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VIEWPOINT

Designing Publicness.
Evaluation, Experience, and the City in Transition

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An editorial interview by Thomas Chung and Luisa Bravo on the 26th of February 2026
RL – Rui Leão | **TC** – Thomas Chung | **LB** – Luisa Bravo

Introduction
Public space is where cities breathe - and where cultures negotiate who "we" are. As the UIA Public Spaces Work Programme advances a 2023-2026 roadmap including this Special Issue of *The Journal of Public Space*, we speak with Rui Leão, UIA Secretary-General and co-founder of award-winning LBA Architecture & Planning in Macau. From the handover-era Nam Van Lake Square and Sai Van Lake Square (ARCASIA Gold Medal 2006) with its incremental waterfront ring, to M30 (UNESCO Asia-Pacific New Design in Heritage Context Award 2022) - an infrastructural "communication tool between two worlds" - and Station 12 at Barra, Rui's projects show how publicness can be crafted through section, symbol, and governance. We discuss translating metrics into meanings and participation into policy, and how Barcelona 2026 can anchor a legacy that cities can measure - and feel.

Q1. What is at stake today in "public space evaluation"? Why does it matter now?

RL. We are at a moment where public space is no longer something residual - it is the space where society negotiates itself. But the way we evaluate it is still too often based

on measurable aspects alone: area, accessibility, infrastructure. These are necessary, but they are not sufficient. What I see is that public space evaluation must go much deeper. It has to consider how people interpret space, how they appropriate it, how they build meaning through it. The danger of so-called objective frameworks is that they tend to universalize criteria that are not universal. What is perceived as inclusive or vibrant in Europe is very different in Asia or Africa.
The UIA Work Programme is trying to deal with this. We are developing an instrument that combines static criteria - things that can be measured - with dynamic and perceived dimensions, such as belonging, healing, and cultural memory. This balance is essential. Otherwise, we risk designing spaces that perform well on paper but fail in real life.

TC: Can a global evaluation framework ever truly reflect local meanings?

RL: It can, but only if it is conceived as a framework for interpretation, not a checklist. The goal is not to impose uniformity, but to create a shared language through which differences can be understood. I believe strongly that there are basic conditions that every public space should meet—accessibility, safety, environmental comfort. But beyond that, the richness comes from local adaptation: ritual, memory, cultural expression. And this is where participation becomes fundamental. You cannot evaluate public space without involving the people who live in it. Otherwise, you are simply measuring an abstraction.

Q2. You have mentioned post-handover Macau as a public space laboratory, could you describe its context?

The handover period of 1999-2000 in Macau was a bit chaotic; you could feel it in the air. The political transition was unpredictable, but it also heralded a space for change that seemed like a promising beginning. The city became an interesting laboratory for public space development for a while, and that environment allowed for speculative projects on an incredible scale. Over the years, we realized that we had designed more than 30% of the city's public space area through infrastructure commissions. Projects along lagoons and roads created in-between public spaces, often without fences, challenging the municipality's obsession with fencing. After overwhelming support during public consultation, this eventually led to the removal of fences from many public spaces, transforming the city.

Q3. Your work in Macau often creates public space where none previously existed. Could you tell us about the Nam Van Square project and the waterfront transformation?

RL: The Nam Van project is deeply tied to the political moment of Macau's handover. There was a desire to define a new identity for the city - between East and West. The Macau Tower was conceived as a strong symbolic gesture, almost like a pagoda marking

territory. The square in front of it became a complementary statement: a space of publicness, openness, and modernity. But the reality on site was very difficult. It was essentially a traffic intersection, not a place. So, the question was: how do you create a sense of place in a condition that is inherently hostile to human occupation?





Figure 1 and 2. LBA Architecture and Planning. Nam Van Square, Macao (2000-2001).
https://lbamacau.net/portfolio/nam-van-square-macau/

The answer came through sectional strategy. Instead of separating traffic and pedestrians completely, we developed ways for them to coexist - lifting pedestrian paths, sinking others, shaping flyovers so that they become spatial elements rather than mere infrastructure. And then there was the water. The lakes were not designed as public space - they were infrastructure. So, we began to invent a waterfront, and step by step, project by project, we extended it. Over time, this became a continuous ring around the lake. Today people jog, stroll, and inhabit that space. It's what I call opportunistic planning - using individual projects to incrementally build a larger public realm.

LB: How would you evaluate the success of such a project?

RL: You cannot evaluate it simply by counting users or analysing circulation flows. You have to look at how the space is absorbed into everyday life. Do people linger? Do they return? Do unexpected uses emerge? Are there overlaps between different types of activity? These are signs of success. In that sense, evaluation becomes almost observational, even narrative. It's about understanding the life that the space generates, not just the space itself.

Q4. Your M30 project (below the Ruins of St Paul) is often described as a "communication tool between two worlds." What does this mean in terms of public space evaluation?

RL: M30 is a very small infrastructure project - an integrated Power Supply & Waste Collection facility - but it sits in an extraordinary context. It is located between two distinct urban systems: the Portuguese stepped urban fabric and the Chinese Lingnan brick architecture. The challenge was not only technical; it was cultural. How do you insert a new building without disrupting this delicate coexistence?



Figure 3. LBA Architecture and Planning. Integrated Infrastructure for Power Supply and Waste Collection, Macao (2021). https://lbamacau.net/portfolio/m30/

We chose to wrap the building in materials that connected with the Chinese fabric but also introduce new elements that allow visibility and permeability. By adopting blue brick and Corten to ventilate, frame views, the building becomes a "hybrid" interface that mediates two urban cultures. This led to a UNESCO Asia Pacific award in 2022. From an evaluation perspective, this is extremely interesting. How do you measure cultural continuity, or the ability of a project to reveal rather than erase differences? I think we need indicators that capture this kind of relational quality - how a building or space connects different layers of the city.



Figure 4. LBA Architecture and Planning. Integrated Infrastructure for Power Supply and Waste Collection, Macao (2021). https://lbamacau.net/portfolio/m30/

Q5. Station 12 in Barra rethinks infrastructure as public space at a more comprehensive scale. Could you reflect on this project?

Yes, Station 12 is perhaps the most complete expression of our approach. Initially, the project was conceived as a large building housing a train station and bus terminus that would dominate the waterfront. We argued that this would destroy the potential for a meaningful public space. Instead, we proposed to bury the infrastructure and create a

square above it. This transformed a constraint into an opportunity. The roof became a park, and the station became a civic threshold between the historic city and the waterfront.







Figure 5, 6 and 7 LBA Architecture and Planning. Station 12, Macao (2017-2023).
https://lbamacau.net/portfolio/station-12/

One of the key moments is the moon gate stair, which frames the transition between ground and roof, between city and landscape. It's not just circulation - it's an experience, almost a metaphor.
What is important here is that public space is not something you add at the end. It must be embedded in the conceptual core of the project.

Q6. How can evaluation frameworks influence real-world delivery, particularly in governance and procurement?

RL: This is critical. If evaluation remains at the level of theory, it will not change anything.
We need to integrate public space criteria into the entire project lifecycle - from the brief to construction to post-occupancy. This includes defining performance indicators that are not purely technical, but also social and experiential.
For example, we could imagine contracts that include requirements for post-occupancy evaluation, community engagement, or even the maintenance of public life indicators over time.
In Macau, we have seen how governance structures - such as better supervision and independent evaluation - can improve outcomes. The same logic should apply to public space.

TC: Is participation essential in this process?

RL: Absolutely. Participation should not be seen as a formality, but as a method of knowledge production. People understand their environment in ways that professionals cannot fully grasp. If you exclude them, your evaluation will always be incomplete. The challenge is to transform participation into something systematic - something that can inform design, evaluation, and policy in a synergistic and continuous way.

LB: How else can we raise awareness of the importance of public spaces in cities? Would awards and similar recognition help? It seems there is no clear and consistent international award specifically for public space on a global scale.

RL: The Work Programme could reflect on establishing a global award for public space. Current commercial awards often feature generic public space categories that do not serve the purpose of recognizing projects responding to local issues, especially in the Global South. Projects like handrails or lighting systems in informal settlements, significant for defining the public realm and democratization, are often overlooked in favour of large-scale, flagship projects.

Q7. Looking ahead to Barcelona 2026, what is the most important message you would like this Special Issue to convey?

RL: I think the most important message is that public space is both a right and a responsibility. The UIA Work Programme has been working towards a roadmap that combines evaluation frameworks with scholarly debate. This is not an academic exercise - it is about enabling better cities. What we hope to achieve in Barcelona is to present something tangible: a framework that can be used, debated, and improved; a body of knowledge that reflects global diversity; and a set of practices that bring people into the process. Public space is where society becomes visible. If we can evaluate it better, we can also design and govern it better.

TC: And this is why this Special Issue is so timely. It opens the conversation to new voices, new methods, and new partnerships - with organizations like UN-Habitat and City Space Architecture - to continue building a global understanding of public space that is both rigorous and humane.

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