

Evaluating Informal Public Space. Understanding Public Space Value in Two Informal Settlements in Ahmedabad, India

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Abstract

In a period of planetary transition marked by accelerating urbanisation, climate stress, and deepening social inequality, public space is increasingly recognised as a process of becoming shaped through everyday practices, relationships, and negotiated meanings. This paper rethinks public space evaluation from this perspective through an empirical study of public life in two informal settlements in Ahmedabad, India, where almost a century of incremental urbanisation has produced dense, socially complex environments that sit outside conventional planning paradigms. Informal settlements accommodate over one billion people globally, yet their public spaces remain under-represented in urban design research and evaluation frameworks and are frequently romanticised as vibrant or dismissed as disorderly in ways that risk erasing the social and economic practices that sustain life in conditions of poverty. The study adapts Jan Gehl's Public Space - Public Life methodology to this context, combining systematic observation and mapping with sustained, relational engagement with residents. This expanded methodological lens reveals four distinct public space types including shared yards and local streets that function as intimate social infrastructures, and neighbourhood and public streets that function as major circulation routes and economic activity centres. The findings demonstrate that the perceived value of public space cannot be separated from social relationships, cultural meaning, and long-term patterns of use that standardised indicators are structurally ill-equipped to register. The paper positions public space evaluation as a critical practice of care, one that must attend to becoming, difference, and lived experience if it is to meaningfully inform design, governance, and policy on a planet in transition.

Keywords: urban informality, informal settlement, Jan Gehl, public life, socio-spatial relationships

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Introduction

Jan Gehl's public space-public life methodology, first published in *Life Between Buildings* (1987) and later consolidated with co-author Birgitte Svarre in *How to Study Public Life* (2013), has become a foundational tool employed widely across Europe, North America, and Australia to study the relationship between built form and human behaviour in public space. Its influence on urban policy and design practice has been substantial, yet its dominance also reflects a deeper tendency in public space evaluation: the privileging of visible, quantifiable activity over the meanings, relationships, and histories that make space significant to those who inhabit it. As James C. Scott (1998) argues in a broader register, the impulse to render complex social environments *legible* and translate lived complexity into standardised, measurable form is a characteristic mode of institutional thinking that routinely simplifies what it cannot easily see. Applied to public space evaluation, this legibility imperative risks producing frameworks that are most fluent in the contexts for which they were designed, and least adequate in those where life is organised differently. Informally constructed public spaces remain comparatively understudied in terms of their architecture and urban design, despite housing over one billion people globally (UN-Habitat, 2025). Without empirical evidence, informal built environments are frequently subject to decisions based on assumptions. Descriptions of public life in informal settlements are routinely over-simplified in praise of vibrant street life, to condemn criminal behaviour, or to criticise ad-hoc, irregular, or poor-quality shelters (van Oostrum, 2022). These assumptions and over-simplifications, embedded in policy, can rationalise interventions that disrupt existing social, cultural, and economic activities, resulting in diminished public life and further disadvantage for marginalised urban residents. Henri Lefebvre's concept of the *right to the city* (1968) elaborated by David Harvey (2008) as a collective right to shape the urban environments in which we live implies that the tools through which we evaluate public space are never neutral. Tools and methods encode assumptions about whose practices count as legitimate urban life, and whose do not. This moves public space evaluation beyond analytical accuracy to political recognition.

Informal settlement is a process of incremental, self-organised construction without government authorisation and has become one of the most prevalent forms of urbanisation in India (Dovey et al., 2020). In Ahmedabad, large-scale rural-to-urban migration over the twentieth century fuelled the growth of informal settlements (Shah, 1988). As Ananya Roy (2009) has argued, informality in Indian cities is not simply a condition of poverty or illegality but a product of planning itself as the selective application of legal recognition has permitted informal building practices of elites to become formalised while criminalising those of the urban poor as 'slums.' Yet describing all informal settlements of the urban poor as 'slums' stereotypes the considerable diversity of their inhabitants, built environments, and aspirations (Gilbert, 2007). Many of these neighbourhoods have been shaped collectively over lifetimes and multiple generations, producing dense, socially complex environments that resist easy categorisation (Marnane and Greenop, 2023). Reductive language forecloses the possibility of evaluating and understanding the forms of public life they sustain. Instead of designed physical form, everyday practices and social networks of residents constitute the connective tissue of urban life. Evaluation frameworks that foreground built form and visible activity may be structurally ill-equipped to register this connective tissue, or as AbdouMalik Simone (2004) describes, *people as infrastructure*.

In India, a settlement granted the legal status of 'notified slum' allows residents to make claims for infrastructure and services from the state. It also brings the settlement under the In-Situ Slum Redevelopment (ISSR) component of the Prime Minister's Awaas Yojana (PMAY), making it eligible for demolition and in-situ redevelopment (Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, 2019). In Gujarat, the Regulation for the Rehabilitation and Redevelopment of Slums (2010, 2013) aims to redevelop notified slums on public land in partnership with private developers, providing eligible residents with a fully serviced apartment at no cost while releasing remaining land for commercial development. The ISSR scheme has since been discontinued after delivering less than 25% of planned dwellings (Tapadia et al, 2025). Redevelopment proposals in Ahmedabad typically favour multi-storey mass housing, with standardised designs that prioritise private dwelling space above a ground level of open public space (Government of Gujarat, 2010, 2013). As in other state-funded mass housing projects, public space disconnected from dwellings and everyday routines has been a poor substitute for the life of neighbourhood streets and shared open spaces (Bamford, 2006). The mass housing approach risks forgetting precisely what Gehl and a longer tradition of urban thinkers from Jane Jacobs (1961) and Kevin Lynch (1960) to William Whyte (1980), Clare Cooper Marcus and Wendy Sarkissian (1986) have argued since the mid-twentieth century: that it is life *between* buildings, not merely within them, that sustains healthy urban communities. This paper takes that argument seriously in a new context. It documents the findings and process of adapting Gehl's public space–public life (PSPL) methodology to record and interpret public life in selected spaces across two informal settlements in Ahmedabad, the largest city in Gujarat in India's north-west with a population of 9.3 million (United Nations World Urbanisation Prospects, 2026), offering a critical commentary on the method's possibilities and limits in this setting. But it does so with a broader evaluative question in mind. Drawing on Michel de Certeau's (1988) distinction between the *strategies* of institutional planning which operate through stable, legible space, and the *tactics* of everyday life which improvise within and around those structures, the paper argues that understanding public life in informal settlements requires attending to practices and meanings that resist standardised capture. Following Doreen Massey (2005), it treats public space not as a fixed container for activity but as a relational achievement: always in process, constituted through social interaction, and shaped by histories of use and inhabitation that cannot be read off physical form alone. The central question, then, is not simply *what is life between buildings like in an informal, Indian context?* It is: *how do we evaluate it — and what kinds of knowledge, relationships, and commitments does that evaluation require?*

Defining public space in an Indian and informal context

The frameworks most widely used to evaluate public space, including Gehl's PSPL methodology, were developed in Northern European cities where the relationship between built form, climate, and public life produces a particular spatial logic: legible streets, clearly bounded public squares, and a relatively stable distinction between public and private territory. Transplanting these frameworks to Indian informal settlements requires cultural translation and acknowledgement of diverse spatial categories, boundary conventions, and norms of appropriate activity that evaluation tools take for granted. As Roy (2009) argues, the planning frameworks applied to Indian cities are themselves

products of a colonial encounter that imposed foreign spatial categories on existing urban cultures, producing forms of illegibility that are then attributed to informality itself rather than to the inadequacy of the frameworks doing the reading. Understanding what public space is in an Indian and informal context is therefore a theoretical prerequisite for any evaluation that aspires to register how residents experience, interpret, and assign meaning to public space.

Public space in traditional Indian settlements is typically comprised of networks of curvilinear streets connected by open-to-sky spaces of varying proportion and scale, usually decreasing in size from most public to most intimate. The traditional Indian street is a multifunctional space that merges public, private, work, leisure, holy, and profane activities (Edensor, 1998, p. 206). Open-to-sky spaces range from large areas that allow the whole community to gather, to meeting places for medium or small-scale groups, to open spaces in and around the home that accommodate play, socialising, cooking, sleeping, and other forms of work (Correa, 1999, p. 106). This spatial organisation does not map neatly onto the European distinction between public and private space.

Traditional settlements in India typically define territory through two types of boundary markers: town, neighbourhood, and dwelling walls that signify community, protection, and power; and more symbolic markers such as where refuse is deposited that indicate a conceptual line between *inside* space (safe, protected, pure) and *outside* space (inauspicious, polluting, threatening, but also free, anonymous, and potentially exciting) (Asokan, 2008; Chakrabarty, 1991). These categories of inside and outside are frequently confused with colonial and modernist categories of public and private, but they are in practice symbolic rather than spatial, corresponding to the types of activities considered appropriate rather than to legally or physically bounded territory (Asokhan, 2008).

This distinction matters enormously for evaluation. Where a European framework might read the physical openness of a space as evidence of its public character, or the enclosure of a courtyard as evidence of its private one, the Indian spatial tradition organises meaning through social convention, ritual practice, and patterns of use that may be invisible to an outside observer. De Certeau's (1988) distinction between strategies and tactics helps to distinguish the spatial strategies of planners and evaluators operating through stable, legible categories in contrast to the tactics of everyday life using improvisation, negotiation, and cultural convention that resists straightforward transcription into standardised form. Cultural distinctions are further complicated in an informal context. Public space in informal neighbourhoods is often limited, subject to intense use because of high population densities, and used as an extension of the home due to small dwelling size (Hernandez-Garcia, 2012). Without formal tenure or traditional boundary markers, it can be difficult to immediately read categories of space in an informal settlement. As Roy (2009) has shown, this apparent illegibility is not simply a feature of informality itself but a product of imposing formal spatial categories on environments organised through different, if no less coherent, logics. The social, legal, and spatial ambiguity of public space in informal settlements allows for flexible appropriation and multiple simultaneous activities, providing residents with opportunities to develop economic livelihoods and sustain strong community bonds (Van Oostrum, 2022, p. 86). Yet public space can also be a site of conflict and tension when the community is not in agreement about rights of way, vertical development, or access to natural light and ventilation (Kamalipour and Dovey, 2020, p. 6).

Simone's (2004) concept of people as infrastructure helps to define a richer understanding of public space value, where the social networks and everyday practices of residents constitute a form of spatial organisation that produces both solidarity and friction. Following Lefebvre (1991), this moves beyond exchange value (what space is worth on the market) and use value (what space does functionally) toward social value: what social activity space affords and makes possible. Massey (2005) extends this further, defining relational value as the specific, irreplaceable constellation of social relationships, histories, and interdependencies that inhabit it, which are impossible to transfer or replicate. Held (2006) adds a dimension that is particularly significant in informal settlement contexts: caring value, the capacity of space to sustain practices of child supervision, mutual surveillance, neighbourly support, shared domestic labour, and the informal economies through which households meet needs that formal systems do not. Ingold (2000) adds that value is also temporal and accumulated through repeated inhabitation, seasonal rhythm, and generational memory in ways that cannot be designed in. Together, these frameworks suggest that value in social open space is not a property that space possesses but a quality that emerges from the practices, relationships, care, and histories through which space is made and remade over time. It follows that evaluation tools premised on physical legibility will systematically misread, and therefore systematically undervalue, spaces organised around relational, caring, and culturally symbolic principles.

For the purposes of this paper, public spaces are defined as all visible, accessible open-to-sky spaces. This deliberately inclusive definition resists the impulse to exclude informal or ambiguous spaces from the evaluative frame before the study has even begun. While it could be argued that open spaces in informal settlements are neither completely public (being self-regulated and monitored) nor completely private (being physically open yet rarely accessed by outsiders), this in-between quality is not a deficiency to be corrected but a distinctive spatial achievement. It reflects Lefebvre's (1991) definition of space produced through lived practice rather than formal designation. Public spaces are noted as deeply important in the daily lives of informal settlement residents (Bayat, 1997; Edensor, 1998; Perlman, 1976), yet their spatial dimensions, types, uses, and transformation over time are not widely documented or understood in comparison to housing or health (Hernandez-Garcia, 2012, p. 94; Mrema, 2013). No replicable protocol exists for PSPL application in informal settlements, where outsider observation alters public life, spatial categories do not map onto formal urban typologies, and value is constituted through social relationships and everyday practice rather than physical form. This paper addresses that gap. The ten methodological adaptations described in the following section constitute a transferable framework for evaluating public space in conditions where standard tools are structurally ill-equipped to register what residents value most. This gap has significant implications for evaluating, upgrading, and redeveloping informal settlements. If evaluation frameworks cannot register what residents value, they risk encoding the very assumptions about disorder, illegitimacy, and spatial failure that Lefebvre's right to the city challenges us to question.

Methodology

This section describes how a public space evaluation in two informal settlements in Ahmedabad (India) was approached in practice and adapted for the spatial logics, social

relationships, and cultural meanings organising public life in Indian informal settlements, including the positionality of the researcher. Data were collected over seven months across 2017, 2018, 2023, and 2026 as part of a longitudinal study incorporating an architectural project to design and oversee construction of an anganwadi (preschool) in Ramapir No Tekro (see The Anganwadi Project, 2015) and doctoral research (Marnane, 2021). The majority of data was collected in 2017 and 2018. In 2023 drawings and photographs were made to document physical changes in Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas. In 2026, interviews, drawings, and photographs were undertaken in both Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas to document changes. Most of Ramapir No Tekro had been demolished by 2026, so the completed 'Sector 3' of the slum redevelopment was visited and documented. Using Lefebvre's concept of the *right to the city* (1968), Roy's definition of informality as a mode of urbanisation (2005), Massey's relational concept of place (2005), and Harraway's case for grounded, relational, culturally embedded evaluation (1988), this paper argues that the value of public space cannot be read from physical form alone, and if the categories of public and private, legible and illegible, are themselves products of particular planning traditions, then the tools used to study public space must be adapted accordingly.

Public space evaluation was carried out in two informal settlements, Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas photographed in Figure 1, located in Ahmedabad's north-west near the Sabarmati River. Both settlements face redevelopment policies anticipated by Roy's (2009) analysis of informal complexities rendered illegible by the planning categories applied to them.



November 2018



May 2023



January 2026

Photographs of Ramapir No Tekro



January 2026

Photographs of Gandhi Vas

Figure 1. photographs of Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas over time (by author)

In 2018, Ramapir No Tekro housed over 150,000 people (Rathi and Zalzal, 2016) or approximately 8,500 dwellings (CEPT University, 2014, p. 127) on land formally controlled by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. People first migrated to this area in approximately 1960 from villages in Gujarat and Rajasthan, searching for work in Ahmedabad, when the area was uninhabited on the outskirts of the city. Three neighbourhoods are described: Baryadev Mandir Chali, Gora Khumbar's Chali, and Vadhiyarivas, housing approximately 865 people in 440 dwellings. Ramapir No Tekro was demolished in 2023 for a slum redevelopment project, with eligible residents rehoused into 25 square metre one-bedroom apartments. In 2018, Gandhi Vas housed approximately 3,700 people within an area extending from Motera Stadium Road to the Sabarmati River, on land owned by a mix of private entities, the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation, and the state government (Amdavad Municipal Corporation et al., 2014, pp. 45–68). Gandhi Vas was first settled in approximately 1970 by migrants from rural and tribal villages in north Gujarat to work in the surrounding textile mills and industries. Demolition began in parts of Gandhi Vas in 2025 for a slum redevelopment project identical in form to that applied to Ramapir No Tekro. In 2026, apartment buildings are being constructed between remnant neighbourhoods. Data collected in these settlements prior to demolition therefore documents a particular public life that is in the process of being erased.

Start with an ethical approach

Gehl and Svarre (2013, p.6) note the importance of ethical considerations, anonymised data, and legislative contexts. In informal settlements, the ethical stakes are considerably higher than procedural protocol. Communities in this study had frequently been promised change without corresponding action and were consequently and justifiably wary of outsiders and their intentions. Research that extracts data from such communities without reciprocal benefit reproduces the relationship between outside expert and legible-but-passive subject that this paper seeks to challenge (Tuhiwai Smith, 2022). The ethical foundation of this project was therefore twofold: explain my role as a researcher honestly from the outset; and be of genuine service to the community beyond the research itself. In practice, this meant beginning fieldwork by volunteering with Manav Sadhna, a local NGO with trusted community relationships, teaching art and craft at community centres and supporting anganwadi teachers, in addition to six months previously spent working as an architect. This allowed me to become a daily participant in community life, explain my research at parent information sessions, and build relationships with teachers, children, and families from which wider community connections grew organically. With white skin, freckles, and green eyes, I was a visibly different outsider, and residents were curious to know me; they understood I did not always know what was going on, tolerated my many "oddities" (Angrosino, 2007, p. 32), and engaged in genuine cultural exchange. Although this approach demanded considerably more time than a conventional PSPL survey, the slow, relational work of building trust was inseparable from the intellectual work of rethinking evaluation itself, and was what made it possible to learn and incorporate local values into the adapted methods that follow.

Draw physical space at multiple scales

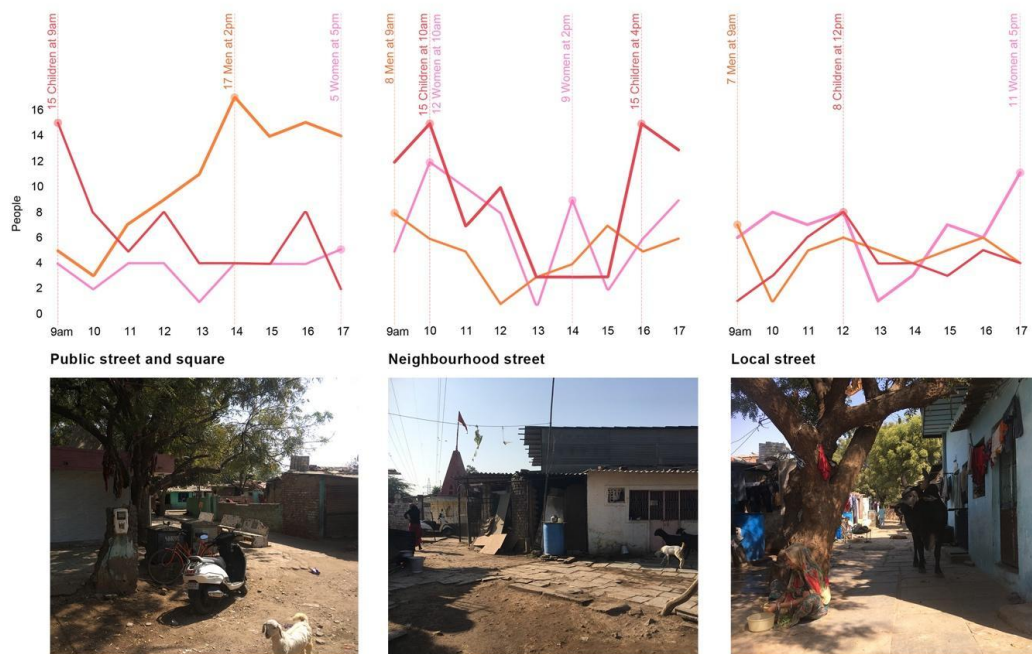
Most PSPL methods require accurate plans of the area being investigated to locate observations and map activity with precision. Informal settlements are rarely formally documented, excluded from the cartographic and administrative systems through which cities are made knowable to those who govern them (Roy, 2009). Generating a base map was therefore both a technical preliminary and an act of spatial recognition. Settlement plans were drawn from available aerial photography and confirmed on the ground through a process similar to Gehl and Svarre's (2013, p. 24) 'test walk' method, which helped develop a feel for public life in the settlement and map building uses, services, circulation routes, signage, entry points, and vegetation from direct observation (Figure 2). Although a settlement-scale plan was achievable, aerial photographs often lack sufficient resolution to produce accurate public space plans as dwellings and pathways are often too small to distinguish, and streets frequently continue beneath roofs. Generating precise drawings through traditional architectural documentation would have been extremely time-consuming and, in spaces subject to continuous monitoring by residents, potentially disruptive to the community relationships on which the research depended. The handheld mobile 3D laser scanner, the Zeb I by GeoSLAM, offered a less obtrusive alternative, generating accurate three-dimensional point clouds of public spaces efficiently (for detail see Zhao et. al., 2021).



Figure 2: Settlement plans of Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas in 2018 prior to redevelopment (by author)

Count people and animals

Gehl and Svarre (2013, p. 24) note that in principle everything can be counted, providing numbers for comparison across time and place. In practice, this method assumes a researcher who can stand still in a space, observing and recording without significantly altering what is being observed. In Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas, children would come out of their homes to spend time with me if I lingered in public spaces, meaning that remaining stationary to record activities would have produced data about my presence rather than about everyday public life. This is a direct methodological consequence of the relational character of these spaces: because belonging and behaviour are regulated through mutual awareness and social familiarity rather than through anonymous co-presence, the introduction of a visible outsider into a space changes that space in ways that a conventional mapping method cannot account for. Rather than remaining still to record, I took video footage as I walked through key spaces, combining counting with the mapping method described below to generate graphs, maps, and tables that could be analysed together to compensate for the limitations of either tool in isolation. Figure 3 shows comparative graphs of people spending time on three streets in Gandhi Vas. While neighbourhood and local streets showed an even mix of ages and genders, one space recorded significantly higher numbers of men. Spatial analysis revealed that men spent leisure time in a large public square playing cards, gambling, reading, and napping in what functioned as a symbolic 'outside' space, while women did not stray from the public street and spent time in and around the home. This pattern points directly to the relational and culturally embedded character of spatial comfort and belonging that standardised indicators struggle to register.



Age and gender count of people spending time in three public spaces in Gandhi Vas

Figure 3: Age and gender tally of people spending time in public spaces in Gandhi Vas (by author)

Map activities

Gehl and Svarre (2013, p. 24) describe activity mapping as plotting the activities of stationary people and where they take place. As described above, I was typically greeted enthusiastically by children who would accompany me through the settlement until they reached the boundaries of their community, after which they would go no further - a vivid illustration of the symbolic inside/outside distinctions discussed earlier, enacted not through physical barriers but through deeply held social convention. The longer I spent in the settlements the more I became a familiar face, disrupting everyday life less. However, my presence continued to influence the number and behaviour of residents in public space and required methodological adaptation as described in the previous section. Figure 4 shows an example of the resulting mapped public space activity in Gandhi Vas at 9am in February 2018. The process demonstrated that people were not the only significant public space users: cows, goats, dogs, birds, turtles, and chickens all play essential roles in the life of settlement residents for religious (cows), productive (goats and chickens), social (birds and turtles), and protective (dogs) reasons, something that redevelopments typically ignore. All counts and activity maps therefore include the location of animals alongside people, reflecting a conception of public life that extends beyond human users.



Figure 4: map of people and animal activities in a neighbourhood street in Gandhi Vas in 2018 (by author)

Trace movements

Gehl and Svarre (2013, p. 24) describe the tracing method as drawing lines of movement on a plan to record how people cross or move through a defined space. In many public spaces in Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas, spaces were so narrow or intensively used that tracing produced cluttered, difficult-to-read data. However, overlaying movement traces with age and gender revealed findings that speak directly to the relational and culturally embedded character of public life. Figure 5 shows men spending time away from dwellings and women remaining in or near their home territory - a spatial expression of the symbolic inside/outside distinction, in which women socialise largely while working within or adjacent to the home, while men leave the settlement daily for work and socialise away from home.



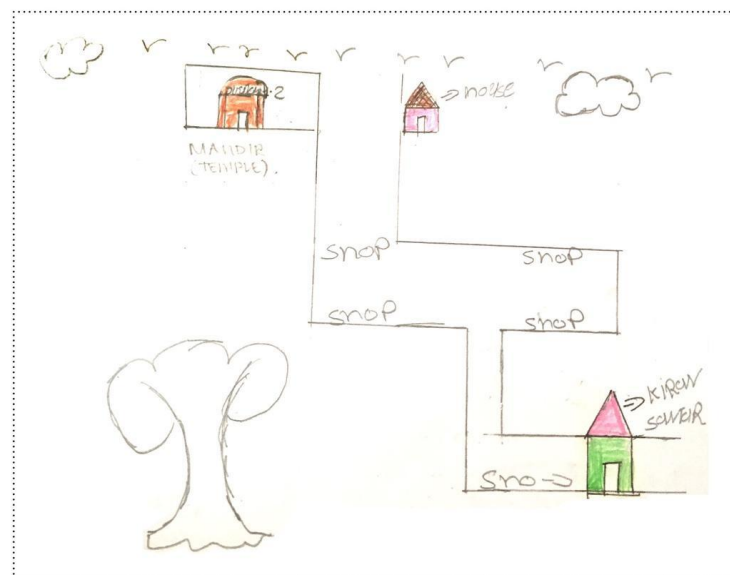
Figure 5: map of people's movements on a neighbourhood street in Ramapir No Tekro between 6-6.15pm on September 12, 2017 (by author)

Children typically spend time on their family's *otla* (front porch) or in the open space immediately in front of their homes, chatting with family, playing marbles, or climbing on pedal rickshaws parked in the street. Tracing children's movements revealed that children as young as three or four regularly ventured beyond the direct visibility of their family home. Every household on the street was known to one another, and children were effectively cared for by the entire community. Klinenberg (2018) and Simone (2004) describe this as infrastructure: safety and care produced not through physical design but through the dense web of mutual familiarity and interdependence that sustains everyday life. As children grew older, however, this shared mobility diverged sharply along gender lines: the range of girls remained restricted to the immediate neighbourhood and nearby

shops or temples, while boys increasingly ventured further. Tracing made this pattern visible across both settlements, demonstrating the gendered use of public space and the nuanced ways in which nearby spaces are conceptualised and claimed.

Walking with residents

Gehl and Svarre (2013, p. 24) describe tracking as discreetly following people without their knowledge, or following someone who has agreed to be observed, to record movement across a large area or over time. In the intimate setting of an informal settlement, tracking without consent would have been both ethically untenable and practically impossible. Instead, walking with residents through the settlements became a method of participatory spatial learning. Conversations during these walks revealed an insider spatial vocabulary that proved essential to understanding how public space was conceptualised and navigated: warnings such as “we don't go down there because of the dogs” - a common explanation for avoiding another group's local street territory, where stray dogs fed and sometimes adopted by households served a protective function, barking and occasionally biting when strangers entered - mapped social boundaries that were invisible on any plan. Residents' preference, it emerged, was to walk along main streets and use local streets only within their own housing cluster or territory.



Map from home to community centre drawn in Gandhi Vas by 5th-grade student not to scale

Figure 6: map of route taken from home to Kiran Centre drawn by a 10-year-old living in Gandhi Vas

Photography walks and drawing activities with children at community centres, such as the example shown in Figure 6, further revealed that navigation through the settlement occurred primarily through landmarks such as shops, trees, temples, friends' houses. This is consistent with broader patterns of wayfinding in traditional Indian settlements, where landmarks and conversation, rather than maps or street grids, orient movement (Ahmed, 2015). Frameworks that privilege measurable form are therefore limited and must be

adapted to capture the relational and embodied spatial knowledge accumulated through lived experience.

Look for traces

Gehl and Svarre (2013, p. 24) describe traces as the residues of human activity (litter, worn grass, dirt patches) that give the observer information about city life. In informal Indian settlements, reading traces requires a prior act of cultural interpretation. The transition between house interior and public space in Gujarat is typically mediated by a raised plinth or uncovered porch called an *otla* that functions simultaneously as a surveillance position, a workspace, and a site of neighbourly interaction (Marnane, 2023). The *otla* allows family members to participate in neighbourhood life and receive visitors without those visitors entering the home, occupying a territory that is neither fully private nor fully public, with boundaries defined by social convention and occupation (Abraham, 2010, p. 200). In an informal context where dwellings are small, this threshold becomes even more significant as open space is routinely used as an extension of the home, and the traces of domestic life extend outward accordingly (Kamalipour, 2016; Hernandez-Garcia, 2012, p. 95).



Figure 7: plan of a local street in Gandhi Vas showing traces of human activity (by author)

Figure 7 shows traces of washing-up water in the street, lines of drying clothes, piles of stored materials, bicycles and rickshaws parked along pathways, *khatlos* (timber and rope beds) stored outside, shoes left at thresholds, and water storage barrels. These traces are legible signs of how domestic and public life interpenetrate. Mapping these traces

comparatively across different spaces in Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas reveals the texture of street life and the considerable variation in how different public spaces are inhabited and claimed (see Table I for analysis of this data).

Interview women

Observational methods - counting, mapping, tracing, tracking - record what is visible in public space, but they cannot access the meanings, histories, and social relationships through which residents understand and value the spaces they inhabit. Interviews are therefore an essential complement, and the choice of who to interview is itself a methodological and political decision. In Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas, women were the primary interviewees for both practical and theoretical reasons. As a woman researcher, it was most appropriate for me to interview women, together with a woman translator. More than this, women are the primary managers of domestic and community life in these settlements, spending most of their time in and around the home and consequently possessing the most detailed and longitudinal understanding of how those spaces function, change, and are contested over time. Their knowledge is precisely the kind of situated, accumulated, relational knowledge that this paper argues evaluation frameworks must find ways to register. Interviewing women also responded directly to the intimate scalar character of public space in these settlements: unlike the more anonymous public spaces of formal urban areas, neighbourhood and local streets in Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas are locally governed through community relationships, and women are central to that governance in ways that are rarely visible from the outside. In an interview in January 2026, Ushaben explained the differences in public space between Ramapir No Tekro and the redevelopment, moving from small, local spaces named after landmarks for each community or cluster of housing to one large precinct without unique identifiers:

That whole area will now be called Pradhan Mantri Aavaaz Yojna, Vadaj, and then Sector 1, 2, 3, 4. No Ramapir No Tekro, no [local names for each community, like] Baryadev Mandir Chali, and those landmarks... the mandir [temple] has gone ... all of that is gone, and now there will be possibly just the one mandir for that entire space... Before all the roads, the gulleys, were named after a mandir or a god, which were landmarks, right? and so now that won't be there. – Ushaben, 17 January 2026

Photograph

Gehl and Svarre (2013, p. 24) describe photography as an essential part of public life studies, documenting situations where urban life and built form either interact or fail to interact. In most formal urban contexts, the ethics of photographing people in public space are governed by relatively settled conventions of anonymity and consent. In India, no rules regarding photography in public places were in force at the time of data collection in 2017 and 2018 (although drone use was illegal), but the intimate scalar relationship between public and private space in informal settlements meant that the ethical stakes of photography were considerably more complex than legislation alone could resolve. The University of Queensland Human Research Ethics Committee classified residents as a vulnerable cohort requiring augmented protections, specifying that all human data, including photographic material, be anonymised before storage or

publication, through taking photographs without people present, blurring faces, or converting images to line drawings. This requirement sits in tension with residents' pride and enthusiasm for photographs and acknowledgement, a phenomenon also reflected in Anne Grinyer's work (2002). Anonymisation felt like erasure rather than protection, another potential act rendering informal settlement life invisible or illegitimate. In practice, the conflict was resolved by relying primarily on drawings rather than photographs to document how people use the built environment, preserving the analytical value of visual documentation while complying with ethical research standards. Photographs that are published, such as Figures 1, 8 and 9, capture public space and public life without identifying individuals. This remains an unresolved methodological challenge for future research to genuinely align with how residents wish to be seen and recorded, representing another question around the right to the city.

Keep a diary

Gehl and Svarre (2013, p. 24) describe the diary as a method for registering and categorising the details and nuances of the interaction between public life and space. In the context of this study, the diary was considerably more than a data management tool. My diary was a methodological space in which I continuously refined my approach and honestly examined my positionality. Each evening during fieldwork, observations and reflections were recorded using a template adapted from Chiseri-Strater and Sunstein (1997) and Skelton (2001), covering the weather, sensory impressions (sights, sounds, textures, smells, taste), behaviours and interactions between people, conversation snippets and summaries, and insider language. This sensory and linguistic attentiveness helped me understand cultural meaning carried through social convention, embodied practice, spoken idiom, and physical form. Each diary entry included reflection on how my presence may have influenced events, what had gone wrong, how methods might be adapted, how I felt about the day, and how my relationships were being acknowledged and incorporated. This attempted to enact the situated, self-aware position that Haraway (1988) and Tuhiwai Smith (2022) argue is a condition of ethical and epistemologically honest inquiry. The lives of informal settlement residents can be extraordinarily difficult, and field notes also provided an opportunity to process strong or lingering emotional responses to what I was witnessing, acknowledging myself as a person in relationship with the community I was learning from. Notes on emerging themes, questions for future investigation, specific follow-up actions, and a daily record of digital files collected meant the diary also functioned as an analytical anchor, helping to categorise and quantify public life observations and connect them to the wider body of data being gathered. The diary embodies an evaluation approach that is sustained, situated, and attentive to becoming, difference, and lived experience.

Triangulation

Triangulation across the PSPL methods described above resulted in inductively identifying the four public space types presented in this paper: public streets, neighbourhood streets, local streets, and shared yards (see Table 1). Initial spatial categories emerged from systematic observation and activity mapping, which revealed consistent patterns in who used which spaces, for what purposes, and at what times. These patterns were then

tested against physical documentation, resident accounts gathered through accompanied walks and interviews, and traces of long-term use. Thresholds between categories were not determined by metric dimensions but by observable changes in the social character of space: who was present, what activities were occurring, and how residents themselves described and navigated transitions between territories, including the informal boundary markers discussed in the cultural context section above, such as changes in surface material, maintenance levels, and the presence or absence of threshold spaces such as the *otla*. The typology was further refined through comparison with Correa's (1999) graduated spectrum of open-to-sky spaces from collective gathering spaces to intimate domestic courtyards in traditional Indian settlements and with the building traditions analysis identifying the continuity of Gujarati spatial organisation in informal settlement form (see Marnane and O'Rourke, 2024). The resulting typology is therefore neither purely empirical nor purely theoretical: it is an interpretive framework grounded in observed practice and refined through historical and cultural comparison.

Table 1: Public space types in Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas

Public space type	Material Conditions	Use	Typical building frontage	Street lighting
Public streets	Unpaved, often strewn with rubbish and waste water	Public circulation thoroughfare, vehicle parking, commercial activity	Shops, temples, dwellings, industry, schools, blank walls	Sometimes street lighting installed by the government
Neighbourhood streets	Unpaved, cleanliness maintained by local households	Circulation by settlement or neighbourhood residents	Dwellings, temples, small shops, fences, blank walls, schools	Sometimes street lighting installed by the government or NGOs
Local streets	Maintained by local households. Often paved by residents, non-government organisations (NGO), or from successful application to government	Multifunctional for circulation, household chores, work, play, leisure and cultural activities, used almost exclusively by local households	Dwellings, temples, small shops	Occasionally street lighting installed by residents, NGOs, or from successful application to government
Shared yards	May be paved or unpaved, maintained by local households.	Exclusive use by local households for household chores, work, play, leisure and cultural activities, separated from public by gate or	Dwellings	Lighting installed by residents

other barrier but
often visible from
public space.

Evaluation Framework

Table 2 synthesises the adapted methods described above into a transferable evaluation framework, structured to inform pre-intervention assessment of public space value in informal settlements as an adaptation of PSPL studies.

Table 2: Evaluation Framework for Public Space in Informal Settlements

Framework element	Content
Evaluation purpose	To assess the relational, social, caring, economic, temporal, environmental, identity, and political value of public space in informal settlements prior to redevelopment or upgrading interventions, where standard indicator-based tools are structurally inadequate to register what residents value most.
Evaluation questions	What types of public space exist and how are they distinguished by social character rather than physical form alone? Who uses which spaces, for what purposes, and under what social and cultural conditions? What value do residents attach to these spaces and through what practices and relationships is that value produced? What are the risks to existing social infrastructure posed by proposed interventions?
Units of analysis	Settlement-scale spatial network and circulation; public space type (street, yard, threshold); social interface between space types; individual user (disaggregated by age, gender, species). Interactions between scales are as analytically significant as a single unit.
Data inputs	Ethical foundation (relationship-building, community explanation of research purpose, volunteering); base maps (aerial photography, ground-truthing, 3D scanning); counts of people and animals (combined with mapping); video-walk activity mapping; movement traces (disaggregated by age and gender); accompanied walks with residents (insider spatial vocabulary, boundary knowledge); cultural reading of traces; interviews with women; ethically anonymised photography; field diary (reflexive daily record).
Analytic steps	(1) Add layered data to base maps across scales and analyse for patterns. (2) Cross-reference activity maps, movement traces, and resident accounts to identify consistent patterns in who uses which spaces and for what purposes. (3) Confirm socio-spatial boundaries through physical markers (surface changes, maintenance levels, threshold spaces) without allowing them to determine classification. (4) Test typology against historical and cultural comparison to distinguish locally specific from transferable patterns. (5) Apply eight value dimensions to each space type as an analytic lens, operationalised through specific data inputs (see Table 3). (6) Assess each space type

	through the question: what would be lost if this space were removed or reconfigured?
Outputs	Settlement-scale maps of public space types and networks; activity and movement maps disaggregated by age, gender, and species; inductively derived typology of public space types defined by relational depth, social character, and use; value assessment for each space type across eight dimensions; policy implications summary identifying spaces and practices most at risk from proposed interventions.
Decisions informed	Redevelopment design: which spatial types and scales must be retained or replicated to preserve social infrastructure. Relocation: what cannot be transferred to a new site and therefore constitutes irreversible loss. Governance: what informal community governance structures underpin spatial safety and maintenance, and how these can be supported rather than replaced. Service provision: where infrastructure investment can strengthen rather than disrupt existing spatial ecologies.
Conditions of application	Applicable at the pre-design stage of any upgrading or redevelopment intervention in informal settlements. Requires sustained community engagement prior to data collection (minimum 3 months recommended). Researcher positionality must be acknowledged and managed throughout. Outputs are intended to complement rather than replace technical infrastructure assessments. Cultural context must be understood before spatial categories are applied or assumed. Best practice would include residents as data collectors or research leaders.

Discussion

Public space is a vital resource for the wellbeing of any community, and particularly for marginalised communities like Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas. It is here, in the public realm, that connections between neighbours are made and community resilience is built (Marnane and Hall, 2026). Public spaces accommodate children's play, cultural celebrations, economic activity, household chores, and are frequently used as extensions of the home in a context where dwellings are small. Streets and yards are surrounded by dwellings for ongoing mutual surveillance and shaded by buildings or large trees, providing climatic relief in the arid conditions of Ahmedabad. Yet not all documented activities are found in all public spaces. Public space networks are found to comprise approximately four spatial types based on materiality and use, as described in Table 1. Visible markers of transition between types typically include street signs, changes in floor material, levels of maintenance, and the types of activities taking place. Figures 8 and 9 document public space types in the study areas of Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas respectively.



Figure 8: Map and photographs of public space types open to the sky in Ramapir No Tekro study area (by author)

The four types of public space – public streets, neighbourhood streets, local streets, and shared yards – are not simply a taxonomic finding of physical characteristics. Each type is primarily distinguished by who uses it, for what purpose, and the depth of social relationship it supports. More social activities were observed in shared yards and local streets, where the relationship between dwellings and public space affords residents greater opportunity to build neighbourhood social ties while carrying out domestic, economic, and leisure activities simultaneously. These spaces correspond closely to what Clare Cooper Marcus (2003, p. 35) defines as “shared outdoor space” located adjacent to dwellings, offering a buffer zone between shared and private territory, and providing for

children's needs. They support what Michael Brill (2001) distinguishes as community life: a spatially defined social relationship between family, friends, and neighbours that is distinct from, but commonly confused with, public life.



Figure 9: Map and photographs of public space types open to the sky in Gandhi Vas study area (by author)

Public streets and neighbourhood streets supported more fixed livelihood activities (recycling, manufacturing, barber shops, etc.) with corner stores operating from every other street corner, and street vendors travelled to local streets and shared yards. Both domestic and public spaces are sites of economic production and exchange. Chen et al.

(2016) found that home-based work represents 18% of urban employment and 23% of urban informal employment in India. In an informal context where families are living in poverty and under stress, opportunities to earn incomes and community bonds forged through social and economic activity are not amenities but necessities, providing access to capital, information, services, and emotional and material support that residents cannot obtain elsewhere (Unger and Powell, 1980, p. 571).

The nuances of public space types, what life they support, and why these matter for residents would not have been discovered without sustained, relational engagement with residents in Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas. Shared yards and local streets, including the *otla* mediating between them and the home, do not register as significant public spaces within standardised evaluation frameworks because they are organised through social relationships and cultural convention rather than the legible, designed amenity such frameworks are calibrated to see. Yet these small spaces are the primary sites of social production in these settlements: spaces of high social value sustaining critical practices of care that are gendered, generational, and invisible to frameworks privileging observable, countable activity (Lefebvre, 1991; Held, 2006). Their value cannot be transferred or replicated through design because it is constituted through relationships, histories, and over sixty years of collective spatial practice — making its destruction irreversible (Massey, 2005). Scott's (1998) concept of legibility is instructive: what is most valuable in these settlements is precisely what is least visible to the planning gaze, and this invisibility has direct policy consequences. Tapadia and colleagues (2025) found that 62% of households in Ahmedabad ISSR redevelopments report higher living costs and 41% report livelihood loss, which is a direct consequence of erasing the home-based economic activity, community governance, and shared spatial practices documented here. Table 3 outlines how these value dimensions are evidenced.

Table 3: Value dimensions and methods of evaluation

Methods to produce evidence	Evidence of the value dimension	Value Dimension	Theoretical framing
Traces + mapping + walking with residents + diary.	Activity maps disaggregated by age, gender, and species.	Social production, activity, interdependence, cultural celebration, and collective space making.	Social value: space as the medium through which social life is actively made, not merely the container in which it occurs (Lefebvre 1991).
Counting + tracing + drawing + walking with residents.	Movement maps disaggregated by age, gender, and species.	Gendered safety, mobility, children's autonomy, multi-species co-habitation.	Relational value: value as constituted through the specific, irreplaceable constellation of social relationships, histories, culture, and interdependencies

			that inhabit a space (Massey 2005).
Mapping + tracing + interviews + diary.	Activity maps disaggregated by age, gender, and species.	Elder care, child supervision, mutual surveillance, neighbourly support, shared domestic labour.	Caring value: Spatial infrastructure sustaining practices of care that are gendered and generational in character (Held 2005).
Mapping + traces + interviews + counting.	Settlement-scale maps locating economic activity; detailed community-scale plan with activity traces.	Home-based work, street vending, visiting wallahs, productive animals.	Economic value: Public space as workplace and site of exchange for informal livelihoods, through which households meet needs that formal systems do not provide (Chen et al 2016; Simone 2004).
Longitudinal drawing (2017, 2018, 2023, 2026) + photography + interviews + traces.	Community-scale plans and sections drawn over time.	Territorial expansion, incremental change.	Temporal value: Value accumulated through repeated inhabitation, seasonal rhythm, and generational memory, constituting place as always in process and never replicable (Ingold 2000; Massey 2005).
Drawing + traces + observation (time of day, season)	Community-scale plans and sections; detailed community-scale plan with activity traces.	Thermal comfort, shade, micro-climate.	Environmental value: thermal comfort as a spatial affordance enabling sustained occupation and public life, particularly in arid climates (Gehl 1987; Nikolopoulou and Steemers 2003).
Drawing + interviews + walking with residents	Settlement, community, and house scale plans and sections.	Landmarks, named territories, spatial narratives.	Identity value: the role of landmarks, spatial narratives, and named territories in constituting place identity and residents' sense of belonging (Lynch 1960).

Interviews + walking with residents + diary	Interview transcripts.	<i>Claim-making and visibility.</i>	Political value: public space as a site through which residents assert presence, exercise rights, and resist erasure (Lefebvre 1968; Harvey 2008; Bayat 1997)
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In Ahmedabad, policy describes informal settlements as “low-lying, insanitary, squalid and over-crowded...slum” areas that are “a source of danger to the health, safety or morals of the inhabitants or its neighbourhood” requiring “rehabilitation” (Government of Gujarat, 2013, p. 2). As Gilbert (2007, p. 706) argues, this language conflates infrastructure deficiency with residents' character, using the idiom of illegality to legitimise eviction and redevelopment. Roy's (2009) analysis shows how this illegibility is produced by frameworks that selectively withhold recognition from the building practices of the urban poor. Standardised mass housing redevelopments may improve tenure security and infrastructure access, but can risk replacing the graduated spectrum of intimate, semi-public, and neighbourhood spaces with an undifferentiated public realm scaled to hundreds of families rather than the six to ten households that share a local street or yard. Vaid (2021) observed that precisely this absence of intimate public space in an Ahmedabad redevelopment produced a loss of control, ownership, and maintenance outside the home, eroding the community life those spaces had sustained. By designating informal spatial practices as pathologies, the state justifies measures that normalise urban space while destroying the social infrastructure, economic opportunity, and community agency within it (Chen et al., 2016), what Lefebvre (1968) and Harvey (2008) would recognise as a violation of residents' right to shape their city.

Gender compounds these consequences significantly. As the methodology section showed, the conceptual distinction between inside and outside space, rather than the Western planning categories of public and private, determines which spaces are considered safe and appropriate for women, girls, and young children. Local streets and shared yards fall within the conceptual territory of inside space, and it is here that women conduct home-based economic activities, supervise children, and build the social ties that sustain household and community life. In redevelopments where residents are moved into apartments with no porch thresholds and no shared outdoor spaces, these activities become difficult or impossible: operating a shop, pursuing livelihood activities from home, owning productive animals, or carrying out household chores while supervising children cannot be accommodated within a 25 square metre apartment opening onto an undifferentiated corridor. This follows Singh's (2010) study, which found that public space is important for developing social ties beyond the family but, depending on type and location, is frequently less accessible for adolescent girls and young women. Patel et al. (2020) similarly note that redevelopment routinely overlooks the interactions between gender, the built environment, and climate resilience. The loss of inside public space is not only a loss of amenity: it is a loss of the spatial conditions through which women exercise agency, generate income, and participate in community governance.

Jennifer Robinson (2006) challenges the marginalising binaries of developed/developing, formal/informal, planned/unplanned through which cities are routinely assessed, and calls for approaches that recognise all cities as ordinary places: dynamic, diverse, and conflicted arenas for social and economic life. This study responds to that call directly. Undertaking a PSPL study in Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas reveals informal settlements as ordinary parts of cities with problems, strengths, and possibilities embedded in their urban fabric. The four public space types identified here are not evidence of planning failure but of planning of a different kind: the incremental, collectively negotiated spatial organisation that Dovey et al. (2020) recognise as a prevalent and sophisticated form of urbanisation. Recognising this requires rethinking what we evaluate, why, and how. Public space evaluation, this study argues, should be conceptualised as a critical practice of care: one that must remain open to the spatial logics, cultural meanings, and social relationships that residents themselves produce. In Lefebvre's terms, the right to the city is not only a right to inhabit urban space, it is a right to have that inhabitation recognised, valued, and protected by the frameworks through which cities are known and governed. Extending that recognition to informal settlements, and to the public spaces within them that sustain life in conditions of poverty, is the practical and political work to which this paper contributes.

Conclusion

Informal settlement is a process driven by residents' desires for access to employment, education, and affordable housing pursued through incremental, collective, and deeply resourceful acts of urban making. With the global population of informal settlements expected to reach two billion people by 2050 (United Nations Population Division, 2018), informally produced urban environments will increasingly become the foundation for permanent city-making rather than temporary conditions awaiting formalisation. The frameworks through which we evaluate, plan, and intervene in these environments therefore carry consequences of enormous scale. This paper has argued that evaluation frameworks developed in formal, planned urban contexts require adaptation to register what is most valuable in informal settlements, not because informal settlements are deficient, but because the frameworks were designed for a different context. Seeking instant solutions to complex urban conditions based on assumptions about the built environment risks damaging precisely the public spaces, social ties, and economic livelihoods that constitute the major assets of the urban poor.

The adapted PSPL study conducted in Ramapir No Tekro and Gandhi Vas demonstrates what becomes visible when evaluation is grounded in sustained, relational, culturally situated engagement. Four types of public space were identified - public streets, neighbourhood streets, local streets, and shared yards - defined by who uses them, for what purpose, and the depth of social relationship they support, as well as their physical characteristics. The more intimate spaces of shared yards and local streets were found to sustain the development of social ties within multigenerational and multifamily clusters of six to twenty households: the scale at which interconnectedness, child supervision, home-based economic activity, and mutual care become possible. These qualities, in conditions of poverty and marginalisation, are as critical to residents' wellbeing and resilience as any formally provided service. Redevelopment models that replace this graduated spatial ecology with undifferentiated mass housing do not merely alter the built environment, they

sever the social and economic relationships that residents have built over lifetimes and generations, and that no standardised indicator is currently designed to measure or protect.

For researchers and practitioners working in comparable contexts, the adapted methods described in this paper - beginning with an ethical foundation, drawing space at multiple scales, combining counting with activity mapping, tracing movement by age and gender, walking with residents, reading traces through cultural knowledge, interviewing women, maintaining a field diary, and triangulating - constitute a replicable protocol for public space evaluation under informality. Taken together, they operationalise a shift from legibility-based assessment to situated, relational evaluation: one that attends to who uses space, for what purposes, under what social conditions, and with what accumulated meaning. The value dimensions proposed - social, relational, caring, economic, temporal, environmental, identity, and political value - provide an evaluative framework that can be adapted to local conditions while remaining grounded in the theoretical arguments advanced here.

This study's methodological contribution is inseparable from its empirical one. The adaptations made to Gehl and Svarre's PSPL toolkit were practical and enacted a different evaluative approach that treats knowledge as situated rather than universal. This positions residents as experts in their own environments rather than subjects of observation, and public space as a process of becoming rather than a fixed condition to be measured. This stance, as Haraway (1988) and Tuhiwai Smith (2022) argue, is both critical and rigorous, directly resulting in the nuances of public space type, use, and meaning documented in this study. These findings contribute to debates about how public space evaluation frameworks might evolve to support sustainable and equitable urban futures. They suggest that the perceived value of public space in informal settlements cannot be separated from the social relationships, cultural meanings, and long-term patterns of use through which it is produced, and that evaluation frameworks aspiring to register this value must be flexible, locally grounded, and open to adaptation.

Future public space–public life studies in informal settlements would benefit from residents' knowledge and could be conducted more ethically and effectively by residents themselves, on their own terms (Patel, 2016). Resident-led research – preferably as paid employment – would develop transferable skills, demonstrate that residents are invested stakeholders with a right to shape the transformation of their own neighbourhoods, and capture forms of spatial knowledge that outsiders, however long we spend in the field, may never fully access. More broadly, as the planet urbanises at a pace that formal planning systems cannot match, the imperative to understand informal settlement not as a problem but as a resource becomes increasingly urgent. From studying informality we can understand how people build community, sustain livelihoods, care for one another, and live with dignity under conditions of scarcity. We can identify opportunities to connect the 1.1 billion people living in informal settlements into wider city networks and celebrate their meaningful contributions to city life (UN-Habitat, 2012). Public space evaluation has a critical role to play in that project, but only if it remains genuinely open to the difference, complexity, and becoming that informal urban life embodies.

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