless establishes a defensible conclusion: participation pluralises urban design theory only when it changes who can shape design knowledge, when they can do so, and how their claims travel into consequential decisions.

Declarations

Competing interests.

The author declares no competing interests.

Author Contribution

Savaş Zafer Şahin prepared whole text and materials.

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and use of generative AI. Personal acknowledgements are omitted for anonymous review. During manuscript preparation, the author used OpenAI's ChatGPT and Codex for language editing, structural review, bibliography checking and preparation of supplementary files. The author independently designed the research, curated and analysed the evidence, made all interpretations and scholarly judgements, verified all citations and outputs, and accepts full responsibility for the article's content.

Data Availability

The data generated for this research has been produced using general public data openly provided by public agencies in Turkey.

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Figures

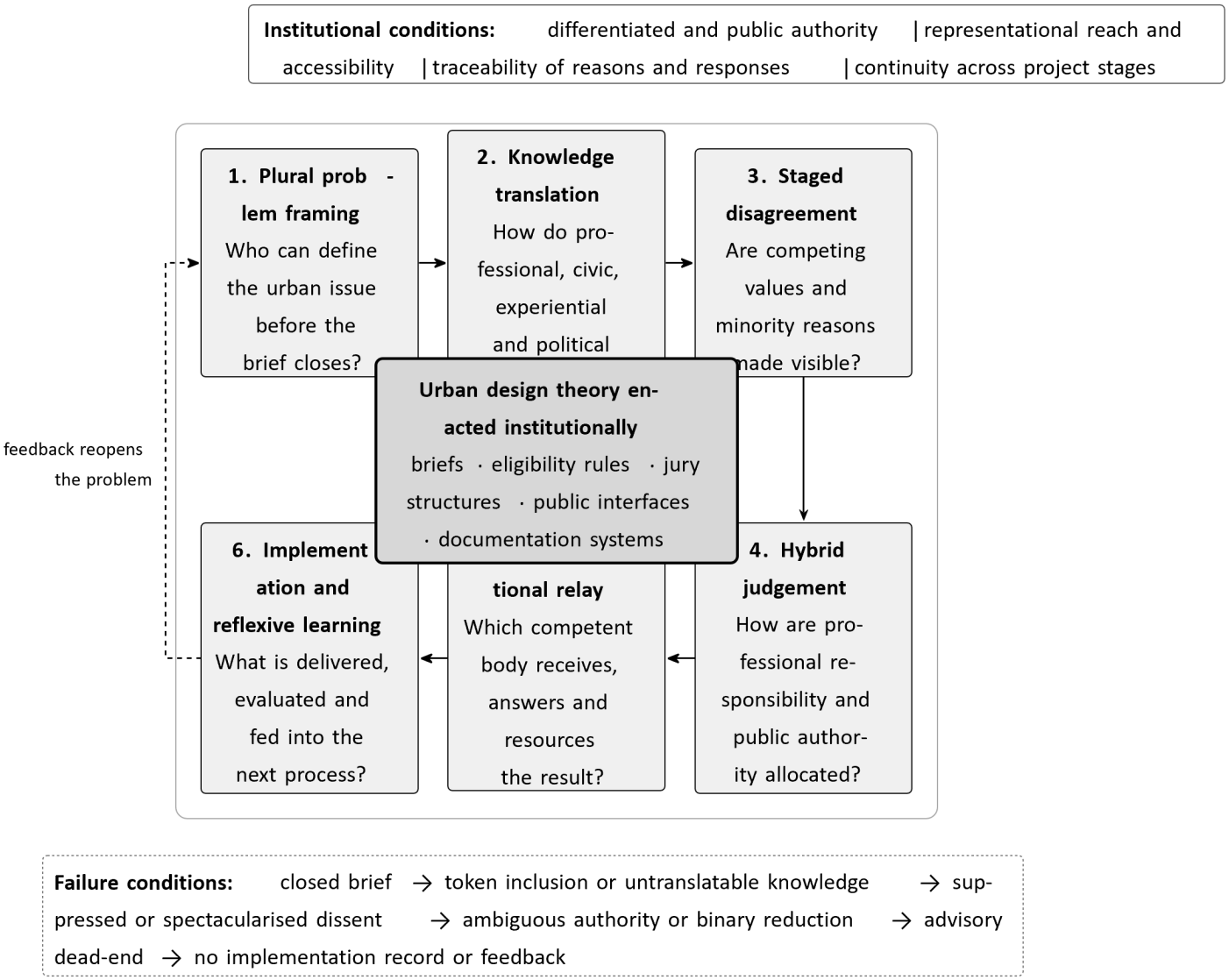


Figure 1

Agonistic design infrastructure as a recursive model of epistemic pluralisation. Arrows represent recursive analytical relations, not a deterministic causal sequence.

Source: Author’s conceptualisation from the Ankara process analysis.