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EDITORIAL

Public Space as a Field of Critical Inquiry

Luisa Bravo
City Space Architecture, Italy
luisa.bravo@cityspacearchitecture.org

The publication of this special issue of The Journal of Public Space, featuring a selection of the best papers from the 2024 Past Present and Future of Public Space conference, represents for me both a scholarly achievement and a significant moment of reflection on a longer intellectual and institutional journey. The conference, held in Bologna from 25 to 27 June 2024, with a subsequent workshop of the Public Space Academy on 28 June, marked the fifth edition of a conference series that began in 2014 and emerged from a research path first initiated in 2012 as my postdoctoral work at the Department of Architecture of the University of Bologna. Over the years, this path has developed into a broader international project dedicated to advancing critical discourse, research exchange, and civic engagement around public space (Bravo, 2019).

When I first conceived Past Present and Future of Public Space, my intention was to create more than a conventional academic conference. I sought to establish a platform through which public space could be examined as a complex and evolving field of inquiry, capable of connecting urban design, architecture, planning, governance, participation and civic engagement, culture, and social justice. This ambition informed the foundation of City Space Architecture in 2013, as a non-profit organisation committed to promoting public space culture through research, education, publishing, and international collaboration. It also informed the subsequent establishment of The Journal of Public Space, launched in 2016 at the Habitat III conference in Quito in partnership with UN-Habitat, and conceived as an open, inclusive, and interdisciplinary publishing platform entirely dedicated to public space. For this reason, the 2024 conference carried a meaning that extended beyond its programme and proceedings. Ten years after the first conference in Bologna, returning to the city for the fifth edition, after three editions at the Venice Architecture Biennale, offered the opportunity to assess the evolution of a field that has expanded substantially in both scope and urgency. Public space today is increasingly shaped by multiple pressures, including privatization, fragmentation, climate change, digital mediation, unequal access, and the reconfiguration of civic life. At the same time, it remains a crucial arena for encounter, conflict, representation, inclusion, and democratic imagination. The papers gathered in this special issue demonstrate the analytical depth with which contemporary scholarship is responding to these challenges.

A defining strength of the 2024 edition was the institutional framework that made the conference possible. Promoted by City Space Architecture, the event was organized in collaboration with the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, ISOCARP – International Society of City and Regional Planners, and the European Prize for Urban Public Space, under the patronage of the Municipality of Bologna and the Emilia-Romagna Region. These partnerships are particularly important to acknowledge because they reflect a principle that has guided my work from the outset: meaningful progress in public space discourse depends on building bridges among academic institutions, cultural organisations, professional associations, and public authorities. The conference was therefore conceived not simply as a venue for presenting research, but as a space for cultivating alliances, exchanging perspectives, and reinforcing the public relevance of scholarship.

The conference programme was designed to embody this transdisciplinary and international orientation and included eleven keynote lectures, two site visits, four parallel sessions – focusing on the four main topics of the conference: morphology and design, multidisciplinary fields, new approaches and emerging trends – and three thematic sessions addressing divided territories, displaced communities, women's empowerment, climate change, and the future of public space practice and research[1]. Taken together, these contributions gave the conference an exceptional intellectual breadth and reinforced its capacity to connect scholarship, professional expertise, and civic commitment (Bravo, 2025).

I also consider it essential to recognize the role of the Scientific Committee and the reviewers who supported the special track dedicated to the first edition of the Public Space Research Award for Master's and PhD theses. Their involvement ensured the scholarly rigor of the conference and contributed to the quality of the papers later considered for this issue. At the same time, the inclusion of emerging scholars was a deliberate choice consistent with my longer commitment to building intergenerational continuity in public space research. Supporting early-career researchers is not an ancillary function of academic events; it is one of the most important ways in which a field renews itself, expands its methods, and opens new directions of inquiry.

The papers selected for publication confirm the maturity and diversity of contemporary public space scholarship. The awarded and shortlisted contributions addressed subjects such as infrastructural marginality, inclusive design and management, digital mediation, performativity, public art, quasi-public conditions, resilient urban landscapes, and the politics of everyday access and representation. These themes reveal how decisively the field has moved beyond a purely formal reading of public space. Public space is now understood more fully as a social, political, and ecological construct, continuously shaped by institutional arrangements, cultural narratives, technological systems, and the uneven distribution of rights and opportunities.

Looking back, it is clear to me that the establishment of City Space Architecture, the Past Present and Future of Public Space conference series and its affiliated research group, and The Journal of Public Space has required persistence, voluntary commitment, and a sustained effort to create spaces of exchange where none previously existed in this form. What has

[1] The full programme of the 2024 Past Present and Future of Public Space conference is available on City Space Architecture main website together with a report on the Public Space Research Awards.
A visual report is available on City Space Architecture community website.
The Boof of Accepted Abstracts and the Academic Proceedings are available on the webpage of City Space Architecture Press hosted by Museo Spazio Pubblico, the operational headquarters of City Space Architecture in Bologna.

made this effort possible is not only individual dedication, but also the support of a growing international network of colleagues, institutions, collaborators, who share the conviction that public space matters deeply to the future of our cities and societies. The 2024 conference reaffirmed this conviction in a particularly powerful way, demonstrating that public space research remains capable of bringing together different disciplines, different publics, and different geographies around questions that are at once theoretical and urgent, local and global.

The publication of this special issue also coincides with an important moment in the institutional development of The Journal of Public Space itself. The journal has now been accepted for indexing in Scopus, a significant milestone that recognizes the quality and relevance of the work published since its foundation. As an Italian research project, we are also proud that The Journal of Public Space has been formally recognised in the national evaluation system. The National Agency for the Evaluation of Universities and Research Institutes - the Italian governmental agency responsible for overseeing quality assurance, accreditation, and evaluation of universities and research centres to improve their performance and academic quality - has indexed the journal as a scientific journal and has classified it as a Class A journal in two disciplinary areas: "Urban Studies, Urbanism, Urban Planning and Urban Design", and "Performing, musical, cinematic and media arts".

In addition, the journal has recently joined the Diamond Discovery Hub (DDH), and our publisher, City Space Architecture, is mapped as part of the Registry of the European Diamond Capacity Hub (EDCH), a free and comprehensive resource designed to foster collaborations within the Diamond Open Access landscape in the European Research Area, contributing to a stronger, more visible and sustainable ecosystem for non-commercial open access publishing. City Space Architecture is also recognised as a research organisation and included in the Research Organization Registry (ROR).

For me, this achievement is especially meaningful because it confirms the scientific rigor of a project that was conceived from the outset as an open, independent, and interdisciplinary platform for public space scholarship. Established in partnership with UN-Habitat and strengthened over the years through the support of academic partners such as Queensland University of Technology, KTH Royal Institute of Technology, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, RMIT University, and the University of the Sunshine Coast, The Journal of Public Space has remained committed to a diamond open access model that ensures free access for readers and no publication fees for authors, while reinforcing the kind of scholarship it has consistently sought to promote: rigorous, critical, internationally grounded, and attentive to the social implications of spatial production. This commitment to equity in knowledge production has always been central to my work and to the wider mission of City Space Architecture.

This special issue should therefore be read not only as the outcome of a successful conference, but also as part of a longer collective endeavour. It reflects more than a decade of work dedicated to establishing a durable infrastructure for public space knowledge through research, publishing, conferences, partnerships, and educational initiatives. Above all, it affirms that public space remains a shared urban good, one that must continue to be studied, defended, and reimagined through critical scholarship and collective action. It is my hope that the research articles collected here will contribute meaningfully to that task and will further strengthen the international conversation that City Space Architecture and The Journal of Public Space have sought to nurture over the years.



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