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# Spatial Dialogues.
## Rethinking Public Space Evaluation in Post-Apartheid Cape Town

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**Abstract**
Public space evaluation commonly relies on measurable indicators of accessibility, activity, comfort, safety, and spatial performance, but often gives limited attention to relational, affective, and historically situated dimensions of lived experience. Drawing on spatial justice, relational, and affect theory, this paper introduces Spatial Dialogues as a relational, evaluative framework for understanding public space through reciprocal exchanges among Self, People, and Space, and Spatial Dialogues Mapping as an exploratory tool for operationalising these relations using criteria, survey responses, and radar-chart visualisation. The framework is tested through Bree Street Sundays, a recurring car-free street experiment in Cape Town's inner city led by Young Urbanists South Africa, understood as an intermittent public-space and tactical-urbanism intervention. Drawing on participant responses, the findings indicate that the intervention produced a strongly positive public-space experience, particularly regarding comfort, enjoyment, social interaction, and collective welcome. However, these positive atmospheres did not fully translate into stronger perceptions of agency, historical connection, or long-term spatial transformation.

**Keywords:** public space evaluation, spatial dialogues, spatial justice, apartheid spatial planning, street experiments

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## 1. Introduction

Public space evaluation systematically assesses how spaces function and are experienced, with the aim of creating more inclusive urban environments through planning, design, and management (Carmona, 2019). Core concerns typically include safety, accessibility, activity, comfort, and environmental performance. While these elements yield important insights into the functional and physical qualities of space, they often overlook the emotional, historical, and relational dimensions through which public space is understood and lived.

In cities like Cape Town, shaped by enduring histories of spatial injustice, this limitation becomes particularly significant. Long after formal segregation ended, the legacy of apartheid on spatial planning continues to shape access to opportunities and amenities, urban mobility patterns, and feelings of belonging in specific areas (Turok, 2001; Harrison et al., 2008). In such contexts, public spaces are embedded in broader socio-spatial realities and are defined as much by experiences of identity, agency, memory, and social inclusion as by their physical attributes. Similar dynamics are evident in many cities across the Global South, where contemporary urban life remains conditioned by past exclusionary systems.

This paper argues that although traditional evaluation frameworks are valuable, they often fail to capture the complex qualities of public space. It introduces *Spatial Dialogues*, a relational framework that conceptualises public space as a network of interactions among the self, others, and the environment. Grounded in relational spatial theory and debates on spatial justice, it foregrounds often-neglected aspects such as identity, belonging, agency, and memory.

To operationalise this framework, the paper proposes *Spatial Dialogues Mapping*, an exploratory participatory tool that translates these relational aspects into quantifiable criteria and visual representations. The framework and tool are explored through the case of Bree Street Sundays, a recurring car-free street event in Cape Town's inner city, offering an initial contribution towards more context-aware methods for assessing public spaces in cities marked by persistent socio-spatial inequalities.

## 2. Evaluating Public Space in Post-Apartheid Contexts

### *2.1 Existing Evaluation Frameworks*

Public space can be evaluated using various existing frameworks that emphasise different aspects of spatial performance and urban life. The Project for Public Spaces (PPS) Place Diagram, for example, uses participatory assessments, surveys, and observational studies across four dimensions: comfort and image, sociability, access and linkages, and uses and activities (PPS, 2022). Similarly, Gehl's Public Life Studies focus on understanding how people use public space by mapping movement patterns, pedestrian behaviour, and social activities, as well as through systematic observation (Gehl, 2011). Another example is the UN-Habitat's public space indicators, which evaluate inclusivity, governance, accessibility, and safety through spatial analysis, policy-oriented metrics and surveys (UN-Habitat, 2015). There is also Carmona's Place Quality framework, which examines the social, environmental, and managerial dimensions of place through a more integrated approach that mixes methods, including surveys, audits, stakeholder engagement and observation (Carmona, 2019).

Most of these frameworks, and others available, provide valuable insights into how public spaces perform, but they primarily assess measurable outcomes and observable conditions. Although some incorporate social dimensions, their emphasis remains largely on patterns of use, functional performance, and physical characteristics. Consequently, they offer limited means for examining how individuals and communities negotiate belonging, construct meaning, exercise agency, or relate to the symbolic and historical dimensions of space. In cities shaped by enduring spatial inequalities, these relational dynamics are particularly significant, as public space functions not only as physical infrastructure but also as a site of social negotiation, identity, and memory.

### *2.2 The Post-Apartheid Condition*

In South Africa, apartheid spatial planning deliberately organised cities through racial segregation, restricted access to economic opportunities and unequal resource allocation (Turok, 2001). Despite apartheid's formal end in 1994, many of its spatial effects persist through patterns of land ownership, access to public space, service provision, and urban mobility, producing what may be described as a post-apartheid urban condition (Harrison et al., 2008).

In this paper, the term *post-apartheid* is presented as an analytical lens rather than solely a historical designation and is analysed through the South African context. Similar to Cape Town, other cities like Luanda, Nairobi, Lagos, and many others carry inherited socio-spatial inequalities produced by colonialism, displacement, exclusionary governance, uneven development, and segregation. In this sense, post-apartheid urbanism refers to contexts where contemporary urban experiences continue to be shaped by historical systems of spatial exclusion.

### *2.3 What Existing Tools Miss*

Existing evaluation frameworks often struggle to capture the historical, affective and relational dimensions of public space, despite its efficiency in mapping other criteria, such as physical quality, activity and accessibility, which are usually prioritised over experiences of identity, belonging, agency and memory. Given that affective and emotional dimensions of public space - the ways people connect, feel, remember, and negotiate space - are not easy to document.

However, this does not diminish the value of existing frameworks; rather, it highlights the need for complementary approaches capable of capturing dimensions of public space quality that are particularly relevant in contexts shaped by enduring socio-spatial inequalities.

## 3. Theoretical Foundations of Spatial Dialogues

### *3.1 Spatial Justice, Relational Space and Affect Theory*

The Spatial Dialogues framework is grounded in three complementary bodies of literature: *spatial justice, relational theories of space, and affect studies,* which provide a basis for deepening understanding of public space as a political, relational and experiential process rather than simply a physical setting or public amenity.

These arguments suggest that evaluating public space requires as much attention to the experiences, meanings, and relationships held within space as to observable patterns of use and physical performance.

Table 1. Comparison of Existing Public Space Evaluation Approaches
*Note: Table created by the Author*

| Framework | Method | Main Focus | What It Misses |
|---|---|---|---|
| **PPS Place Diagram** | Participatory assessment, surveys and observation | Access, sociability, activity and comfort | Sense of place and belonging, identity, and collective memory |
| **Gehl Public Life Studies** | Observation, pedestrian counts and behavioural mapping | Public life, human behaviour and movement patterns | Emotional connections, perceptions of exclusion, and historical meanings of a place |
| **UN-Habitat Public Space Indicators** | Policy indicators, spatial analysis and surveys | Inclusivity, accessibility, governance and safety | Everyday lived experiences, local narratives, agency, and the social meanings attached to space |
| **Carmona Place Quality Framework** | Observation, surveys, audits and stakeholder engagement | Holistic place performance across multiple domains | Relational and affective dimensions of place, memory, identity, and negotiated experiences of space |

### 3.1.1 Space is Political

Lefebvre (1991) argues that space is socially produced rather than passively occupied. As he states, *"(social) space is a (social) product"* (Lefebvre, 1991, p.26), suggesting that space both reproduces and reflects broader social relations. Furthermore, Soja (2010, p.1) argues that *"justice has a geography"* and that the spatial organisation of cities actively contributes to the production and reproduction of inequality.
Therefore, spatial justice theory can help us shift our attention from the aesthetic qualities of space to the distribution of resources, opportunities, and experiences across space. In essence, public space cannot be separated from everyday urban life, which is still shaped by contemporary and historical geographies of exclusion, particularly in contexts such as Cape Town.

### 3.1.2 Space is Relational

While spatial justice highlights the political dimensions of space, relational theories help us understand how social interaction is fundamental to the evolving and subjective

nature of space. In her seminal work, *For Space,* Massey argues that space should be understood as:

> *"The product of interrelations; as constituted through interactions, from the immensity of the global to the intimately tiny"*
> *(Massey, 2005, p. 9)*

Space is therefore not complete or fixed but is constantly produced through encounters among people, institutions, histories, and material conditions. Similarly, de Certeau (1984) argues that planned environments can be transformed into lived spaces through use, interpretation, and everyday practices such as walking, gathering, and occupying space.
Public space can therefore be understood as an ongoing negotiation rather than a stable physical object.

#### 3.1.2 Space is Affective

Affect theory expands this understanding by recognising that space is not only produced and negotiated but also *felt*. Ahmed (2004, p. 11) states that emotions *"shape the very surfaces of bodies, which take shape through the repetition of actions over time,"* suggesting that feelings of attachment, exclusion, belonging or comfort emerge through repeated encounters between people and places. Additionally, Anderson (2009) similarly describes affect as the atmosphere through which people collectively experience and respond to environments.

### *3.2 Defining Spatial Dialogues*

Drawing on these foundations, this paper defines *Spatial Dialogues* as the reciprocal and dynamic relationships through which individuals, social groups, and spatial conditions continuously shape, negotiate, and interpret one another.
The concept of dialogue is used not to describe verbal communication but processes of mutual influence and co-production. People shape space through their presence, memories, practices, and claims to belonging, while space shapes people by constraining, enabling, discouraging, or encouraging social relations and particular experiences.
Spatial Dialogues therefore understands public space as a field of ongoing exchange. Individuals are in dialogue with space through their experiences and perceptions; people are in dialogue with one another through encounters and collective forms of belonging; and communities are in dialogue with space through processes of access, memory, agency and appropriation. Rather than evaluating space solely through observable indicators, Spatial Dialogues proposes that the quality of public space can also be understood through these relational exchanges.

## 4. Developing the Spatial Dialogues Framework

In response to the theory, design experimentation and the context of public space and tactical urbanism advocacy in Cape Town, the Spatial Dialogues framework was developed through an iterative process with the purpose of complementing existing public space evaluation frameworks by documenting the historical, affective and

relational dimensions of public space experience that are often difficult to capture with conventional indicators.

Table 2. Forms of Spatial Dialogue
*Note: Table created by the Author*

| **Form of Spatial Dialogue** | **What Is in Dialogue?** | **What It Reveals** |
|---|---|---|
| **Self ↔ Space** | The individual and the spatial environment | How people interpret, experience, and emotionally respond to public space. |
| **People ↔ People** | Users sharing the same space | How public space enables encounter, interaction, exclusion or coexistence. |
| **People ↔ Space** | Users and the social, physical, and symbolic conditions of the space | How people access, shape, occupy, or feel constrained by public space. |
| **Past ↔ Present** | Historical memory and contemporary use | How histories of exclusion, memory, and identity remain visible, are reinterpreted, or are erased. |
| **Temporary ↔ Long-term** | Temporary activations and longer-term urban transformation | How short-term interventions reveal possibilities and limits for lasting change. |
| **Formal ↔ Informal** | Planned design or governance and everyday user practices | How official intentions interact with informal, spontaneous, or user-led occupation. |

### *4.1 From Contextual Themes to Relational Dimensions*

The first iteration emerged from a broader inquiry into how public space experiences could be documented beyond observable use, activity levels, and physical form. The initial framework, instead of relying on fixed performance indicators, sought to capture how people feel, interpret, relate to, attach meaning to, and occupy public space, informed by the theoretical foundations that guided its conception.
The initial mapping tool was therefore organised around *four core themes: Belonging and Identity, Interaction and Encounter, Power and Access,* and *Meaning and Memory*.

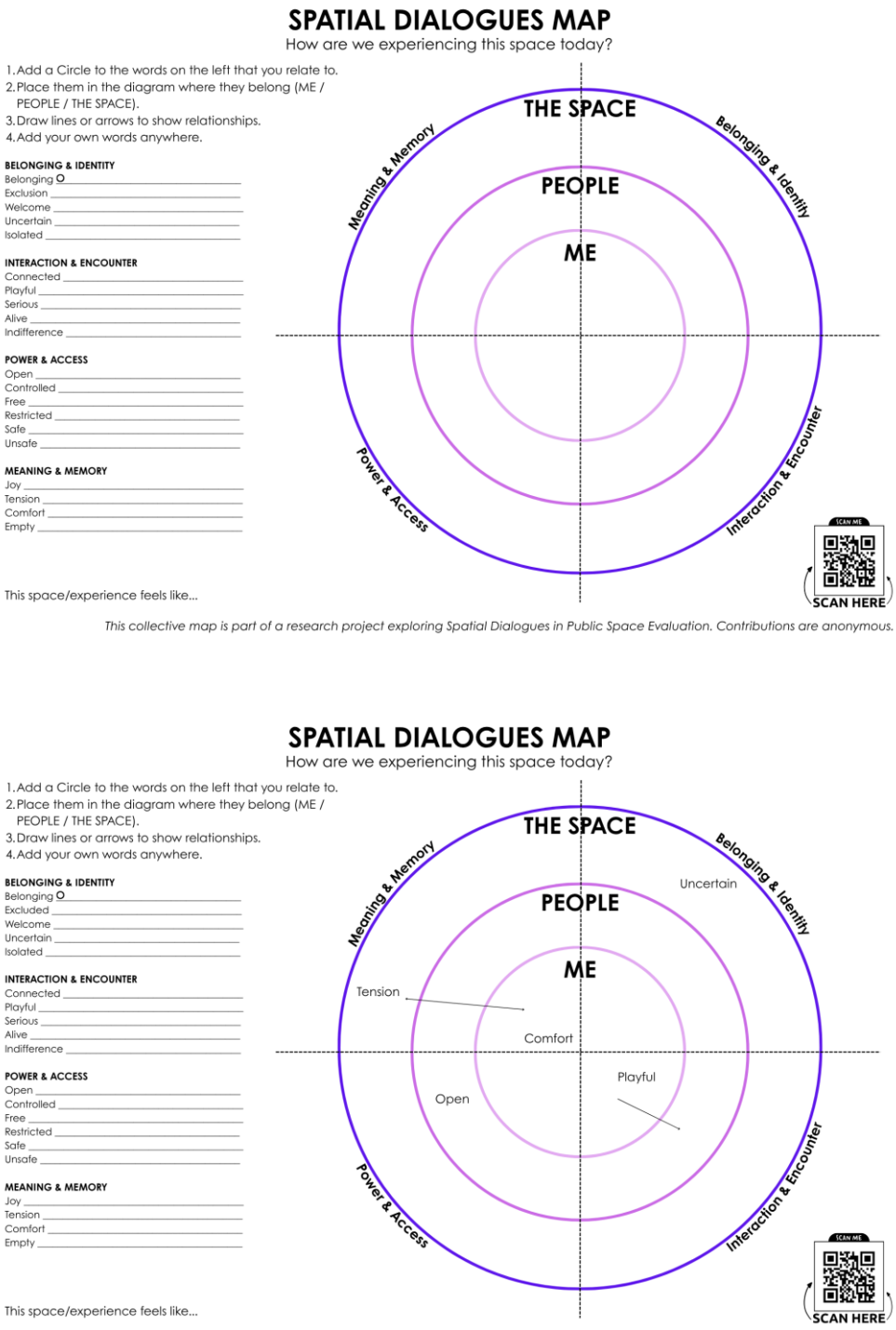






Figure 1. First iteration of the Spatial Dialogues Map.

*Note: Participatory mapping tool organised around four thematic dimensions, used to explore how people locate emotions, perceptions, and relationships within public space.*

*(Source: Author).*

Although this version encouraged open-ended reflection, the four categories often overlapped and were not easy to separate during the experimentation phase. The categories were too similar, and the emotions or experiences were too intertwined, making it difficult to fill in the sheet and process the data afterwards. The framework was therefore refined from four thematic areas into *three core relational dimensions:* Self, People, and Space.
These dimensions ask:

- How do individuals experience space?
- How do people relate to one another within space?
- How does the spatial environment enable, constrain, or carry these relationships?

### *4.2 Final Framework Structure*

The *Self* dimension captures individual experience through *three criteria:* Identity, Need**,** and Meaning.
*Identity* refers to whether users feel represented, recognised or able to see themselves in the space. *Need* assesses whether the space supports emotional and physical requirements such as safety, comfort, ease of use and rest. *Meaning* captures whether the space feels personally valuable, significant or enjoyable.
The *People* dimension focuses on social relations through *three criteria:* Interaction, Encounter, and Belonging.
*Interaction* refers to the felt or visible quality of social exchange. *Encounter* captures the possibility of different users having diverse or spontaneous contact. *Belonging* assesses whether the space is perceived both personally and collectively as inclusive and welcoming.
The *Space* dimension addresses symbolic and structural conditions through *three criteria:* Agency, Access, and Memory.
*Agency* refers to whether users feel able to shape, appropriate, and participate in the use of space. *Access* considers physical access and the social ease of entering, staying or moving through. *Memory* captures whether the space evokes history, cultural identity, continuity or collective meaning.

### *4.3 Spatial Dialogues Mapping Tool*

Consequently, to operationalise the framework, a *Spatial Dialogues Mapping* tool was developed to combine survey questions with visual mapping through a radar chart. Each of the nine criteria is rated on a six-point scale and plotted along a corresponding axis, allowing the results to form a visual profile of public space experience.
The output is not intended to be a definitive measure of public space quality; rather, it is a radar chart that makes strengths, weaknesses, relational patterns, and imbalances visible across the dimensions of *Self, People, and Space.* In this way, it supports comparisons across individuals' and user groups' experiences, events, and sites, while retaining attention to the social, affective, and historical qualities of public space.

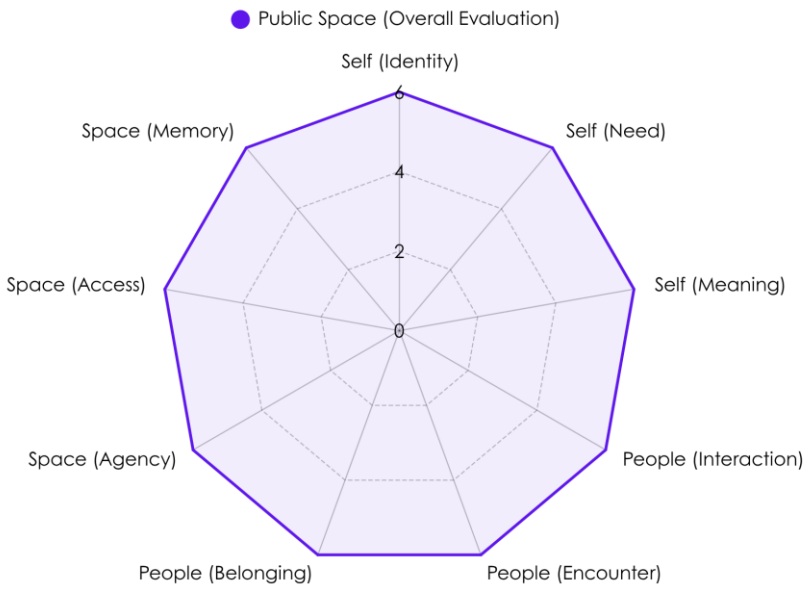



Figure 2. Spatial Dialogues Mapping Radar Chart.
*Note: Visual representation of responses across the nine criteria, allowing strengths, weaknesses, and imbalances in public space experience to be compared. (Source: Author)*

## 5. Case Study and Methodology

This study tests the Spatial Dialogues framework through *Bree Street Sundays*, a recurring car-free street experiment in Cape Town's inner city led by *Young Urbanists South Africa* under the broader *Street Experiments Afrika* platform. The initiative can be understood as a form of tactical urbanism: a temporary, experimental and low-cost approach to reimagining urban space before permanent transformation is possible. Every Sunday, Bree Street is closed to vehicles between Wale and Strand Streets, creating a pedestrian-friendly zone where people can gather, walk, linger, and play. Cape Town Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis described the intention as *"making a space safe and welcoming for families to enjoy the city on foot"* (Inside Guide, 2025).

Bree Street Sundays can also be understood as an *intermittent public space, as* a street that periodically shifts from a vehicle-oriented corridor into a pedestrian-oriented environment for social interaction, public life, and collective occupation. Although temporary, it is still relevant in public space evaluation to examine how a street performs and is experienced when its spatial conditions are deliberately altered. In this case, the intervention operates as a live test of alternative public space.

The site is significant because of its location within Cape Town's inner city, an area shaped by colonial and apartheid spatial planning, land value pressures, uneven access, and contested public life. The City of Cape Town's *CBD Local Spatial Development Framework* identifies the central city as strategic for improved mobility, pedestrian conditions, and public realm quality (City of Cape Town, 2025). The initiative has also

been discussed at a national level, as part of a broader shift towards testing people-centred streets through temporary urban experimentation (Our City News, 2026). The initial research design intended to compare Bree Street with *Lerotholi Avenue, in Langa*, the oldest township in Cape Town. Due to timing, access, and capacity constraints, this paper focuses only on Bree Street. The revised analysis draws on *124 anonymous responses collected across multiple Bree Street Sundays, including rating-scale responses and qualitative comments.* As the original monitoring and evaluation survey was not designed specifically around Spatial Dialogues, responses were aligned with the framework's nine criteria. Rating scores were converted to a six-point scale, while qualitative comments were coded thematically. The resulting values were visualised through radar charts to interpret relational patterns across Self, People, and Space. The method is exploratory and event-based, and it does not compare event days with ordinary street conditions. However, this limitation is part of the study's contribution: *Spatial Dialogues Mapping helps evaluate what permanent or intermittent public spaces reveal, what they obscure, and how they might inform longer-term transformation.*




Figure 3. Bree Street Sundays in Cape Town.
*Note: Temporary street closure creates space for walking, cycling, gathering, and social interaction. (Credits: Solly King, provided by Young Urbanists)*



Figure 4. Mobility and Play on Bree Street.
*Note: Chalk markings, seating, cycling, and informal street occupation. (Credits: Solly King, provided by Young Urbanists)*

## 6. Findings and Discussion

The Spatial Dialogues Mapping results suggest that Bree Street Sundays generated a strongly positive public space experience, while also revealing unevenness across the framework's relational dimensions. Based on 124 responses collected across multiple Bree Street Sundays, the strongest scores were recorded in Need, Meaning, and Belonging, indicating that participants generally experienced the intervention as enjoyable, comfortable, and socially welcoming. Identity, Interaction, Encounter, and Access also scored positively, suggesting that the temporary removal of vehicles supported spontaneous contact, social exchange, and ease of movement.

The comparatively weaker dimensions were Agency and Memory, indicating that *while the street became livelier and more accessible, participants were less certain about their ability to shape the space or to connect it to deeper historical and collective meanings.*

The individual charts help us understand why a relational tool is necessary in these assessments. Although most responses were positive, each radar chart has a different shape, showing that public space experience is not uniform, which supports Massey's understanding of space as *"the product of interrelations"* (2005, p. 9). Bree Street did not become a singular homogeneous public space, but a field of overlapping experiences shaped by different users, forms of participation, and expectations.

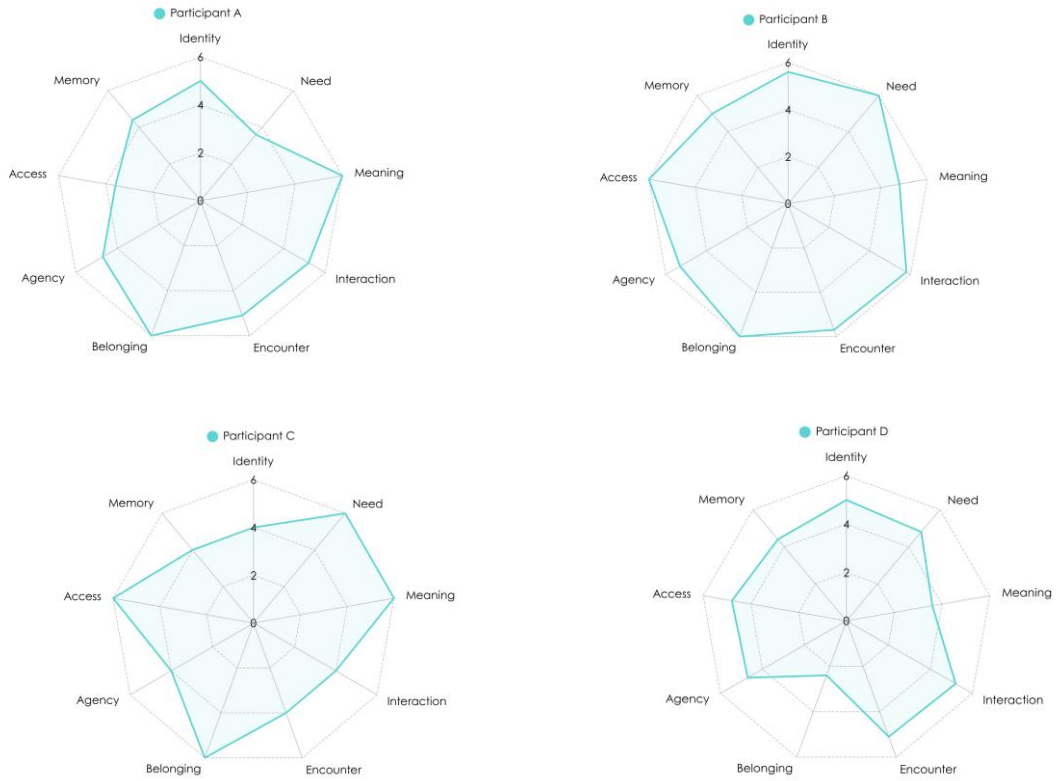



Figure 5. Individual Spatial Dialogues responses.
*Note: Selected participant radar charts showing variations in how individuals experienced Bree Street across the nine criteria. (Source: Author)*

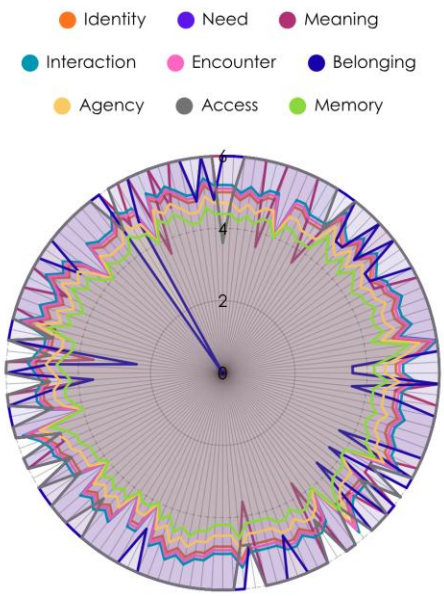



Figure 6. Aggregated participant responses.
*Note: Overview of all 124 participant responses across the nine Spatial Dialogues criteria. (Source: Author)*

Despite the distinctive results from individual charts, the aggregated responses show strong affective and social experience. Through Lefebvre's claim that *"(social) space is a (social) product"* (1991, p. 26), Bree Street can be read as temporarily reproduced through walking, cycling, gathering, lingering and playing.
However, lower scores in Agency and Memory suggest that *temporary occupation does not necessarily produce deeper spatial transformation.* Corroborating with Soja (2010), spatial justice requires more than access or activity; it also requires attention to representation, participation, and historical meaning.
If we look at the weekly charts, they reveal that Bree Street's public qualities and people's experiences varied across the season. This matters in this case because Bree Street Sundays do not function as a permanent public space but rather as an intermittent one, shaped by programming, attendance, atmosphere, weather, and broader social conditions.

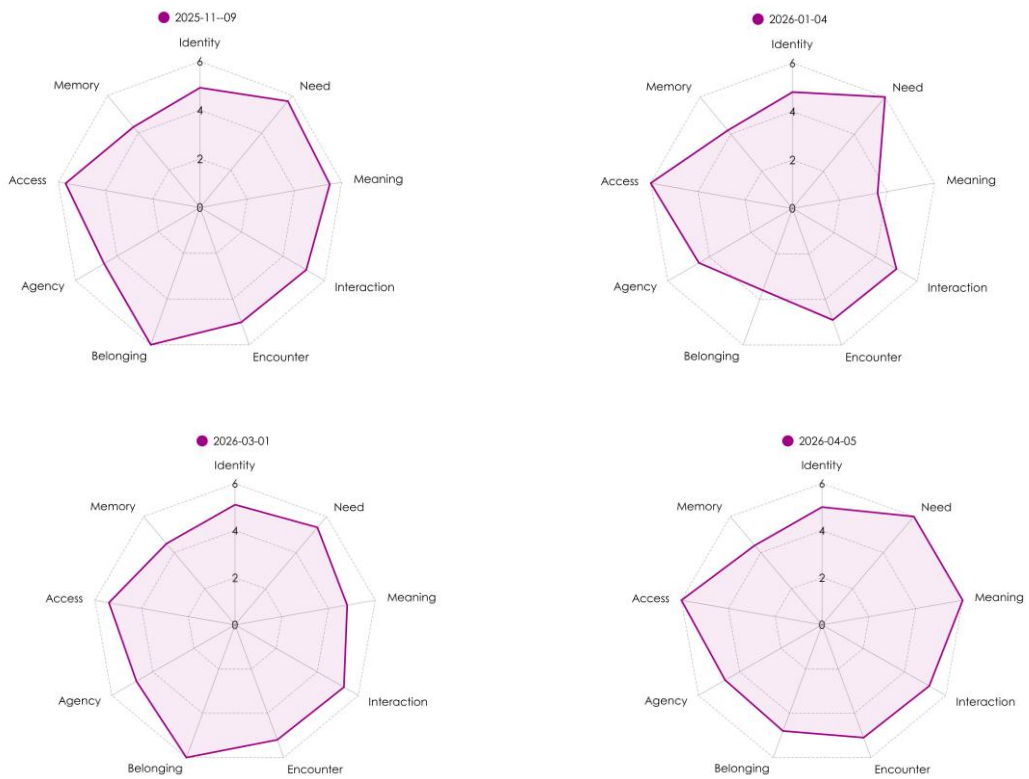



Figure 7. Weekly Spatial Dialogues assessments.
*Note: Weekly radar charts showing how public space experience varied across different Bree Street Sundays. (Source: Author)*

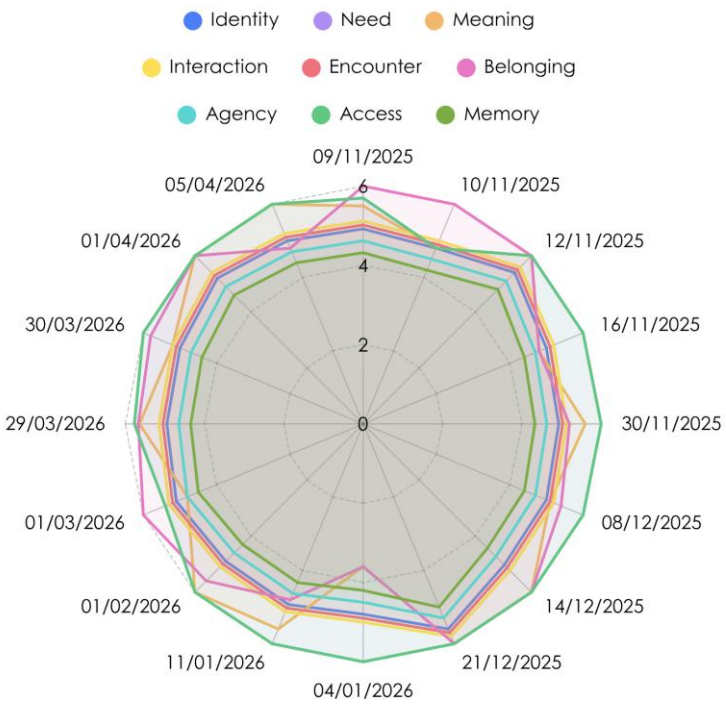



Figure 8. Season-wide Spatial Dialogues Assessment.
*Note: Overall radar chart summarising the season average. (Source: Author)*

The season-wide assessment makes it even more evident that Bree Street performed strongly as a space of enjoyment, comfort, and social welcome, *but less strongly as a space of agency and memory.* Revisiting affect theory, we can better understand and explain this distinction by emphasising that positive atmospheres may reveal the possibility of different urban experiences, but they do not automatically indicate deeper structural change.

The full overview then shows the value of layered evaluation. While individual charts revealed subjectivity, weekly charts exposed the implications of temporality, and the season average revealed broader tendencies of consistency across some criteria, the main finding is therefore not simply that Bree Street Sundays were successful street experiments to reclaim public space, but that *a space can be vibrant, enjoyable, and socially active while still revealing limits in agency, memory, and spatial justice.*

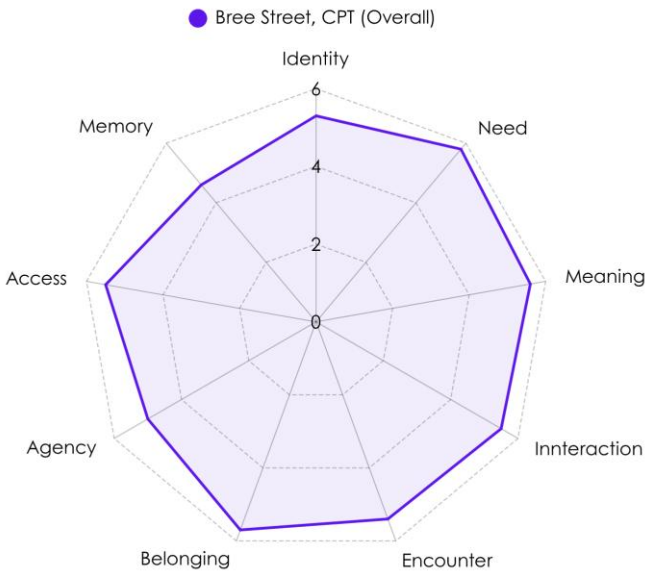



Figure 9. Full Spatial Dialogues overview.
*Note: Combined visualisation of individual, weekly, and overall patterns. (Source: Author)*

## 7. Implications, Limitations, and Future Research

The Spatial Dialogues Framework is meant to help practitioners move from general impressions of success towards more specific questions about agency, collective memory, comfort, and belonging. This can inform programming, governance decisions, design adjustments, and longer-term public space strategies. The Spatial Dialogues Mapping tool's implications for public space evaluation, placemaking, and public participation can be articulated by identifying where experience is strong or weak across Self, People, and Space, and by applying appropriate recommendations.

Table 3. Translating Spatial Dialogues Scores into Public Space Recommendations.
Note: Table created by the Author

| **riterion** | **What a Low Score May Indicate** | **Possible Response** |
|---|---|---|
| **Identity** | Users do not feel represented or personally connected to the space. | Include local cultural references, multilingual communication, and diverse programming. |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Need** | The space may feel uncomfortable, unsafe, or difficult to stay in. | Improve seating, shade, lighting, toilets, safety, wayfinding, and universal access. |
| **Meaning** | The space works functionally but lacks emotional or personal significance. | Add public art, storytelling, cultural activities, performances, and opportunities for expression. |
| **Interaction** | Limited social activity and exchange. | Encourage low-pressure social activities or games. |
| **Encounter** | The space attracts limited groups and does not support diverse contact. | Curate inclusive programming and invite people of different ages, races, classes, and mobility levels. |
| **Belonging** | Some users may access the space but not feel genuinely welcome. | Reduce social barriers, avoid over-policing, support informal users, and clearly signal welcome. |
| **Agency** | Users feel unable to shape, influence, or participate in the space. | Use participatory design, feedback stations, open calls, and community-led programming. |
| **Access** | Physical or social barriers may limit entry, movement, or staying. | Improve pedestrian crossings, transport, cycling and disability access, signage, and affordability. |
| **Memory** | The space feels detached from local history or collective meaning. | Include oral histories, archives, local narratives, memorial practices, and historical public art. |

## 8. Conclusion

While existing frameworks for public space evaluation remain useful for assessing activity, accessibility, safety, comfort, and spatial performance, they often struggle to capture the historical, relational, and affective dimensions through which public space is negotiated, lived and contested. In such contexts, the question of what gets measured in public space evaluation becomes deeply political.

In response, Spatial Dialogues is introduced as a relational evaluative framework and Spatial Dialogues Mapping as an exploratory tool for operationalising it. This method

comes as a supplement to existing ones, aiming to make visible dimensions often obscured by technocratic and performance-oriented approaches, including identity, need, meaning, interaction, encounter, belonging, agency, access and memory. Drawing on 124 participant responses across multiple iterations, the findings are not representative or universal, but indicative and analytically useful. Participants consistently experienced Bree Street as comfortable, socially vibrant, enjoyable, and welcoming. Yet the most significant finding lies in the areas where the scores declined: Agency and Memory. This suggests that positive atmosphere and strong public life do not automatically translate into deeper spatial agency, historical connection, or long-term transformation.

This distinction is critical for post-apartheid Cape Town and for other cities shaped by inherited spatial injustice. Considering that tactical urbanism and placemaking may temporarily suspend everyday spatial tensions, however, when evaluating public spaces, one must investigate what such interventions reveal, what they obscure, and how they can inform more sustained forms of spatial repair. Spatial Dialogues Mapping therefore opens possibilities for more context-sensitive, reflexive, and relational evaluation of public space in the pursuit of spatial justice.

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**Declaration on AI-assisted tools**

The author used Microsoft Copilot and OpenAI's ChatGPT to support data processing, organisation of survey-derived criteria, generation of preliminary tables, refinement of language, and editorial polishing of selected sections of the manuscript. The tool was used under the author's direction and supervision. All conceptual framing, interpretation, argumentation, final analysis, and manuscript decisions remain the responsibility of the author. No AI tool is listed as an author, and all AI-assisted outputs were reviewed, revised, and verified by the author before inclusion.

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