

EDITORIAL

How We Evaluate Shapes What Public Space Becomes

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Public space - streets, parks, squares, waterfronts, commons, and civic interiors - is foundational to wellbeing, democratic expression, climate resilience, and socio-cultural identity. Yet it remains under-protected and under-funded in many contexts, vulnerable to privatisation, encroachment, and uneven access. As cities densify and rural territories evolve, the need to assess the quality and impact of public spaces has become more urgent - and more complex.

This Special Issue of The Journal of Public Space has been developed by the UIA Public Spaces Work Programme (WP) as part of our 2023-2026 roadmap that positions public space as both a universal right and a strategic lever for policy and practice¹. Our WP and the UIA have an enormous asset for public space assessment, bringing together professionals from all five regions of the globe, thereby pooling the cultural, historical, identity-related, and governance-related experiences of each region as shared resources.

On the proposed instrument for assessing the performance of public space

The instrument for assessing the performance of public space on a global scale emerged as a natural response during our first meeting, when we each introduced ourselves: what values we consider essential for public space, and what threats public space faces in the countries and regions we represent. In our belief, the instrument provides for the protection, evaluation and enhancement of public space performance. The instrument

¹ Chung, T. & Brener, N. (2025) *Becoming Public: A 2023–2026 Roadmap for the UIA Public Spaces Work Programme*. UIA. <https://www.uia-architectes.org/en/mag/becoming-public-a-2023-2026-roadmap-for-the-uia-public-spaces-work-programme/>

addresses anyone interested in public spaces. Its role is to check how public space universal and local values are upheld and how societies and communities are catered to, offering the possibility to foresee risks and seek collaborative learning opportunities. Furthermore, in the development of this instrument, particular consideration is given to the observation derived from the examination of the case studies presented by our colleagues², namely that the perception of the role public space fulfils within the local community is fundamental to its evaluation.

Since public space is not only materialised design, but also a sensorial and cognitive experience, our instrument includes both morphological and phenomenological criteria, splitting the assessment instrument in two interdependent categories.

1. Morphological criteria are quantifiable, based on documenting the components making up the public space. As any change to them would require lengthy and complex processes, including design, securing funding, and medium- and long-term legal/administrative measures of decision making, we refer to them as static qualities: inclusive design, cultural diversity, social interaction, environmental resilience, economic sustainability, shared responsibility and local governance.
2. Phenomenological criteria take into account users' perception of public space, and as they may be subject to spontaneous changes or activations, we refer to them as dynamic qualities: ecosystemic equity, sense of freedom, sense of belonging, healing device, cultural capacity, increases happiness, poachability, subjective beauty³.

From Roadmap to Special Issue

It is with our WP's endeavour in mind that we set up a partnership with City Space Architecture and The Journal of Public Space. This Special Issue invited scholars, practitioners, and researchers from around the world to rethink how we evaluate public space. Contributions not only interrogated the effectiveness of existing indicator frameworks, but also critically reflected on the deeper questions of what, how, and why we evaluate public space in the first place. The responses we received validated our own three-year-long research and confirmed the global need for updated and more sensitive assessment tools.

Our open call for this Special Issue received 98 submissions from the five UIA regions. Following a double-blind peer-review process, eleven papers were selected for publication. Together, they engage with the themes emerging from the member-led discussions - equity, climate resilience, governance, health, and culture - while contributing new insights and perspectives through the uniqueness of their case studies and the distinct approaches adopted by the authors.

Collectively, the contributions expand and complement established frameworks for evaluating public space (e.g., Carmona, Gehl, Low, Madanipour, Mehta, White, and UN-Habitat), charting new directions grounded in studies of sites across African, Asian European, and South American cities.

² Chung, T. & Brener, N. (2025) *Operationalising Public: Instruments, Knowledge, Participation (2023–2026)*. UIA. <https://www.uia-architectes.org/en/mag/operationalising-public-instruments-knowledge-participation-2023-2026/>

³ You may read our booklet titled *How to Protect, Assess, and Enhance the Performance of Public Space* [here](#) and download the assessment form [here](#).

While several papers focus on Athens, Berlin, and Paris - cities with long traditions of public space scholarship - they offer important new perspectives. In Athens, **Dimitris Loupetis** examines Strefi Hill as an example of a “wild” territory in which counter-hegemonic practices resist property speculation, securitisation, gentrification, and touristification - arguing, through the paired concepts of “urban safari” and “becoming-territorial,” that evaluation itself is a contested political process through which different forms of urban life are rendered legitimate or disposable. In Paris, **Traganou, Kastoryano, Amellal and Madeux** reframe public space evaluation through a “plurispacial” perspective, tracing the everyday spatial experiences of an unhoused migrant to demonstrate how vulnerable populations navigate urban space and multi-scalar governance structures, and developing a replicable evaluation protocol that foregrounds trajectory, temporality, and embodied experience.

Focusing on Berlin, **Veronika L. Sharova** investigates residents’ relationships with a public space inherited from the city’s socialist past and asks whether residents seek to protect the authentic character of the Ernst-Thälmann-Park environment because of its listed-monument status or because of personal attachments and spatial memories that, through emerging forms of solidarity, become collective memory. Questions of collective memory and identity also feature in **Dieudonné Elohim da Costa’s** study of tactical urbanism interventions at Bree Street, Cape Town. Introducing the Spatial Dialogues framework, the paper highlights limitations in existing evaluation frameworks, which often assess accessibility, safety, comfort, and spatial performance, yet struggle to capture the historical, relational, and affective dimensions through which public space is negotiated, lived, and contested.

Another limitation in public space frameworks and planning guidelines is raised by **Ines Dobosic**. Her paper demonstrates how competing priorities can produce contradictory planning outcomes, for instance when climate resilience objectives and security-oriented interventions are not adequately coordinated, revealing how quality is not merely assessed but actively produced through institutional frameworks.

Drawing on research in the Indonesian neighbourhoods of Surakarta and Banjarmasin, **Rizqa Hidayani [et al.]** extend debates on participation in public space production. Beyond involvement in design processes, they emphasise the importance of fostering stewardship and ownership through inclusive and ongoing engagement, supported by institutions and resources to sustain long-term maintenance and social activation - proposing process-based indicators that foreground these often-overlooked social and institutional conditions.

In Ahmedabad, **Kali Marnane** examines the evaluation of public spaces in informal settlements. The study argues that residents should be recognised as experts in their own environments rather than as subjects of observation, calling for a shift from legibility-based assessment towards situated and relational forms of evaluation that account for social practices, lived experiences, and accumulated meanings. This approach could offer valuable insights into how communities build social ties, sustain livelihoods, care for one another, and live with dignity under conditions of scarcity.

Focusing on Pescara, Italy, **Luciana Mastrolonardo, Stefania Gruosso and Chantal Zurlo** identify a deeper rationale for involving children in the design of temporarily organized school streets. Such participation not only contributes to more user-responsive outcomes but also has the potential to expand children’s cognitive space -

reconceptualising the street as cognitive infrastructure rather than merely a traffic-calming measure.

Brandão, Brandão, Cardoso Ferreira, Prudêncio, and Madalozzo develop a Public Space Service System (PSSS) based on studies conducted in Brazil, Chile, Portugal, and Spain. Rather than attempting to resolve the tensions inherent in public spaces, the proposed framework aims to incorporate subjectivity, context, and the diversity of actors involved in creating, regulating, and inhabiting them.

Questions of inequality are revisited in **Alessandro F. Rosaneli's** study of Curitiba, Brazil. Moving beyond earlier assessments focused on the physical and functional dimensions of public spaces, the paper employs a Public Space Coefficient (PSC) to examine the unequal distribution of specific public space types across the city. In doing so, it further advances understanding of the spatial geography of socio-spatial injustice and highlights the importance of equity-oriented approaches to public space evaluation.

Harteveld, De Martino, Ghelichkhany, Ulkü, and Ellen offer a theoretical insight into a compelling research project, STEPS, that touches on three social aspects of public space: social cohesion, social encounter, and social learning. The paper argues that these dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for developing design principles that support socially sustainable public spaces.

Together, these eleven contributions demonstrate that public space evaluation is undergoing a fundamental reorientation. Several cross-cutting themes emerge: evaluation as a political act shaped by power, history, and institutional context; the inadequacy of snapshot, feature-based assessments for capturing temporally dynamic, relationally constituted spatial processes; the critical importance of disaggregation - by space type, user group, experiential dimension, and governance regime - in revealing inequalities that composite metrics obscure; and the generative potential of Global South perspectives in challenging evaluation orthodoxies rooted in Northern assumptions.

The geographic and methodological breadth of the collection is striking: from post-socialist Berlin to post-apartheid Cape Town, from Deleuzian political ontology in Athens to extended cognition theory in Pescara, from informal settlements in Ahmedabad to participatory stewardship in Indonesia and systemic service frameworks across Ibero-American cities.

The investigation of public space evaluation frameworks of this Special Issue is completed by two further contributions: a viewpoint presenting the perspective of our partner, the UN Habitat's Global Public Space Network, and an interview related to the issue's topic with Rui Leão, the current UIA Secretary-General.

What unites all these diverse contributions is a shared conviction that how we evaluate public space shapes what public space becomes - and that evaluation frameworks must be as diverse, contested, and culturally embedded as the spaces they seek to understand. This Special Issue is offered as a contribution to that ongoing conversation - one that, as our call for papers affirmed, "must remain open to debate, adaptation, and innovation."

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