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Rethinking Public Space Evaluation

Editors Thomas Chung, Maria Duda, Nikos Kazeros, Hendrik Tieben, Wai Chung Wu
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Dr Luisa Bravo

The Journal of Public Space, *Founder and Editor in Chief*

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(from the [statement](#) submitted at the 26th UN-Habitat Governing Council (Nairobi, Kenya, 8-12 May 2017))

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The Journal of Public Space is the world's first international, interdisciplinary, academic diamond open-access journal dedicated entirely to public space. Built on a well-established global network of scholars and professionals, the journal is committed to expanding current scholarship by offering a global perspective and providing a platform for countries that are often overlooked to share their views and discuss topics that are usually sidelined in mainstream knowledge, such as neglected and emerging issues.

The Journal of Public Space embraces diversity and encourages dialogue and storytelling from a variety of disciplines and countries, particularly those that are usually underrepresented, thereby overcoming the Western-centric approach that currently dominates the discourse. Like a proper public space, The Journal of Public Space is free, accessible and inclusive for both authors and readers. It provides a platform for both emerging and established researchers, as well as professionals, artists, activists and community leaders. The Journal of Public Space aims to promote research, showcase best practices and inform discussions about issues related to public spaces in our ever-changing societies.

The Journal of Public Space addresses the social sciences and humanities as major fields and is also interested in attracting scholars from other disciplines. Acting as both a scholarly journal and an interdisciplinary discussion and exchange platform, it is enriched by hosting papers on design projects, art performances, and social practices that foster civic engagement and non-expert knowledge.

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POLICIES

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- A global campaign launched at the Habitat III conference in Quito, Ecuador, 2016

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An abstract of about 300 words with up to five keywords is also mandatory.

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THE JOURNAL OF PUBLIC SPACE

Rethinking Public Space Evaluation.

Frameworks, Indicators, Impact (for Sustainable Urban-Rural Futures)

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The UIA Public Spaces Work Programme rethinks public space as both universal right and strategic lever for policy and practice, to enable healthier, more just, and more resilient societies.

Through regular global meetings and collaborative task forces, we have developed outputs that bridge research, design practice, and public policy: a Global Instrument for Public Space Evaluation and Special Issue of The Journal of Public Space. We have built strategic partnerships with international organizations, including UN-Habitat, City Space Architecture and IFoU (International Forum of Urbanism).

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How to Protect, Assess, and Enhance the Performance of Public Space



UIA Public Space Booklet



Evaluation check list



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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 Elohy 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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From Urban Safari to Becoming-Territorial. Locality Perspectives of the Centre of Athens

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Abstract

This article examines how public space in central Athens is produced, evaluated, and contested under conditions of touristification, privatization, and neoliberal urban restructuring. In the wake of the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic, dominant frameworks of public space quality - typically focused on safety, efficiency, and attractiveness for investment - are increasingly challenged. Public space emerges not as a fixed entity but as a dynamic and contested field where competing forms of value, use, and meaning are negotiated. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's concept of becomings alongside Ghassan Hage's notion of generalized domestication, the article conceptualizes gentrification and touristification as intertwined processes that produce a new "familiar" urban space. This is described as a domesticating pole, where public space is reshaped to accommodate tourism, transforming everyday life into a consumable and managed resource. In contrast, the article identifies a "wild" pole of public space production, driven by grassroots movements and informal collectivities. These actors cultivate alternative ways of inhabiting space based on care, coexistence, solidarity, and non-instrumental uses, challenging dominant urban rationality. Focusing on the territorial struggles surrounding Strefi Hill - a hill serving as a small-scale forest area in the Exarcheia neighbourhood in the centre of Athens - the article employs a comparative qualitative methodology to examine representations, discourses, and everyday practices of inhabiting public space as articulated by different actors. This methodological approach enables an examination of how divergent enactments of locality correspond to different evaluative understandings and criteria of public space quality, highlighting evaluation as a situated, contested, and politically embedded process.

Keywords: urban safari, domestication, becoming, urban movements, public space

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Introduction: Strefi under siege

Strefi Hill, a small, forested elevation at the northern edge of Exarcheia in central Athens, has in recent years become a focal point of intense urban conflict. Despite its modest scale, the hill constitutes one of the few freely accessible green spaces in a densely built neighbourhood, functioning for decades as a site of everyday coexistence among residents, migrants, activists, and visitors. Since 2021, however, it has been at the centre of a contested redevelopment project promoted by the Municipality of Athens in collaboration with private real-estate investments. What was initially framed as the regeneration of a 'neglected' public space, quickly evolved into a broader struggle over who has the right to inhabit the city, under what conditions, and according to which values.

The conflict unfolded through a sequence of escalating interventions and responses. During the COVID-19 lockdown, the Municipality announced a redevelopment plan through a sponsorship agreement with Prodea Investments (a major real-estate company active in the area), presenting it as an act of environmental restoration and public benefit. Shortly after, fencing, construction works, and a permanent police presence transformed the hill into a controlled and partially inaccessible zone. From 2022 onwards, repeated police operations, identity checks, and violent dispersals targeted residents, assemblies, and everyday users, while self-organized spaces in the surrounding area were evicted. In parallel, local inhabitants and grassroots collectives organized assemblies, reappropriations, and continuous activities on the hill - from maintenance works to collective kitchens and cultural events - sustaining a persistent presence despite repression. In 2024, after 16 months of continuous struggles from local movements, multiple judicial proceedings and the election of a new mayor, Prodea Investments were forced to abandon the project and leave the hill. Still, policing remained constant, suggesting that what is at stake exceeds any single project, and concerns the wider reconfiguration of urban life.

The hill cannot be understood independently of its location within Exarcheia, a neighbourhood that occupies a singular position in the political and symbolic geography of Athens. Historically associated with student movements, anarchist and leftist politics, squatting, and self-organized infrastructures, Exarcheia has long been constructed both as a space of resistance and as a space of disorder. In dominant narratives, it appears as an enclave of lawlessness requiring immediate intervention, a representation that actively prepares the ground for its imminent transformation. In the context of post-crisis urban restructuring, where central Athens has become a field of intensified investment driven by tourism and real-estate speculation, such representations legitimize new regimes of control. Thus, core public spaces of the neighbourhood - such as Strefi Hill and its central square - are increasingly targeted by private capital and institutional policies for the release of their economic and touristic potential.

Within this framework, the redevelopment of Strefi Hill exemplifies a broader process through which urban space is rendered governable. The proposed interventions - reconfigured paths, new infrastructures, environmental improvement, surveillance - were justified in the name of accessibility and safety. Yet, for many residents, these measures signalled the imposition of a spatial order aligned with the transformation of Exarcheia into a consumable urban landscape. The installation of fences, the restriction of access, and the normalization of continuous police presence contributed to the experience of the hill as a space under occupation. What emerges is less a redesigned

public space and more a terrain in which inhabiting is progressively reorganized as a regulated and conditional activity, oriented toward circulation, observation, and consumption rather than open-ended coexistence.

In response, the Open Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill arose as a collective effort not only to oppose the redevelopment, but to reclaim the hill as a lived and shared space. Rather than limiting its activity to protest, the assembly developed practices centred on inhabiting the hill otherwise: regular assemblies, collective maintenance, cultural events, children's activities, and everyday gatherings. Through these practices, the hill is not simply defended but actively reproduced as a social environment grounded in care, co-presence, and mutual responsibility. The conflict thus unfolds at the level of everyday life, perceiving public space as a living terrain shaped by encounters, attachments, and collective experimentation.

This article approaches the struggle over Strefi Hill as an entry point into broader transformations affecting contemporary cities. Processes of gentrification and touristification do not only reshape the built environment but mold the ways in which urban space is perceived, inhabited, and made meaningful. In this sense, urban space appears simultaneously as a field of domination and as a terrain of struggle, making it central for understanding the dynamics of contemporary contentious politics, as well as the emergence of broader political alternatives (Lefebvre 2014). While the conflictual nature of public space has been explicitly linked with the framing of urban order as coercively produced (Mitchell 2003), existing literature on public space evaluation has often focused on criteria such as accessibility, inclusivity, sociability, comfort, vitality, and democratic participation (Low 2022; Madanipour 2010; Mehta 2014). While these approaches provide important tools for understanding the social production of urban environments, they frequently treat evaluative categories such as “safe,” “successful,” “vibrant,” or “inclusive” as normatively self-evident. This article instead approaches evaluation itself as a contested political process through which different forms of urban life are rendered legitimate, governable, desirable, or disposable. Finally, the increasing importance of the local in articulating counter-narratives reflects also to what Wills (2013) describes as a *reterritorialisation of politics*, in which everyday spaces of life become key sites of collective subject formation. By tracing the conflict around Strefi Hill through discourses, representations, and practices, this article argues that such struggles reveal not only competing claims over space, but fundamentally different modes of inhabiting the city—between processes that seek to domesticate urban life and those that insist on keeping it open, relational, and irreducibly wild.

1. Locals, wilds, domesticated: Urban domestication and the production of familiar space

Within critical urban studies, domestication has often been employed as a macro-narrative describing processes through which cities are stripped of historically defining forms of public life. Zukin (2009) frames domestication as a generalized condition in which authentic public spaces diminish as “wilder” neighbourhoods undergo aesthetic upgrading through the arrival of establishments like Starbucks, reshaping local cultures and displacing longtime residents. Similarly for Bondi (1998, p. 195), gentrification functions as a process that “turns history into heritage, and untamed urban wilderness into domesticated urban landscapes,” linking domestication to both the conquest and

management of urban uncertainty, while Allen (2006) examines Berlin's Potsdamer Platz as an insidious form of power underpinning new public spaces, though he identifies an inclusive yet "staged version of publicness" (p. 453).

Across these approaches runs a common thematic: the problem of relating to spatial otherness. The commodification of urban space is presented as coextensive with the management of uncertainty, aligning with concerns about securitization, pacification, ordering, disciplining, homogenizing, commercializing, and controlling contemporary public space. Stavrides (2024) further explores domestication as a process of taming the "wild" territories that constitute the city's *externality* to society, framing it as a process that "seeks to maintain urban ordering within the main imperatives of contemporary capitalism" (p. 21). Here, taming acquires a more ambiguous meaning. Rather than referring solely to pacification or homogenization, it points to a *shift in perspective* in which what was once external and threatening - such as nature - becomes something "that can be put into the service of the city" (Ibid., p. 23). In this sense, the "wild" refers less to qualitative value than to a social imaginary of the unfamiliar Other.

The question of *beneficiality* is central across other disciplines as well. Koch and Latham (2021) note that research in anthropology (Ingold 2000), media and technology studies (Berker et al. 2006), social history (Kasson 1978), and post-socialist studies (Stenning et al. 2010) converges in conceptualizing domestication as a process through which relations between humans and other entities - objects, ideas, or forms of life - gradually stabilize into arrangements experienced as useful or mutually beneficial. Domestication thus functions as an analytical concept, illuminating how initially unfamiliar or alien relations become familiar, routinized, and productive.

Yet the notion of mutual benefit is itself complex. Bökönyi (1989) observes that domestication presupposes cultural and morphological transformations, differentiating domesticated species from their wild counterparts. Consequently, the entity benefiting from domestication is no longer identical to its pre-domesticated form. In this sense, the experience of mutual benefit in domestication "does not stop it being a relation of power structurally grounded in the initial practices of capture and taming that initiated it" (Hage 2017, p. 69). While biological analogies are always dangerous, they highlight domestication as a mode of domination aimed to appear as non-domination, a struggle to make entities partake in the making of one's home, that simultaneously constitutes a mode of aggression and exploitation.

Ghassan Hage's notion of *generalized domestication* pushes this paradox further by reframing domestication as a *mode of existence*: a way of "inhabiting and deploying oneself in the world, that in the process of relating, creates the very world it relates to" (Hage 2017, p. 64). In this sense, domestication brings into being a world whose defining feature is that entities acquire meaning only insofar as they *exist-for* a domesticating subject. Central to this process is the *fantasy of viability*: the production of a meaningful environment allowing subjects to experience the world as inhabitable, stable, and worth sustaining (Ibid., p. 65). This fantasy simultaneously masks the extractivist nature of domestication that relies on: a) maximal occupation of space and imposition of the occupier's interests as its organizing principle, b) socio-spatial extractivism maximizing the domesticator's benefit, and c) construction of difference between domesticator and domesticated experienced as polarity (Ibid., pp. 71-80). Domestication can thus be understood as the ongoing project of creating and sustaining viable spaces, while simultaneously operating as a classificatory apparatus: a set of tools through which

societies identify, interpret, and evaluate difference as either threatening or beneficial, guiding processes of integration or exclusion.

In a broader sense, this understanding resonates with Camatte (2006), who argues that capitalist modernity produces a generalized domestication of human life itself.

Domestication reorganizes existence according to the requirements of capital, so individuals come to experience imposed order as natural and unavoidable. Within this framework, gentrification and touristification can be conceptualized as two expressions of the extractivist logic of exogenous urban transformation (Sassen 2015; Panico 2020; Rossi 2022), oriented toward producing familiar, manageable spaces capable of sustaining the capitalist fantasy of urban viability: a coherent reality in which all events and relationships can be assigned a market value (Wacquant 2012; Vogl 2015). Sarah Schulman describes this as *gentrified thinking*: a dominant way of perceiving and inhabiting the city that “replaces most people’s experiences with the perceptions of the privileged and calls that reality” (Schulman 2013, p. 161). Such logic produces a “strange notion of happiness” requiring denial of others’ experiences, assessing everyone by their utility, and then acting accordingly (Ibid.).

Urban growth is thus narrated as de facto improvement (Brawley 2009), yet this sense of progress relies on erasing minor or marginalized experiences. Streets, squares, parks, and small public spaces are reshaped to align with globally circulating imaginaries of neoliberal urbanity, and channel leisure and consumption practices into the urban field, while pushing away forms of life associated with unpredictability (Boer 2023). Poverty, homelessness, social minorities, informal gatherings, and political contestation are penalized, legitimizing intensified surveillance, policing, and regulation (Smith 1996; Mitchell 2003). As the hegemony spreads, alternative forms of urban life struggle to claim space (Pettas 2018; Stavrides 2016), and counter-hegemonic practices are marginalized or rendered invisible by reducing exposure to radically different people, objects, and ways of being (Boer 2023).

Consequently, displacement and deterioration of neighbourhood social fabric (Sassen 2015), loss of well-being and affective discomfort (Łojewska 2023), commodification and consumption of alternative urban life (Zukin 2009; Maitland 2010) are not incidental, but integral to securing an urban environment functioning as a domesticated landscape for capitalist expansion. Within this logic, the tourist emerges as the central figure: transient, economically valuable, and requiring urban space to be rendered legible, safe, and affectively comfortable. If neoliberal urban transformation functions as a mode of world-making, the touristic experience becomes its privileged mode of inhabiting the city: a mode of relating that deterritorializes urban environments, only to reterritorialize them as consumable products.

2. Urban movements as anti-domestication imaginaries: inhabiting against classification

If generalized domestication describes a mode of world-making in which urban space comes to *exist for* the domesticator, then contemporary urban movements can be understood as practices that interrupt this process by contesting the very conditions through which urban reality is made viable. As argued in the previous section, neoliberal urban transformation produces environments structured to sustain a specific fantasy of viability, one that privileges familiarity, security, and economic usefulness, while

marginalizing forms of existence, assessed as non-beneficial or threatening for the reproduction of capitalist urban order. From this perspective, conflicts around gentrification and touristification (Rossi 2022), initiatives reclaiming public space (Stavrides 2016), or struggles against privatization and policing (Koopman 2010) cannot be reduced to disputes over planning or resource distribution, since they reveal deeper conflicts over the ways in which the city can be inhabited, and over who is allowed to participate in its production (Lefebvre 2014; Butler 2011; Stavrides 2016). Social movements and grassroots initiatives thus may possess the capacity to rearrange the “distribution of the sensible,” in Rancière’s (2010) terms, while actively reconfiguring the field of what can exist, affirming that “another possible is possible” (Escobar 2020). Approached in this way, struggles over territory can be understood as conflicts over possible urban realities (Stavrides 2019; Mauvaise Troupe Collective 2018). Territorial struggles simultaneously confront the capitalist social relations imposed by state and market (Stavrides 2019), while reconceptualizing territory itself as “a process that defines space through patterns of relations” (Brighenti 2010, p.57), as well as through the multiple meanings, symbols, identities, and representations of place and community that shape it (Arampatzi 2017). Within this understanding, minor or marginalized processes of reterritorialisation from below are able to challenge the legitimacy of dominant spatial assemblages, producing *territories-in-resistance* (Stavrides 2019): expanding and inclusive spaces-in-the-making that host specific collectivities of struggle while tending toward wider networks of solidarity and cooperation.

Such emergent spaces can function as familiar spaces of alternative urban ecosystems: laboratories for grounding, reworking, and negotiating broader political alternatives in everyday life contexts (Arampatzi 2016a). In turn, they produce *alternative social rationalities* (Stavrides 2019), based on mutual care and the recognition of interdependency (The Care Collective 2020), solidarity experiments and non-commodified means of social reproduction (Graeber 2011), practices of commoning and participation (Stavrides 2016), or forms of cooperation and coexistence (Mauvaise Troupe Collective 2018). To defend a territory is, therefore, also to defend what has been created there, what has been lived through while defending it, the traditions and forms of life that have taken shape there, and the particular ways of relating to environment, community, and everyday existence; what Escobar (2001) describes as *the politics of the defence of place*.

In this perspective, territory is not a passive container of social action, but something enacted through embodied practices that simultaneously transform those who inhabit and the space they inhabit (Escobar 2017). Feminist and decolonial approaches in Latin America employ the idea of *body-territory* to further emphasize this co-constitution, where the defence of nature, land, neighbourhood, or public space is inseparable from the defence of the forms of life inscribed in the body itself (Gago 2020). Anti-gentrification and anti-touristification struggles could then be identified as *anti-domestication movements*, contesting the life-as-asset logic of extractive capitalism while sustaining, through collective practices of coexistence, the social and ecological conditions necessary for the reproduction of life in local communities (Chaves 2021; Panico 2020). Emerging through this process is what Liguori (2026) calls *the common*: a shared field of potentialities — memory, language, land, resources, symbols, practices — that belongs to the many-as-such, cannot be seized by state or market through classificatory inclusion, and “invents forms of existence that do not coincide with the

institutions offered by the dominator.” In this sense, urban movements operate as counter-classification forces, dismantling “the borders erected between those who may potentially share common worlds” (Stavrides 2019, p.75).

Building on this understanding, resistance to domestication can be approached not only as the production of alternative spaces, but as a transformation in the very relation between bodies, subjects, and territory. While generalized domestication operates by classifying identities and stabilizing spatial functions, insurgent forms of inhabiting unsettle this order by dissolving the distinction between subject and environment, giving rise to what can be described as the political ontology of *becoming-territorial*.

Understanding an uprising as a predominantly territorial phenomenon (Consejo Nocturno 2018), practices such as occupations, barricades, and collective reappropriations of public space can be read as processes of deterritorialization and reterritorialization, in which political subjects do not act upon space as external agents, but become inseparable from the spatial configurations they produce (Mauvaise Troupe Collective 2018). As suggested in the notion of *body-barricades* (Cervantes 2021), in metropolitan revolts the body itself becomes infrastructure of struggle, while space is animated through collective co-presence, generating affective relations, and compositions of movement that act as “the imprint of another form of organizing the world that is taking place.” In Deleuzian terms, such processes can be understood as *becomings*: disjunctive syntheses that deterritorialize both subject and environment, producing new assemblages in which land, infrastructure, objects, animals, plants, and bodies enter in relations of reciprocal differentiation (Deleuze & Guattari 1987; Viveiros de Castro 2014). If to inhabit a territory is first of all to “experience ourselves territorially” (Consejo Nocturno 2018), then becoming-territorial is to belong to it as much as it belongs to you, to shape together an alliance, a pack, a herd, a multitude. Becoming-territorial thus names a mode of inhabiting that corresponds to what Liguori (2026) describes as a theory of *resistance as world-building*: a territorial experiment that suspends the cartographies through which urban space is rendered governable, in which forms-of-life enter into intimacy with the most sensitive parts of a territory, extending, multiplying, and taking shape through the gradual construction of alternative dependencies in the rhythms of collective resonance.

3. Domesticating and wild poles as analytical methodology

To approach the conflict around Strefi Hill, this article adopts a methodological distinction between the *domesticating pole* and the *wild pole* as analytical positions that allow the comparison of different ways of imagining, representing, and inhabiting urban space. As argued in the previous chapter, generalized domestication operates by rendering space predictable, governable, and oriented toward consumption, producing environments aligned with the needs of administration, security, and capital accumulation. Within this framework, gentrification and touristification can be understood as different expressions of the same *domesticating process*. As Panico (2020) observes, gentrification often entails radical reshaping of urban fabric through demolition, displacement, and redevelopment, whereas touristification tends to preserve and immobilize the image of place as authentic, maintaining built and social landscapes in a fixed, marketable guide through patrimonialisation, aestheticization, and multicultural commodification. Rather than opposing tendencies, these processes

function as complementary modalities through which spatial otherness is appropriated. The domesticating pole, therefore, operates as a double bind, oscillating between *extensive strategies of control* - regulation, policing, exclusion, spatial restructuring - and *intensive strategies of incorporation*, through which alternative forms of life are reframed as consumable difference. In this sense, characterizations like "authentic", "safe", "accessible", or even straightforward "touristic" are pre-decided as inherently positive evaluations of public space.

Opposed to this logic, the wild pole does not designate a symmetrical position, nor simply the negation of domestication, but a different mode of relating to spatial otherness that resists dominant classification. Following Halberstam's (2020) understanding, instead of being constituted as society's outside, wildness introduces a surplus of possibilities within it, opening access to what remains unknown, excessive, or disorderly in relation to established forms of governance. Co-extensively, the term wild is used to name a field of potentiality in which modes of inhabiting remain open to difference, rather than to evoke a natural state, absence of order, or a morally superior condition. From this perspective, the wild pole gestures towards an evaluation of public space that is inseparable from its capacity to sustain openness, to nurture coexistence, and to give birth to unpredictable forms of collective becoming. To operationalize this framework, the conflict around Strefi Hill is examined through the comparative study of discourses, representations, and practices between the Municipality of Athens, touristic platforms (such as AirBnB, TripAdvisor, GetYourGuide, etc.), and the Assembly for the Defense of Lofos Strefi. All three actors were selected as representatives of broader dynamics (state institutions, globalized market and social movements) involved in the production of locality (Massey 1994; Gupta & Ferguson 1997), each corresponding to a distinct mode of inhabiting the city. The comparative procedure examined how different materials articulated recurring themes related to safety, accessibility, authenticity, care, coexistence, urban value, legitimacy, openness, disorder, visibility, and publicness. Rather than coding materials through rigid categories, the analysis focused on how specific representations and practices gravitated toward one or the other pole, while also paying attention to moments where these distinctions became conflictual or contradictory. Public statements, promotional material, touristic descriptions, visual imagery, as well as practices of intervention, maintenance, occupation, and collective use are approached as elements of broader assemblages that constitute distinct collective imaginaries of what is felt, experienced and asserted as 'quality public space'. The empirical material was collected between 2021 and 2026, during a period marked by the redevelopment of Strefi Hill, the construction of the Exarcheia metro station, the intensification of touristification processes, and the expansion of policing and securitization practices across the neighbourhood. The research draws on a heterogeneous archive consisting of approximately 33 public municipal statements and redevelopment documents, 128 tourism-platform descriptions and reviews, over 200 assembly announcements (social media posts, official website announcements and newspaper articles) and 86 assembly communiqués (posters, banners, flyers, leaflets), 38 visual renderings and promotional images, 22 photographs produced by the author, and repeated site observations conducted throughout the five-year period. Furthermore, the research incorporates a longitudinal timeline documenting at least 35 documented incidents of police intervention and reported police violence in Exarcheia and around Strefi Hill during the above-mentioned period, created by the author. The timeline was

curated through the examination of assembly archives, news reports, legal support documentation, publicly circulated testimonies, audiovisual material, and activist documentation, all of them framing policing as a constitutive dimension of the militarization of public space itself. Rather than functioning as a detached chronicle of ‘gentrification incidents’, the material gathered operates as a form of counter-archive: a situated attempt to render visible dispersed and frequently marginalized experiences accompanying both neoliberal urban transformation and neighbourhood resistance, that remain largely absent from official narratives of urban regeneration and public order. The research is informed by the author’s situated dual proximity to the field. Firstly, as a permanent resident of Exarcheia for the last 17 years, he possesses intimate, personal and extensive experience of the neighbourhood’s urban and social change related to gentrification and touristification, as well as a critical understanding of its local ecosystem. Secondly, throughout the period examined, participation in assemblies, public discussions, protests, events, and collective activities connected to the defence of Strefi Hill and broader struggles around public space in Exarcheia was effectively engaged. This dual proximity enabled long-term observation of everyday transformations and access to ephemeral materials and practices that would otherwise remain fragmented or invisible. At the same time, it required continuous reflexive attention regarding political situatedness and interpretive positioning. The analysis therefore does not claim neutrality in a positivist sense, but adopts a situated perspective attentive to the conflicts, attachments, and forms of collective inhabitation through which urban space is continuously produced and contested. All the photographs included in the article were produced by the author during public events, assemblies, personal walks, and everyday situations occurring in publicly accessible spaces between 2021 and 2026. Care was taken to avoid reproducing identifiable individuals without consent where possible, while platform-based and user-generated materials referenced in the analysis were anonymized where necessary.

4. Extensive domestication: Municipality of Athens and urban extractivism

In the conflict around Strefi Hill, the Municipality of Athens operates as the primary agent of the domesticating pole, seeking to reorganize the hill through extensive territorial control. The attempted redevelopment projects and intensified policing do not simply manage existing public space, but actively redefine the hill’s function, who may inhabit it, and under what conditions. Official narratives present these interventions as necessary improvements in the name of safety, accessibility, environmental protection, and quality of life, emphasizing a supposed mutual benefit between authorities and residents. As former mayor Kostas Bakoyannis stated in January 2021 regarding Prodea Investments’ “adoption” of the hill, the goal was to restore it to its “true” urban form and bring “forgotten” parts of Athens back into civic life (OTA Voice 2021), even though such neglect results from the municipality’s years-long regime of *active carelessness* (Care Collective 2020). These narratives portray the hill as abandoned urban nature in need of activation, an “empty” space to be “filled” with economic and touristic activity. Beneath the language of care, such interventions reorganize territory according to external criteria of urban evaluation, while displacing or neutralizing existing forms of inhabitation.

A first step in this process is the production of a discursive field framing the hill and Exarcheia as problematic. The municipality's website describes this neighbourhood as a place where "rebels with, and quite often without, a cause have earned Exarcheia a reputation as the turf of anarchists and radicals" (Figure 1). Former and current mayors, as well as state officials, reinforce this framing by linking activist activity to obstruction and arguing that anarchists prevent the neighbourhood from reaching its "final form", as "there are those who are determined to keep certain parts of the region in a state of stagnation," while "the issue of order, social peace, and the rule of law in the region is non-negotiable" (LiFO 2025; Efimerida ton Syntakton 2024). Those who resist are presented both as 'minorities' and threats to the viability of the 'true' residents (Efimerida ton Syntakton 2022)." This discursive policy corresponds to Wacquant, Slater, and Pereira's (2014) notion of *territorial stigmatization*, where negative representations attach to specific urban areas, legitimizing exceptional control under the guise of protection. Through this polarization, resisting communities are stripped of locality, while the municipality's interests appear as its organizing principle.

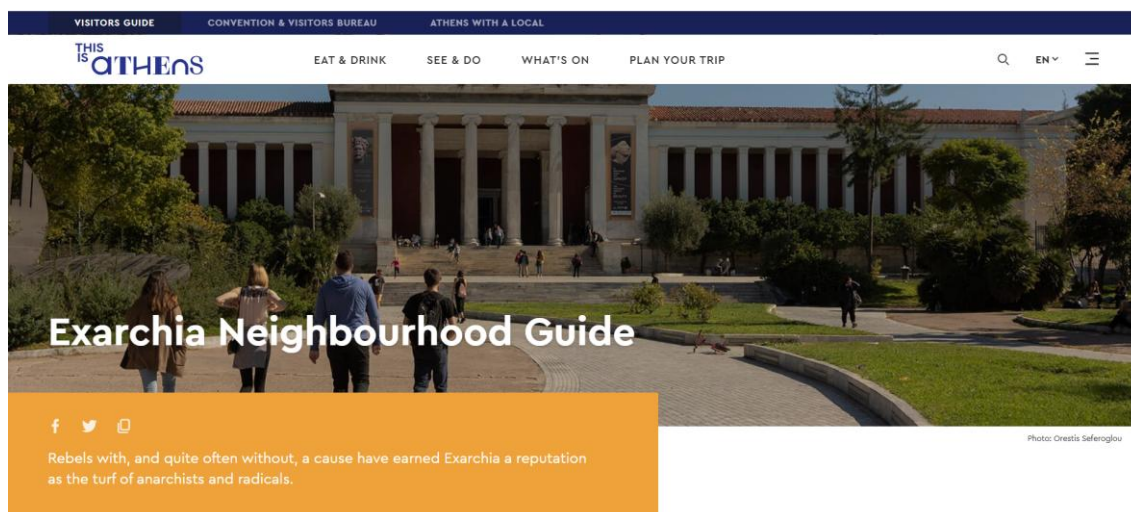


Figure 1. Official description of Exarcheia from 'This is Athens', the official guide to Athens for visitors and residents, created and operated by the Municipality of Athens (This is Athens, n.d.)

Visual representations reinforce this domesticating discourse. Architectural renderings of Strefi Hill produced by Prodea Investments (Figure 2) depict a fully pacified, stylized environment inhabited by normative figures—families, couples, children—while conflictual or marginal presences are absent. Colors are playful, emotions harmonious, non-human entities absent, and materials standardized, creating an a-temporal and a-local atmosphere that detaches the hill from the spatio-historical processes that defined it as public space. As Latour (2002) notes, technical images produced within professional frameworks tend to appear as neutral descriptions rather than situated constructions, invoking a transcendent register of reason that shields them from contestation. These renderings aim to prefigure a completely pacified space, presenting a specific form of inhabitation as natural and desirable, while concealing the conflicts through which it is produced.



Figure 2. 3D renderings of Strefi Hill for the redevelopment proposal by Prodea Investments (OTA Voice 2021).

Gentrification never unfolds without violence, and the domestication of Strefi Hill makes this explicit. From the initial dispersal of residents on day-one of the constructions (Efimerida ton Syntakton 2022b), to physical attacks on parents (Efimerida ton Syntakton 2022a), prohibition of gatherings (Efimerida ton Syntakton 2022b) and blockade of children's events in 2024 (Avgi 2023), and the eviction of the Exostrefis squat in 2025 (The Press Project, 2025), policing repeatedly appears as something more than an issue of security management. Permanently stationed riot police forces and 24/7 surveillance produce a normalized *state of exception* (Agamben 2003) redefining presence as temporary, conditional, and revocable. Even after Prodea abandoned the project and after the election of the new, 'progressive' mayor Haris Doukas, police presence remained constant, indicating that repression secures the hill's development potential rather than the project itself. In this sense, policing unfolds as a repetitive spatial pattern through which domestication is materially enforced, utilizing fear as a tool of social cohesion that restructures the lived experience of the hill itself. This regime reflects contemporary urban governance's reliance on spatialized repression. Graham (2010) argues that metropolitan power often operates through denial of access, controlled zones, and selective sovereignty, enforcing authority by regulating movement and presence. Random ID checks, face control, bans on gatherings, constant patrols, and targeted dispersals constitute a form of *active urbanism* (Ibid.) - a set of territorial practices through which repression stabilizes the conditions necessary for its redevelopment. Allan Paul (2024) describes this as *anaesthetic violence*: coercion presented as neutral, technical, and necessary, hidden behind rhetoric of safety and improvement. Police thus function as fluid urban infrastructure, cutting, blocking, and redistributing access in order to maintain controlled territorial occupation, revealing the colonial and extractivist character of the process. Beyond policing, the occupation of Strefi Hill reflects a broader militaristic logic in which urban transformation requires neutralizing the material and symbolic conditions sustaining collective life. Following Hanafi's notion of *spacio-cide* (2012), destruction here is not a side effect of gentrification, but a primary lever of political pressure. The dismantling of watering networks, excavation of vegetation, damage to paths and public infrastructure, occupation by heavy machinery, fencing of public land, and removal of

self-organized structures, combined with the militarization of everyday life by police forces (Figure 3, Figure 4), constitute what Mbembe (2003) calls *infrastructural warfare*: the violent reconfiguration of the built environment aimed at disrupting the spatial conditions that allow collective life to emerge. The hill becomes both material and symbolic target whose control enables the reorganization of the surrounding neighbourhood according to dominant urban order. To take control of Strefi is not simply to renovate public space but to dismantle spatial supports of forms of life that exceed the capitalist vision of urban viability. Domestication thus extends beyond the hill, contributing to the wider domestication of Exarcheia, as the suppression of one central collective space destabilizes the social ecology that made the area a persistent site of dissent.



Figure 3. Pictures of the hill on August 2018 (three years before the project) and on June 2023, showing the ecological destruction caused by the Prodea Investments redevelopment project during the first year of its operations (Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.).



Figure 4. Left: Heavy machinery excavating the trails leading to the top of the hill. Right: Permanent police forces guarding the basketball court (Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.).

5. Intensive domestication: consuming the Other and the urban Safari

While the previous section examined the Municipality of Athens as an agent of extensive domestication, operating through regulation, policing, and the material reorganization of

urban space, the tourism industry can be approached as a mechanism of *intensive domestication*, in which spatial otherness is not eliminated but reasserted as a consumable product. As argued in previous chapter, touristification depends on the preservation and stabilization of selected forms of urbanity, maintained as recognizable, authentic, and emotionally accessible, while conditions that could disrupt the fantasy of urban viability are displaced, neutralized, or rendered invisible. Following approaches in tourism ethnography and tourism geographies (Adams 2025), tourism is engaged as a situated mode of spatial perception and embodied encounter with locality, that utilizes representational, corporeal, and affective tools as place-making practices. With this in mind, touristic domestication is examined through the comparison of discourses, visual representations, and spatial practices of *tour-with-a-local* experiences offered to tourists by numerous touristic platforms (AirBnB, TripAdvisor, GetYourGuide, etc.). Although diffused within the urban fabric, these practices construct both Strefi Hill and Exarcheia as familiar environments for visitors, revealing how locality itself is produced as a field of economic, symbolic, and affective investment adapted to the requirements of contemporary urban capitalism.

Touristic domestication is first articulated through discourses that transform the unfamiliarity of the neighbourhood into a desirable experience. Alternative tours in Exarcheia, often described as “the Bohemian neighbourhood of Athens,” promise access to a *different city*, inviting visitors to see Athens through the eyes of a local and discover places described as hidden, reclusive, or off-the-beaten-track, usually with the help of a guide who reveals stories and locations otherwise inaccessible (Figures 5). Verbs and phrases such as *step into*, *explore*, *discover*, *taste*, and *become* repeatedly used in tour descriptions, frame the active role of the visitor in shaping the *tour-with-a-local* experience, while urging him to be “not a tourist, but a traveller.” User reviews reproduce the same narrative, emphasizing the excitement of exploring streets “you wouldn’t find alone,” discovering “secret spots,” or seeing the “authentic city,” presenting the experience as playful, surprising, and emotionally rewarding (Figure 6).

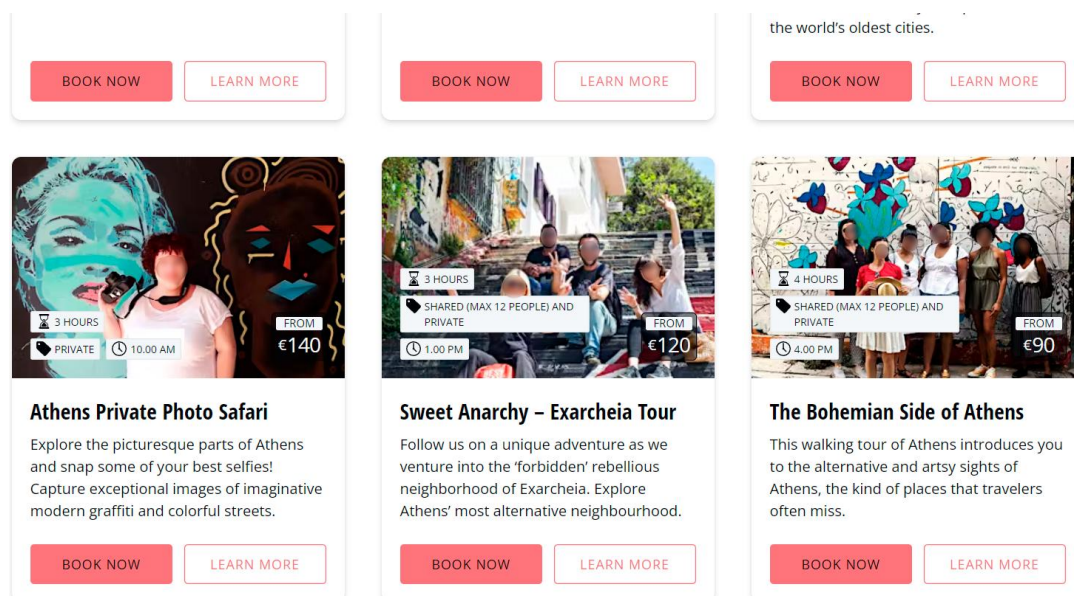


Figure 5. Various AirBnB Experiences organized in Exarcheia (AirBnB 2026a).

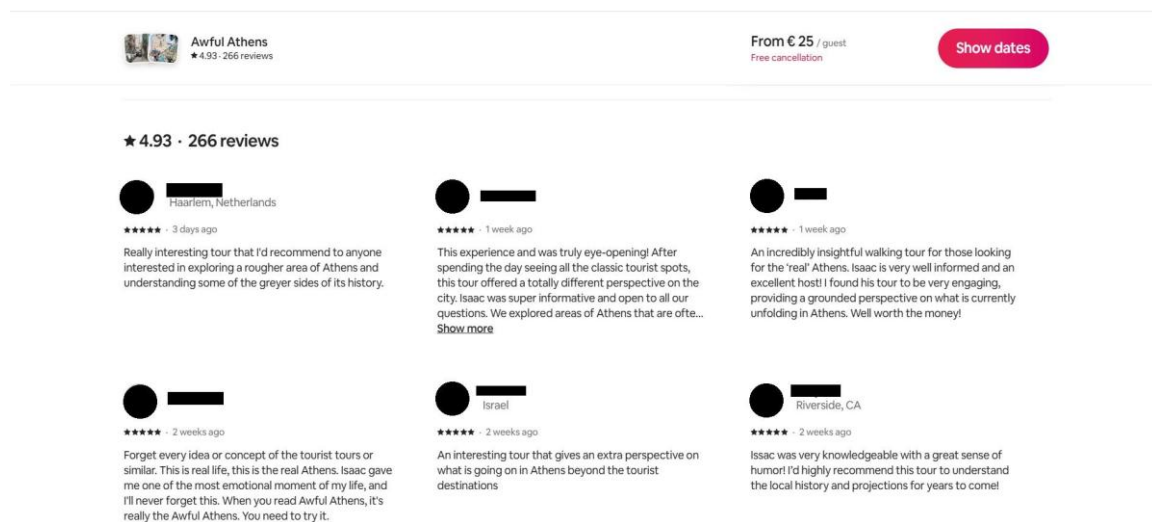


Figure 6. Reviews of the “Awful Athens” tour-with-a-local Airbnb Experience, describing it as an eye-opening experience (AirBnB, 2026b).

In this discourse, everyday life becomes a terrain of small adventures, by attributing aesthetic and emotional value to the ordinary, turning informal practices, social tensions, and everyday environments into objects of curiosity and desire (Urry 1990; Zukin 2009; Maitland 2010; Melchionne 2013). Through this affective economy, otherness is reorganized as an exotic commodity: the neighbourhood becomes attractive precisely because it appears unpredictable or transgressive, but with the promise that it can be approached without risk. Discourse itself operates as a domesticating mechanism, converting unsettling aspects of urban life into consumable narratives, that allow the visitor to enjoy the unfamiliar while remaining within the horizon of the capitalist fantasy of viability. The marketing motto “live your myth in Athens” then is less an invocation to Greek mythology, and more the revealing of the mythic properties of the touristic discourse itself: it doesn’t hide or denies reality but distorts it (Barthes 1972).

Visual representations circulating through tour platforms, promotional material, and user-generated photographs play a central role in the domestication of locality, as they capture otherness while transforming it into a recognizable aesthetic quality. Photographs of guided walks, street markets, cafés, graffiti, and everyday scenes around Exarcheia and Strefi Hill present the neighbourhood as an aestheticized landscape of alternative urban life, where social diversity, informality, or even insurrectionary memory appear as picturesque elements rather than expressions of complex urban life (Petras et al. 2021). In this sense, the image operates as a classificatory device: by isolating fragments of everyday life and framing them as scenes of authenticity, it translates the unfamiliar into a stable visual code that can circulate within the expectations of the touristic gaze (Saito 2007).

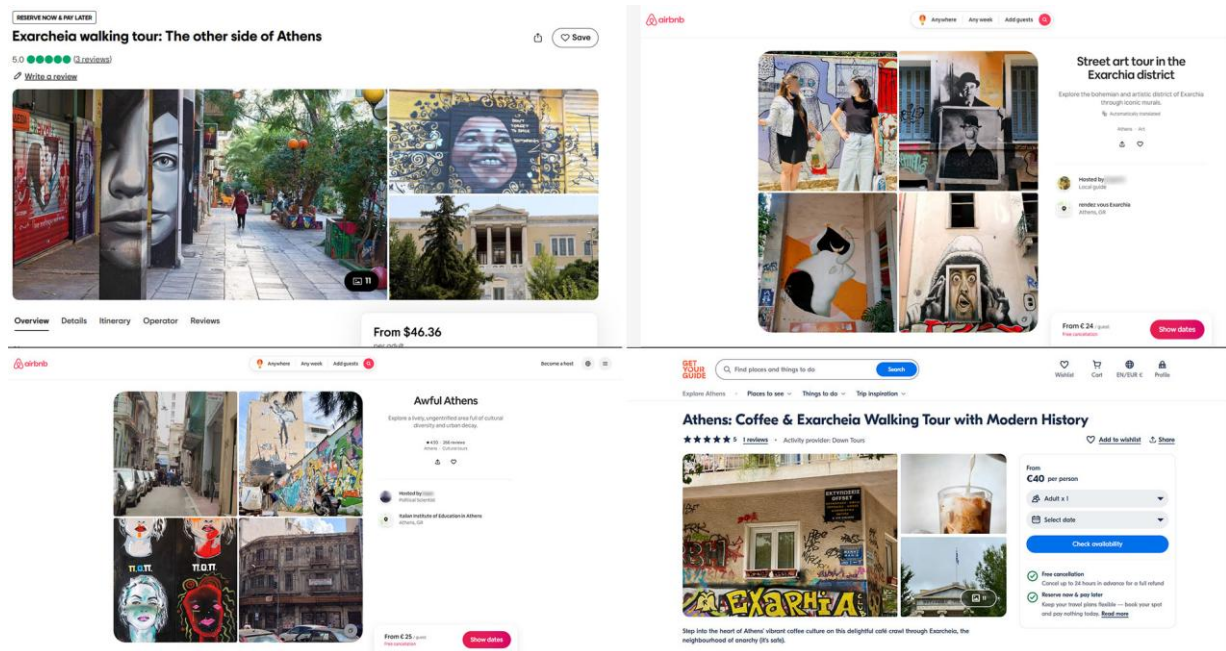


Figure 7. The aesthetic dimension of urban everyday life in Exarcheia as presented in tour-with-a-local experiences on various platforms (Author's screenshots).

These images do not only represent locality but verify the tourist's incorporation into it. Visitors are depicted walking, eating, or posing with guides and residents, presenting participation in ordinary activities as proof of belonging. Therefore, the photographic image functions as a kind of magic trace, produced in direct contact with reality and capable of influencing it; to be photographed as part of locality then, is to certify one's presence within it (Barthes 1981; Stavrides 2002; Azoulay 2012). The act of photographing becomes the means through which the visitor is temporarily inscribed in the multiplicity of the local, generating a new social geography in which tourism does not superimpose with the rest of the city, but it is incorporated to the daily dynamics of the urban realm (Cócola Gant 2015). From this perspective, the tourist becomes a new inhabitant of the city, a "resident on holiday" (Ibid.), and although its visit could last shortly, the presence of these temporal inhabitants is permanent. Touristic domestication unfolds then through performative practices that organize an encounter with difference mediated by the market. In alternative tours around Strefi Hill and Exarcheia, these practices are staged so that the visitor experiences an embodied immersion into locality through a haptic connection to the urban environment. Walking, observing, cataloguing, and photographing the city resembles a form of urban tracking, where fragments of everyday life are captured and appropriated, turning the unknown into something tangible and finite. Borrowing Sontag's (1977) term, the recent touristic activity in Exarcheia can be understood as a form of *urban safari*: a guided tour into wild territory, where urban environment can be enjoyed as a living spectacle. The phone or the camera then functions as the intermediates for the construction of a fetishistic gaze, inscribing the diffuse nature of the everyday within the photographic frame, while simultaneously establishing a relationship of dominance over the photographed subject by maintaining a safe distance.

In the end, what is consumed is otherness itself. As Bell Hooks (1992) argues, consumption is not merely an action, but the dominant social relation of contemporary society. Consumer culture turns difference into a resource through which the subject can feel transformed while remaining unchanged, producing encounters with the unfamiliar Other that confirm, rather than challenge one's position (Ibid.). By encountering locals, tasting local cuisine and discovering hidden spots and underground vibes, the visitor can experience a temporary transformation into a local, while locality is reduced to a spatial product for mass consumption. Collectible like a postcard, the experience of everyday life as lived through the tour-with-a-local practices, is, in short, an experience of controlled encounter with otherness.

6. 'Strefi Free and Wild': locality, wildness, and the refusal of the domesticated city

If the redevelopment of Strefi Hill by the municipality and its touristic re-appropriation through urban safari practices both operate as mechanisms of domestication, the discourse, visual representations, and spatial practices of the Open Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill articulate an emancipatory spatial imaginary, condensed in the recurring motto "Λόφος Στρέφη ελεύθερος και άγριος" (Strefi Hill free and wild). Here, wildness does not signify abandonment, disorder, threat, or lack of care, but a positive condition of openness, multiplicity, and collective coexistence that resists the reduction of the hill to a controllable, profitable, and legible urban resource. As Halberstam argues, the wild designates forms of life that escape classification and exceed the normative structures that seek to discipline them (Halberstam 2020). Rather than be reduced to nostalgia for an untouched urban nature, the insistence on the wild character of the hill functions as a political affirmation of locality as something lived, produced, and defended through attachment, repetition, and shared presence. The wild thus emerges as the counter-pole of domestication: the possibility of a different spatial order, grounded in the ongoing production of locality through practices of inhabiting those bind bodies and desires to the territory.

In contrast to the celebratory language of redevelopment and the exploratory tone of touristic narratives, the discourse produced by the Open Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill is marked by a persistent sense of siege and urgency. Assembly texts repeatedly describe the transformation of the hill as an occupation carried out against the will of those who live around it, referring to police presence, fencing, surveillance, and construction works that render the space increasingly uninhabitable, as if "the hill is being handed over to investors while residents are pushed aside." (Lofos Strefi Assembly 2023; Athens Indymedia 2026). In these accounts, gentrification and touristification are not abstract processes but lived conditions that generate both material and affective loss of well-being. As these discourses reveal, displacement may occur even without relocation, when imposed spatial transformations produce estrangement from one's own environment and force residents to experience themselves as out of place within it (Łojewska 2023). Under such conditions, subjects may come to embody a socially produced otherness, perceived as incompatible with the controlled atmospheres of redeveloped space, a form of symbolic violence that penetrates everyday life (Ibid.). The communication of these emotions, as well the continuous documentation of the municipality's extractivist policies and contradictory

discourse, aim to serve as counter-narratives to the dominant rationality for public space. Yet, these same texts also operate as calls to collective resistance, repeatedly affirming the hill as inseparable from the lives - human or not - of those who inhabit and defend it. By claiming the space as common, free, and lived, the discourse actively produces the community it invokes, forming a political we that emerges through struggle itself, as the condition for the preservation of locality against its dispossession (Figure 8, Figure 9).



Figure 8. Left: Sign located on the top of the hill, May 2024. Right: Sign on the hill stating “The hill belongs to its tortoises”, May 2024 (Author’s pictures)



Figure 9. Left: Stencil in the streets surrounding the hill stating “AirBnB everywhere, neighbours nowhere”, July 2024. Right: Flyer distributed during neighbourhood outreach campaign organized by the Assembly, June 2022 (Author’s pictures).

The visual representations produced by the Open Assembly for the Defense of Strefi Hill depart radically from both the sanitized renderings of municipal redevelopment, and the exoticized realism of touristic imagery. Posters, drawings, and collages circulating in

calls for gatherings, festivities, and collective actions depict the hill as a dense and hybrid world populated by humans, animals, plants, and fantastical creatures, often merged in playful, or monstrous compositions (Figures 10). Rather than presenting the space as an ordered landscape to be improved or consumed, these images construct an imaginary of the hill as a living territory whose vitality exceeds the sum of its components. Such representations can be understood as counter-imaginaries that emerge in conditions of struggle, challenging dominant spatial narratives by appropriating and transforming their visual language through collage patterns, bricolage-type inventiveness, juxtaposition, and constant circulation in both physical and digital environments (Stavrides 2024). In this sense, they participate in what Latour (2002) describes as *iconoclasm*, where images are produced not in the absence of previous representation, but in conflict with other images, exposing the instability of what is presented as reality. The recurrent appearance of these figures across posters, fanzines, flyers and announcements, sustains a shared urban imaginary in which locality appears as an innate quality of all forms of life inhabiting the hill, affirming a wild multiplicity that re-appropriates the production and sustaining of public space as a field of emancipatory potential.



Figure 10. Various posters and communication material of the Open Assembly featuring humans, animals, plants, hybrids, and the hill as a multitude
(Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.).

If the domesticating pole limits spatial engagement to controlled circulation, surveillance, and consumable experience, the practices developed around Strefi Hill multiply the ways in which the space can be inhabited. The timeline of actions organized by the Open Assembly reveals a dense rhythm of recurring activities: weekly assemblies, collective maintenance works, reforestation and anti-flood interventions, communal kitchens, picnics, concerts, children's games, sports tournaments, screenings, and open celebrations (Figure 11). Through this repetition, struggle becomes habitualized, not as an exceptional reaction, but as an everyday mode of relating to the hill. Such continuity can be understood through what Simone (2018) describes as *rhythms of endurance*, the capacity of urban residents to sustain forms of life through repeated, often modest practices that allow them to remain present within environments marked by pressure,

uncertainty, and control. At the same time, these activities actively re-signify public space as an *affective infrastructure*, sustained through relations of care, co-presence, and mutual interdependence, rather than managerial regulation (Kallianos & Karathanasis, 2021). Cooking together, repairing paths, planting trees, playing, or simply remaining on the hill, are practices through which residents renegotiate their attachment to the neighbourhood, and their position to the city as a whole. To inhabit then, constitutes a form of insurrectionary practice, as it effectively generates a plane of ungovernability, a binding, a *situating*, that entails the unfolding of an intimacy of experience between beings and territory.



Figure 11. Practices of collective reappropriation of the hill as a lived territory, organized by the Open Assembly. Left up: Collective kitchen, January 2026 (Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.). Left down: kids artistic workshop, January 2026 (Ανοιχτή Συνέλευση για την Υπεράσπιση του Λόφου Στρέφη n.d.). Right up: Neighborhood basketball tournament, March 2023 (Author's picture). Right down: Event organized by the assembly titled "Public spaces for the needs of the people", April 2022 (Author's picture).

6. Conclusion: Evaluating Public Space Beyond Domestication

The conflict around Strefi Hill reveals that struggles over public space are not limited to disputes over management, accessibility, or competing urban functions, but concern

fundamentally different ways of valuing and inhabiting the city itself. To say it differently, the conflict concerns what kinds of presence, affects, temporalities, and forms of coexistence are considered legitimate within changing urban environments. On one hand, the Municipality of Athens and the tourism industry articulate a shared domesticating rationality, albeit through complimentary modalities. Extensive domestication, enacted through policing, redevelopment, and infrastructural intervention, seeks to stabilize space by eliminating uncertainty and imposing a singular vision of order. Intensive domestication, as expressed in touristic practices, does not erase difference but reorganizes it as spectacle, transforming the unfamiliar into a consumable experience. Taken together, these modalities also provide a broader framework for understanding gentrification and touristification as evaluative processes rather than merely geographic or economic transformations: they produce a city in which otherness is either suppressed or aestheticized, but in both cases subordinated to the reproduction of a capitalist fantasy of viability. Within this regime, evaluations such as *vibrant*, *alternative*, *authentic*, *safe*, or *accessible* do not operate as neutral descriptions of places, but as classificatory devices that predefine what kinds of urban life are considered desirable and economically efficient: public space becomes valuable insofar as it can be rendered governable, attractive, and compatible with circulation, investment, and tourist consumption.

It is at this intersection that the figure of the tourist emerges as the ideal subject of the domesticated city. Detached, mobile, and economically valuable, the tourist inhabits space through controlled encounters with difference, while the unfamiliar *other* is not eliminated, but rendered desirable as an exotic commodity, its potential threat neutralized through mediation, guidance, and framing. The city, in turn, is reorganized to sustain this mode of relation, as urban life is increasingly restructured as a smooth sequence of experiences, encounters, and images designed to be easily navigated, staged, photographed, and narrated. Public space is stripped away of friction, reduced to a choreographed performance of locality, a theatre of tamed otherness, an urban thematic park. In this sense, the urban safari is not simply a metaphor for embodied touristic practices but could be understood as *the dominant ontological condition of the domesticated city*: a mode of inhabiting in which otherness is sought out as resource, a way of being in space that transforms every form of contact into extractive relations with difference.

The dynamics observed at Strefi Hill, however, show that this condition is neither complete nor uncontested. The practices developed by the Open Assembly sustain a different relation to space, grounded in ongoing engagement rather than episodic experience. Through weekly assemblies, maintenance, shared activities, active participation, horizontal forms of decision-making, and continuous presence, the hill persists as a living territory produced through use, care, and repetition. Seen from this perspective, the practices on Strefi Hill do more than oppose a specific redevelopment. They sustain an alternative way of composing urban life. The hill takes form as a dense web of relations continuously produced through the realization of collective habits - cooking, repairing, gathering, playing, dancing, discussing. These rhythms do not simply defend a pre-existing locality, but actively produce it, reconfiguring the hill as a common space that evades capture precisely because it remains open, relational, and in continuous transformation. Public space, from this perspective, is evaluated according to

its capacity to sustain openness, solidarity, interdependency, unpredictability, and heterogeneous forms of life that challenge dominant market or administrative logics. If domestication positions space as something that exists for the domesticator, becoming-territorial effectively cancels this hierarchy. The subject no longer stands apart from the environment but becomes part of an assemblage in which agency is distributed across human and non-human elements, practices, material and affective infrastructures. Locality in this sense emerges as a relational condition, as the hill becomes intelligible as a collective formation in which humans, animals, plants, and natural elements participate in the production of a shared world. This relational dimension becomes particularly visible in moments where the distinction between subject and territory is suspended. During collective reappropriations in the first phase of the struggle, participants formed a human chain encircling the hill, “hugging” it as part of a day-long gathering (Figure 12). This is not a metaphorical gesture, but a political ontology in practice. To belong then, is to experience locality through active engagement, attachment, and sustained intimacy with a place, rather than granted through recognition by external authorities.



Figure 12. Instances from the action of collective hugging of the hill (Author's pictures)

Within this framework, domestication and wildness operate as analytical poles that organize different regimes of spatial evaluation and legibility, while urban safari and becoming-territorial designate corresponding modes of inhabiting through which these tendencies are lived, practiced, and reproduced. Furthermore, this process reveals the fundamentally speculative mode of evaluating public space. Urban environments are not primarily assessed according to what they presently are, but according to their potential capacity to become otherwise. Under neoliberal urbanism, this potentiality is mobilized through capitalist speculation: the neighbourhood is evaluated according to its ability to generate future economic revenue, attract investment, increase symbolic prestige, or produce consumable experiences. At the same time, however, the practices documented around Strefi Hill reveal another relation to urban potentiality grounded not in speculation and extraction, but in collective experimentation and emancipatory becoming. We could argue then, that conflicts over public space can be read as competing appropriations of urban potential itself, framing evaluation as a situated, contested, and politically embedded process.

Moreover, the analysis suggests that the domesticating pole cannot function through the elimination of wildness alone. On the contrary, processes of touristification and

neoliberal urban redevelopment appear to require continuous effort for the production, preservation, and management of certain forms of spatial otherness in order to sustain their own expansive agenda. Wildness becomes valuable precisely insofar as it succumbs to the law of the market, masked as atmosphere, aesthetic intensity, authenticity, danger without risk, or controlled unpredictability. The neighbourhood must remain sufficiently different from standardized urban environments in order to attract attention, desire, and investment, while simultaneously being reshaped into a space where this difference can be safely and efficiently consumed. We could argue then, domestication does not simply suppress wildness but continuously re-evaluates and reorganizes it according to the logics of circulation, profitability, marketing, and city-branding. Behind the guise of commodity, everything deserves a place in the sun; even political disobedience itself.

Yet, if domestication necessarily depends upon the partial preservation of wildness, then wildness also retains the capacity to exceed and destabilize the domesticating apparatus that attempts to contain it. Precisely because domesticated urban space can never fully eliminate unpredictability, excess, or the possibility of defiance, wildness persists as an immanent force capable of reopening stabilized urban environments toward new forms of sociality and collective inhabitation. In this sense, wildness does not only function as a method for re-evaluating spaces outside or not yet fully incorporated into neoliberal urbanism, but also as a potential force of re-evaluation emerging from within domesticated space itself. Public space therefore remains irreducible to its imposed functions, continuously exposed to processes of overflow, reappropriation, and becoming that exceed the evaluative frameworks through which it is governed. To defend the wild, then, is perhaps not to denounce evaluation altogether, but to open up to the possibilities of a different kind of evaluation - one that does not domesticate otherness but inhabits it.

Statement related to our ethics and integrity policies

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Reframing Public Space Evaluation through Multisited and Plurispatal Perspectives

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Abstract

This paper proposes a multisited and plurispatal methodological framework for evaluating public space as a justice-oriented method that foregrounds the lived trajectories of precarious migrants across overlapping spatial and policy scales. Ever since Vikas Mehta's Public Space Index (2014) articulated a multidimensional, site-based evaluative model, the field has increasingly approached public space evaluation as a hybrid practice combining observation, participation, and outcomes-based evidence, including policy considerations (UN-Habitat Global Public Space Toolkit, 2024; Ramos-Vidal, 2024; Mela, 2025). While these approaches offer valuable tools for assessing performance, they typically depend on aggregated metrics and assume relatively stable users and sites.

Drawing on social and design justice frameworks, the paper positions structurally produced vulnerability as a key standpoint for evaluation. Empirically, the paper draws on interdisciplinary research conducted in Belleville, Paris, during the COVID-19 pandemic, when lockdown measures exposed the fragile infrastructures that sustain the lives of migrant and unhoused communities. Combining sensory ethnography, long interviews, embodied observation, collaborative mapping, and policy analysis, we trace the multisited trajectories through which vulnerable communities navigate urban space and multi-scalar governance structures.

Public space emerges through overlapping normative and policy migration frameworks - multiculturalism, interculturalism, transnationalism, and cosmopolitanism - which operate simultaneously across scales, and which shape conditions of recognition, belonging, and exclusion. Building on this, we propose a shift from site-based, score-driven assessments toward trajectory-oriented evaluation grounded in "narrative cartography." By conceptualizing public space as a plurispatal and transcalar interface, the framework connects spatial analysis with policy design and calls for collaborative evaluation teams that include researchers, community organizations, policymakers, and migrants themselves as experts of "lived space" (Lefebvre). This approach seeks to advance a more just and empirically grounded framework for understanding and evaluating public space within the mobility regimes that shape contemporary planetary urbanization.

Keywords: public space evaluation, migration and urban space, narrative cartography, spatial justice, transcalar urbanism

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“We were nine people - walking, walking, walking; sometimes we would walk thirty-five kilometres a day... In Paris we do everything by foot. I go to the public baths on rue de Meaux, then I pass Simon Bolivar, Secrétan, Atlas, Bozaris... then I come down to the Soupes - chorba, as the Algerians say - and afterwards I walk to the park. I stop, I greet people, tac tac tac... But how will I do this? It's impossible to draw a scheme of my daily trajectory.”

Ahmed (interview, 2021)¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, a bar in the Belleville neighbourhood of Paris - known for its vibrant mix of immigrant and bohemian cultures - was transformed into the Soupes de Belleville, a mutual aid soup kitchen, imagined by bar owner Pilote “as a dream-industry island in the maze of capitalism” (interview, 2021). There we met Ahmed, an undocumented, unhoused man from Marrakesh who had been living in Paris for two years without a residence permit, moving through the city with a shopping cart carrying his belongings.

As Ahmed drew us the maps of his journeys, we realized that his daily itinerary through Paris - between parks, mosques, night buses, soup kitchens, and the box where he sleeps in the northern suburbs - was homologous to his trajectories within a constellation of places that brought him to the city - through Turkey, Greece, Albania, Kosovo, Montenegro, Croatia, Switzerland and Italy (Figures 1 and 2). For Ahmed and many others, Belleville was only one node within a wider network of places. Thus, the experience of precarious migrants in Belleville's public space amid the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic revealed what was often obscured or dismissed as a concern relegated to the margins: that “public space” is not a bounded site but a dispersed infrastructure of survival.

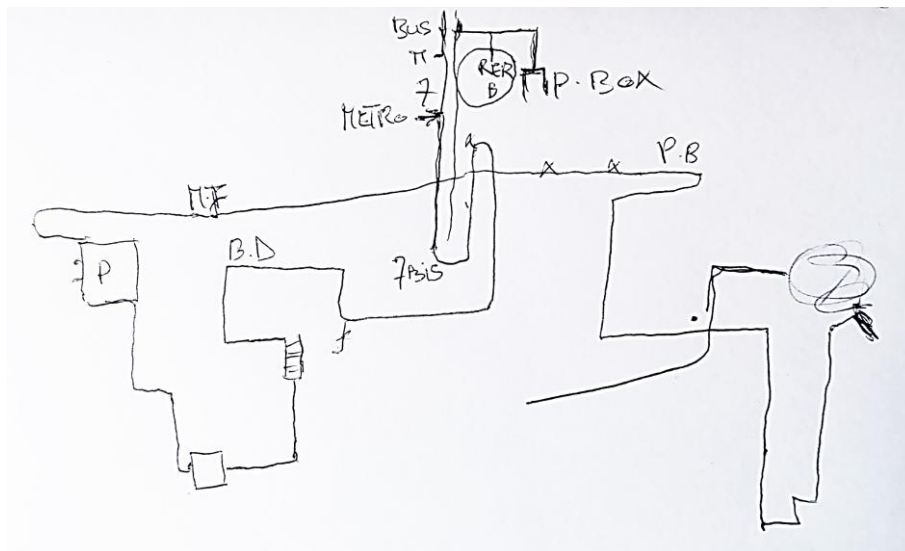


Figure 1. Ahmed's drawing of his daily itinerary in Paris, April 2021.

¹ The names of unhoused and migrant interviewees have been replaced with pseudonyms.

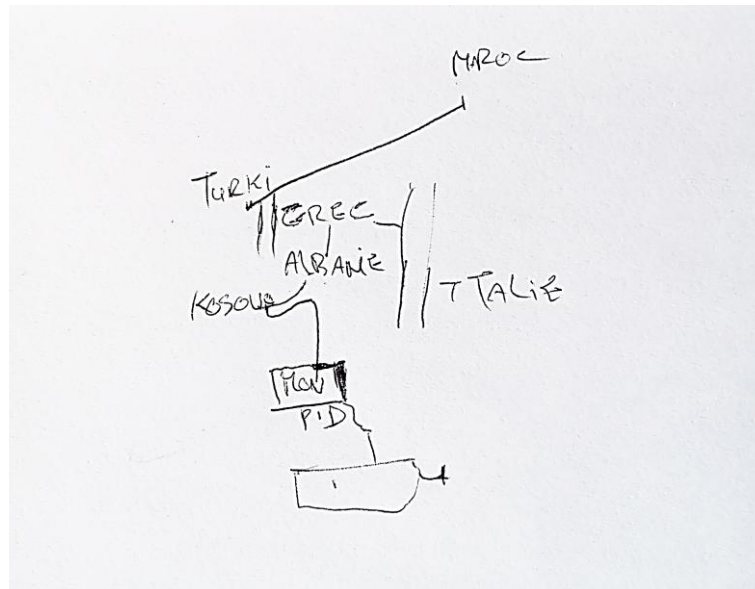


Figure 2. Ahmed's drawing of his immigration itinerary, April 2021.

Public space evaluation has traditionally relied on frameworks that look at fixed sites and generalizable indicators of quality, while privileging communal stability and wellbeing. As Sally Merry notes, referring to the use of indicators in governance, “indicators produce readily understandable and convenient forms of knowledge about the world that shape the way policymakers and the general public understand the world” (Merry, 2011, p. 92). Similarly, evaluations of public space generate forms of knowledge that can be easily understood and used by planners, policymakers, and citizens in local or national governments.

Yet public space, as experienced by those who inhabit its margins, is an ever-changing landscape where broader forces of unequal rights are materially enacted. Ahmed's trajectories raise methodological questions for evaluation: How can public space be assessed through localized evaluative frameworks when its use unfolds across multiple sites and regulatory systems? How can universalized indicators account for radically differentiated lived experiences? What does “accessibility” mean when public space is experienced as a shifting network of survival across a broader geography? Ahmed's story suggests public space should be understood as a dispersed field shaped by uneven power dynamics and conditions of mobility.

This paper suggests criteria for reframing public space evaluation through a multisited and plurispatial approach that illustrates the expansive spatial experiences of precarious subjects, focusing on unhoused “people on the move” (Ticktin and Youatt, 2021, p. 5). Our proposal conceptualizes public space as a field shaped by overlapping governance structures that derive from multiple sites, diverse group identities, and competing modes of integration. The argument builds on social justice frameworks that converge on a shared principle: that justice is assessed by examining how institutions affect those most vulnerable to harm. Vulnerability, in this context, is understood not as an individual condition but as one that is structurally produced (Gilodi et al, 2024, pp. 628–30), shaped by legal status, socio-economic precarity, racialization, and mobility regimes. Based on this understanding, we suggest that the weakest subjects constitute a

legitimate and necessary standpoint from which to evaluate public space.

The paper contributes an empirically grounded, methodologically innovative approach derived from the interdisciplinary collaboration of a four-member research team with backgrounds in design and sociology, focusing on Belleville, Paris. Conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic, the study encountered a public space transformed by lockdown measures which exposed the everyday infrastructures of survival that sustained migrants when formal institutions withdrew. Through the consideration of plurispatal policy frameworks, sensory ethnography, long interviews, embodied observation, and collaborative mapping, the research traced the trajectories of individuals whose daily movements across Paris and beyond exemplified the multisited nature of migrant life. These narratives revealed the entangled nature of public space with transnational routes and multi-scalar governance frameworks, as well as its constant remaking through practices of solidarity and neglect.

As claimed in earlier publications, “to establish a ‘routed perspective’” - one that does not privilege origins and roots over routes - “we must broaden our lens and seek connections far beyond the specificity of a given site” (Clifford, 1997; Traganou, 2009, p. 21). This paper also expands our understanding of the production of public space “beyond professional expertise to encompass the agentic and emergent actions of displaced people and solidarity movements” (Lichtman and Traganou, 2023, p. 5). The paper begins with a brief review of theories on public space and migration/displacement, followed by a discussion of specific public space evaluation frameworks. Following this, we describe our interdisciplinary research in Belleville – tracing the inquiry that led to our multisited, plurispatal evaluation of public space, and we conclude by articulating the broader principles and implications of this approach.

1. Public Space, Displacement, and the Limits of Evaluation Frameworks

Conceptualizing Public Space through Notions of Migration, Displacement and Multisitedness

Public space has been subject to various, often conflicting interpretations across disciplinary perspectives and ideological positions. Whilst practically defined as streets, open spaces and facilities, the concept encompasses values, beliefs, institutions, and communication networks, as well as patterns of identification and interaction.

“Public space,” “public sphere,” and “public realm” are interconnected notions. Jürgen Habermas (1989) conceptualized the public sphere as a domain in which “society” engages in rational-critical debate and self-reflection. Numerous thinkers have questioned Habermas’s belief in an idealized public sphere, viewing it instead as an exclusionary space that sustains the illusion of formal equality among participants, as if all individuals engage on equal terms in an open exchange of ideas, while in reality profound disparities persist in access, opportunity, and the capacity to be heard. Nancy Fraser’s influential critique (1990, p. 67) argues that Habermas’s model is insufficient because it fails to account for power differentials. Instead, Fraser sees multiple, hierarchical publics, including “subaltern counterpublics” formed by marginalized groups whose communicative practices and political claims fall outside dominant spheres. Fraser (pp. 66–70) emphasizes the need to ask who is rendered visible, whose claims are recognized, and under what structural constraints participation occurs.

Don Mitchell (2003, p. 35) extends this concern to the materiality of public space,

arguing that it is where “the desires and needs of individuals and groups can be seen, and therefore recognized, resisted, or... wiped out.” For Mitchell, public space is a site of ongoing struggle over visibility, access, and belonging, shaped by policing, property regimes, and the disparate distribution of rights. For Miodrag Mitrašinić and Vikas Mehta (2021, p. 3), public space today is practiced as “laboratory” for testing “impositions ... and ... restrictions on public life and limitations of civil liberties, but also... new strategies and tactics of resistance ... as well as of authentic new ways of institutionalizing the emergence of multiple publics.”

When viewed in the context of migration and homelessness, public space becomes a site where national borders, legal status, and systems of governance are materially enacted. Migration scholar Mariana Mazzucato (2021, p. 552) suggests abandoning “the assumption that social, political, economic and cultural contexts perfectly map onto the same geographical space” and instead adopting a “multisited” network approach that enables researchers to “broaden the unit” of analysis to incorporate “phenomena within the different localities that are relevant to migrants.” Design and architecture theorists have examined “how displacement materialized in specifically designed articulations, and how institutions use technology and material means to establish normative regimes” (Traganou and Lichtman, 2023, p. 7). According to design theorist Mahmoud Keshavarz (2018, p. 163), a perpetual and fraught “borderwork” operates as “a designable space capable of speeding up some passages while blocking others.” Borders, however, are not fixed in place. As architecture scholars Andrew Herscher and Ana María León (2020) postulate, “The border becomes a colonial construct at multiple scales, dividing property, cities, regions, states, and even species” (n.p.). Tracing this dispersed materiality “offers glimpses of colonial power at work even in realms of life outside border zones” (Traganou and Lichtman, 2023, p. 7). Research indicates that public spaces, despite claims of equal access, are also bordered spaces (Traganou, 2016). For migrants who are both unhoused and undocumented, public space functions as an extension of domestic space - for sleeping, eating, seeking aid, maintaining social networks, and so forth - because their access to private or institutional spaces is curtailed. The Belleville fieldwork showed that while most residents retreated indoors during the pandemic, unhoused and undocumented migrants continued to inhabit streets, squares, and markets as essential spaces of survival, while at the same time experiencing the effects of accessibility obstacles and legal protection deficits. These conditions highlight the need for evaluation frameworks attentive to precarity, (in)visibility, and systems of exclusion.

1.1 Public Space Evaluation

From Site-Based Assessment to City-Wide Policy Frameworks

Several evaluative frameworks have been developed to assess the quality and role of public space. Defining public space in terms of access and use rather than ownership and recognizing that “unconditional universal access” (2014, p. 54) is rarely achievable, Mehta proposes a Public Space Index that focuses primarily on streets, plazas, squares, and parks. His framework evaluates the quality of public space across five dimensions: meaningful activities, inclusiveness, safety, comfort, and pleasurability. While the framework acknowledges inclusiveness, vulnerable groups appear only indirectly within criteria of accessibility and social diversity.

The evaluative approaches of the Happy Cities movement, endorsed by the World Health Organization since 1986, emphasize the relationship between urban happiness and quality of life. Scholars such as Sahar Samavati et al (2025) highlight equality and diversity as key planning principles that promote spaces which are accessible regardless of age, gender, ability, or socio-economic status. While this perspective broadens the social dimension of public space, it lacks emphasis on the structural conditions affecting vulnerable populations.

Complementary perspectives are offered by Ignacio Ramos-Vidal and Elsy Domínguez de la Ossa (2024) and Maria Mela and George Varelidis (2025), who examine the relationship between public space characteristics and social cohesion - interpersonal encounters, social support, and the formation of social capital - by assessing frequency of use, walkability, and sense of community. Mela et al. also developed a participatory evaluation model that collects direct feedback from users, capturing how different demographic groups, including older residents, parents of younger children, business owners, and individuals with higher education, perceive and evaluate the same spaces. Despite considering community ties, participation, inclusion, and well-being, these two frameworks focus mainly on stable residential populations and thus do not portray the experience of people on the move and/or unhoused.

Ameliorating some of these limitations, the public space frameworks developed by UN-Habitat (2016, 2020) operate at a city-wide scale, shifting attention from individual sites to the network, distribution, and connectivity of public spaces. The “City-Wide Public Space Assessment Toolkit” and the “Global Public Space Toolkit: From Global Principles to Local Policies and Practice” are aligned with the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030, particularly SDG 11.7 universal access to safe, inclusive, and accessible green and public spaces. These frameworks emphasize participatory assessment, digital inventories, and collaborative governance, involving cross-departmental reference groups and community participation in data collection. These tools identify gaps in accessibility and connectivity barriers across neighbourhoods, while also focusing on the need to more explicitly address vulnerable populations. Their data collection protocols recommend capturing the presence of all those who utilize the spaces, including understanding the needs of homeless people, informal workers, migrants, refugees, and persons with disabilities, and encouraging inclusive participation of these groups within assessment teams. Public space, described as “the poor man’s living room” (2020, xi), is framed not only as a design or experiential issue but also as a matter of urban equity and social justice.

Taken together, these frameworks illustrate an expansion in public space evaluation from site-based qualitative assessments toward city-wide policy frameworks that integrate observation and community participation. While these approaches expand evaluative criteria, they still rely on aggregated perceptions, an epistemic approach that risks masking disparities between user groups with unequal access to space. Moreover, these frameworks focus on distributional outcomes rather than structural conditions - such as power asymmetry, precarity, and differential mobility - which shape how marginalized groups experience public space. This emphasis may create blind spots in evaluation, particularly regarding how spaces are produced (market, community, or state logics), reproduced (who maintains them and how), and transformed over time.

Critical Theory–Based Evaluative Frameworks of Public Space

Unlike fixed-site and metric-driven frameworks, our approach aligns closely with evaluative frameworks that focus on critical and social justice understandings of power dynamics affecting public space, as described in the critical perspectives of Setha Low and Kurt Iveson (2016) and Sasha Costanza-Chock (2020).

In their “Propositions for more just urban public spaces,” Low and Iveson outline five interconnected dimensions of justice in public space, each grounded in a distinct body of critical theory and “both critiquing and informing the positions that are taken in public space disputes” (p. 10):

- 1) *Distributive justice* (pp. 16–17) foregrounds the uneven allocation of spatial resources and access, drawing particularly on David Harvey (1973) and Edward Soja (2010) to emphasize how privatization reshapes urbanity.
- 2) *Recognition* (pp. 17–18), based on Nancy Fraser’s work (1990) on status hierarchies and “parity of participation,” focuses on how marginalized identities are rendered invisible in public space.
- 3) *Interaction* (or *encounter*, pp. 18–19), building on the work of Iris Marion Young (2011) as well as Ruth Fincher and Iveson (2008), emphasizes the importance of meaningful encounters across difference rather than mere co-presence.
- 4) *Care and repair* (pp. 20–21) draws on feminist ethics of care, particularly Joan Tronto (2013) and Ash Amin (2008), to highlight maintenance, stewardship, and the uneven geographies of urban upkeep.
- 5) *Procedural justice* (pp. 21–22), also based on Fraser’s work, is grounded in participatory democratic theory - about interrogating who has voice and power in shaping public space and how decision-making processes exclude different.

In *Design Justice: Community-Led Practices to Build the Worlds We Need*, design and media theorist Costanza-Chock writes that design reproduces inequality when it centres “the imagined user who is typically white, male, able-bodied, documented, and financially secure” (p. 44), and proposes a Design Justice framework to guide justice-oriented intervention. Design Justice demands that those “most impacted by structural inequalities” define the problems and solutions that designers are called to address (p. 7). Based on these, Costanza-Chock proposes ten principles for Design Justice: “[1] sustain, heal, and empower... [2] centre the voices of those who are directly impacted... [3] prioritize design’s impact on the community... [4] [consider] change as emergent from an accountable, accessible, and collaborative process... [5] [reposition] designer as a facilitator rather than an expert... [6] [consider] everyone is an expert based on their own lived experience... [7] share design knowledge and tools... [8] [create] sustainable, community-led and controlled outcomes... [9] non-exploitative solutions... [and] [10] look for what is already working” (pp. 6–7).

Our public space evaluation is oriented toward challenging the unequal distribution of risks, harms, and constraints of the marginalized, rather than toward normative expectations of public space or simply the distribution of amenities or resource allocation. Most important, we believe those who are most affected by structural injustice must be central participants in both its diagnosis and its remediation.

2. The Belleville Research

Belleville as a Migrant Palimpsest



Figure 3. The Soupes de Belleville, a solidarity project during the pandemic, Belleville, April 2021.
Photo by Adèle Madeux.

Belleville, located at the intersection of the 19th and 20th arrondissements of Paris, has long been recognized as one of the city's most enduring immigrant neighbourhoods - a site of layered migratory histories and cultural heterogeneity. Successive waves of migration, from Eastern European Jews to North African, Asian, and Caribbean communities, have produced what scholars describe as a "mosaic pattern" of cohabitation and intercultural exchange (Simon, 1999, p. 101). Although gentrification has transformed parts of the area since the 1990s (Scott, 2015), Belleville retains its reputation as a zone of creativity, solidarity, and everyday cosmopolitan practice.



Figure 4. Citoyennes Interculturelles de Paris 20ème, an intercultural civil society association in Belleville that provides food-related services, Rue de Tourtille, June 2022. Photo by Jilly Traganou.

The fieldwork conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic identified Belleville not simply as a migrant residential neighbourhood but as a multisited node within wider spatial networks shaped by mobility, legal precarity, and informal infrastructures of support. The research team encountered Belleville as a palimpsest of migration, where everyday public space bore traces of both historically rooted solidarities and contemporary struggles. The presence of grassroots mutual aid initiatives - most notably the Soupes and Citoyennes Interculturelles de Paris 20ème (CIP 20) (Figures 3 and 4) - highlighted the neighbourhood's longstanding ethos of collective care and attentiveness to otherness and multiple forms of belonging. As formal institutions withdrew or reduced services during the pandemic, thus rendering structurally produced marginalization more visible than ever, these initiatives became some of the few active public infrastructures available to precarious migrants.

2.1 Understanding Normative Frameworks of Migration Governance

According to the PLURISPACE: Negotiating Diversity in Expanded European Public Spaces research project (Kastoryano et al, 2026), normative approaches to migration, incorporating four “-isms” - multiculturalism, interculturalism, transnationalism, and

cosmopolitanism - have significantly shaped public policy and academic discourse.² The normative claims of each approach differ in how they relate to diversity and difference, how they conceptualize citizenship and migrants' integration, and what kinds of governing configurations they entail. At the same time, these frameworks also illuminate how different forms of vulnerability - legal, social, and economic - are distributed and negotiated in urban space. The four-isms shaped the lenses through which we "read" Belleville, and our research looked for their distinct spatial expressions and complementarities.

Multiculturalism is a difference-sensitive approach to integration, emphasizing the need to revise citizenship and national identity in order to recognize group identities. It operates from the idea that the nation-state remains the main context for integration. The emphasis is on racial and ethnic equality and on enabling minorities to publicly challenge negative stereotypes, promoting self-definition, and securing institutional accommodations (Modood, 2005). A significant percentage of Belleville's population comes from immigrant backgrounds, and many residents live in social housing. Thus, practices of multiculturalism are evident across the neighbourhood, especially in communal public spaces near housing. As visiting researchers, we often observed groups of people engaging in ethnic-cultural festivals that included food sharing and other communal activities. These gatherings function not only as expressions of cultural identity but also as collective strategies for negotiating marginalization and reinforcing social support networks. Applied to public space, multiculturalism privileges cultural visibility and anti-discrimination but sometimes assumes that the political community is territorially fixed and democratically inclusive. This assumption might exclude undocumented or transient migrants whose legal precarity limits their access to formal recognition.

Interculturalism frames integration as a citizenship-making process that fosters connections among people from diverse backgrounds - including nationals - to achieve a cohesive society. A key outcome, and interculturalism's *raison d'être*, is the formation of a new public citizenship identity: a "culture of diversity" that promotes awareness, recognition, participation, and representation while encouraging the creation of shared public spaces (Zapata-Barrero, 2019). Due to Belleville's immigrant history, local government has supported the growth of numerous cultural associations, with policies such as the "contrats de ville," which allow public service organizations to rent municipal spaces at low cost. These associations reflect both genuine and state-incentivized interculturalism. An example is CIP 20, a collective kitchen run by women from diverse backgrounds that provides mutual aid across the city (Figure 4). Such initiatives demonstrate how intercultural infrastructures can also operate not simply as Low and Iveson's "co-presence" (described above), but as spaces of care and support that mitigate social and economic precarity. Yet while interculturalism emphasizes interaction and encounter, such interactions rarely unfold on equal terms. When looking through this framework alone, observers might overlook a symmetry of power between groups.

² The HERA-funded PLURISPACE project was led by Riva Kastoryano (France) in collaboration with Tariq Modood (UK), John Erik Fossum (Norway), and Rikard Zapata-Barrero (Spain).



Figure 5. Belleville Market, June 2022. Photo by Jilly Traganou.

Transnationalism recognizes the multiple links and affiliations that connect migrants across borders, emphasizing solidarities that extend within the European space and between migrants' countries of settlement and origin. These transnational connections influence how public space is structured both within and beyond national and local boundaries, expanding notions of territorial, cultural, and political belonging (Kastoryano, 2007; Kastoryano, 2016). Belleville's renowned ethnic markets, largely run by immigrants, attract visitors from across Paris, including former residents and their descendants (Figure 5). Many goods are sourced through transnational networks, with the markets offering ethnic foods - Asian vegetables, Middle Eastern spices - as well as cultural items, such as Muslim pilgrimage objects. Market activity also fosters intercultural encounters: During our observations, we met Rami, fundraising for a Sufi Mosque back in his native Dakar, and François (known locally as "the fool"), who sparked exchanges with passersby while creating chalk drawings of the Qur'an's Surah 101 on the pavement of Place de Ménilmontant (Figure 6). These encounters illustrate how transnational networks intersect with everyday urban practices, often contributing to informal infrastructures that sustain migrants navigating uncertain economic and legal conditions.

Cosmopolitanism, through its universal moral claims, challenges democracy's reliance on a bounded political community (Fossum and Olsen, 2022), resulting in various expressions on the ground. Belleville's ethos of solidarity and rebellion is rooted in its history as a

stronghold of the Paris Commune. This legacy endures in commemorative statues, leftist bookstores, murals, and ongoing demonstrations for progressive causes. During the pandemic, mutual aid efforts such as the Soupes embodied this ethos, serving as “space[s] of representation... in which particular groups and individuals can make themselves visible” (Figure 3). Characteristic of what Fuyuki Kurasawa terms “cosmopolitanism from below” (2004, p. 241), these efforts emerged through informal urban interactions and spontaneous solidarities among residents and newcomers. Unlike institutional cosmopolitanism, this version was enacted by grassroots actors in the absence of state support, forming “a loose constellation of ‘subaltern counterpublics’” (Kurasawa 2004, p. 235). These practices blurred the boundaries between public and private spaces - an everyday condition for those living on the margins - while shifting the focus from demands for recognition or redistribution by those in power toward the self-managed prefiguration of alternative social relations and infrastructures of care. In our research, these four-isms were treated not as abstract typologies but as interpretive lenses - heuristic devices structuring the research design and guiding field inquiry. They functioned also as methodological prompts that shaped where our attention was directed, shaping site selection and interview choices, while our empirical engagement made visible and tested the -isms’ assumptions and limits.



Figure 6. Chalk drawing in Ménilmontant Square, April 2021. Photo by Adèle Madeux.

2.2 Design-Led Ethnographic Study

Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's triad of perceived, conceived, and lived space (1991), our team focused on lived space: embodied practices, affective encounters, and informal trajectories that structure everyday urban experience. This focus aligned with design-ethnographic traditions (Pink, 2015) and with a design justice orientation attentive to "who might be harmed" by public space policies or transformations (Costanza-Chock, 2020, p. 24). The methodology reflected a cross-disciplinary integration of design-led mapping practices with a dual attention to material and embodied experience on the one hand, and sociological interest in institutions, regulations, and governance structures on the other. Fieldwork was conducted over multiple observation periods between 2021 and 2024, combined with desk research, policy analysis, and collaborative critical cartography that led to new research questions and research reframing. Our ethnographic study of Belleville adopted a mixed-methods approach combining sensory ethnography, long-form semi-structured interviews, participant observation, and an experimental technique we termed "narrative cartography." The research team began mapping Belleville from the onset, treating cartography not simply as an output but as a heuristic mode of inquiry that both shaped and was shaped by the fieldwork process.

Interviewees were selected through a snowball sampling strategy, in an effort to capture differentiated experiences of public space under current and past conditions of mobility, precarity, and housing insecurity. The sample included approximately 25 interlocutors with various experiences: migrant, unhoused, current and former residents, participants in voluntary associations, employees or owners of local establishments, artists with studios in the area, and street artists. Participants were identified through field-based engagement in mutual aid sites, neighbourhood enterprises, and general public spaces in Belleville.

Our analytical procedure followed abductive logic, moving between field materials (interviews, sensory notes, mapping exercises) and the conceptual frameworks structuring the study, attempting to ground-truth the four -isms and test their limitations. Rather than applying a predefined coding scheme, we cross-read data against the four -isms and inscribed it in our emerging cartography, leading to new questions and eventual categorization across three interrelated scales: micro, meso, and macro. This allowed for empirical observations that both informed and revised the interpretive relevance of each framework, producing an iterative feedback loop of fieldwork, cartographic translation, and theorization.

Given the engagement with undocumented and precariously housed participants, the study followed a relational ethics approach emphasizing ongoing verbal consent, use of pseudonyms or anonymization where requested, and the omission of sensitive locational data that could expose individuals or informal infrastructures to policing or displacement. The study focused on how situated trajectories reveal broader structural spatial and governance dynamics that may resonate across other contexts of precarity, avoiding statistical generalization.

Our research team acknowledged the colonial histories of cartography, its capacity to flatten difference and temporalities, and its potential to expose hidden populations. For this reason, we made an ethically motivated decision not to visualize sensitive informal infrastructures or hidden sites that could endanger migrants during the pandemic lockdown period, thus refusing to employ extractive or risk-producing forms of representation.

2.3 Multi-scalar Empirical Findings

Micro / Embodied Encounters

At the micro-level, we encountered Belleville through sensory experience-sounds of the market, traces of prior gatherings, signage, chalk drawings, and spontaneous interactions in spaces such as Place de Ménilmontant and the Soupes kitchen. These encounters indicated that rather than a sphere of deliberation and exchange, public space was a site of social reproduction, a space of survival, sustenance, shelter, care, and informal work. Our field research noted shifting norms and rhythms of public space usage during the lockdown, particularly the stark contrast between empty commercial streets and the persistent presence of unhoused, undocumented, or otherwise precarious migrants in mutual aid places and spaces of transnational exchange such as the Belleville market.

Meso / Associational Structures



Figure 7. Poster in the streets of Belleville, April 2021. Photo by Adèle Madeux.

The meso-level focused on formal and informal organizations operating in and around Belleville that highlighted the uneven geographies of urban upkeep noted above by Low and Iveson as essential elements of care and repair justice. Signs posted in windows and on walls - announcing cultural associations, social services, political debates - were read as markers of an active public sphere, albeit partially hidden from view due to pandemic-related restrictive policies. Intercultural local associations such as CIP 20, despite

temporarily suspending certain activities, continued to operate behind the scenes, distributing meals and sustaining intercultural networks. Street posters, including those responding to the high-profile murder case involving an elderly Jewish woman, revealed deep tensions and competing visions of multiculturalism in the neighbourhood (Figure 7).

Macro / Trajectorial Narratives

The macro-level encompassed the multisited trajectories of migrants whose transnational exchanges and movements extended far beyond Belleville's boundaries, exposing the unequal allocation of access, an important aspect in Low and Iveson's distributive justice framework. Ahmed's cognitive maps revealed networks of formal and informal gathering sites, social services points, and infrastructures of both mobility and exclusion across and beyond Paris, highlighting a spatialized system of survival and its obstacles that could not be captured by neighbourhood-level assessments alone (Figures 1 and 2). These narratives showed that Belleville is part of a constellation of spaces across Paris, France, and transnational routes in Europe and elsewhere.

2.4 A Migrant's Narrative

Ahmed - a Moroccan-born, undocumented, unhoused man in his fifties - played a central role in shaping the study's micro-, meso-, and macro-scalar insights. Our research team member Adèle first met Ahmed while volunteering at the Soupes kitchen, where he described his daily routine, sleeping sites, hygiene practices, and social networks, as well as associations that he and his network relied upon and transnational movements across Turkey, Greece, Albania, countries of the former Yugoslavia during 1990s war, Switzerland and Italy before his arrival to Paris in 2021.

Ahmed's stories were accompanied by two hand-drawn homologous maps: one showing his daily route between his sleeping spot in Paris's northern suburbs and Belleville, and another logging his journey across Northern Africa and Europe. Ahmed described this years-long journey as a process of "walking, walking, walking... sometimes 35 kilometres a day," relying on mosques, fields, and various support networks for food and shelter (Figures 1 and 2).

In Paris, Ahmed's network included sites such as some of the 115 emergency shelters; public baths; the Poissonniers mosque; and spaces of solidarity such as La Chapelle, a gathering area for people on the move in Paris. Ahmed's daily and weekly trajectory - from sleeping in a box, to washing in municipal baths, to eating at Soupes in Belleville, to circulating by bus at night - appears at first glance as a series of disconnected public spaces. Yet Ahmed's narrative highlighted vulnerabilities, and his trajectories offered a ground-level view of public space as a survival and solidarity infrastructure rather than a civic amenity.

While Ahmed's narrative plays a prominent role in our analysis, it is not treated as a representative case but instead as an expression of spatial experiences observed across multiple interlocutors and sites. His trajectory makes legible multi-scalar patterns of displacement, access, and informal urban support.

2.5 Research Insights

Cosmopolitanism from Below and Pandemic Solidarities

The Belleville research revealed how grassroots solidarities sustained migrant life during the pandemic, capturing Kurasawa's cosmopolitanism from below. At a time when

formal institutions retreated, new and continuing mutual aid initiatives transformed open areas, storefronts, and sidewalks into essential infrastructures of care. The Soupes was one such crisis-response solidarity project, established in September 2020 to confront the increased inequalities resulting from the pandemic. Initiated by Pilote, a business owner who decided to convert his bar into a soup kitchen to provide mutual aid for the unhoused, the Soupes brought together people from different immigration backgrounds with messages like “You are beautiful” and “Love is my religion.” These practices contrasted sharply with institutional cosmopolitanism, demonstrating that cross-cultural solidarity emerges most robustly through everyday material practices rather than abstract moral universalism.

The pandemic thus made visible the limits of state authorities’ capacity to protect vulnerable subjects whose lives unfold in public spaces. Like other places in Paris, Belleville’s plazas and markets appeared “empty” from the majority perspective of the average citizen, as most people had withdrawn into their home for fear of contamination, yet several public spaces were still densely inhabited by those who lacked protections. At the same time, our Belleville research exposed the limits of current public space frameworks, which prioritize recognition, dialogue, and shared civic culture without tackling the profound inequalities shaping migrant experience, by revealing an expansive network of public spaces that function in tandem as an infrastructure of solidarity sustained by community members rather than public authorities.

From Multicultural Neighbourhood to Trans-scalar Structures of Exception

The period of the COVID-19 pandemic uncovered humanitarian and policy deficits across the world that in many cases were not previously foregrounded. During this period, Belleville’s public space emerged as part of a trans-scalar terrain, shaped by border policies and administrative precarity. The research taught us that Belleville was never just a multicultural residential neighbourhood, but part of a dispersed geography of survival that sprawled across metro lines, peripheral parks, municipal baths, soup kitchens, mosques, and improvised sleeping sites in the city’s dispersed public spaces. The urban fabric captured what Doreen Massey has described as place “constructed on a far larger scale ... which includes a consciousness of its links with the wider world” (1991, p. 28) - a relational production of place always in motion, always under construction.

The Belleville research also highlighted an urbanism structured by the governance of exception. Migrants navigated spaces according to shifting conditions of tolerance: They were allowed to sleep in certain peripheral parks and not others. They rode buses to avoid police encounters or unsafe conditions. The enforcement of rules varied spatially and temporally. A park that tolerated informal gathering in the afternoon might be aggressively policed at night, bus lines were coded as dangerous or safe depending on police rotations, and so on. Migrants held in their head maps based on their experiences of various places and on word-of-mouth communications with each other that were constantly updated and that redirected their moves.

This precarious experience echoed what Ananya Roy (2005) identifies as the production of informality by the state itself: the “planning of unplanning,” where certain populations are subject to neglect or criminalization. For migrants in Paris, these exceptions extended far beyond Belleville. Their routes into the city had already been shaped by

the Schengen regime, asylum bottlenecks in Italy and Greece, the reality of deportation, and adverse conditions at home that pushed them to migration. Belleville's streets intersected municipal policies, national asylum laws, European Union border regimes, and global migration networks. A police patrol enforcing a municipal order, for example, might be responding to a national anti-camping regulation shaped by EU-level asylum reforms.

Mitrašinović and Mehta (2021) have argued that public spaces emerge from multilevel governance, and public space in Belleville is one of the numerous outcomes of such intersections. Evaluation of public space must therefore follow routes and structures of exception, while being attentive to multiple scales of governance that affect mobilities between public spaces and across borders.

2.6 Multisited Narrative Cartography: Re-imagining Belleville's Boundaries

Using Belleville's public space as a portal to the broader spatial experience of migrants, our purpose was not to capture the myriad itineraries that intersect in its territory but to recognize a (dis)continuum of space access and policy. The maps capture and intersect key aspects of the inquiry outlined above - manifestations of the four normative concepts; embodied, associational, and trajectorial layers of the research findings; and storytelling and cognitive mapping by Ahmed.

The first map (Figure 8) is an axonometric depiction of Belleville, marking a web of key immigrant spaces of civil society and public provision as identified through our fieldwork: the Soupes, community kitchens and other immigrant-led associations, Belleville's park, the street market, and social housing sites. We selected these map locations through both our micro-/meso-/macro-scale sense-making in Belleville's public spaces and the ground-truthing of -isms. These are public sites of encounter, marginality, and negotiation, shaped by intersecting local and global forces, national policies, and cosmopolitanism from below which emerged more forcefully during a time of heightened vulnerability and systemic state withdrawal.

The second map (Figure 9) situates Ahmed within a broader mosaic map of Paris based on his own narrative. Echoing the Situationist *dérive*, the map traces Ahmed's daily circulation and broader psycho-geographical experience across Paris: where he sleeps, bathes, stores his belongings, eats, and socializes. Belleville appears as one node in a network of spaces in Paris shaped by structures of exception and unequal access to essential life resources.

The third map (Figure 10) zooms out of Paris and France, offering a bird's-eye view of the broader geography of Ahmed's transnational trajectory as it emerged from his storytelling. From North Africa to Southern Europe, the Balkans, and France, Ahmed's journey is not a linear path from A to Z but rather a zigzagging itinerary shaped by transnational border regimes, deportation, and asymmetrical possibilities of passage. As much as Belleville is a bounded area of exception, distinct from the rest of Paris, it is also part of a multisited spatial reality, connected to various locations in Paris and outside of France, bringing together disparate trajectories that unfold beyond its immediate boundaries.

Belleville, 20e

OTHER ASSOCIATIONS

COLLECTIF MAISON DE L'AIR

For a popular, cultural and solidary Maison de l'Air, the association aims to open up the pavilion located in the heights of the Parc de Belleville (property of the City of Paris) so that it can remain a space open to residents and contribute to the structure of the neighbourhood.

ICI SAVIES

Participation in the life of the placette Cascades-Savies via the organisation of a range of events such as concerts, animations, artistic events and street parties.

LES AMIES DU 20e

Association aiming to organise animations in the neighbourhood, hosting temporary events (thematic workshops, street concerts, observing the Paris sky, etc.) in a friendly, intergenerational and intercultural setting.

COULEURS BRAZIL

Cultural sport and social association, creating social links in the neighbourhood to encourage a healthy community. The association hosts animations, festivals and organises collective actions advocating for more green spaces.

ASSOCIATION SURMELIN SAINT-FARGEAU ENVIRONNEMENT

Defends the neighborhood's heritage and creates links between residents, participates in urbanism, environmental challenges and greenery.



LES SOUPES DE BELLEVILLE

The Soupes is a Covid-ad-hoc solidarity node in Belleville that attracts neighbours and people from other neighbourhoods as volunteers. Most guests (beneficiaries) are homeless migrants who live in Northern Paris and banlieues.

CIP20



CIP 20

A collective kitchen: CIP20 is an intercultural association created by mothers from Africa, the Middle-East, Asia, South-America, Europe (...). They cook meals based on the recipes they know and share their cultures through food. They offer it to others for a low-price and their goal is to allow low-income families to access a restaurant. They started grass-root and got support from the municipality.



MEMOIRE DE L'AVENIR

Activist art gallery, and art producers: They designed a nexus between art and society. They believe that art (and especially cultures) can allow us to ease society issues and peacefully relate to one another. They work with other associations in south-Belleville.



United Belleville cherche à favoriser l'expression participative locale et à contribuer au renforcement du lien social à travers ses actions sur le quartier de Belleville (ressourçerie éphémère, kermesses d'école, apéritifs de quartier...).



SOCIAL HOUSING

The 20th arrondissement is the third largest in terms of social housing: 35,362 or 38.2% of the main residences (according to the SRU statistics) while the medium number is 2.4% in the parisian region. From 2006 to 2017, the rate of social housing increased by 35% with 8,578 social housing units created in Paris.



RUE DENOYEZ

In 2001, artists settled in abandoned houses rue Denoyez, in the Bas Belleville. In 2015, the municipality requested part of the art workshops of rue Denoyez to make a nursery, social housing and a social residency for isolated women. This gave rise to protests and mediated debates about whether the policy shall prioritize social actions or preserve creative expression spaces. Although the artistic associations have ended, the street remains covered with street art.



MARCHE DE BELLEVILLE

The Belleville Market is located along the Boulevard de Belleville. It is known for its range of produce imported from North Africa (Morocco, Algeria, Tunisia).



POSTERS

Posters and graphic traces on the streets of Belleville.



PARC DE BELLEVILLE

Belleville's park was inaugurated in 1905. It was built on a hill that dominates Paris, and had been a vineyard for centuries before it was turned into a gypsum mine carser in the 19th century. Hovels were built on the hill to welcome immigrant workers (most of them coming from Limousin to work in the winter) and abandoned. Part of the urbanism efforts to revitalize Belleville, the park project was thus built on top of a space that encompassed wastelands and insalubrious housing.



BOULEVARD DE BELLEVILLE

Along the Boulevard de Belleville are located a large number of shops, the majority of them selling food or textiles, run by Asian and North African communities.



Figure 8. Belleville and its major public and civil society spaces and Institutions, 2021.
Map drawn by Dalia Amellal.

Ahmed's Daily Itinerary in Paris, 2021

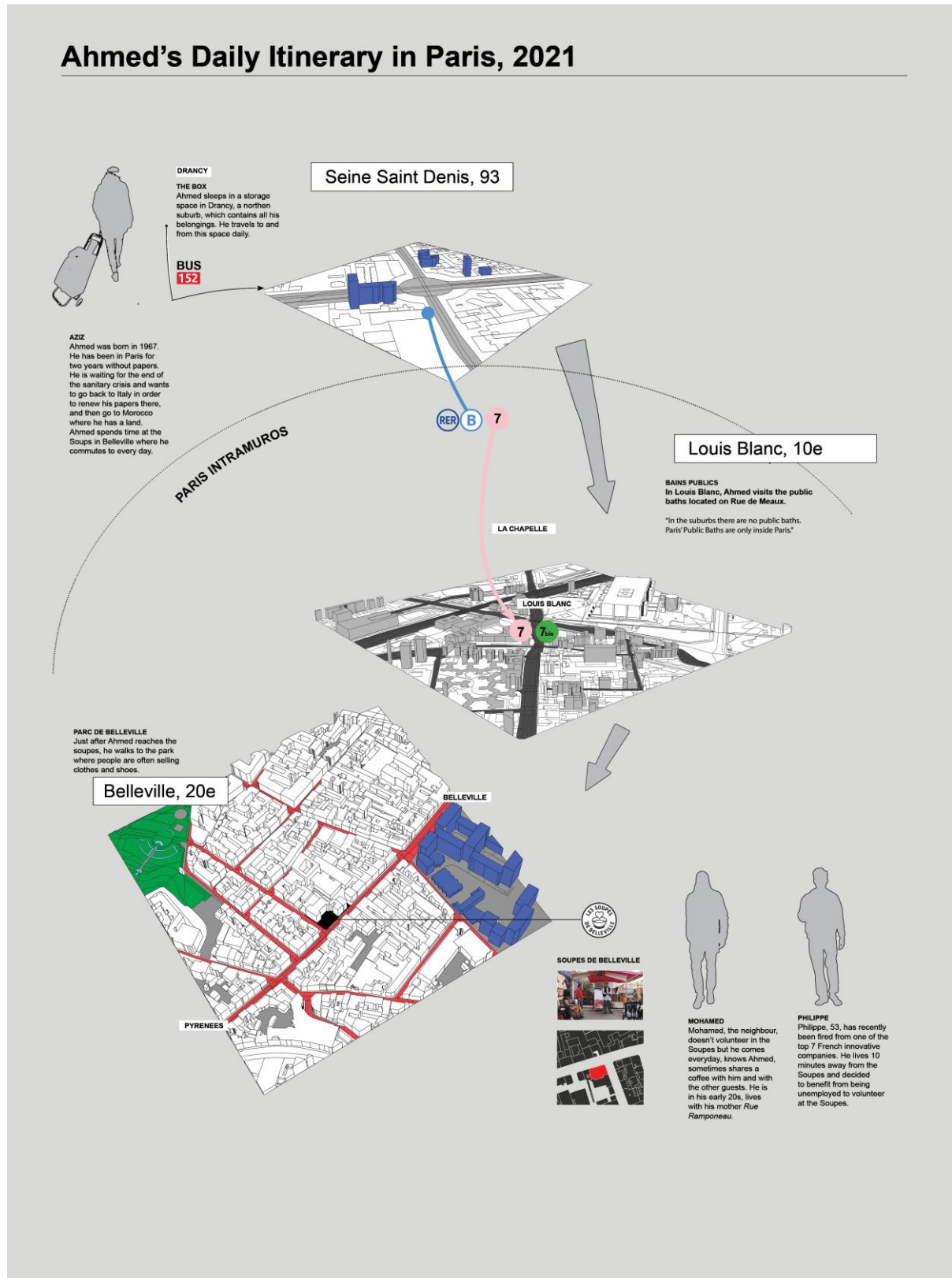


Figure 9. Ahmed's daily itinerary through public spaces in Paris, as described in April 2021.
 Map drawn by Dalia Amellal.

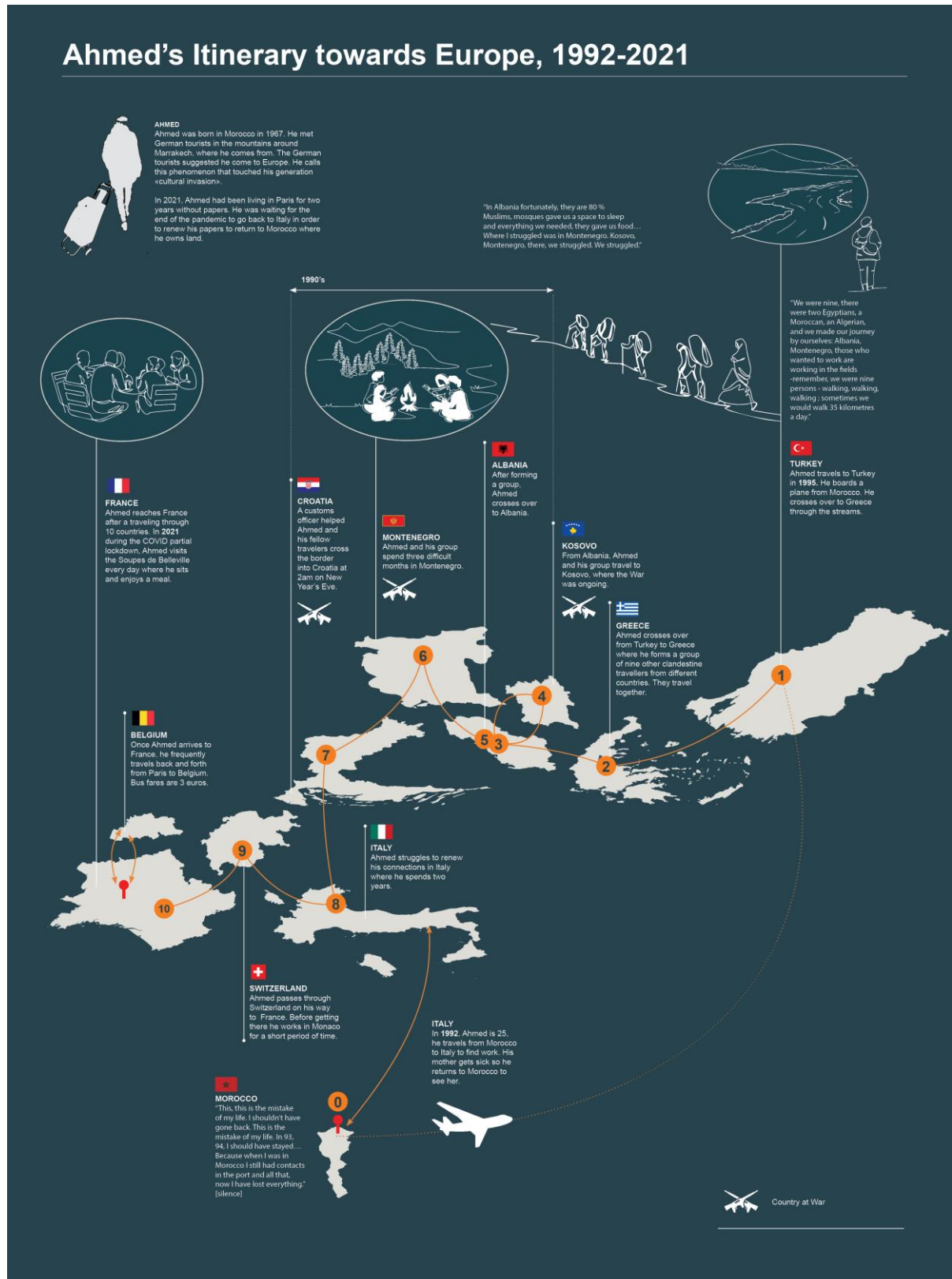


Figure 10. Ahmed's immigration itinerary from Marrakesh to Paris, 1999-2021.
Map drawn by Dalia Amellal.

Rather than generating universal scores, our narrative cartography endeavours to produce situated inscriptions capable of informing planners, mutual aid organizations, public health agencies, and migration policymakers about the uneven operation of public spaces and the trans-scalar realities that affect them and are affected by them. This study can help identify infrastructural gaps, mobility barriers, and governance fragmentation in an effort to support more equitable and coordinated arrangements of public space.

3. Conclusion: Toward a Multisited and Plurispatal Evaluation of Public Space

This paper argues that public space evaluation must be fundamentally rethought if it is to account for structural inequality and the embodied experiences of those most affected by differentiated conditions of citizenship. Vulnerability-centred evaluation converges around the principle that justice is best assessed through its effects on those whose lives are most exposed to legal precarity, bodily risk, and exclusionary governance. Thus, the paper proposes a shift from site-based, aggregate models toward a trajectory-oriented approach. This shift requires understanding public space as multisited and plurispatal, shaped by overlapping normative logics of migration and belonging. Building on existing evaluative approaches, this framework does not discard established criteria such as accessibility, safety, or participation, but perceives them as situated and contested.

While grounded in the Belleville case, our evaluative framework is adaptable across a variety of urban contexts (Table 1). It proposes a method that can be recalibrated according to various spatial, political, and institutional conditions. The following protocol summarizes how this framework engages empirical material across four interconnected layers of inquiry:

- 1) It identifies **exposure events** - here, the pandemic - as moments when vulnerability is intensified through displacement, policing, infrastructural withdrawal, environmental risk, or episodes of controversy (Yaneva, 2012). Such events serve as entry points for research and, ideally, can be identified before a crisis fully unfolds.
- 2) It examines **nodes** - here, Belleville - understood as public spaces that support everyday survival and social reproduction. These sites become focal points for fieldwork, generating diverse forms of evidence, including sensory ethnography, participant observation, collaborative mapping, and semi-structured interviews.
- 3) It traces **trans-scalar trajectories** - here, Ahmed's - through interviews and participant-drawn maps, focusing on the routes through which vulnerable individuals navigate border regimes and public-space networks to access vital conditions for life, including sustenance, shelter, hygiene, care, income, and social relations.
- 4) It considers **governance structures** - here, those related to migration - as institutional, legal, and spatial arrangements that regulate mobility, belonging, and access across multiple scales, paying particular attention to exceptions, gaps, and inconsistencies.

Table 1. Multisited and Plurispatal Public Space Evaluation Protocol. Developed by Jilly Traganou, Riva Kastoryano, Dalia Amellal, Adèle Madeux

Multisited and Plurispatal Public Space Evaluation Protocol

Layer of inquiry	Focus	Data Inputs	Analytic Procedure	Outputs
Exposure Events	Identify moments where vulnerability intensifies through displacement, policing, infrastructural withdrawal, or environmental risk, before crisis	Policy documents, field observation, interviews, regulations	Trace how controversy or crisis reorganizes access, visibility, and mobility across public spaces	Identification of risk conditions and governance failures
Nodes	Locate public spaces sustaining survival, encounter, and social reproduction	Sensory ethnography, participant observation, collaborative mapping	Analyze how spaces function as infrastructures of care, exclusion, intercultural interaction, or solidarity	Maps of solidarity infrastructures, civil society and public-sector actors; Spatial identification of missing critical infrastructures
Trajectories	Trace trans-scalar routes through which vulnerable subjects access shelter, food, hygiene, care, work, and social networks	Narrative interviews, participant-drawn maps, embodied observation	Understand mobility and immobility across multiple sites and scales in a given city/country, including transnational routes and informal support systems	Mobility maps, infrastructural gaps, barriers to access
Governance Structures	Examine institutional, legal, and policy frameworks regulating migration, mobility, and public space access	Migration policy analytical data, municipal regulations, NGO practices, field data	Cross-read empirical findings against four overlapping normative frameworks: multiculturalism (recognition), interculturalism (interaction), transnationalism (cross-border networks), and cosmopolitanism (solidarity beyond national frameworks)	Identification of fragmented governance, differential recognition, and uneven rights regimes
Cross-scalar Synthesis	Integrate empirical and critical cartographic findings into evaluative claims	Combined field materials and interdisciplinary interpretation	Abductive and iterative synthesis between mapping, theory, and fieldwork, allowing empirical findings to test and revise the relevance of the four “-isms” in public space networks	Narrative cartographies, policy implications, and recommendations for planners, NGOs, and public agencies

Our particular focus on migration was guided by **four overlapping normative frameworks**: multiculturalism, foregrounding recognition and the visibility of difference; interculturalism, emphasizing interaction and the production of shared civic cultures; transnationalism, extending the spatial field beyond the nation-state through networks, flows, and diasporic attachments; and cosmopolitanism (particularly in its vernacular “from below” form), articulating ethical and material practices of solidarity that exceed national institutional frameworks. While each of these four -isms captures a partial dimension of this condition, their intersection reveals the full complexity of public space.

Our reconceptualization strengthens the connection between spatial analysis and policy. As Schneider and Ingram have shown, policy design constructs target populations through processes of inclusion and exclusion that are inherently political (1993). The four -isms express distinct policy imaginaries that shape these constructions, each producing different configurations of deservingness and undeservingness, of visibility and invisibility. A plurispatial and multisited evaluative framework allows for a critical assessment of how such policies materialize in space and how they might be reoriented toward greater equity.

Our evaluation approach is both informed by and manifested in **narrative cartography** that inscribes routes, traces exposures to risk, and identifies conditions of exception across municipal, national, and transnational scales. Developed as a multistage interpretive mapping method, narrative cartography combined our various findings, generated new research questions that prompted research reframing, and synthesized insights into spatial diagrams that move beyond the scale of a singular public space to emphasize broader field dynamics. In the Belleville project, narrative cartography functioned not only as a heuristic research tool but also as a carefully designed research outcome with attention to how spatial knowledge is visually constructed and communicated. We recognize, however, that future evaluation teams may choose to employ narrative cartography primarily during the research process rather than as part of the final output.

Last, this evaluation paradigm demands a reconfiguration of expertise. Evaluation teams should include representatives of community associations and mutual aid groups who have deep knowledge of local and trans-local needs and informal infrastructures, as well as interdisciplinary research teams that combine design, ethnographic, and quantitative research methodologies. Furthermore, these teams should work across institutional silos and connect municipal agencies, from urban planning and transportation to social services and public health. They should extend collaboration across national, regional, and transnational policymakers and organizations that relate with migration and public space governance at different scales.

Yet, together with Miriam Ticktin, we should remain alert to the “feeling of control in those who care for the ‘innocent,’” which creates a “class of saviours” (2020, n.p.). Thus, above all, evaluating teams should give “voice and power” to migrants themselves, as the “experts of lived space,” whose trajectories form the basis of evaluation - a necessary component for establishing procedural justice.

This framework’s novelty lies in bringing together insights from critical urban theory and migration policy studies and applying them to public space evaluation through the development of a mixed-methods qualitative framework. In doing so, it advocates for a collaborative, interdisciplinary approach to understanding how public space participates

in both the production and the potential mitigation of structural harm. Integrating multisited narrative cartography with a plurispace perspective, the framework reorients public space evaluation toward questions of justice, suggesting that it is necessary to comprehend migrant trajectories, multilevel governance, and regimes of exceptionality not only in a certain city or country, but also across borders. Such an approach hopes to offer a more adequate account of the contemporary planetary urban realities of migration and exclusion, and to provide a foundation for more equitable and politically responsible public space governance and design across borders.

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Remember and Reuse. Spatial Memory and Emotional Value of Post-socialist Public Spaces

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Abstract

The legacy of socialist architecture and urban planning in Europe is worthy of attention not only from the point of view of its historical significance but also in the context of modern “culture wars” or “memory wars,” which are a recognizable feature of modern socio-political life. Using the example of a specific location, the Ernst-Thälmann-Park in Berlin, the article examines the problem of perception of this heritage of European urbanism of the 20th century. This location in eastern Berlin remains the subject of residents' emotional experiences and discussions about the memory of the place revolves around both the demolished gas storage buildings, on the site of which a park was created during the socialist era and the central square with its monument. Nowadays, the residential area with the central square is popular among the locals, combining symbolic and practical aspects. It is emphasised that within the framework of socialist urbanism, the creation of public spaces received considerable attention. This was rooted in the ideological foundations of the socialist system: the dominance of the public over the individual and the values of centrally organized social practices. The collapse of the Eastern Bloc resulted in numerous transformations in political institutions, in the economy, in social relations. These transformations also impacted strategies and practices in urban planning, construction and architecture: the planned economy was replaced by free market, and ideological foundations blurred. At the same time, “places and spaces of memory” emotionally linked to the socialist era are being revised, and the discussion on the value of this architecture is going on. The spatial aspects of this debate are particularly evident in urban environments, given the high diversity of urban communities and the specific nature of urban life: politically competitive and agonistic.

Keywords: spatial memory, spatial narrative, emotional value, post-socialist cities, symbolic conflict, agonistic practices, heritage and everyday life

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Introduction

“Attachments are often hidden and sometimes only revealed during times of change and as such can be less visible than responses”.
(Madgin, 2025, p. 15).

The dynamics of social and political relations in post-socialist societies are complex and varied. In the context of the architectural and urban history of Europe, the legacy of the socialist period (1945–1989/90) remains one of the most controversial pages. The aesthetic, ideological, social and emotional aspects of the legacy of (post)socialist urbanism have both defenders and implacable critics. However, this is a detail of a more general picture: despite the fact that three decades have passed since the end of communism in the countries of the former Eastern Bloc, the discussion about “post-transit” societies remains relevant in both scientific and socio-political contexts. There are a number of reasons for the attention of researchers, politicians and citizens themselves to the post-socialist urban environment. The following can be mentioned: “culture wars” as a characteristic feature of modernity, the crisis of liberal democracy and the growing popularity (in particular in Central and Eastern Europe) of so-called illiberal democratic projects; concerns about neo-imperial, “quasi-Soviet” claims of the Russian Federation in the former sphere of geopolitical interests of the USSR; discussion about such a phenomenon as Ostalgia, etc. Relevant research requires precise focus in terms of chronology, geography and the conceptual foundations of the research subject. This article, using the example of a specific urban location, examines some aspects of the dynamics of spatial memory and emotional perception of public space as a subject of symbolic conflict in the urban environment of a post-socialist city. Within the framework of socialist urbanism, the creation of public spaces was given considerable attention. This was rooted in the very ideological foundations of the socialist system: the dominance of the public over the individual and the values of centrally organized social practices. Mass construction after World War II was carried out in accordance with these ideological principles both in the Soviet Union and in the Eastern Bloc states. The collapse of the bloc resulted in numerous and sometimes closely interconnected transformations: in political institutions, in power and hierarchy, in the economy, in social relations etc. These transformations also significantly impacted strategies and practices in urban planning, construction and architecture: the planned economy was replaced by free market principles, and ideology had lost its meaning even earlier.

At the same time, “places of memory” and spaces linked to the socialist era - not just physically but also emotionally - continue to be subject to permanent revision. As a result, discursive conflicts arise in post-socialist societies regarding the historical memory of a shared past that influences the present and future. The spatial aspects of this debate are particularly evident in the urban environment, given the high degree of diversity of urban communities and the very specific nature of urban life: politically oriented, competitive, i.e. *agonistic* (Mouffe, 2005; Mouffe, 2013; Bell, 2008; Sharova, and Letnyakov, 2023). These issues of contemporary social theory and political philosophy are revealed, in particular, through the example of the debate around public spaces in post-socialist cities.

Theoretical Background

In recent years, the phenomenon of post-socialist urbanism has been the subject of growing interest among researchers, including outside the field of the history of architecture and urban planning. The post-socialist city, therefore, is not only a historically significant phenomenon (for example, from the point of view of preserving architectural monuments of the second half of the twentieth century), but also something complexly important in the context of current social, political and cultural issues. That the (post)socialist city is currently being studied in an interdisciplinary context is confirmed by even a cursory review of the relevant scientific literature and periodicals: it is examined in works on the history of architecture and urban planning (Hirt, 2005; Hirt, and Stanilov, 2007; Belci, and Tirell, 2011; Brünenberg, and Engler, 2023; Frost, 2018; Poljak Istenič, and Kozina, 2020; Gerten et al, 2022), memory studies (Hackmann, and Lehti, 2013; Grama, 2019; Ilchenko, 2019; Dellenbaugh-Losse, 2020), postcolonial and decolonial studies (Pucherová, and Gáfrik, 2015; Kołodziejczyk, and Şandru, 2016; Sharova, and Letnyakov, 2023), cultural theories (Forrester et al., 2004; Bartetzky et al, 2009; Diener, and Hagen, 2015; Dogan, 2019; Čamprag, 2019; Sharova, 2022b; Massino, and Wien, 2024), political science and political sociology (Stanilov, 2007; Diener, and Hagen, 2013; Burch-Brown, 2017; Therborn, 2017; Polese et al, 2018; Sharova, 2022a) etc.

However, it is safe to say that the socialist city as a special phenomenon of history, culture, technology and ideology has not yet exhausted its potential for modern researchers. This phenomenon itself has such a complex and multifaceted character that each specific case requires clarification of what exactly becomes the subject of research: monuments and places of memory (for example, monuments to the numerous heroes of the “communist pantheon”), industrial architecture of cities, blocks of standard mass residential housing, public spaces intended for recreation and/or ideological indoctrination? In some cases, the locations of a post-socialist city combine a number of these characteristics. It seems to be accurate considering the case of the current research, which will be discussed further in more detail.

Some of the concepts underlying this study require brief clarification. Specifically, symbolic conflict is related to the concept of symbolic power (Bourdieu, 1989), based on the idea that various agents constantly compete for control of symbolic resources that enable them to define and interpret social reality in a particular way, including the narrative of the past. The agonistic type of a conflict is described in political philosophy: specifically, Mouffe argues that political struggle in a democracy does not necessarily entail consensus; indeed, on a number of fundamental issues, consensus is unattainable. However, it is likewise impossible for just one side to win, as the configuration of political agents is fluid and subject to the dynamics of democratic competition (Mouffe, 2005; Mouffe, 2013). Consequently, a crucial task for society is to transform the uncompromising, antagonistic conflict into an agonistic one. In this regard, the analysis of agonistic conflict is particularly significant for societies that have undergone a transition from authoritarianism to democracy, a matter of particular relevance to post-socialist European countries, including the former GDR.

To identify the interrelationship between emotional perception and the spatial characteristics of the environment, I address the concept of spatial memory. Until recently, the concept of spatial memory was primarily used in the natural sciences, such

as neurophysiology and cognitive science¹. However, the very idea of spatiality as it applies to memory and emotions has significant foundation in the social sciences and humanities, as well as in literature. The theoretical foundations of this approach were laid in the 20th century in philosophy, social theory and cultural studies. Benjamin (Benjamin, 1986, 2019) and Bachelard (Bachelard, 1994) outlined the connection between environment, space and place, including those in the city, with memory, perception and emotional experience. Pierre Nora's notion of "lieux de mémoire" (places of memory) has made a significant contribution to the ongoing discussion following the spatial turn in the social sciences (Lefebvre, 1981; de Certeau, 1984; Nora, 1989). Hubner and Dirksmeier, in turn, suggest a new term *placemories* to describe the interrelation between feeling, society, memory and place applying the critical approach for deciphering spatialised memories in cultural geography (Hubner, and Dirksmeier, 2023).

I assume that this framework is relevant to issues concerning the architectural and urban planning heritage: the historical past which is embodied in the material objects of the urban environment and acts as a constant backdrop to the everyday life of city dwellers. The perception of this heritage is, undoubtedly, not static but rather undergoes transformation in response to the dynamics of public consciousness, political processes and cultural innovations. In the context of this research, the concept of counter-monuments is particularly useful as it offers a specific way of interpreting memorial objects during periods of social and political change (Young, 1992; DeTurk, 2017; Stevens et al., 2012, 2018). The reunification of Germany, alongside with the collapse of socialist regimes of the Eastern Bloc, necessitated a profound re-evaluation of the historical memory embodied in the urban environment, particularly in the form of buildings, public spaces and monuments erected under the former regime. In my view, the phenomenon of the counter-monument itself is a physical representation of an agonistic engagement with collective historical memory. It demonstrates the claims of mnemonic subjects to the possession of discursive resources and highlights the multiplicity of narratives concerning the past as they manifest in the present social reality. I will return to this concept later when considering the case study.

Methodology

As noted above, the topic of rethinking socialist architectural and urban heritage is highly complex and, therefore, requires a refined methodological framework in each specific case. The objective of this article is to move beyond the framework of architectural and cultural heritage history by applying concepts from political philosophy and social theory to the subject of the research. In my view, this approach is particularly relevant for analysing the legacy of post-socialist architecture and urban environments, which remain contradictory within the contemporary social and cultural context and bear debatable political and ethical meanings. In my research, I examine the spatial and material aspects of commemorative practices. In my view, this approach represents a promising direction within the context of contemporary memory studies. I examine the

¹ See, for example: Bicanski, A., & Burgess, N. 2018 A neural-level model of spatial memory and imagery. *eLife* 7: e33752; Lopez, A., & Bosco, A. 2025. Long-term spatial memory in aging: does research overlook retrograde memory relative to anterograde memory? *Spatial Cognition & Computation*, 1–18.

experience of perceiving a location in East Berlin that serves as a site of memory of the socialist period, but also as a site of everyday life, personal and family memory and interaction at the level of horizontal connections within the urban community. With this in mind, a combination of methods from social anthropology and critical social theory (Low, 2000; Low, 2017; Madgin, and Kenny, 2022; Madgin, 2025) seems to be relevant, as well as concepts rooted in the theory of political participation (Lefebvre, 1968; Harvey, 2008; Sanoff, 2010). A corresponding combined approach has been tested within the framework of critical urban studies, which focus on the social and political aspects of urban life (see, for example: (Mitchell, 2003; Brenner, 2009; Brenner et al., 2011; Rossi, 2019). I would argue that this approach is particularly relevant for investigating urban spaces that have undergone a transformation from a planned organisational structure to one based on democratic and market principles: spaces that have lost their ideological content while retaining the external form and recognisable visual features of socialist-era architecture and urban planning.

Discourse analysis is the primary research tool employed, given that the case involves elements of discursive struggle, symbolic conflict and the reassertion of narratives of the past within the context of public space in the post-socialist city. Thus, I have attempted to present a comprehensive picture encompassing the reception of the project in professional architectural periodicals at the time of the construction (both German and Soviet); fragments of contemporary political discourse at the level of Berlin's municipal administration; the reactions of local residents and experts to proposals regarding the future of the residential complex and its public space; as well as a description of an artistic reinterpretation—an installation serving as a commentary on the monument. However, this is not an exhaustive picture. I believe that the inherently complex nature of the subject requires further investigation through an interdisciplinary research lens. The given study methods and tools in the field of urban studies and memory studies being applied to the issue of urban planning in the cities after transition, with their highly diverse urban communities. The research of this kind should lead to a set of conclusions on the spatial aspects of social and cultural phenomena. They, in turn, can be used for the development of principles of solidarity and participation that are adequate to the resolving symbolic conflicts in plural societies.

Socialist Public Space: Ideology and Practice

In Soviet architecture, the organization of public spaces was given a very specific meaning: they, like other forms of official art, were intended to promote the “socialist way of life” and be part of the visual ideological narrative of the Soviet state. The same was to be true in the sphere of the USSR's interests, that is, in the “people's democracies,” including those in Europe. According to this logic, an entire city could be a monumental propaganda piece—for example, this quality was ascribed by Soviet architects to Leningrad: in this city, the birthplace of the Bolshevik political project, “the entire architectural character, the entire planning structure, all its interflowing architectural ensembles constantly exert an enormous ideological influence on people” (Petrov, 1970).

A similar assumption could be made about East Berlin after the Second World War - that part of it that was administratively and politically under the control of the USSR.

The urban development project of East Berlin during the division of post-war Germany was decided in the corresponding vein of ideological confrontation. Overall, the eastern part of the city was rebuilt and redeveloped in a way that symbolically contrasted itself with the “old” Berlin, that is, Nazi Berlin, which, during the Cold War, had acquired, if not a symbolic successor, then at least a less implacable adversary of its recent past-West Berlin. All the more remarkable is the fact that, spatially, the new planning decisions and objects in the east of the city seemed to reflect historically significant sites of the former, unified Berlin: the iconic Stalin Allee (predictably renamed Karl-Marx-Allee during the Soviet “Thaw”) was linked in the urban development plan of that period to Unter den Linden and the Brandenburg Gate (Dellenbaugh-Losse, 2020, p. 35). Thus, in a competitive environment, a new symbolic landscape was formed, associated with “socialist values” - equality, social justice value of labour etc. It's worth noting, however, that post-war construction in Berlin, executed in the spirit of Sozialistischer Klassizismus - that is, the eclectic style still often referred to in the post-Soviet region as “Stalinist Empire style” - visually correlated rather weakly with these values. But the international style of Modernism and Brutalism in architecture that replaced it, in addition to appearing significantly less pompous, was also intended to serve as proof that the GDR was no less technologically advanced, with a dynamically developing economy, than its Western neighbour and rival.

The fall of the Wall is cited in most relevant studies as the starting point for the de facto “reinvention” of cities in the former Eastern Bloc. This event became the most visible, striking visual symbol of the change of eras and generations, giving rise to new contradictions, debates and doubts. The de facto reunification of Berlin's “West” and “East” signified the need for a redefinition of identity - both local/urban and federal/national (which, incidentally, remains unfinished to this day, considering at least the question of the status of Ossi and Wessi in the public consciousness in modern Germany).

Soviet architectural criticism devoted considerable attention to the GDR's urban planning experience: compared to other Eastern Bloc states, socialist Germany played a special, symbolic role as an outpost of socialism in close proximity to the capitalist world. This applied to all spheres, including, of course, such ideologically significant ones as urban planning and construction. This area of development, formally following the famous 16 principles of construction (*Die 16 Grundsätze*, 2005) was characterized, in particular, as “a combination of bold dreams with a sober, very businesslike consideration of real possibilities” (Kopelyansky, 1970). GDR planners, according to this evaluation, in their projects were proceeding “from a clear social perspective, view cities as dynamic systems, the expected changes to which are taken into account in modern master plans... The focus of all these urban planning measures is concern for the individual and for the member of the socialist collective” (ibid.). GDR urban planning practices were seen as primarily involving the reconstruction of cities from within, i.e., from the centre to the periphery, increasing the density of development, bringing harmless industries and other places of employment closer to residential areas and developing advanced transportation systems. And, of course, Soviet architectural critics noted a “decisive break with the apologists of capitalist urban planning” among urban planners in the GDR.

Ernst-Thälmann-Park: A Social and Socialist Housing Project

The Ernst-Thälmann-Park is a highlight of socialist urban planning in the late GDR. Inaugurated in 1986, just three years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, it also became a quintessence of the communist symbolism even the mythology, in its material form: the myth, projected onto the urban territory.

A notable detail of the construction of a residential area between Prenzlauer Allee, Danziger Straße and Greifswalder Straße, with a vast public space and a monument is the attention the project initially received from the political leadership of the state. The implementation of the project took relatively little time: in 1979, the Politburo of the SED decided to transform the site of a disused gasworks on Greifswalder Straße into a park and name it after Ernst Thälmann—with no exaggeration, the most prominent person on the list of the official communist historiography in the GDR. Thälmann (1886–1944), a dockworker and transport worker from Hamburg, became chairman of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) and its paramilitary organization, the Red Front Fighters' League (RFB), in 1925. After the KPD was banned by the Nazis in 1933, he was imprisoned for eleven years and murdered in Buchenwald concentration camp in 1944.

In 1981, State Council Chairman Erich Honecker personally commissioned the Soviet artist Lev Kerbel to design a Thälmann monument at the corner of the most important traffic routes of the area, Greifswalder Straße and Danziger Straße. The monument, 14 meters high and 15 meters wide, stands on a base made of Ukrainian granite (*Ernst-Thälmann-Park*, 2026). The monument and the park, with a newly built residential area of several prefabricated houses (architect Manfred Zumpe et al.), were inaugurated in 1986 - on the centenary of Thälmann's birth (Historical Critical Commentary, 2023). A 16-hectare park was created around the residential houses. At the time, the project received positive comments from architectural critics in the GDR, such as the following:

“An urban planning concept became reality entirely in the spirit of Ernst Thälmann, who declared as early as 1919, ‘The housing question can only be solved by constructing all dwellings in such a way that all modern advancements benefit not a small minority, but the general public.’” (Adalbert Behr. 1987. *Building in Berlin 1973 to 1987*. Ehrhardt Gißke (ed.). Berlin: Koehler and Amelang, 1987);

“The paths through the extensive grounds, adorned with seasonal flowers, roses and rhododendrons, lead to numerous playgrounds, the cultural centre with its rooftop theatre, a café, an indoor swimming pool and the Zeiss Planetarium. Groups of trees alternate with terraced lawns. Various designed seating areas invite visitors to relax.” (Fritz Steinwasser. 1987. *Parks and Green Spaces in Berlin*. Berlin: Berlin-Information);

“Since its opening, Ernst Thälmann Park has been one of the social centres not only of the district. Its residents themselves take care of the maintenance and design of the grounds, as do the pioneering partnerships of the surrounding schools, which, for example, have taken on the task of caring for the flowers.” (Fritz Steinwasser. 1987. *Parks and Green Spaces in Berlin*. Berlin: Berlin-Information). (*Revisited*, 2026).



Figure 1. Residential area next to Thälmann monument. Source: Veronika Sharova, 2026

The residential complex of prefabricated apartment blocks—with over 1,300 apartments for 4,000 residents, ponds, playgrounds and a swimming pool—was not built from scratch. The site had been location to the Fourth Berlin Gasworks since 1874, six gas storage tanks (gasometers) were constructed between 1882 and 1908 and functioned till 1981. The gasometers were partially demolished in 1981 (not without resistance from the residents of the East Berlin district of Prenzlauer Berg), and the remains integrated into a new residential area: the original building is the former gasworks administration now houses a gallery and the *Theater unterm Dach* (Theater Under the Roof). An octagonal extension—the *Wabe* (Honeycomb)—still serves as an event hall and a cultural centre, a popular meeting place for the local community. Considering this “social-discursive negotiation” (Meissner, 2025) against the background of the previously existing type of urbanscape, the Ernst- Thälmann-Park project, as a residential district with public space, is a striking example of an urban *palimpsest*—a type of development in which new structures emerge on the site of previous ones that have been destroyed by external factors (demolition, damage from military action, natural disasters, etc.) or naturally ruined with time and then rebuilt (see for more details: (Sharova, 2022b)).

Palimpsest development, unlike “assemblage” development - in which new structures are introduced into the existing urban environment without destroying it—presupposes a “layering” of memories of the location's previous state, which, in turn, can generate a unique symbolic tension within the environment: in emotional terms, this tension can be expressed as a sense of landscape loss, a sense of alienation from familiar visual experience, a fear of loss of identity and connection to the environment etc. This phenomenon is examined using the example of public spaces in the cities after transition including the given one.

The apartments have been very popular since their construction, and, according to GEWOBA housing association (which manages approximately 1,100 apartments), 31% of the tenants are first-time tenants (as of November 2013) (*Etwas zur Geschichte*, 2026). However, after 1989, the condition of the residential complex gradually deteriorated, both housing complexes and the surrounding park fell into increasing disrepair. Funds for park maintenance became increasingly scarce, the fountain and irrigation system was shut down around 2006 for cost reasons, and the neighbourhood pond was slated for removal (*ibid.*). In fact, the care of most of the territory fell on the shoulders of caring local residents and dedicated volunteers.

But it can be assumed that the most controversial aspect in the recent history of Ernst-Thälmann-Park has remained the monument itself and the public space surrounding it, a large square—as was customary in socialist urban planning practice. Memorials, as Dellenbaugh-Losse rightly points out, are generally “...the most visible and explicit form of spatial symbolism... and one of the most contested” (Dellenbaugh-Losse, 2020, p. 13–14).

With the fall of the Berlin Wall, the monument to the communist leader who fought Nazism but was also, according to the German historian Ilko-Sascha Kovalchuk, a staunch supporter of Stalinism and the gravedigger (*Totengräber*) of Weimar democracy (*Ernst Thälmann. Der Mythos*, 2026), lost the meaning intended by its creators. It can be said that this part of the visual narrative became “illegible” within the context of the public space it belonged to. Following the historian's question, it is worth asking: what does the monument, which thousands of people can still see every day, now symbolize? The reaction of city authorities was initially simple and predictable: after German reunification in 1990, a commission of the Berlin Senate recommended the demolition of the monument. But its recommendation led to no real action; only the stone plaques bearing texts by Ernst Thälmann and Erich Honecker were removed, but the monument was left on its site. In May 1993, the debate came to the next stage; the Prenzlauer Berg district assembly (*Bezirksverordnetenversammlung*) decided to dismantle the monument. But this time the demolition was not implemented too, due to a lack of financial resources (*Historical Critical Commentary*, 2023). In 1997, most of the residents of Prenzlauer Berg voted to keep the name “Ernst-Thälmann-Park” (*ibid.*). Since 2014, it is a listed monument, together with the park and the ensemble of the housing estate of WBS 70 residential prefabricated houses and high-rises (*Erläuterungen zum Vorliegen*, 2014). The city of Berlin has been maintaining the statue since 2006 but later abandoned attempts to remove the graffiti from the granite, citing the high cost and complexity of the work. The result is the monument's current appearance. As of the spring of 2026, the monument is fenced off, making access difficult, but the previously applied graffiti remains on surface of the pedestal and the statue itself.

But it was not the end of the discussion on the monument's future. In 2022, it is once again attracted increasing attention. In March 2022, a group of members of the CDU party in the Berlin Pankow district council introduced an initiative to demolish the monument, citing Russian aggression and the war in Ukraine. The motion justifies this by stating that the Russian president Vladimir Putin is 'still driven with resentment because of the collapse of the Soviet Union and wants to resurrect the former superpower'. Following the logic of local centre-right politicians, the monument to the former chairman of the Communist Party of Germany (KPD) does not correspond to the values of a democratic society that opposes this war and Russia's imperial ambitions, as it symbolizes the ideology of communism.



Figure 2. Thälmann monument. Source: Veronika Sharova, 2026

The press immediately joined the dispute: for example, the independent Berlin newspaper *taz* (*Die Tageszeitung*) pointed out that “more than 30 years after the end of the Soviet Union... Russia is a capitalist state that has absolutely nothing to do with communist ideas”. “The mention of the “depiction of the hammer and sickle on the

monument,” meanwhile, points to the real motivation: Thälmann is to be erased from memory because he was a communist... That party voted for the demolition as early as the beginning of the 1990s”, argued *taz* author Erik Peter in his article, which also attracted several dozens of highly emotional readers’ comments (Peter, 2022).

The article also mentions an important detail: shortly before the issue of demolition was raised in the city council, the monument received an artistic commentary in the form of additional elements designed to conceptually redefine its meaning. That “redesigning” project contributed much to the rethinking, “recontextualisation” of Ernst-Thälmann-Park public space.

Agonistic Conflict and Emotional Value of a Place in the Case of Ernst-Thälmann-Park

An attempt to rethink the spatial narrative of Ernst-Thälmann-Park in an artistic way was undertaken in 2019–2021. In 2019, the district office of Pankow organised the competition “Artistic Commentary on the Ernst Thälmann Monument”; more than 100 artists from all over Germany took part in it. A year later, in 2020, the results were summed up: the jury recommended Betina Kuntzsch’s “Thinking from the Pedestal” project for realization (Kuntzsch, 2021). The project combined motifs of memory of a place, political identity during the GDR era and the period of transition after German reunification and reflections on the quality of public spaces in the context of the daily life of city residents. One of the competition’s requirements was a proposal for an improvement in the quality of the open space in front of the monument. By placing five dark coral-red concrete elements in front of the monument, echoing the shape of the pedestal, the artist intended to emphasize the greater proportionality of these figures to humans, within the scale of the large open space. I’ll add that the theme of the proportionality of human and built environments is not completely foreign to socialist urban development, at least within experimental projects (see, for example: (Sharova, 2021)). In this regard, there is an interesting overlap between certain ideas and initiatives belonging to the socialist era and contemporary artistic commentary.

The nature of a “counter-monument” is clearly discernible in the additional elements installed near the Thälmann monument, owing to their provocative character. Seamlessly integrated into the space of the square, they invite the viewer—that is, any passer-by—to re-evaluate the spatial narrative of the ensemble formed by the square and the monument, as if to join a dialogue not only with the artist, but also with the past embodied in this public urban space. Moreover, these blocks, installed as an artistic commentary, do not clash visually with the original ensemble conceived by the public space’s architects in the 1980s; moreover, their “socialist-style” dark red hue harmonizes with the colour of the monument’s granite base, which is currently covered in graffiti.

On the one hand, the Ernst-Thälmann-Park is quite a typical example of a residential complex that was built as a showcase project for the concept of “socialist housing.” At the same time, its “spatial symbolism” (Dellenbaugh-Losse, 2020, p. 17) reflects a number of noteworthy aspects of the discursive, narrative, ideological and agonistic recontextualization of the urban environment after the democratic transition of the turn of the 1980s–1990s. This is an obvious symbolic conflict, which includes not only the attempts to rationalize the political position, such as the ones described above, but

also an emotional component; not only the desire to destroy the subject of the conflict, thus achieving some kind of “zero sum”, but also grassroots civic initiatives and impressive artistic attempts to rewrite this ideological message, incorporating it in a new way into the modern urban environment.



Figure 3. “Thinking from the Pedestal” project. Source: Veronika Sharova, 2026

The debate over the need to preserve (or, conversely, destroy) a public space containing a monument from the GDR era is, in my view, an expressive example of an agonistic conflict. This phenomenon, initially conceptualized within the categories of political philosophy, has also found its way into critical urban studies, which, in turn, is embedded within the broader field of critical social theory. The “right to the city” is an idea explored in the works of a number of social theorists, primarily from the left; this concept emphasizes the need for inclusivity, accessibility and democracy in urban spaces. The idea was first articulated by French philosopher Henri Lefebvre in his 1968 book *Le Droit à la Ville* and then developed in numerous later works (Mitchell, 2003; Harvey, 2008). The concept of the “right to the city” extends not merely to access to resources (which is certainly crucial in an era of widening inequality) but also to the ability to influence the changes taking place within the urban environment. It therefore relates to citizens’ liberty and, furthermore, to fundamental, even “precious”, human rights that are all too often neglected (Harvey, 2008).

But, as the case under study demonstrates, residents can unite and demonstrate their agency in realizing their “right to the city” and in their efforts not to initiate changes but rather to avoid them, at least those they consider an infringement on their familiar and comfortable living environment. The activism of the Ernst-Thälmann-Park community is indicative in this regard: interestingly, residents of the area advocating for the expansion of the protected area use the slogan “*Die Stadt gehört uns*” (“The city belongs to us”) in their activities, which clearly refers to the “right to the city” concept and slogan. The local residents’ initiatives have been realised in a grassroots project *AnwohnerInitiative Ernst-Thälmann-Park. Wie wollen wir hier leben?* (“Residents’ Initiative Ernst-Thälmann-Park. How do we want to live here?”) (*AnwohnerInitiative Ernst-Thälmann-Park*, 2026). Perhaps in this situation “the idea that the city might function as a collective body politic, a site within and from which progressive social movements might emanate”, as Harvey points out, doesn’t seem that “implausible” (Harvey, 2008). In the given situation, one can expect the implementation of a social and political scenario of direct democratic participation, civil complicity, or, in other words, participatory design, i.e., “an attitude about a force for change in the creation and management of environments for people” (Sanoff, 2010, p. 1). If in the classic democratic theory participation was explained through the lens of actions lying in the sphere of traditional politics (elections, influencing political decision-making, staffing political elites etc.), the theory of participatory design, in turn, focuses on the sphere of transformation of the living environment and the environmental needs of the residents themselves, and not of politicians, bureaucrats, or experts.

However, I would like to note that in the given case of a transforming public space, the political orientations of local residents do not appear to be the leading, or at least the only, motive. In this regard, I would like to conclude by addressing the topic of *spatial emotional value* and illustrating this concept using the example of Ernst-Thälmann-Park. It is quite common to associate historically significant places with the emotions they evoke. But I assume that everyday mundane spatial memory and perception are also objects of emotional value. From this perspective, standardized objects, such as prefabricated buildings of mass-construction residential areas, as well as standardized public spaces, can be objects of affection, nostalgia, pride, sense of belonging and other emotions. The lexicon of “people–place relations” (Madgin, 2025, p. 11) can also include such notions as “‘association’, ‘attachment’, ‘interaction’, and ‘connection’ sit alongside other terms such as ‘sense/spirit of place’, ‘genius loci’, ‘townscape’, ‘character’, ‘social value’, ‘communal value’, and ‘social historical interest’” (ibid.). The question is: Are local residents willing to protect the authentic character of the Ernst-Thälmann-Park environment because this public space is a listed monument, or is this intention is rooted in the people’s personal emotions towards this place, in a personal spatial memory, which in the context of emerging solidarity is transformed into a collective memory? A convincing answer to this question would require a full-scale socio-anthropological study, similar to those conducted and described by Setha Low (Low, 2000; Low, 2017). I will make only a few suggestions (which I hope will be developed in the further research). When discussing the emotional content of the perception of public space and the living environment, we should not ignore such mental states as fear (including fear of change) and a sense of stability, which, at the micro-level of everyday life, takes on particular significance—especially given the total instability and unpredictability of the current era of polycrisis.

Local residents often cite a sense of community as a motivating factor in their attachment to the area and the emotional value of the location. Here's just several examples: a married couple living in one of the buildings in the complex since 1985 «still enjoy living in Ernst-Thälmann-Park, also because of the abundance of greenery and the strong sense of community: "People help each other, visit each other, whether they've always lived here or are newcomers. We have everything we need here: shopping, transportation, our specialists. We're happy here," they say (*Ernst-Thälmann-Park*, 2021). Another, younger tenant, who moved into her new apartment in Ernst-Thälmann-Park in 2020s, notes that she was "absolutely thrilled" (*ibid.*), and describes her apartment in the way that "It has a real urban feel to it", and particularly highlights "a kind of community spirit" (*ibid.*).

In other cases, local residents note not only the abundance of greenery and the familiar, convenient infrastructure of the area, but also social values: long-standing acquaintance with neighbours, solidarity with community members, the opportunity to spend time together, discuss everyday topics and celebrate holidays together (*Vor Ort im Prenzlauer Berg*, 2026). At the same time, other respondents answer that they can easily imagine moving to another place (*ibid.*). Interestingly, some also report a sense of being directly present in ongoing history when they are in the square next to the monument (*Wildwest im Thälmannpark*, 2019).

Conclusion

I believe that the study of post-socialist urbanism is particularly relevant at present, amidst the ongoing polycrisis. Urban environments endowed with rich internal ideological and political substance as well as distinct external artistic expressiveness are embedded within public discourse and play a significant, albeit at times underestimated, role in its dynamics, including conflictual ones. When discussing the dynamics of collective memory practices in the context of post-socialist public spaces, the following hypothesis may be assumed considering the given case. The square with the Ernst Thälmann monument became a place of memory only once it had lost its original ideological significance. Now, it serves as a remembrance of a lost country—the GDR—for those who see it as an object of n(O)stalgia following German reunification. The Thälmann monument is, therefore, a paradoxical object. At the time of its erection, it did not have any memorial significance; rather, it had political and pragmatic meaning as an integral part of the official ideological narrative of the Socialist Unity Party of Germany (SED). Thus, it appealed to the present rather than the past, which was largely a formal matter for local residents, while Thälmann himself was merely a ritualistic image. In a sense, it is a monument with a delayed effect.

Considering the residential area as a whole, it can be concluded that the phenomenon of the formation of "place-based emotional communities" (Madgin, 2025, p. 40–42) is observed not only in relation to the protection of architectural monuments of a more classical type, but also in the case of mass construction projects that possess special qualities of belonging, identity and authenticity of the environment, in relation to which mechanisms of solidarity, participation and joint action also arise, and these processes can occur against the background of the evolution of symbolic conflicts regarding collective memory, historical justice and other elements of public discourse in its spatial dimension.

Given the geographical and cultural diversity of post-socialist cities in Europe, the ways in which public spaces from the socialist period are reimagined, remembered, and reused also vary significantly: they are objects of a political debate, they are destroyed, or become objects of mass interest in the form of *commie tourism* (Diener, and Hagen, 2013), and sometimes they simply symbolically disappear into oblivion. The Ernst-Thälmann-Park case seems to be important because, despite its specificity, it is not unique: it can easily be scaled up not only within the former GDR, where many monuments, urban planning elements and public spaces from the socialist period remain, but also much more broadly, within the territory of the former Eastern Bloc, where the architectural and urban legacy of socialism continues to be both the subject of symbolic conflicts and, at the same time, a familiar visual backdrop to everyday life for millions of people in the cities after transition.

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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.*

SPATIAL DIALOGUES MAP

How are we experiencing this space today?

1. Add a Circle to the words on the left that you relate to.
2. Place them in the diagram where they belong (ME / PEOPLE / THE SPACE).
3. Draw lines or arrows to show relationships.
4. Add your own words anywhere.

BELONGING & IDENTITY

Belonging ☐

Exclusion ☐

Welcome ☐

Uncertain ☐

Isolated ☐

INTERACTION & ENCOUNTER

Connected ☐

Playful ☐

Serious ☐

Alive ☐

Indifference ☐

POWER & ACCESS

Open ☐

Controlled ☐

Free ☐

Restricted ☐

Safe ☐

Unsafe ☐

MEANING & MEMORY

Joy ☐

Tension ☐

Comfort ☐

Empty ☐

This space/experience feels like...

This collective map is part of a research project exploring Spatial Dialogues in Public Space Evaluation. Contributions are anonymous.

SPATIAL DIALOGUES MAP

How are we experiencing this space today?

1. Add a Circle to the words on the left that you relate to.
2. Place them in the diagram where they belong (ME / PEOPLE / THE SPACE).
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BELONGING & IDENTITY

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POWER & ACCESS

Open ☐

Controlled ☐

Free ☐

Restricted ☐

Safe ☐

Unsafe ☐

MEANING & MEMORY

Joy ☐

Tension ☐

Comfort ☐

Empty ☐

This space/experience feels like...

This collective map is part of a research project exploring Spatial Dialogues in Public Space Evaluation. Contributions are anonymous.

Figure I. 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.

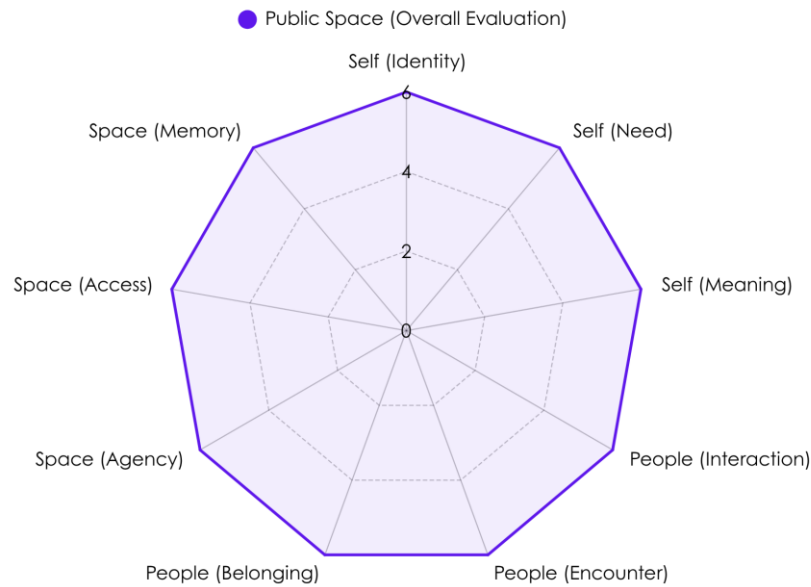


Figure 2. Spatial Dialogues Mapping Radar Chart.

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.

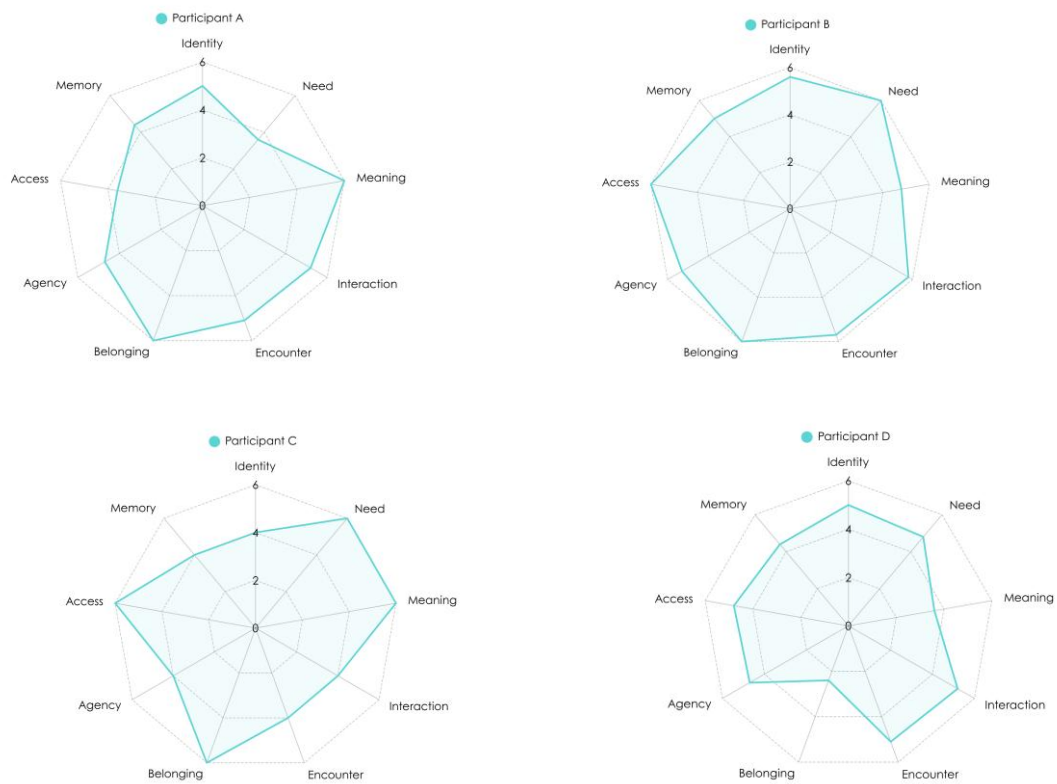


Figure 5. Individual Spatial Dialogues responses.

Note: Selected participant radar charts showing variations in how individuals experienced Bree Street across the nine criteria. (Source: Author)

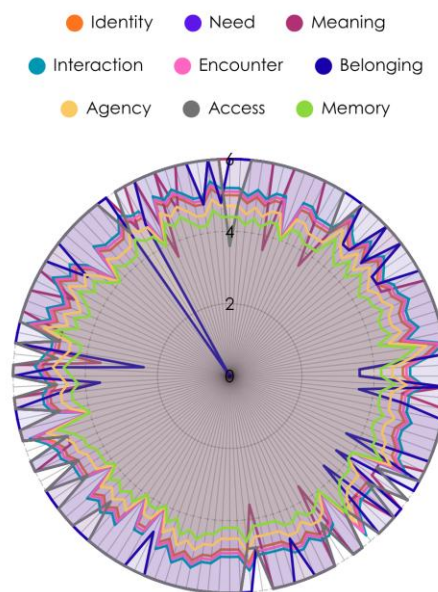


Figure 6. Aggregated participant responses.

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.

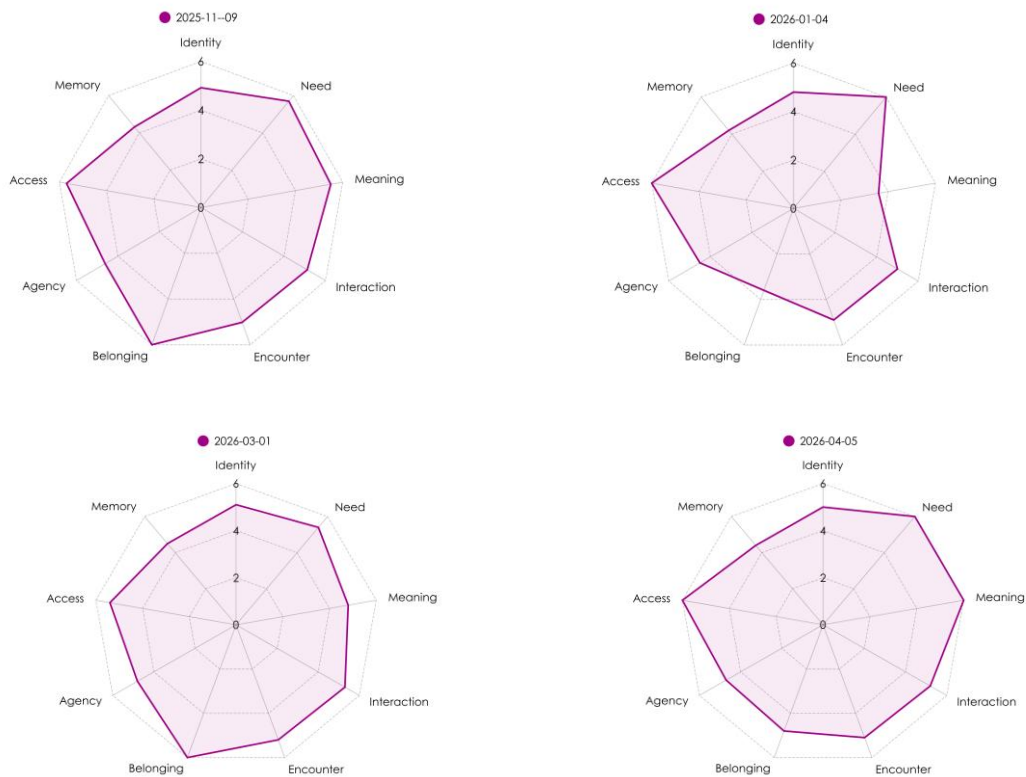


Figure 7. Weekly Spatial Dialogues assessments.

Note: Weekly radar charts showing how public space experience varied across different Bree Street Sundays.
(Source: Author)

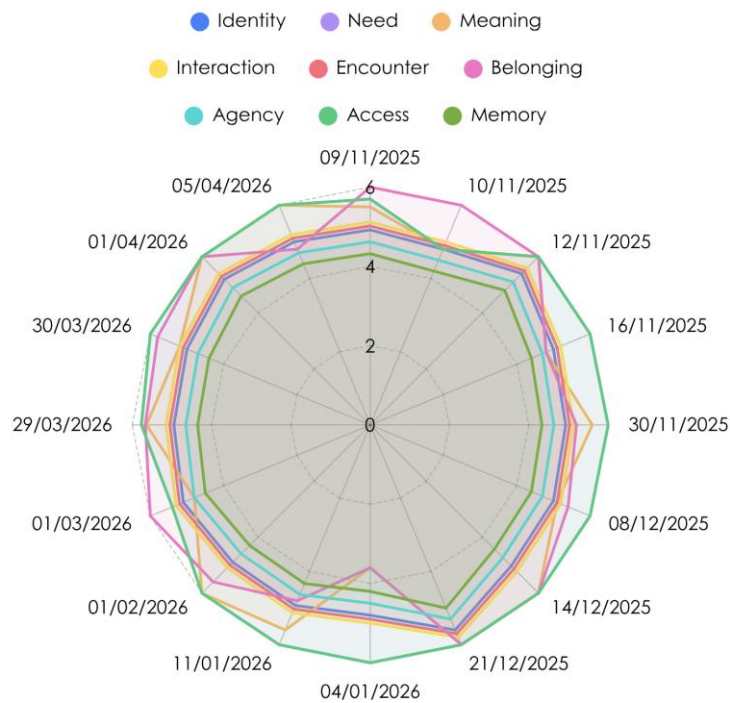


Figure 8. Season-wide Spatial Dialogues Assessment.
Note: Overall radar chart summarising the season average. (Source: Author)

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*.

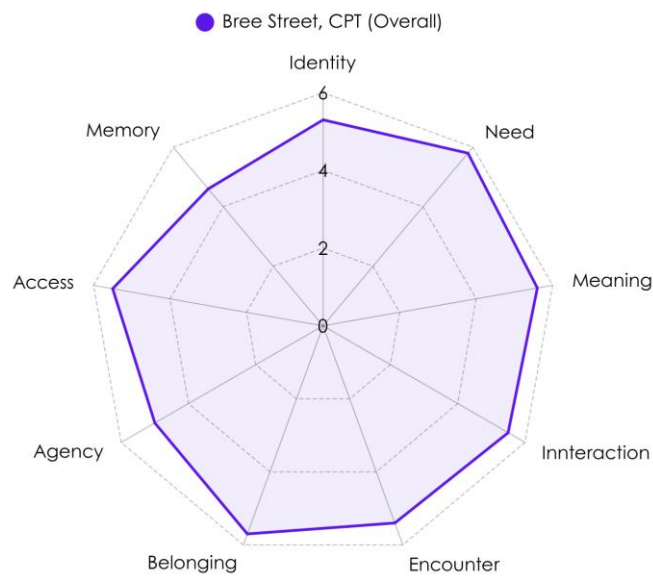


Figure 9. Full Spatial Dialogues overview.

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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Limits of Public Space Evaluation under Overlapping Urban Priorities

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Abstract

Public spaces emerge through the layering of interventions implemented over time in response to shifting urban priorities, regulatory frameworks, and moments of urgency. Concerns about climate change, security, and crime are increasingly shaping how these are adapted and managed. These efforts are rarely coordinated and arise from fragmented processes. Evaluation approaches within each domain tend to rely on standardised and quantitative indicators, which can miss perceived quality, while generalised quality evaluations rely on qualitative ones. Neither accounts at the same time for both how quality attributes are perceived and institutionally produced. These tools work best within separate domains and temporal isolation. The objective of this paper is to rethink evaluation by conceptualising public space as a site of negotiation, with a particular focus on the intersection of urban security and climate adaptation. Rather than assessing these agendas as separate performance domains, the paper explores how their interaction shapes the quality conditions of public space over time and challenges what evaluation can meaningfully capture. The paper combines a policy and planning document analysis with spatial observations to trace how security and climate adaptation measures are translated into built interventions, and to make the resulting trade-offs and synergies legible for evaluation. The analysis shows that public space quality cannot be adequately assessed through individual interventions alone, but depends on how measures are combined, sequenced, and implemented over time. This requires evaluation approaches that recognise quality attributes as institutionally produced conditions. The findings highlight the limitations of domain-specific evaluation in capturing the temporal and institutional character of public space quality. The paper does not propose a new evaluation method but identifies three reorientations for future evaluation practices: toward temporal sequencing, relational reading, and cross-domain interaction. This perspective contributes to more context-sensitive approaches to public space evaluation in cities facing overlapping demands.

Keywords: public space, urban security, crime prevention, climate adaptation, assessment

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1. Introduction

As cities respond to escalating climate risks, rising security concerns, and shifting socio-political pressures, public spaces are being reshaped through interventions that arrive from separate institutional domains - often without coordination, and rarely with shared criteria for success. Cities implement de-sealing, tree planting, and green infrastructure to address heat and flooding; simultaneously, they install surveillance systems, anti-terrorism barriers, and access restrictions to address crime and violence. These interventions originate in different institutions, operate under different mandates, and are assessed against different conceptions of what constitutes a successful outcome. Public space, in this sense, is rarely the product of a single design intention. It emerges through the cumulative layering of measures implemented incrementally over time, in response to shifting priorities, regulatory frameworks, and moments of institutional urgency. Under these conditions, public space is not a stable object with fixed qualities. It is a site of negotiation, continuously shaped by competing institutional logics whose interventions accumulate, interact, and sometimes contradict one another. What counts as quality in such a space depends on who is doing the counting: the same tree canopy can represent climate resilience or a security liability; the same bollard can represent protection or an obstacle to adaptation. While comprehensive frameworks for evaluating the quality of public spaces do exist, they treat quality as a phenomenon experienced by users, without tracing the attributes they record to the institutional processes that produced them. Hence, this approach results in a blind spot when multiple domains shape the same space. This paper examines that structural blind spot through the specific intersection of urban security and climate adaptation. The two domains were selected for three reasons. First, both agendas are currently being implemented at scale in cities across Europe, yet through entirely separate institutional channels, funding streams, and planning instruments. Second, both agendas produce spatially tangible, material outcomes that take the form of competing physical prescriptions, which makes their interaction observable and analytically tractable in ways that other overlapping priorities, such as digitalisation or social equity, are not. Third, while synergies between crime prevention and climate adaptation have begun to attract attention in the literature (Chamard, 2024; Jonescu et al, 2024), the implications of their intersection for evaluation specifically remain unexplored. The objective is to diagnose this limitation empirically, through an analysis of planning, policy and institutional documents as well as targeted spatial observations, and subsequently to identify what the evaluation would need to account for to do justice to the holistic evaluation of public space quality.

2. Background

Public space has been understood as a site of democratic encounter (Francis, 1987; Carr et al., 1992; Parkinson, 2012; Sezer, 2020), as socially produced and politically contested (Lefebvre, 1992; Mitchell, 2003), and as shaped by regimes of ownership, access, and management that make its publicness a matter of degree rather than a fixed condition (Madanipour, 2003; Kohn, 2004; Carmona, 2010). What matters for this paper is not a definitional resolution of these debates, but a specific implication they share: public space is continuously produced through social and institutional action, and through the accumulation of interventions that shape one's perception of it. This paper's argument unfolds across three public space typologies: the park, the plaza, and the street. As Carmona (2010, p. 166) notes, morphologically based categories of public space are

almost infinite in their complexity. Yet when considered in terms of functional use, socio-political value, and institutional layering, these three types represent a wide enough spectrum in the question of how quality is perceived and assessed.

In planning practice, the quality of public space is assessed through a wide range of approaches, from standardised checklists and site audits to performance monitoring. These approaches differ not only in method, but in what they fundamentally ask of a space. Dziekan et al define evaluation as a systematic assessment of a measure's value and importance, guided by criteria established through a set of standards (2013, p. 12). They stress that evaluation must be distinguished from other forms of assessments, such as monitoring and audits. An audit is a systematic check against predefined criteria or standards (EFUS, 2007, p. 10). Monitoring is a systematic tracking of indicators over time to follow developments and implementation progress. Both can deliver information for evaluation, but on their own, they do not yet say anything about the *quality* of the space. This distinction is important because the two domains examined alongside public space quality - security and climate adaptation - rely predominantly on these narrower forms. The following section explores how public space quality is understood and evaluated, and the underlying logic of how each domain constructs its assessment, what each makes visible, and what remains invisible.

2.1 Public space quality

Although there is no single definition of quality in public spaces, it can be revealed by observing how people use them. This insight stems from a long lineage in spatial and behavioural observation - from close reading of everyday street life to systematic activity mapping and pedestrian counting to time-lapse studies and structured observation protocols (Jacobs, 1961; Burano Gruppe, 1972; Whyte, 1988; Dellemann et al, 2002; Gehl, 2011; Gehl and Svarre, 2013). From this, the presence of diverse users lingering and interacting emerges as the primary evidence of spatial quality. But what must spaces provide to sustain such use? Carr et al (1992, pp. 87-136) argued that they need to satisfy diverse human needs, which they classified as comfort, relaxation, passive and active engagement, and discovery. Scholars and practitioners have sought to identify a wide range of quality attributes and indicators, which have since been operationalised for evaluation purposes. Gehl (2011) structured 12 criteria across three groups: protection, comfort, and enjoyment. The Project for Public Spaces developed the Place Diagram, organising the qualities of successful places around four attributes: sociability, uses and activities, access and linkages, and comfort and image, and 33 indicators (Project for Public Spaces, 2021). Mehta's (2014) Public Space Index (PSI) measures quality across five dimensions: inclusiveness, meaningful activities, safety, comfort, and pleasurable, and through a structured scoring system applied across multiple space types. The weighting of variables within such indices is, as Mehta (2014, p. 70) acknowledges, a complex task unlikely to produce consensus, as different spaces with different expectations could generate dozens of variations. A similar framework, employing eight dimensions (Accessibility and Linkage, Maintenance, Attractiveness and Appeal, Comfort, Inclusiveness, Activities and Uses, Purposefulness, and Safety and Security), Public Space Quality Index (PSQI), was developed and tested in India by Praliya and Garg (2019). Designed for application across diverse urban contexts, UN-Habitat (2020) proposed site-specific assessment toolkits structured around five dimensions: use and user, accessibility, amenities and furniture, comfort and safety, and green environment, with 20

indicators. What unites these frameworks is that they evaluate quality as a condition experienced by users, and not as products of the processes that produced them. This matters because the quality attributes are shaped by institutional decisions that define what each attribute means and how it is spatially manifested. When those definitions and implementations diverge, user-side-only evaluation registers the result without detecting the conflict that produced it.

2.2 Security and safety evaluation

Safety has long been recognised as a precondition for public space quality. Jane Jacobs (1961) identified it as the foundational concern. The concept of safety in public space is multifaceted but usually refers to traffic safety and safety from crime and violence (Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 2011; Mehta, 2014). The paper focuses on the latter, including both objective risk and the subjective perception of safety. When spaces are perceived as unsafe - whether due to recorded crime, media reporting, or visible signs of disorder - institutional responses follow. Security measures are implemented, and with them comes a distinct evaluation logic. Rooted in environmental criminology and its foundational frameworks, Crime Prevention Through Environmental Design (CPTED) (Jeffery, 1971) and Defensible Space Theory (Newman, 1972), this logic asks whether a given spatial configuration minimises criminal opportunity and perceived danger. Success is defined as crime and fear reduction and risk minimisation (Clarke, 1995; Cozens and Love, 2015; Franke and van Soomeren, 2021; Larcher et al, 2022). The spatial environment is treated as a variable to be optimised for behavioural outcomes, but the behaviours in question are criminal acts, not the diverse social interactions that public space quality evaluations value. Hence, CPTED principles have been criticised for producing the opposite effect: spaces optimised for security can become exclusionary, over-controlled, and inhospitable to the very social life that makes them safe in the first place (Kohn, 2004; Németh and Schmidt, 2007; Németh, 2010). Németh and Schmidt (2007) proposed a 20-indicator index structured across four categories: laws and rules, surveillance and policing, design and image, and access and territoriality. The critical tension within this domain, however, is that security interventions do not merely protect people but reshape public space. Németh (2010) demonstrates empirically that as behavioural control in publicly accessible spaces increases, individual choice decreases and the openness that constitutes publicness erodes. Since its inception, CPTED has evolved through three generations: from physical design strategies in the first generation, through the incorporation of social and psychological dimensions in the second, to the third generation, which integrates crime prevention with sustainability, public health, and quality of life (Saville and Mihnjac, 2019). This third generation is the closest the security domain comes to acknowledging cross-domain interaction, though its evaluation instruments have yet to operationalise this aspiration. EU's Security by Design report (Larcher et al, 2022) also acknowledges the tension between different agendas, noting that overdesigned security measures may lead to obtrusive and aesthetically unpleasant solutions, and advocates for integrating protection into urban design. Yet the evaluation logic remains anchored in protective performance: bollard resistance ratings, standoff distances, vehicle approach angles. Security interventions thus reshape not just safety but also comfort, accessibility, and other attributes that public space quality frameworks measure, yet without any evaluative connection between the two.

2.3 Climate Adaptation Evaluation Logic

Thermal relief during heat, access to shade, shelter from wind and rain, and generally comfort have long been recognised as a dimension of public space quality (Gehl, 2011) and are tightly connected with climate. Cities are implementing adaptation measures that reshape the sensory and microclimatic conditions of public spaces at an increasing scale. Yet institutionally, the evaluation of these interventions is anchored not in experiential quality but in environmental performance. It is assessed primarily through monitoring (cooling capacity, stormwater attenuation, sealed surface ratios, vegetation coverage, and carbon sequestration are tracked against baseline projections using biophysical models, GIS-based spatial analysis, and remote sensing (Welle et al, 2015; Zardo et al, 2017; Dumitru and Wendling, 2021). Success is expressed in engineering units, such as degrees of cooling and tonnes of carbon per hectare. Major institutional frameworks, including the IPCC's (2022) adaptation assessment and the European Environment Agency's (2019, 2025) reports on green infrastructure, consolidate this optimisation logic. These instruments acknowledge that climate interventions affect the use of space; the evaluation, however, remains oriented toward environmental performance. A tree is assessed by its quantitative cooling contribution, not by how it structures visibility of social interaction. A permeable surface is assessed by its infiltration rate, not by whether it facilitates or impedes pedestrian movement. It registers the physical features of public space through a bioclimatic lens that is structurally inattentive to the security conditions or experiential qualities those same elements simultaneously produce.

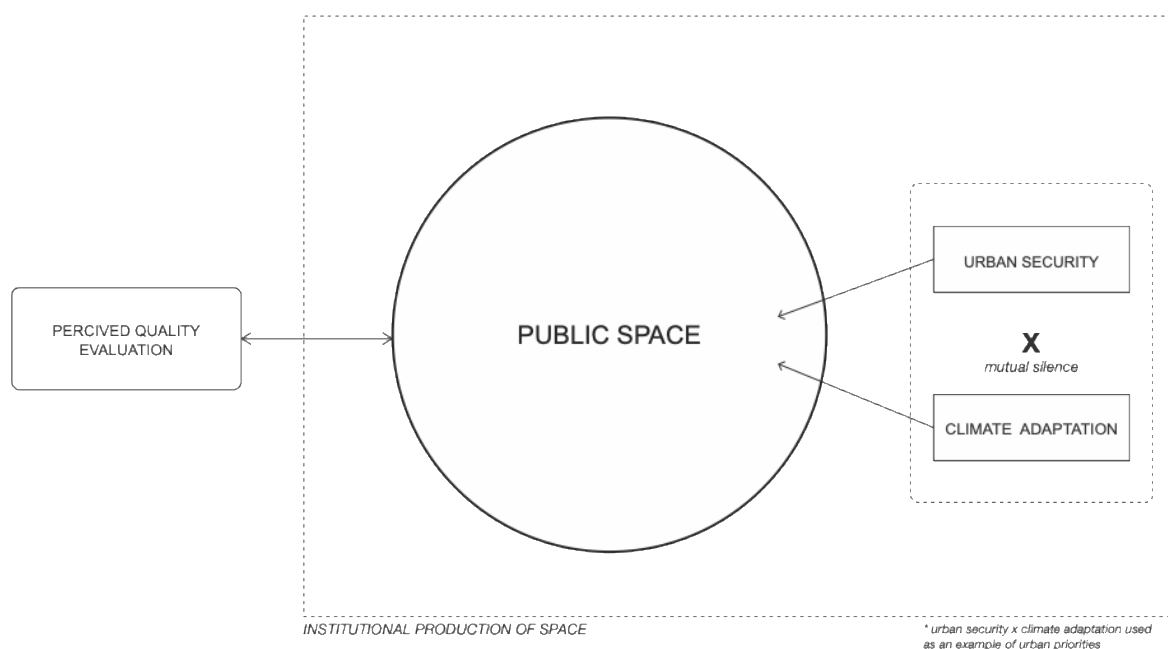


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework. Source: Ines Dobošić (2026)

3. Method

The study combines two complementary methods. First, an analysis of planning, policy and institutional documents and laws in which they are anchored reconstructs how security and climate are institutionally framed and traces the pathways through which each domain’s priorities are translated into spatial interventions. Second, spatial observations across three public space types trace how those institutional priorities materialise in the built environment, and what their co-presence means for evaluation. The analysis was confined to one city, Berlin in this case, because a single institutional and legal context was required. Security and climate adaptation are configured through different actors, instruments and statutes within the governance system, so tracing their interaction depended on holding that context constant. Both operate within a common analytical frame: a defined set of quality attributes and physical elements through which the two domains’ interventions could be investigated. The unit of analysis is the relationship between institutional framing and physical configuration. To establish this frame, the quality attributes discussed in the reviewed literature and institutional documents were extracted (some stated directly as such, some identified through interpretation) and consolidated into a smaller set, since the same quality recurs under different terms across sources. An attribute was retained only if it appeared in both the theoretical literature and the institutional corpus and could be tied to an observable physical element - that is, only where the theoretical and institutional framings converged on the same spatial prescription, even if under different names. This yielded the four attributes in Table 1: safety, comfort, accessibility, and environmental quality. Each attribute was coded according to how it related to the theory of public space, the security domain and the climate domain, how each defines it, and through which physical element it is spatially observable. The mapping is interpretive throughout. It showed that several attributes are claimed by both domains, which are sometimes given different meanings. The empirical scope of the study is deliberate: the analysis focuses on what is built and institutionally documented.

Table 1. The four quality attributes and how each is defined across the literature and institutions

Quality attribute	Public space quality (evaluative reference)	Urban security documents	Climate adaptation documents
Safety	freedom from fear; freedom from harm by others; feeling safe	absence of crime; risk minimisation; visibility and territorial control	reduced exposure to climate risk
Comfort	Positive thermal and sensory experience; quality of stay	an environment free of fear-inducing cues; absence of disorder and visible deterioration	thermal and microclimatic relief, shade, cooling, shelter from wind and rain
Accessibility	open access for all, without economic, physical or symbolic barrier	graduated and controlled access; territorial regulation	access to climate-comfortable spaces

Quality attribute	Public space quality (evaluative reference)	Urban security documents	Climate adaptation documents
Environmental quality	green environment; sensory richness	a sightline liability; vegetation setback	vegetation cover; unsealed, permeable ground; ecological performance

3.1 Institutional Framing

In this paper, the term planning, policy and institutional documents encompasses documents of varying legal status and governing function, including binding laws and regulations, formal planning instruments, non-binding strategies and action plans, design guidelines and standards, implementation programmes, and monitoring and evaluation tools. The study is exploratory, and the purpose is not a comprehensive policy review but a targeted reconstruction of the institutional frameworks through which public space is produced. The set of documents was compiled through institutional mapping (senate departments and borough offices relevant to urban security and climate adaptation) and iterative cross-reference tracing across documents. A document was retained if it met at least one of two criteria: (a) it prescribes or leads to spatial interventions in public space under the domain of security or climate adaptation; or (b) it establishes how such interventions are assessed. The resulting set contained 20 documents. Each document was read through five analytical dimensions: (1) problem framing: how it defines the urban problem it addresses; (2) spatial interventions: what physical measures it prescribes; (3) institutional responsibility: which actors are mandated to implement and evaluate the prescribed interventions; (4) evaluation logic: what indicators or monitoring mechanisms the instrument embeds and whether these could register cross-domain effects; and (5) cross-domain acknowledgement: whether there is reference to the other domain. From this reading, a framing typology (Table 1) was constructed, mapping the two domains across all five dimensions, making the structural divergence between them visible and the condition of mutual silence traceable.

3.2 Spatial Reading

The purpose of spatial reading is investigative. From the spatial prescriptions contained in the reviewed institutional documents, the physical elements addressed by both domains were identified: vegetation, lighting, barriers, surfaces, and street furniture. It is this cross-domain co-presence that makes them analytically productive: they are the built elements at which competing evaluation logics converge on the same physical object/space. Elements that appeared in only one or two domains, such as CCTV cameras (security only) or drainage infrastructure (climate only), were excluded from the observation frame.

For this, three sites were selected, one for each typology established in Section 2: a park (Görlitzer Park, Kreuzberg), a plaza (Breitscheidplatz, Charlottenburg), and a street (Scharnweberstraße, Friedrichshain). A site was eligible if it was subject to security and/or climate adaptation, whether through formal designation or the applicability of both domains' guidelines to its typology. The sites function as typological probes rather than in-depth case studies. While a single site cannot represent the full diversity of its type, the

probes demonstrate that the condition exists and is legible in a built form in different space types. At each site, the five elements served as a structured observation lens. For each element, the reading poses two questions. First, what is physically present, i.e. what interventions from which domain is visible in the space? Second, what would existing evaluation frameworks register about this element, and what would they miss? Each site was visited in daylight and after dark. Observations were recorded through photographic documentation, annotated map and field notes, organised against the five elements and the five analytical dimensions used in the document analysis, so that the spatial reading and the institutional reading share one analytical structure. The observation was interpretive rather than quantitative: it recorded which interventions are present and how competing evaluation logics would read them.

4. Findings

4.1 Institutional insights

The document analysis reveals that security and climate adaptation do not merely address different problems, but they construct different meanings of the same quality attributes. Safety, comfort, accessibility, and environmental quality are central to how public space quality is evaluated, but when these attributes are traced through the planning instruments that govern Berlin's public spaces, they fracture: each domain claims jurisdiction over the same qualities, defines them through its own logic, and evaluates them against criteria that are invisible to the other. Security instruments frame public space as a site of risk, in which spatial configuration enables or deters criminal behaviour. The General Security and Public Order Act in Berlin (ASOG Bln, 2006) provides the legal basis for classifying certain publicly accessible streets, paths, squares, or other areas as Crime Hotspots in Berlin (*kriminalitätsbelastete Orte*). The Urban Crime Prevention advisory materials (*Städtebauliche Kriminalprävention*) frame building and public space design as affecting both actual safety and perceived safety, and seek early counteraction to signs of neglect (Belkahla, 2024). *The Urbane Sicherheit* guidelines connect insecurity to disorder through Broken Windows Theory (Kelling and Wilson, 1982) logic: neglect, vandalism, and visible deterioration are treated as precursors to norm violations. Under this framing, safety means legibility, visibility, and territorial control; comfort means an environment free of fear-inducing cues; a well-functioning space is one in which criminal opportunity has been designed out. Climate instruments frame the same space as a site of environmental deficit (SenMVKU, 2025). *StEP Klima 2.0* (SenStadt 2022) identifies heat load, sealed surface ratios, and insufficient vegetation as the problems to be resolved. *Klimarisikoanalyse* (SenMVKU 2026) assesses climate risk through spatially differentiated indicators of heat stress, drought, and flooding exposure. The Heat Action Plan (SenWGP 2025) frames heat as a public health risk and positions public space as a delivery mechanism for cooling infrastructure. Under this framing, safety means protection from heat-related mortality; comfort means thermal relief, shade, and access to cool spaces; a well-functioning space is one in which environmental performance has been optimised. Both domains claim to produce safer, more comfortable, better-functioning public space. They do so through definitions that are not merely different in emphasis but structurally incompatible: a dense tree canopy is comfort under one logic and a safety liability under the other; an open, paved, well-lit surface is safe under one logic and an environmental failure under the other. This divergence in problem framing and quality defining

corresponds to a separation in institutional jurisdiction. At the state level,¹ climate adaptation falls under the Senate Department for Urban Mobility, Transport, Climate Action and the Environment (SenMVKU),² while urban security falls under the Senate Department for the Interior and Sport (SenInnSport).³ The Senate Department for Urban Development, Building and Housing (SenStadt)⁴, incorporates both agendas to a certain degree insofar as their interventions are implemented in the built environment, but does not do so in depth. This division is reproduced at the Borough⁵ level: climate-related responsibilities sit with the Office of Transportation and Green Spaces⁶, public order and security enforcement with the Public Order Office,⁷ and spatial planning with the Urban Planning Office.⁸ Each domain embeds its own criteria for assessing success — and no instrument in the corpus measures across both. The Police Crime Statistics (Polizei Berlin, 2026) records crime frequency by location; CPTED audits score spatial compliance against predefined design principles; perceived safety surveys capture subjective fear at a point in time. Success is defined as crime reduction, fear reduction, and risk minimisation. On the climate side, the risk analysis assesses climate risk across twelve action areas through spatially differentiated indicators: heat load, drought stress, flooding exposure, and vegetation loss. The Urban Green Spaces and Public Spaces action area evaluates public spaces solely based on environmental indicators. Security, crime prevention, and policing do not appear among the twelve fields. The evaluation architecture does not omit security by accident; it is designed around environmental risk categories in which crime is not a variable. A security evaluation that records a space as safe cannot detect whether the conditions that produced that result have degraded thermal comfort, restricted access to cooling, or reduced the environmental quality that the climate instruments define as essential. A climate evaluation that records a space as performing well cannot detect whether the vegetation that provides those gains has reduced the visibility and territorial legibility that the security instruments treat as preconditions for safety. Each domain can declare success by its own criteria, while the other domain's definition of quality remains unmeasured. The analysis of cross-references confirms what the preceding dimensions imply. No security instrument in the analysed corpus references climate adaptation, environmental performance, or the quality attributes that the climate domain defines. Conversely, no climate instrument references security conditions, crime prevention, or the quality attributes that the security domain defines. The closest approach is the Heat Action Plan, which identifies heat-vulnerable populations, including elderly and homeless people, but does not assess how security interventions affect those populations' access to cooling infrastructure. The Security Summit Action Plan (Senatskanzlei, 2023) acknowledges health and social prevention alongside policing, but this refers to adjacent social services, not to the other domain's conception of spatial quality. This silence is not an accidental oversight. It is the structural consequence of an

Original names in German:

¹ Land Berlin

² Senatsverwaltung für Mobilität, Verkehr, Klimaschutz und Umwelt (SenMVKU)

³ Senatsverwaltung für Inneres und Sport (SenInnSport)

⁴ Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen (SenStadt)

⁵ Bezirk

⁶ Straßen- und Grünflächenamt (SGA)

⁷ Ordnungsamt

⁸ Stadtentwicklungsamt

institutional architecture in which different agencies hold different definitions of what quality means and assess them through separate instruments.

Table 2. Document analysis across five analytical dimensions

Analytical dimension	Urban security / crime prevention	Climate adaptation
(1) Problem framing	Public space as a site of (possible crime) risk, where spatial configuration enables or deters criminal opportunity; disorder, fear, and concentration of crime as the central problems; subjective and objective safety as distinct but linked concerns.	Public space as a site of environmental deficit or potential, where climate-change impacts (heat, flooding, drought) are spatially differentiated; unequal burden distribution across neighbourhoods as the central problem; vulnerability, sensitivity, and adaptive capacity as the operative categories.
(2) Spatial interventions (or conditional leading to it)	Lighting for elimination of dark corners; sightline clearance and vegetation setbacks; access control barriers and bollards; hostile furniture; CCTV; zone signage;.	Greening and trees; de-sealing and permeable surfaces; stormwater retention; shaded seating; cooling corridors; water features; green/blue infrastructure on rooftops and facades.
(3) Institutional responsibility	<i>Senatsverwaltung für Inneres und Sport; Landeskriminalamt; Polizei Berlin; Ordnungsämter.</i> Mandate: public order, crime prevention, threat response. Separate reporting lines, separate data systems. Advisory role in planning via SKP but no binding integration mechanism.	<i>Senatsverwaltung für Stadtentwicklung, Bauen und Wohnen; Senatsverwaltung für Mobilität, Verkehr, Klimaschutz und Umwelt; Grünflächenämter</i> Mandate: environmental protection, urban development, climate resilience. Separate reporting lines, separate spatial data systems. Coordination via BEK and FNP but no binding integration with security domain.
(4) Evaluation logic	Checklist-based audits against CPTED principles; crime statistics; before-and-after comparison; compliance scoring; perceived safety surveys. Predominantly point-in-time. Success defined as: crime reduction, fear reduction, risk minimisation.	Quantitative environmental metrics: temperature reduction, runoff attenuation, vegetation cover, sealed surface ratio. Biophysical modelling; GIS-based spatial analysis; remote sensing; proxy indicators and hotspot methodology. Performance measured against baseline projections. Success defined as: measurable environmental improvement (degrees of cooling, m ² de-sealed, % canopy cover).

(5) Cross-domain acknowledgement

Security instruments do not mention climate adaptation objectives, environmental performance metrics, or sustainability targets. Spatial prescriptions (e.g. vegetation setbacks, surface sealing for barrier installation) are formulated without reference to their climate implications.

Climate instruments do not reference security conditions related to crime prevention, or policing. Two documents (*BerlinStrategie 3.0*, *Koalitionsvertrag*) reference both domains but in entirely separate chapters with no cross-referencing. The *Hitzeaktionsplan* identifies heat-vulnerable populations but does not assess how security interventions affect their access to cooling infrastructure.

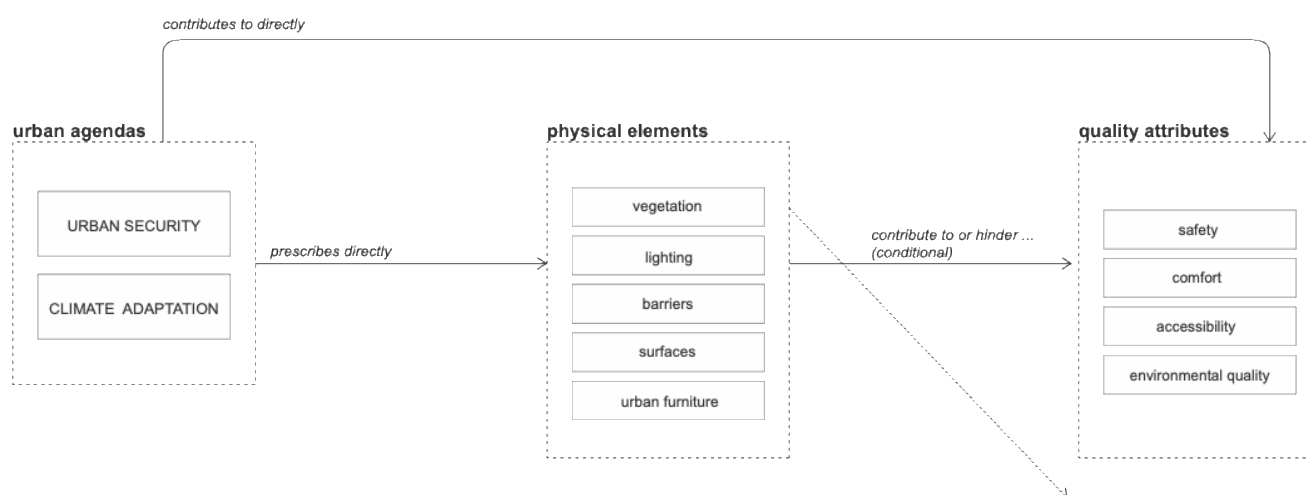


Figure 2. Analytical frame: Pathways through which institutions shape public space quality.
Source: Ines Dobošić (2026).

4.2 Spatial constellations

The following three sites are read through the five spatial elements identified in the methodology. Each site represents a distinct public space typology and demonstrates a different way in which the evaluation blind spot diagnosed in the document analysis manifests in physical space.

Park

Görlitzer Park in Kreuzberg is a prominent example of the overlap between climate adaptation and security agendas in an urban park. The park is simultaneously a designated crime hotspot (*kriminalitätsbelasteter Ort*), a weapon and knife prohibition zone (*Waffenverbotszone*) subject to intensified policing measures, and in *StEP Klima 2.0* (SenStadt, 2022), an open space with the potential for bioclimatic enhancement. Read across the five elements that contribute to the quality of a space, the spatial co-presence of both domains has physically materialised. Under the premise of safety and crime prevention, the park's historical brick perimeter wall with gaps allowing open access from

surrounding streets has been recently fitted with metal fencing and a turnstile, creating a real barrier for access.



Figure 3. Aerial view of Görlitzer Park. Source: Geoportal Berlin, TrueOrthophotos 2025 (DOP20RGBI), SenSBW. Modifications by author (2026).



Figure 4. Entrance to Görlitzer Park from Wiener Str.



Figure 5. Perimeter wall on Görlitzer Str



Figure 6. Newly planted trees in the park

Source: Ines Dobošić (2026)

Exit is possible at all times, including after the night closure, and some gates remain open during the day, but the access regime is graduated rather than absolute. Vegetation is plentiful and orderly: planting along paths is well-maintained, with trimmed understory and clear path edges ensuring sightlines, and enough trees for shade. Considering the climatic burden of the area, defined in *Umweltgerechtigkeitsatlas* (SenMVKU 2025), the strategic urban plan *StEP Klima 2.0.* (SenStadt 2022) identifies the site as a potential area for bioclimatic enhancement. Lighting follows the main paths and bigger gathering spots after dark, ensuring visibility. The concept was recently extended and upgraded under Berlin's street-lighting guidelines (SenMVKU, 2024); it treats the park as a crime hotspot, with fixtures made individually controllable and lighting levels set in coordination with the

police. Surfaces are mixed but largely unsealed, with broad lawns; the main paths are paved in asphalt. Against the near-fully sealed streets surrounding it, the park retains substantial permeable ground. Benches are mostly in good condition and widespread, which contributes to the comfort of spending time in the park. Each element is layered onto the park by separate institutional decisions whose agendas sometimes align and sometimes conflict: the understory thinned for sightlines is the understory that would otherwise thicken the canopy's cooling or provide better animal refuge. In addition, daily circulation of police, public order officers, and park rangers marks the park as continuously managed under the security logic. A security assessment that records a controlled, low-risk space with sightlines held and access regulated could score positive points in the park. Climate assessment could record the same as negative. A framework for public space quality must decide what it is looking at. Is the park safe? The fence and managed sightlines suggest controlled risk, but they also signal that danger exists, which shapes perceived safety regardless of actual crime levels. A daytime survey conducted while gates are open may register accessibility, yet the security infrastructure remains legible as a reminder of the threat. Comfort is not independent of this reading. Accessibility is temporally conditional: present by day, absent by night. No instrument assesses this condition as a single, jointly produced quality. Each domain evaluates the park as though the other were not there.

Plaza

Breitscheidplatz, in Charlottenburg, was the site of the 2016 terrorist vehicle-ramming attack, and the security response that followed physically shapes the space to today. These have been harshly criticized and countermeasures are planned. These new measures would address both issues of safety and security, but also of climate. On the plaza, what is observable today is a layered accumulation of interventions from different moments and mandates, but barriers carry the space: sand-filled steel basket barriers and anti-vehicle bollards mounted on ramps line the perimeter. Fencing and prohibition signage define controlled access zones during the Christmas market and other gatherings. Together, these elements form a hostile vehicle mitigation landscape that is legible at a glance: the plaza communicates that something happened here and that the institutional response is ongoing. Surfaces are predominantly sealed hardscape, with heavy multi-lane traffic running directly adjacent on Budapester Straße and Tauentzienstraße. The *Umweltgerechtigkeitsatlas* (SenMVKU 2025) defines the area as subject to multiple environmental burdens and the strategic urban plan *StEP Klima 2.0*. (SenStadt 2022) identifies as the site of action for blue-green measures for cooling during the day and at night, which would mean de-sealing and greening. A small cluster of trees provides shade in one area and a fountain offers a water element. Benches around trees and around the fountain provide seating in the shade but are not plentiful. The security infrastructure was implemented under political urgency following a crisis event and established physical conditions. The new development plan calls for a climate-resilient redesign of the space. Within that framework, it prescribes closure to through-traffic explicitly for security reasons — to prevent vehicle attacks on Breitscheidplatz — which simultaneously frees carriageway space for what the same document identifies as climate adaptation measures. A security assessment that evaluates the barriers' protective performance would be recorded as positive.



Figure 7. Aerial view of Breitscheidplatz. Source: Geoportal Berlin, TrueOrthophotos 2025 (DOP20RGBI), SenSBW. Modifications by author (2026)



Figure 8. Across the street from Breitscheidplatz



Figure 9. Sand bags as vehicle barriers



Figure 10. Hostile vehicle mitigation barriers

Source: Ines Dobošić (2026)

A climate assessment that would measure sealed-surface ratio and greenery would be rather negative. A public space quality assessment that assesses the space as found condition could find that the barriers impede the passage of wheelchairs and bicycles, or that benches in the shade are comfortable. Each assessment would provide a coherent interpretation. However, none would register that the condition encountered is the result of uncoordinated institutional action over nearly a decade, nor that the quality of this plaza is not a designed outcome, but rather a product of which domain arrived first.

Street

The Scharnweberstraße in Friedrichshain is part of the *Ostkreuz-Kiezblock* and presents a trend of a new way of thinking about the role a street has or could have. Measures implemented largely fall under traffic safety and climate protection, which are housed by the same institutions as previous probes, but their effects stretch further. A modal filter, metal bollards blocking through-traffic for motor vehicles while permitting passage for pedestrians, was installed as part of the district's area-wide traffic calming programme,

implemented under the Borough's wider traffic-calming programme and anchored in the Berlin mobility act (*Mobilitätsgesetz*).

The intervention was designed as a traffic safety measure, and its planning document specifies the evaluation logic accordingly. What is observable at the site is a row of bollards on an otherwise unchanged asphalt street. Adjacent to the filter, the reclaimed street space has been provisionally activated: parklets, a table tennis table, and seating elements have appeared in what was previously a traffic lane.



Figure 11. Aerial view of Scharnweberstraße. Source: Geoportal Berlin, TrueOrthophotos 2025 (DOP20RGBI), SenSBW. Modifications by author (2026).



Figure 12. Access to Scharnweberstraße



Figure 13. Regulations in Scharnweberstraße



Figure 14. Play & protect barriers

Source: Ines Dobošić (2026)

The street is quieter than the surrounding area; pedestrians and cyclists move through at a pace that the through-traffic formerly made difficult. Implemented measures do the work for two domains unintentionally, and the Borough's own decision document acknowledges that the intervention produces effects well beyond traffic reduction. It

states that the reduction of through-traffic has positive impacts on climate and environment through emissions reduction, and envisions that, depending on the extent of redesign, the pedestrian zones created by the concept will become climate-resilient public spaces. The *Umweltgerechtigkeitsatlas* (SenMVKU 2025) rates the areas' green space provision as poor; the filter physically creates the precondition for addressing this deficit without meaning it. The same spatial conditions it produces, reduced vehicle speed, increased pedestrian presence, and activated street frontage near a school, correspond to the conditions that crime prevention identifies as safety-enhancing: natural surveillance, territorial definition, and the reduction of anonymous through-movement. No security instrument was involved in producing these conditions. This is the evaluation failure that the street typology exposes: domain blindness. The modal filter generates spatial conditions that serve traffic safety, climate adaptation, and crime prevention simultaneously, yet it is evaluated exclusively within the domain that authorised it. The traffic assessment will count vehicles and measure accident reduction. The climate assessment would measure de-sealed surface area and vegetation cover — neither of which yet exists, because the surface remains asphalt, and the greening the planning documents envision has not been built. The crime-preventive effects the intervention incidentally produces, a quieter street with more eyes, a school environment with reduced vehicle threat, are present but belong to no evaluation because no security instrument governs this site. A public space quality assessment would register comfort and a more sociable street environment but would have no mechanism for tracing these conditions to a traffic-calming instrument, let alone for recognising that the same intervention is simultaneously performing unregistered work for two other institutional domains. Each domain assesses its own mandate. None registers what the object is doing for the others.

5. Discussion

Both the analysis of institutional documents and spatial observations point to one condition: the same public space is shaped by domains that, in their evaluation practices, don't register one another, leaving quality conditions that each assesses as though the other were absent. What evaluation frameworks could record as attributes of the space are not independent conditions, but products of institutional logics that define the same words differently. This is a structural problem, not a data gap. The evaluation frameworks reviewed in Section 2 assess quality as a condition experienced by users. They do so competently and, within their stated purpose, reliably. But they treat these attributes as given features of a space and conditions to be observed. They are not designed to trace the attributes they record to the institutional processes that produced them. When multiple domains shape the same space, and political shifts, that push one or other are frequent, as the three sites demonstrate, the origin becomes consequential: the same tree, the same bollard, the same surface carries competing definitions of quality depending on which institutional logic does the assessment. At the same time, as the document analysis demonstrated, the institutional instruments themselves operate in silos. Quality evaluation cannot trace attributes to their institutional origins; institutional evaluation cannot see beyond its own domain. Between the two, there is no mechanism for registering that competing definitions of the same quality are being produced in the same space.

The strongest counterargument is that domain separation is a deliberate feature of good governance, not a failure. Each agency holds a defined mandate; each instrument maintains internal coherence. While this separation is understandable, the question arises: how to deal with it in the context of the assessment of multifaceted spaces. Furthermore, how could it be integrated in perceptual assessment? This paper's finding frames this under the need for reorientation of the public space quality evaluation.

Three reorientations:

- *Temporal sequencing*
Firstly, the evaluation should consider the origins of quality conditions, as these may result from the sequence of events. Which domain arrived first establishes the spatial and material constraints within which subsequent interventions must operate. Reading this sequence surfaces the preconditions that a record of a single point in time may omit.
- *Relational reading*
Secondly, evaluation should consider the quality attributes of physical elements in relation to each other and their institutional origins, rather than assessing them in isolation. What scores positively in one, can be produced by the same institutional action that scores negatively in another. Considering them in relation to each other reveals the trade-offs inherent in a single institutional action, which would otherwise remain invisible.
- *Cross-domain interaction.*
Thirdly, evaluations should not only assess performance within individual domains but also map the interactions between them. An intervention may perform tasks in domains that have not explicitly authorized it. Mapping these interactions renders such tasks visible, whereas evaluating a domain solely against its own criteria leaves these tasks unrecorded.

Two limitations must be acknowledged. First, the three sites function as typological probes and establish that the condition that is legible in a built form across different space types exists, but not how prevalent it is. Second, the analysis operates at the level of institutional framings and physical configurations, and it does not include user perspectives. While public space evaluation frameworks foreground perceived value, for this study, holding users outside the frame allowed the institutional layer to be characterised on its own terms. The three reorientations set out above are the result of this approach.

6. Conclusion

Existing public space evaluation frameworks do not account for the institutional conditions under which spatial quality is produced. This paper demonstrates why these frameworks require an update by examining the intersection of urban security and climate adaptation in Berlin. A combination of document analysis and spatial observation showed that urban agendas operate in mutual silence, and that this silence is evident in the built environment. These conditions are legible in the physical fabric of the city, yet invisible to the evaluation tools that claim jurisdiction over them. The paper's contribution is conceptual: it establishes that the quality attributes are not neutral features of the space but products of institutional action, and that under domain overlap, a single physical element registers as a different quality to each domain that assesses it. Following this

diagnosis, the paper proposes three reorientations that expand the user-centred evaluation, directing it toward the conditions under which spatial quality is produced. Operationalising these into transferable evaluation instruments is the next step this diagnosis makes possible. This approach, which involves interpreting the quality of public spaces through the evaluation logics of the institutions responsible for them, can be applied wherever urban priorities are pursued through separate institutional channels. This condition is not unique to Berlin; it is a structural feature of sectoral urban governance.

Disclose AI usage

During the preparation of this work, the author used Claude (Anthropic) to assist with the writing process, including the development of arguments and structural reasoning and DeepLTranslate for partial translation of source documents and the author's own writing. The author reviewed and rewrote all AI-assisted content and takes full responsibility for the published work.

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Unfolding Process-Based Indicators: Linking Participation, Perceived Ownership, and Stewardship Practices to Public Space Sustainability.

Reflections from Neighbourhood-scale Public Spaces in Surakarta and Banjarmasin, Indonesia

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Abstract

This paper examines how community-centric design processes influence the sustainability of neighbourhood-scale public spaces through the lens of perceived ownership and stewardship practices. While participatory approaches are widely promoted in public space development, their contribution to the long-term maintenance and care that contribute to the sustainability of the space remains insufficiently discussed. Building on insights from 'collective ownership' literature that links perceived ownership to stewardship behaviours in shared environments, the study investigates how these dynamics unfold in practice. Drawing on two neighbourhood-scale public space projects co-designed with local communities in Indonesia, Sungai Jingah (Banjarmasin, 2012) and Mangkubumen (Surakarta, 2022), the paper explores how participatory processes that were designed to facilitate community aspirations and build ownership are translated into patterns of use, social inclusion, and maintenance. The paper adopts qualitative, practice-based research approaches, combining in-depth semi-structured interviews with reflective process, field observations and project archives on impact assessments. The findings show that community-centric design contributes most to the usership and inclusivity of the space, ensuring that the design of spaces reflects the needs of the user. Although the participatory process facilitates the emergence of ownership and stewardship practice, the result is highly context dependent. Ownership and stewardship practice does not automatically emerge from participation but develops through a combination of various factors such as interest, control over the space, attachment and familiarity, and investments, mediated by factors such as tenure stability, social cohesion, governance arrangements, and access to resources. While stewardship practices emerge through community initiative, their continuity often depends on larger institutional support. This paper proposed a process-based evaluation framework that not only focuses on the design process of the space but also covers aspects that nurture the sustainability of the space, particularly by facilitating the ownership building and stewardship practices that contribute to the sustainability of small-scale public spaces.

Keywords: community-centric design, sense of ownership, stewardship practice, sustainability, neighbourhood-scale public space

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I. Introduction

1.1 Background

Public spaces play a very critical role in shaping social interaction, civil life, and urban well-being. They provide spaces for people to gather, interact, and build community ties, while at the same time contributing directly to the health and environmental quality of cities. Many cities around the world increasingly recognise the importance of public space. Many guidelines and tools have been created as guidance in building thriving public spaces, and efforts to evaluate their quality and performance have also grown. However, many public space guidelines and evaluation frameworks for public space often emphasise the measurable physical and functional attributes, such as accessibility, design quality, safety, vibrancy, and intensity of use (Carmona, 2019). These indicators have proven useful for assessing spatial quality and usability, yet they often provide only a partial understanding of what makes public spaces sustainable over time.

While physical conditions and patterns of use are important indicators, they rarely capture the social and institutional processes that enable public spaces to remain active, cared for, and meaningful to local communities. In many cases, public spaces may initially succeed in attracting users but gradually deteriorate due to the absence of local stewardship, unclear governance arrangements, or a lack of community engagement in their management. As a result, questions related to who feels responsible for a space, who cares for it, and how it is collectively maintained remain underexplored within dominant public space evaluation frameworks.

This limitation becomes particularly visible in neighbourhood-scale public spaces, especially in fast-paced developing Asian cities. In this context, small-scale public spaces often emerge in dense urban settlements to respond to the lack of the predominant type of public space like public parks. In such contexts, small-scale public spaces often operate with limited institutional resources and rely heavily on community participation and informal governance structures for their maintenance and activation. Small-scale spaces, such as riverbanks, neighbourhood parks, pocket parks, and shared open areas, frequently depend on the everyday practices of local residents to remain functional and meaningful. Yet, evaluation approaches rarely examine the social dynamics that sustain these spaces beyond their initial design or construction.

Participatory and community-centric design approaches have increasingly been adopted around the world as alternatives to top-down public space development, particularly in contexts where standardised design solutions fail to reflect local needs, context, and culture. This approach positions local communities not merely as the users of the space but also as actors who are actively shaping the spaces. Community-centric design approaches often involve various citizen engagement activities such as co-design workshops, community consultations on various aspects regarding the development of public space, and participatory decision-making processes, which aim to better align design outcomes with local needs and socio-cultural context. This approach is also often linked to broader goals of community empowerment, social inclusion, a greater sense of ownership, and sustainability. However, despite their growing adoption, the connections between the participatory design process and the sustainability of the space are rarely examined in public space evaluations. The long-term social and institutional conditions that shape the use, care, and maintenance of neighbourhood public spaces remain under-theorised or embedded in the design process.

1.2 Research Gap and Justification

Participatory design processes are frequently assumed to foster a stronger sense of ownership among community members, which in turn is expected to lead to greater care, stewardship, and long-term sustainability of public spaces. While this assumption is widely referenced in planning and design practice, empirical evaluations that examine how these relationships unfold over time remain limited. Most studies of participatory design tend to focus on the design process itself, examining methods of engagement, inclusivity of participation, or immediate design outcomes, rather than exploring the longer-term social dynamics that emerge after implementation.

1.3 Research Aim and Objectives

This paper seeks to contribute to the ongoing discussion on rethinking public space evaluation by examining the relationship between community-centric design approach, perceived ownership and stewardship practices in neighbourhood-scale public space. Rather than evaluating public spaces solely through their physical attributes or patterns of use, this study explores how participatory design processes shape the social dynamics that influence the long-term sustainability of public spaces.

Drawing on two neighbourhood-scale public space projects co-designed with local communities in dense urban settlements in Indonesia, Sungai Jingah in Banjarmasin (2012) and Taman Rukun Mangkubumen in Surakarta (2022), the study investigates how participatory design processes are translated into patterns of use, collective care, and stewardship practices over time. By revisiting projects implemented across different time periods and socio-economic contexts, the research offers a longitudinal perspective on how ownership and stewardship unfold in practice.

The paper addresses two main research questions:

1. How does a community-centric design approach influence the sense of ownership and stewardship among local communities in neighbourhood public spaces?
2. Under what conditions do these social process dynamics contribute to the long-term sustainability of neighbourhood-scale public spaces?

By examining these questions, the study aims to contribute to the development of more context-sensitive public space evaluation frameworks that foreground social processes and community agency, while building long-term sustainability.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

This paper looks into the process of community-centric design and how this participatory approach shapes perceived ownership and stewardship practices that contribute to the sustainability of small-scale public spaces. While participatory approaches are widely promoted in public space development, the mechanisms through which they translate into long-term care and sustainability remain insufficiently theorised. This section develops a conceptual framework that links participation, ownership, and stewardship as interrelated processes in neighbourhood-scale public space.

In this paper, public space is understood as space that is collectively accessible and meaningfully open to community use, regardless of formal ownership or design typology (Carmona et al., 2003; Madanipour, 2015; Varna and Tiesdell, 2010). Following Roy's (2005) challenge to formal-informal dualisms, we extend this definition to include neighbourhood-scale spaces in dense urban settlements that emerge through informal, incremental, or community-led processes. In this context, public space encompasses the shared open areas,

riverbanks, and semi-formal community spaces that constitute the primary public realm for low-income urban communities in Indonesian cities.

2.1 Community-Centric Design & Participatory Planning

Community-centric design builds on long-standing traditions in participatory planning, which advocate for the inclusion of citizens in decision-making processes that shape their environments. Foundational work by Sherry Arnstein (1969) through the “ladder of participation” conceptualises participation as a spectrum ranging from tokenistic consultation to meaningful citizen control.

While Arnstein’s participation ladder remains important for foregrounding power, later critiques caution against understanding participation as a linear progression. Many argued that participation should be better understood as a situated and relational process, shaped by institutional arrangements, social relations, and uneven capacities to influence outcomes (Tritter and McCallum, 2006; Collins and Ison, 2009). Cornwall (2002) argues that participation is not only a matter of inclusion but is shaped by the spaces in which it occurs, including who creates these spaces, who is invited, and whose knowledge is recognised. This emphasises the role of planners in mediating power and enabling more equitable participation (Davidoff, 1965; Forester, 1989).

Building on these debates, community-centric design repositions local communities from passive users to active co-authors of space, centring their knowledge, aspirations, and lived experiences. Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991) highlight that communities are not merely sources of local inputs, but co-producers of knowledge and action. Recent urban planning practices involve participatory methods that position communities as active contributors to spatial design, and the collaborative role of residents and planners in jointly producing spatial knowledge, design alternatives, and governance strategies (Sanoff, 2000; Sendra and Fitzpatrick, 2020; Sendra, 2024). This is particularly relevant in neighbourhood-scale public spaces, where formal planning processes often overlook everyday needs, informal spatial practices, and the experiences of marginalised users.

Recent literature also suggests that participation should be assessed not only by whether communities are included, but by whether participation enables agency, empowerment, and longer-term transformation (Hickey and Mohan, 2004). This aligns with Mirafteb’s (2004) “invented space”, which highlights long-term transformation requiring community agencies that extend beyond formal “invited” participatory spaces into more informal “invented” spaces of collective actions and care.

In this paper, community-centric design is therefore understood not simply as the inclusion of residents in design activities, but as a process of co-producing spatial knowledge, negotiated power, and creating conditions for collective agency. By embedding participation into design processes, community-centric approaches aim to produce spaces that are more socially relevant and inclusive.

However, participation alone does not ensure that public spaces are sustained over time. Principles such as those set out in UN-Habitat’s Global Public Space Toolkit (2015) emphasise participation as a key component of inclusive public space development, yet public space conversations commonly remain framed around design outcomes with less attention given to how participatory processes contribute to long-term maintenance, care, and governance. This raises a critical question: to what extent does participation translate into ownership and sustained stewardship of public space?

2.2 Sense of Ownership as a Social-Spatial Process

Sense of ownership in public space is often conceptualised as psychological ownership, defined as a subjective feeling that a place belongs to oneself or one's community (Pierce et al., 2001; Chung, 2025), particularly in the absence of legal rights (Her et al., 2022).

Empirical studies show that community engagement in planning processes is positively associated with perceived ownership and the perception of public space as part of the social fabric (Mullenbach et al., 2019). The increase of psychological ownership is also observed in cases where consumers or users customise or cocreate, in which they feel like they own the product after investing themselves in the process (Peck et al., 2021) through time, money, thoughts, skills, and physical, psychological, or intellectual energy (Her et al., 2022).

Psychological ownership is understood to emerge through three key pathways: control, knowledge, and self-investment (Pierce et al., 2001). These dimensions provide a useful lens for analysing ownership in public space contexts. Control refers to the degree to which individuals are able to influence decisions related to the space, often through participation in design or planning processes. Knowledge is developed through everyday use and familiarity, reflecting lived experience and ongoing interaction with the space. Self-investment involves the contribution of time, labour, ideas, or other forms of personal input into the creation or maintenance of the space. Together, these pathways explain how individuals internalise a sense of connection and responsibility toward public space.

While psychological ownership is a useful analytical lens, it was developed largely in individualistic Western contexts and may not fully capture the collective and relational dimensions of spatial belonging in Global South communities. Decolonial urban scholars argue that dominant notions of spatial ownership in postcolonial contexts are shaped by colonial-liberal property logics that privilege individual legal rights and marginalise collective forms of attachment (Blomley, 2004; Roy, 2005). In many non-Western settings, including dense urban settlements in Indonesia, relationships with shared spaces are better understood as collective custodianship: socially embedded responsibilities sustained through relationships rather than individual appropriation (Tuck and Yang, 2012). Roy's (2005) conception of informality as a legitimate mode of spatial production governed by social norms is particularly relevant where communities maintain public spaces they do not legally own. This collective and relational understanding of belonging complements psychological ownership theory and helps explain why ownership emerges unevenly and through practice rather than as a direct outcome of participatory design.

2.3 Stewardship Practice and Sustainability

Psychological ownership is closely linked to stewardship behaviour in shared environments. Peck et al. (2021) hypothesise that increasing psychological ownership facilitates stewardship of public goods. When individuals perceive a public space as "theirs", they are more likely to develop a sense of responsibility that motivates actions to care for and maintain the space (Mullenbach et al., 2019). This relationship operates through perceived responsibility, which mediates the transition from ownership to active behaviour. In everyday practices, stewardship behaviours as an outcome of psychological ownership over public spaces can include effortful behaviours such as picking up trash, changing the light bulb, or organising activities, and financial behaviours like donating money for the upkeep of the resource. These actions contribute to the long-term sustainability of public spaces beyond the initial design phase.

However, stewardship in shared spaces is often undermined by unclear ownership and decentralised responsibility, which weaken individual initiative, resulting in a gap between positive attitudes and actual pro-environmental behaviour (She et al., 2022). Individuals sometimes assume that others will take care of the space, reducing their own willingness to act, a phenomenon Peck et al. (2021) refer to as the diffusion of responsibility. Strengthening psychological ownership through meaningful participation, therefore, becomes critical in sustaining community-led care in public spaces. In this sense, stewardship can be understood as the behavioural outcome of psychological ownership, linking community-centric design processes with the long-term sustainability of public spaces.

2.4 Public Space Evaluation Indicators

Existing frameworks for evaluating public space have mainly focused on physical, functional, and behavioural attributes, including accessibility, comfort, safety, activity, and patterns of social interactions (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2011). These approaches have contributed significantly to understanding how public spaces function and how they support social interaction.

More recent frameworks expand this perspective by incorporating broader dimensions of public space quality. For example, Mehta (2014) evaluates public space through inclusiveness, meaningfulness, safety, comfort, and pleasurability, while UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Toolkit (2015) emphasises availability, accessibility, quality, and participatory planning processes. While these frameworks recognise the importance of participation, it is primarily discussed in relation to participation's beneficial impact on design outcomes. Other approaches further emphasise the importance of publicness, ownership, control, governance, flourishing cultures, and management as key dimensions of evaluation (Varna and Tiesdell, 2010; Carmona, 2008; Carmona, 2019; Village Well, 2025). These more holistic approaches move public space evaluation beyond design or performance indicators by recognising that public space quality is shaped by social meaning, governance arrangement, management capacity, and quality of participation. Recent literature on ethical co-design further suggests that participation should be evaluated by whether communities are meaningfully involved in collective decision-making and the post-design process (Sendra, 2024).

However, limited attention is given to how participatory processes translate into long-term sustainability of public space. Existing indicators rarely capture how perceived ownership is formed, how stewardship practices emerge, and how maintenance is sustained over time. This gap is especially important for neighbourhood-scale public space, where sustainability depends on residents' everyday relationships, informal care practices, and links between community initiatives and institutional support.

2.5 Summary

Community-centric design repositions local communities and their knowledge at the centre of the design process, as formal planning often overlooks everyday needs and informal spatial practices. When engagement enables meaningful contributions, individuals develop psychological ownership that strengthens emotional attachment and perceived responsibility, encouraging communities toward active care of public spaces. Stewardship behaviours emerging from this sense of responsibility contribute to the long-term sustainability of public spaces. However, existing public space evaluation frameworks

primarily focus on physical attributes and design outcomes, with limited attention to these relational and behavioural dynamics. At the neighbourhood level, this gap is particularly significant as sustained care often depends on local residents.

Building on literature, this study examines how community-centric design processes influence the sustainability of neighbourhood-scale public spaces through the lens of perceived ownership and stewardship practices.

Table 1: Synthesis of available public space evaluation indicators

SOURCE / FRAMEWORK	EVALUATION FOCUS	WHAT IT CAPTURES	INDICATORS OR DIMENSIONS COVERED	REVIEW AND RELEVANCE
Whyte (1980); Gehl (2011)	Public life and behaviour in public space	How people use public space in everyday life	Sitting, walking, staying, social interactions, activity patterns, human-scale design	Less attention to ownership, governance of public space, and post-construction care.
Mehta (2014)	Public space quality	Social quality of public space	Inclusiveness, meaningfulness, safety, comfort, pleasurability	Strong highlight on user experience, less highlight on long-term stewardship and maintenance.
UN-Habitat Global Public Space Toolkit (2015)	Inclusive and accessible public space policy	City-level public space provision and policy orientation	Availability, accessibility, safety, inclusivity, quality, participation	Participation is discussed as part of planning and design, but not discussed as a long-term process.
UN-Habitat City-Wide Public Space Assessment Toolkit (2020)	City-wide public space assessment	A systematic and comparable set of public space assessment indicators	<u>Quantity dimension</u> : spatial distribution, network, accessibility, area <u>Quality dimension</u> : Accessibility, use/users, amenities, comfort, safety, green environment	More focused on inventory and quality of public space rather than the design process and ownership/stewardship aspect.
Varna and Tiesdell (2010)	Publicness of public spaces	Publicness of public space, including aspects of ownership, control, and governance	Ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, animation	Ownership is discussed in a more formal setting (contrasting public vs private) than community-based ones. The correlation to the space's sustainability is not discussed.
Carmona et al. (2008); Carmona (2019)	Public space design process and public space management	Connects design quality with governance and management	Planning, regulation, design quality, management, public value	It discusses management of public space, but not necessarily operationalises community stewardship at the neighbourhood scale
Sendra (2024)	Ethical co-design process	Framework for evaluating the quality of the co-design process	Genuine decision-making, partnership, power awareness, transparency, time/resources, continuity	Provide rigorous considerations on ensuring an ethical co-design process.
Village Well Regenerative Placemaking Model (2025)	Holistic, systems-oriented place evaluation	Place performance across social, cultural, economic, ecological, and physical dimensions	Healthy Planet, Flourishing Cultures, Joyful People, Loveable Places, Thriving Economies; 90 evidence-based patterns (Place Code)	Explicitly foreground community engagement process, not just outcomes, as the core mechanism of placemaking transformation.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Research Approach: Practice-based research and reflective inquiry

This paper presents the cases of neighbourhood-scale public spaces implemented with co-design approaches led by Kota Kota Foundation, in two Indonesian cities, Banjarmasin and Solo. The study utilises a qualitative approach combining systematic reflection with empirical materials, including in-depth interviews with community members, local leaders, and other stakeholders involved in the design, use, and management of the spaces, supported with project documentation, impact narratives, and site observations. Central to the project implementation in both case studies are the strong elements of citizen engagement in the design, use, and maintenance of the public space. By revisiting projects implemented across different time periods, the research allows for reflection on both immediate outcomes and longer-term impacts. This allows an impact evaluation framework that extends beyond short-term indicators, which focuses on the use of the space.

3.2 Research Design

The paper follows a comparative qualitative case study approach, enabling the study to examine how community-centric design processes unfold across different socio-spatial and temporal contexts. Rather than comparing the two cases to produce generalisable claims, the study uses comparison as an analytical strategy to identify patterns, variations, and conditions that shape the relationship between participation, perceived ownership, stewardship practices, and long-term public space sustainability.

The study centred its analysis on two cases of neighbourhood-scale public spaces: (1) Sungai Jingah, Banjarmasin, and (2) Mangkubumen, Surakarta. The two cases were implemented at different points in time and in different neighbourhood contexts, allowing the research to reflect on both immediate and longer-term outcomes of participatory public space development.



Figure 1. The case study sites. (Left) Sungai Jingah, Banjarmasin; (Right) Mangkubumen, Surakarta)

Table 2: Comparison of the case study

Aspect	Sungai Jingah, Banjarmasin	Mangkubumen, Surakarta
Year built	2013	2022
Area (m ²)	105 m ² (15 m x 7 m)	350 m ²
Location	Banjarmasin	Surakarta
Neighborhood context	Located in riverbank areas in a stilt urban neighbourhood, connected with the river.	Located in a dense urban settlement in a small urban stream, near a social housing complex.
Socio-economic context of the communities	• Strong connection to the river • Low-income communities • Permanent living in stilt housing near the riverbanks	• Dense urban settlement with limited road access • Low-income communities • More temporary living conditions, most of the users live in rented social housing
Involvement of communities	• Co-design workshops (design competition of the space) • Each neighbourhood representative proposes their idea, and the winning neighbourhood gets selected.	• Co-design workshops • Involving children and the elderly in the design process • Accessibility audits with disabled persons organisations (DPOs) are part of the process.

These two public spaces were selected based on the following justifications:

- Both public spaces were designed using a participatory approach, with local communities actively involved throughout the process.
- Both represent similar socio-economic conditions as they are located in low-income neighbourhoods with different socio-economic nuances. While the Banjarmasin space is located in a dense stilt-house neighbourhood, the Surakarta public space is located along a smaller riverbank stream near social housing.

3.3 Research Methods

To address the research objectives, the study employs the following qualitative data collection methods.

3.3.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members, local leaders, and other stakeholders involved in the design, use, and management of the public spaces. In total, 12 respondents were interviewed. Five community members were interviewed at each site, including residents who participated in the participatory design process, users, and community representatives involved in the ongoing activation and maintenance of the spaces. In addition, we also interviewed actors who actively participated in designing or activating the space.

The interviews explored several key themes, including participants' experiences during the co-design process, perceptions of ownership toward the public space, patterns of use and community activities, and the mechanisms through which the spaces are maintained and cared for over time. Particular attention was given to understanding how residents perceive their roles and responsibilities in sustaining the space after its construction. This method allowed respondents to share their perspectives and lived experiences in depth while enabling the researchers to probe specific issues related to ownership, stewardship practices, governance arrangements, and the long-term sustainability of the public spaces.

3.3.2 Field observation & documentation

Field observations were conducted in both sites to examine the current conditions and patterns of use of the public space. Observations focused on how the spaces are used in everyday activities, the presence of community-initiated events or activities, and visible practices of maintenance or care. These observations also documented the condition of facilities and infrastructure, and the presence of informal governance arrangements, or community-led initiatives that contribute to the activation of the space.

3.3.3 Project archives & impact narratives

In addition to interviews and observations, the study draws on project documentation and impact narratives collected by Kota Kita Foundation during and after the implementation of the public space projects. These materials include project reports, documentation of participatory workshops, community feedback records, and previously collected impact stories from residents and local stakeholders.

These archival materials provide insights into the original objectives and processes of the participatory initiatives and allow the researchers to trace how the spaces have evolved over time. When combined with interview data and site observations, they offer a

comprehensive understanding of how community-centric design processes contribute to ownership and stewardship dynamics in neighbourhood public spaces.

4. Case Study

4.1 Overview of the case studies

This paper draws on two case studies of neighbourhood-scale public spaces developed through participatory processes in Surakarta (Solo) and Banjarmasin, Indonesia. In both cities, public space development has traditionally been dominated by formal typologies, such as enclosed parks and ceremonial spaces, which are often designed and implemented through top-down approaches. In contrast, smaller, informal or semi-formal public spaces within neighbourhoods, despite their importance in supporting everyday social interaction, tend to receive less attention in planning and investment. The selected case studies, therefore, offer an opportunity to examine how community-centric design approaches can be applied to neighbourhood-scale spaces and how such approaches unfold across different socio-spatial contexts.

4.1.1 Sungai Jingah, Banjarmasin (2012)

The Sungai Jingah neighbourhood is predominantly inhabited by low-income communities living in dense stilt housing along the Martapura River. The population in 2012 was 10,403 residents, who are socially diverse, consisting of youth, working-age adults, and elderly residents, many of whom rely on river-based or informal livelihoods. Despite the strong relationship between the community and the river, the neighbourhood faces spatial and environmental constraints.

Many households use river water for daily needs. However, the river is also used for dumping household waste and sewage due to the 'back-of-house areas' concept, where kitchens, bathrooms, and laundry rooms are considered less clean and often face the river. This practice has led to the river's ecological degradation and risk to public health. At the same time, residents experience a lack of accessible communal spaces for social interaction and limited connectivity between river-based transport and the neighbourhood due to the absence of adequate docking points.

These conditions present opportunities for spatial intervention. The riverfront location offers the potential to create an accessible neighbourhood-scale public space that not only serves as a community gathering area but also strengthens the positive relationship between residents and the river. The development of a river-oriented public space was focused on neighbourhood unit 14, which has the potential to improve environmental conditions, enhance accessibility, and support economic activities such as handicrafts, blade making, and wood carving. Given that local livelihoods are closely tied to river-based activities, the introduction of a river-facing public space, including docking access, was intended to support both social interaction and small-scale economic activities, while also enhancing public understanding of the importance of caring for the river as part of a healthy environment.

The public space was built in 2013, involving local communities along the riverbank and collaborating with various stakeholders including the government, local communities, local slum upgrading committee (PNPM). The public space was funded by multiple sources, combining grants, government and community contributions, and crowdsourced funding.

4.1.2 Taman Rukun Mangkubumen, Kali Pepe, Surakarta (2022)

The second case study is Taman Rukun Mangkubumen, located in Mangkubumen, a dense urban neighbourhood in central Surakarta (Solo). The site occupies a vacant plot adjacent to *Rusunawa Mangkubumen*, a government-built social housing complex, and is situated along the banks of the Pepe River, one of the main rivers in the city. While the river has historical significance in the development of Surakarta, it has experienced environmental degradation, including declining water quality and encroachment by informal settlements.



Figure 2. The site context in Mangkubumen. (Left) Site condition before the intervention; (Right) The site is located along the Kali Pepe River, next to a social housing compound.

The surrounding area is characterised by high-density urban development with limited access to open space. The social housing complex accommodates approximately 77 low-income households, with the public space intended to serve not only these residents but also an estimated 320 people living within a 100-meter radius. The housing is designed for low-income residents registered with the government, with priority given to elderly residents and persons with disabilities on the ground floor. Many residents rely on informal economic activities, and the area has a high proportion of children without access to safe, accessible play spaces. In addition, the site is located near a school for visually impaired children, further emphasising the need for inclusive and accessible public space.

The neighbourhood faces multiple challenges related to both environmental conditions and social infrastructure. The deteriorating quality of the river and its surrounding environment, combined with inadequate public space, limits opportunities for social interaction and community activities. Residents also reported limited involvement in formal planning processes, contributing to a sense of detachment from spatial development in their area. Furthermore, the lack of safe play areas raises concerns for children, who often have limited options for outdoor activities in dense urban environments.

Despite these constraints, the site presents significant opportunities for intervention. As the land is owned by the government, it provides a feasible entry point for developing a neighbourhood-scale public space through collaboration between local authorities, community members, and supporting organisations. The strategic location within a dense settlement and near key community facilities also allows the space to serve as a multi-purpose community hub, fostering interaction among different groups while addressing the lack of accessible open space in the area.

The public space was developed in 2022 in collaboration with the local government of Surakarta, which granted permission to utilise government land, funding from UN-Habitat, facilitated by civil society organisations (including Kota Kita, Ayo ke Taman, and Urban+ Institute), with participation of local residents and communities.

4.2 Community-centric design approach

This section outlines how community-centric design was operationalised in the two case studies, highlighting both shared principles and key differences in approach across Sungai Jingah (Banjarmasin) and Kali Pepe (Mangkubumen, Surakarta).

4.2.1 Co-design Process in Sungai Jingah, Banjarmasin: Participation as Collective Learning, Preliminary Design and Awareness Raising

The community-centric design approach in Sungai Jingah combined an intensive participatory workshop process with an earlier phase of embedded, place-based research, thereby grounding the design intervention in everyday community practices. Framed as a “competition as campaign”, the approach aimed not only to generate design proposals but also to build awareness and engagement among residents.

Prior to the participatory workshops, the process included a period of live-in research and design, during which a member of the project team resided in the neighbourhood for approximately one month. This phase was critical in building trust, understanding local dynamics, and identifying entry points for engagement. During this period, the researcher conducted transect walks, community mapping, and informal interviews, working closely with neighbourhood leaders (RTs) and residents to document spatial conditions, social networks, and everyday practices.

This embedded approach enabled a nuanced understanding of how residents interact with the river, how informal systems of governance operate, and how existing community initiatives, such as waste management or local economic activities, are organised. It also allowed the project team to establish familiarity and credibility within the community before initiating formal participatory activities.

Building on this foundation, the design phase was organised as a three-day participatory workshop, where residents worked collaboratively to move from problem identification to spatial design. The process followed a structured sequence:

- ✓ Understanding context and problems: Residents collectively identified key environmental and spatial challenges affecting their neighbourhood.
- ✓ Developing ideas and priorities: Participants explored possible interventions and prioritised programs that respond to local needs.
- ✓ Designing spatial solutions. Residents translated ideas into spatial proposals through model-making and visual tools, which were then presented to a jury involving government stakeholders.

The workshops emphasized learning-by-doing, using visual tools, storytelling, and simplified design methods to communicate planning concepts in accessible ways. Participation extended beyond the design phase into collective construction activities, where residents contributed labour and engaged directly in building the space, reinforcing their connection to the outcome.

Despite these strengths, the approach remained relatively time-bound and project-driven, with limited formal mechanisms for sustained engagement after construction. While the live-in research phase and participatory workshops enabled deep initial engagement, the

continuity of community involvement in the longer term relied largely on informal social structures and community leadership rather than institutionalised governance arrangements.



Figure 3. Co-design process in Sungai Jingah in 2011. (Up) Understanding context and problem; (Bottom-left) Developing public space ideas and priorities; (Bottom-right) Participants present their ideas to a jury involving government stakeholders.

4.2.2 Co-Design Process Kali Pepe (Mangkubumen), Surakarta: An iterative process focusing on the inclusion of various community members

In contrast, the community-centric design approach in Kali Pepe was developed as a more iterative, multi-stage co-design process embedded within a broader program that aims to promote inclusive and resilient riverbank public spaces. The process began with a city-wide and site-specific assessment, including evaluation of public space accessibility, inclusivity, and community needs, and engagement with more than 70 residents across 5 different potential sites to understand local dynamics and identify potential sites.

Once the site in Mangkubumen was selected, the co-design process unfolded through four structured workshops over six months, enabling deeper engagement and iteration. A key feature of this approach was its explicit focus on inclusivity and diversity of participants, including:

- ✓ Separate sessions for children and adults in the beginning to familiarise children with the design process and ensure equal participation at a later stage.
- ✓ Inclusion of elderly residents and persons with disabilities.

- ✓ Utilisation of awareness-raising tools such as *persona* to represent diverse user needs.
- ✓ The design process combined physical and digital participatory tools, including:
- ✓ Community mapping and aspiration exercises using visual prompts (maps, images).
- ✓ Game-based modelling, using Minecraft, enables residents to visualise and test spatial ideas.
- ✓ Using persona as a tool to encourage participants to consider accessibility and inclusivity in design decisions.

These tools were deliberately designed to lower barriers to participation and enable residents with different levels of literacy and technical knowledge to contribute meaningfully. The Kali Pepe process also involved multiple rounds of stakeholder consultation, including local government, particularly about permits, and technical experts on accessibility, ensuring that community-generated ideas could be translated into feasible design proposals, as well as discussions with local communities on maintenance, ensuring the selection of materials that have minimal consequences for maintenance costs. During construction, accessibility audits were conducted with disabled people's organisations (DPOs) to ensure the space was accessible.

The participatory approach extended beyond design into activation and maintenance considerations, with discussions on how the space would be used, managed, and sustained over time. This reflects a shift from participation as a one-time event toward a more integrated and process-oriented model.



Figure 4. Co-design process in Mangkubumen (2022). (Up-left) Separate session with children to identify their challenges; (Up-right) Various tools used to ensure every participant is comfortable to voice their aspirations; (Down-left) Designing spatial solutions using Minecraft; (Below) Prioritisation of design features and maintenance considerations. Source: Kota Kita Foundation.

4.2.3 Comparative Participatory Design Process between the Two Sites

While both cases adopted participatory approaches, they differ in several key dimensions. Sungai Jingah utilises an awareness-raising-based, intensive participatory model, effective in mobilising communities and generating immediate engagement outcomes. In contrast, Kali Pepe reflects a longer-term, iterative co-design model that emphasises inclusivity, continuous engagement, and integration with local institutional processes. These differences highlight how community-centric design practices varied, shaped by engagement objectives, available time, and community character and contexts.

5. Findings and Discussions

5.1 Community-centric design: Reflection on process and impacts

The findings show that the primary impact of community-centric design lies in improving the relevance and usability of neighbourhood-scale public spaces. The participatory process enables communities (Hickey and Mohan, 2004), including those often marginalised in planning, to articulate everyday needs and aspirations, which are then translated into spatial features that align with local needs and practices. This supports the argument that participatory design strengthens the “fit” between public space and lived realities, particularly in contexts where formal planning often overlooks neighbourhood-scale needs. In both case studies, respondents emphasised that public spaces continue to be used because they respond to existing gaps in daily life. In Sungai Jingah, the space functions as an extension of everyday activities, used for sitting, weekly exercise, waiting during posyandu, community health-care programs, informal gatherings, and extension for community events such as weddings and community meetings. Despite the participatory process no longer being widely remembered, the space remains active, suggesting that the enduring impact of participation lies more in shaping spatial relevance than in sustaining memory of the process itself.

In Mangkubumen, the participatory process had a more visible influence on design outcomes. Respondents identified specific features, such as playgrounds, seating areas, and elderly-friendly elements, as direct results of community input. The inclusion of children and elderly participants broadened the scope of needs considered, resulting in a multi-functional space aligned with the neighbourhood’s diverse demographic profile. This demonstrates how community-centric design can expand whose needs are recognised in public space development.

The community-centric design process in both locations enables awareness-raising of broader social and environmental issues by creating opportunities for collective learning, reflection, and dialogue among community members (Davidoff, 1965; Forester, 1989; Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991). In Banjarmasin, the participatory design was used to reflect on the lack of waste management issues in the riverbank neighbourhood, while in Mangkubumen, the issue of social inclusion was more deeply discussed and facilitated.

On the other hand, the findings suggest that participation does not automatically lead to a strong sense of ownership. In Mangkubumen, some respondents perceived little difference between participatory and non-participatory development, noting that the space would be used regardless due to its necessity, as there is no such facility in the area. On the other hand, some respondents highlighted their participation in the process to make a difference in the attachment to and use of the space. This highlights an important finding: participation

more consistently produces usership, frequent and diverse use of space, rather than clearly articulated ownership.

“At that time, in the meeting room, I was happy to be involved in the design process (of the space) using Minecraft. But now, I'm even happier because it went from just a game to becoming a real-world park. I can now play soccer more freely with my friends in the park, without distractions like motorcycles passing by.” (MB-06, youth participants, Impact Evaluation Interview 2023)

Overall, community-centric design contributes most directly to use, inclusion, and spatial relevance, while its influence on ownership remains contingent. This distinction is critical, as it reframes participation not as an end in itself, but as a process that enables public spaces to better reflect and support everyday community life.

Table 3: Comparative Participatory Design Process

Elements	Sungai Jingah, Banjarmasin	Mangkubumen, Surakarta
Design process	One month live-in process for behavioral research and a 3-day intensive workshop, group-based design competition with local communities, and model-making.	A series of co-design workshops in six months utilising different tools, such as mapping, persona, Minecraft modelling, and iterative feedback.
Construction	Local communities provide insights on local materials and are involved in the construction process	Construction led by CSO partners, with close consultation with local residents
Hand-over process	Informal transition process to local communities. Approach PNPM as local actors that can connect to funding for maintenance and repair.	More formalised engagement with local communities and a gentle agreement with local government, as it's located in government assets.
Use and Activation	• Organic use by local residents for sitting, and sometimes parking (at night) • Use by other visitors • Community events (focus groups on waste management, etc)	• Designed with intentional programming (play, gathering, inclusivity) • Organic use by local communities for sitting, playing, socialising, and exercising.
Maintenance	• Informal, community-led, voluntary • Maintenance by nearby local communities with voluntary mechanisms for minor repairs (changing bulbs, repairing docks)	• Semi-structured; discussed during design but dependent on community + institutional support • Maintenance by community groups

However, from the case studies, we learned that several preconditions must be considered to ensure that community-centric design processes are meaningful and effective in achieving these outcomes. First, the process must identify communities that are often overlooked in the design process, particularly marginalised groups whose needs are less visible in formal planning. This aligns with Cornwall's (2002) argument that participation is shaped by who creates participatory spaces, who is invited, and whose knowledge is recognised.

Second, engagement tools must be designed to enable the participation of diverse groups. The participatory design literature highlights the importance of visual, interactive, and accessible methods that enable diverse users to express their needs and aspirations without relying on technical language (Sanoff, 2000; Sendra, 2024). Third, the process must acknowledge and address power imbalances, with planners and designers acting as facilitators who translate community input into feasible spatial interventions.



Figure 5. Use of space. (Up-left) The use of space in Sungai Jingah by children (2012); (Up-right) The use of public space for the capacity development activity for women groups organised by a local community-based organisation (2023). (Below) The use of public space in Mangkubumen in 2023.

Source: Kota Kita Foundation, Borneo Urban Lab

5.2 From participation to ownership: Context-dependent outcomes

While community-centric design contributes to the usability and relevance of public space, its translation into perceived ownership is neither automatic nor uniform. Drawing on the concept of psychological ownership, defined as the feeling that a place is “mine” or “ours” (Pierce et al., 2001), the findings suggest that participation creates enabling conditions for ownership, but does not guarantee its emergence. Ownership develops through pathways such as control, knowledge, and self-investment, and is shaped by broader socio-spatial contexts.

In Sungai Jingah, the relationship between participation and ownership is weakly articulated at the level of collective memory. Most current users do not recall the design process, and only a limited number of residents were directly involved. Moreover, some of the residents

have moved to other areas or have passed away. However, elements of ownership are still evident in practice. Residents demonstrate familiarity with the space and engage in small acts of care, such as collectively repairing wooden elements or replacing lighting. These practices reflect forms of self-investment and everyday responsibility (Pierce et al., 2001), suggesting that ownership can persist as an embedded practice even when it is not explicitly expressed.

In Mangkubumen, the relationship is more complex. Although residents were actively involved in the design process, ownership is not uniformly articulated among all users. Field evidence shows that ownership emerges in various forms, even when it is not clearly stated. For instance, an elderly resident described her routine of maintaining the space, some others were able to identify features as a result of their participation, another took pride in the space, while some others practised informal monitoring of the space.

“I enjoy exercising here and sweeping the park ground early in the morning to keep it clean and pleasant.” (MB-07, elderly participants, Impact Evaluation Interview 2023)
“I am proud that the public space was finally built and that it is being used by the community here. The most memorable part of the process was participating in the planning discussions.” (MB-02, local community group)

This reflects a form of self-investment and care, indicating that ownership can manifest through everyday stewardship practices (Peck et al., 2021; Her et al., 2022), even if not collectively articulated.

Table 4: Elements of Perceived Ownership in Sungai Jingah and Mangkubumen

Elements of Perceived Ownership	Translation to public space	Sungai Jingah, Banjarmasin	Mangkubumen, Surakarta
Control	Participation in design and decision-making	• Most current users do not recall the design process, and only a limited number of residents were directly involved.	• Stronger participation in the design process (co-design workshops, inclusive tools such as Minecraft) • Residents can identify features resulting from their inputs.
Knowledge	Daily use, familiarity with the space, lived experience	• Strong familiarity developed through long-term use • Space embedded in daily routines (gatherings, exercise, waiting area). • Knowledge is built through continuous interaction over time.	• Strong familiarity was developed through the design process • Space has close proximity to where the primary user lives.
Self-investments	Time, labour, ideas (in design and maintenance)	• Evident in everyday maintenance practices (repairing wood, replacing lighting, and small collective actions). • Investment occurs mainly post-construction through informal stewardship.	• Evident both in the design phase (ideas contributed) and in maintenance (cleaning, sweeping, organising activities). • However, investment is uneven and constrained by limited resources and dependency on external support.

A key factor shaping these variations in the perceived ownership is the broader socio-spatial context, including local norms, collective practices, and cultural understanding (Roy, 2005). In Mangkubumen, the public space is located within a social housing environment characterised by more temporary residency and a perception of the space as a government asset. This condition may limit the development of strong, collective ownership, even where individual attachment and care are present. In contrast, the more stable social relations in Sungai Jingah support informal stewardship practices despite weaker recall of the participatory process.

These findings suggest that participation primarily creates conditions for ownership, but its realisation depends on contextual factors such as tenure stability, social cohesion, and governance arrangements. Ownership, therefore, should be understood as a differentiated and context-dependent outcome, emerging unevenly across users and expressed through both perception and practice.

5.3 Community-based stewardship practices: A key element in sustaining small-scale public spaces

The findings show that the sustainability of neighbourhood-scale public spaces is closely linked to the presence of everyday stewardship practices, rather than ownership alone.

While perceived ownership may motivate care (Mullenbach et al., 2019), it does not automatically translate into sustained maintenance. Instead, stewardship emerges through a combination of individual initiative, collective arrangements, and access to resources.

In Sungai Jingah, stewardship is largely informal and decentralised. Maintenance activities are carried out through small-scale, voluntary actions by residents, such as repairing damaged wooden elements, replacing lighting, or tending plants. These practices are not coordinated through formal structures or funding mechanisms but rely on personal initiative and mutual awareness among neighbours. For example, residents described how responsibilities such as replacing broken lights are informally rotated, and how repairs are undertaken using locally available materials. This reflects a form of distributed stewardship, where care is embedded in everyday practices rather than institutionalised systems.

“Residents who live nearby are the ones taking care of the space. Some people who like plants, voluntarily take care of the greens. When the shade was broken, someone helped repair it; he bought the materials with his own money. Alhamdulillah, there are always community members who are willing to chip in.” (SJ-02, local resident)

However, the stewardship practices extended through collaboration with local organisations, which have programs in the neighbourhood. They help connect with the government to provide support for the clean-up and replanting of the plants.

“We asked the government for support for a collective clean-up in the river and public spaces. This was part of a larger program we are running in the community.” (SJ-06, community-based organisation)

In Mangkubumen, stewardship practices are more structured but also reveal clearer limitations. Maintenance is partially organised through community groups (called *paguyuban*), including routine activities such as monthly clean-ups and collective care of plants and paving. At the same time, residents noted that while small-scale repairs can be managed locally, larger infrastructure issues, such as damaged facilities, remain beyond the

community's capacity to address. This creates a dependency on external support, particularly from local government or other institutions.

“The Housing Department helps with maintenance through their staff. But we, the residents of the social housing, organise ourselves for monthly clean-ups.” (MB-05, community leader)

Across both cases, a key tension emerges between public use and concentrated responsibility. While the spaces are widely used, including by non-residents, the maintenance burden is often borne by a relatively small group of active residents. This imbalance highlights a critical limitation of community-based stewardship: without sufficient support, responsibility becomes unevenly distributed and potentially unsustainable over time. The two public spaces differ in their features. Sungai Jingah has relatively easy-to-maintain features, such as lamps and wood, and does not have heavy infrastructure components. While the Mangkubumen space has more substantial infrastructure, such as a children's playground, basketball hoops, and seating, this may result in higher maintenance costs. Given that residents live in relatively low-income communities, reliance on a more established governance structure is expected.

These findings suggest that while participation and ownership can enable stewardship, they are insufficient on their own. Sustaining public space requires not only social motivation but also access to resources, institutional linkages, and governance mechanisms that can support ongoing care. In this sense, community-based stewardship should be understood not as a substitute for formal systems, but as a complementary layer that depends on broader enabling conditions.



Figure 6. Stewardship practices in Sungai Jingah. (Left) Care practice by local residents by replanting vegetation; (Right) Collective River clean-up and care for the space in collaboration with community organisations and government actors. Source: Borneo Urban Lab

5.4 Factors shaping the sustainability of neighbourhood-scale public space

The findings indicate that the sustainability of neighbourhood-scale public spaces is shaped by a combination of social, institutional, and contextual factors (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2011; Varna and Tiesdell, 2010; Carmona, 2008; Carmona, 2019; Village Well, 2025), rather than by participation or ownership alone. While community-centric design contributes to relevance and use, the long-term sustainability of these spaces depends on the continuity of

use and maintenance and on the conditions that enable or constrain local stewardship practices.

One of the most significant factors is the presence of local leadership, which plays a key role in organising maintenance, mobilising residents, and sustaining collective action over time. In both cases, stewardship practices, whether informal or semi-structured, are often driven by a small number of active individuals who take the initiative to maintain the space. This highlights the importance of leadership in bridging the gap between individual ownership and collective action.

Social cohesion and everyday relationships also shape how stewardship is enacted. In Sungai Jingah, strong neighbourhood ties support informal, distributed forms of maintenance, where responsibilities are shared through mutual awareness rather than through formal systems. In contrast, the more fluid social dynamics in Mangkubumen, influenced by the nature of social housing, contribute to a less consistent sense of collective responsibility. A key structural factor is tenure condition and perception of space. In more permanent settlements, public space is more likely to be perceived as a shared community asset, supporting long-term attachment and care. In Mangkubumen, however, the perception of the space as a government-provided facility, combined with more temporary residency, limits the development of strong collective ownership, even where participation has occurred.

The findings also reveal a persistent mismatch between users and caretakers. While the spaces are widely used, including by non-residents, the maintenance responsibility remains concentrated among a limited group. This imbalance underscores the limitations of relying solely on community-based stewardship.

Finally, access to resources and institutional support emerges as a critical enabling factor. While communities can manage everyday maintenance, larger repairs and long-term improvements require external support. This suggests that sustainable public space governance must integrate community initiative with institutional backing, rather than treating them as separate or substitutive approaches.

Building on the findings from Sections 5.1–5.4, Figure 7 below synthesises the relationship between community-centric design, usership, perceived ownership, stewardship practices, and public space sustainability. The framework shows that while community-centric design directly contributes to spatial relevance and user adoption, the transition toward ownership, stewardship, and sustainability depends on the contextual social and institutional conditions previously discussed. The framework also identifies process supports that can be incorporated into co-design to strengthen continued use and care over time.

5.5 Recommending “a process” as a public space sustainability indicator

Building on the framework presented in Figure 7, this section proposes process-oriented considerations and indicators for public space sustainability by foregrounding ownership, stewardship, and maintenance as critical dimensions. The findings suggest that the sustainability of neighbourhood-scale public spaces cannot be assessed solely through physical indicators but must also consider the social and institutional processes that enable spaces to remain relevant, used, cared for, and governed over time. In this sense, sustainability is understood not only as an outcome of design but also as a process shaped by inclusive participation, a sense of ownership, stewardship practices, access to

governance, and support for resources. The proposed indicators extend existing public space evaluation frameworks by focusing on the conditions that support the transition from usership to long-term sustainability.

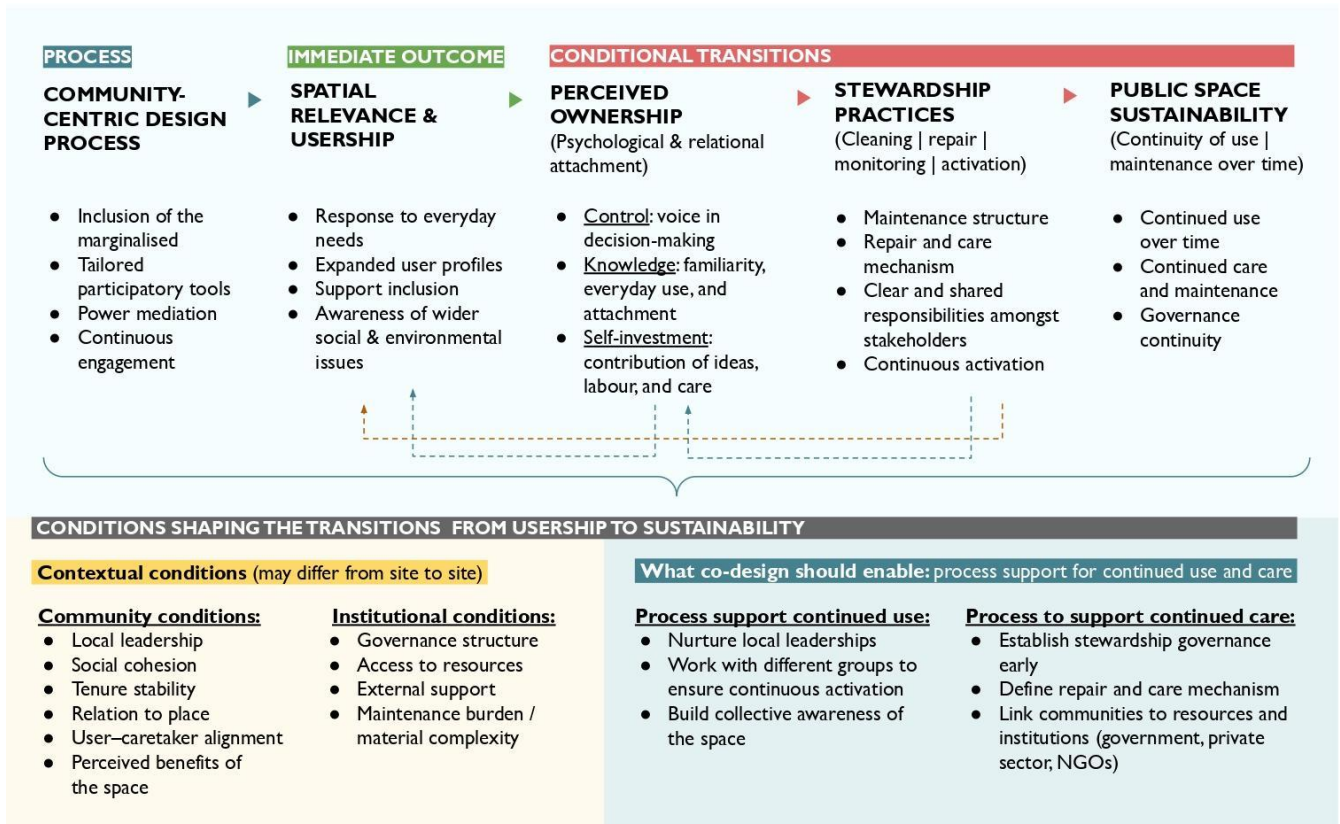


Figure 7. Process-based framework linking community-centric design, perceived ownership, stewardship practices, and public space sustainability.

First, the co-design process must be intentionally inclusive and context-specific, ensuring that the needs of marginalised and often overlooked groups are identified and meaningfully incorporated. This requires not only broad participation but also the use of tailored tools and facilitation strategies that enable diverse forms of engagement. Addressing power imbalances is central to this process, with planners and designers acting as intermediaries who translate community knowledge into spatial interventions. These aspects are important because the findings show that participation contributes most directly to spatial relevance and usership when local needs, everyday practices, and diverse aspirations are meaningfully incorporated into the design.

Second, the process needs to support the formation of a sense of ownership and stewardship beyond the design phase. Participation alone does not automatically build ownership and long-term care. Rather, ownership emerges through control, knowledge and familiarity, and self-investment, while stewardship depends on whether communities have the capacity, structure, and resources to maintain the space. This requires post-construction engagements, clear roles and responsibilities, clear repair and care mechanisms, and links to institutional support. Partnerships with local government, private

sectors, non-profits, and other institutions are essential to sustain public space over time. Without these enabling conditions, the burden of maintenance risks falling unevenly on a small group of active residents, limiting long-term sustainability of the space.

Based on these considerations, Table X proposes process-based dimensions that can be used by practitioners to evaluate public space sustainability. The indicators are understood as qualitative, process-based signs that indicate whether the conditions for long-term public space sustainability are present. They are not intended to replace physical and functional measures of space, but rather to complement them by making visible the social and institutional process through which public spaces are co-produced, maintained, and sustained over time.

6. Conclusion

This paper has examined how community-centric design approaches influence the development and sustainability of neighbourhood-scale public spaces, drawing on case studies from Surakarta and Banjarmasin, Indonesia. The findings demonstrate that while participatory processes play a critical role in shaping spaces that are socially relevant and widely used, their impact on ownership and long-term sustainability is more complex and context dependent.

The study highlights that participation contributes most directly to usership and inclusivity, ensuring that public spaces reflect the needs of local communities. However, the emergence of ownership and stewardship depends on additional factors, including tenure stability, social cohesion, governance arrangements, and access to resources. Ownership, therefore, should not be assumed as a direct outcome of participation, but understood as an evolving process.

Across the two case studies, the findings highlight the critical role of local actors in sustaining neighbourhood-scale public spaces through voluntary and semi-formal models of care. At the same time, they reveal the limitations of relying solely on community initiative. While stewardship practices emerge organically, their continuity is constrained in the absence of clear governance structures and access to resources. This suggests that co-design processes must extend beyond the design phase to facilitate not only spatial outcomes but also discussions on roles, responsibilities, and long-term maintenance arrangements involving multiple stakeholders.

To conclude, the paper proposes to add process-oriented frameworks that consider how public spaces are co-produced, maintained, and sustained over time. In doing so, it offers both conceptual and practical insights for advancing more inclusive and resilient approaches to public space development.

Table 5. Proposed Process-Based Indicators for Public Space Sustainability

Process-based dimensions	What it evaluates	Proposed indicators	Supporting Literature
Community-centric design process	Whether the design process meaningfully engages diverse groups , especially those marginalised or less visible in the planning process (context specific – could be children, elderly, women, persons with disabilities, ethnic minorities, low-income residents, and other communities at the margin)	Inclusion - Diversity of participants involved in the design process. - Presence and active contributions of the marginalised groups, such as children, the elderly, women, persons with disabilities, low-income residents, ethnic minorities or other marginalised groups (context dependent). Engagement methods - Use of engagement tools adapted to local literacy, age, culture, ability, and spatial knowledge, allowing diverse community members to express their aspirations meaningfully. Addressing power imbalance - Presence of trained planners/designers acting as facilitators. - Clarity of decision-making roles among multi-stakeholders. - Evidence that community input influenced the final design. - Participants report feeling heard or involved.	Cornwall (2002); Sanoff (2000); Hickey and Mohan (2004); Fals-Borda and Rahman (1991); Sendra and Fitzpatrick (2020); Sendra (2024).
Improving spatial relevance and usership	Whether the resulting public space responds to everyday needs and is actively used by different groups.	- Space is used for activities identified during the community-centric design process. - Diversity of users observed and involved in the design process. - Frequency of use and range of activities supported. - Users report that the space responds to their needs. - Space is used beyond its original intended function.	Whyte (1980); Gehl (2011); Mehta (2014); UN-Habitat (2015, 2020).
Formation of a sense of ownership	Whether users develop a sense of ownership (psychological and relational attachment) to the space	Control - Users feel they have influenced the space Knowledge - Users express familiarity with the space. - Users describe the space as reflecting local needs, identity, or community values. Self-investment - Users recognise their contribution to the space. - Users express pride or attachment to the space. - Users express a sense that the space is "ours." - Users feel responsible for the space. - Users say they would act if the space were damaged or misused.	Pierce et al. (2001); Mullenbach et al. (2019); Peck et al. (2021); She et al. (2022); Chung (2025).
Preparing & nurturing stewardship practices	Whether there are structures, responsibilities, partnerships, and resources that enable stewardship to continue over time.	- Discussion of maintenance and care responsibilities facilitated during the design process - Existence of post-construction engagement to support leadership, activation, and maintenance coordination - Clarity of roles and responsibilities for maintenance and care - Existence of defined repair and care mechanisms - Establishment of links to resources and institutional support, including local government, NGOs, and private sectors.	Carmona (2008, 2019); Varna and Tiesdell (2010); Sendra (2024); UN-Habitat (2015, 2020).
Emergence of everyday stewardship practices	Whether everyday stewardship practices of care, maintenance, monitoring, and activation emerge after implementation.	- Existence of care practices: Residents clean the space, water plants, repair minor damage, or maintain facilities. - Users monitor the space informally. - Presence of community groups that organise activities and activate the space. - Existence of reporting mechanism for damage.. - Local communities contribute labour, money, or materials for upkeep.	Peck et al. (2021); Mullenbach et al. (2019); Carmona (2019).

Use of AI Tools

AI-assisted writing tools, including ChatGPT and Grammarly, were used during the preparation of this manuscript to support language editing, rephrasing, proofreading, and improving the clarity and flow of the text. The tools were not used to collect data, generate empirical findings, or make analytical decisions. All interpretations, arguments, case descriptions, and conclusions were developed and reviewed by the authors.

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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

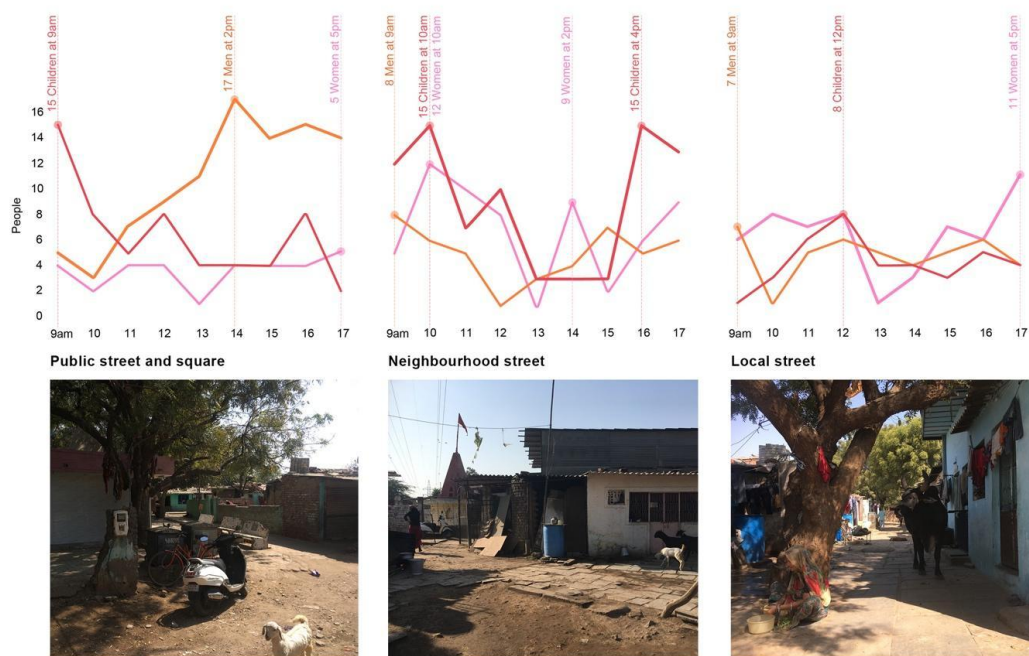
Most PSPL methods require accurate plans of the area being investigated to locate observations and map activity with precision. Informal settlements are rarely formally documented, excluded from the cartographic and administrative systems through which cities are made knowable to those who govern them (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 ZebI 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.



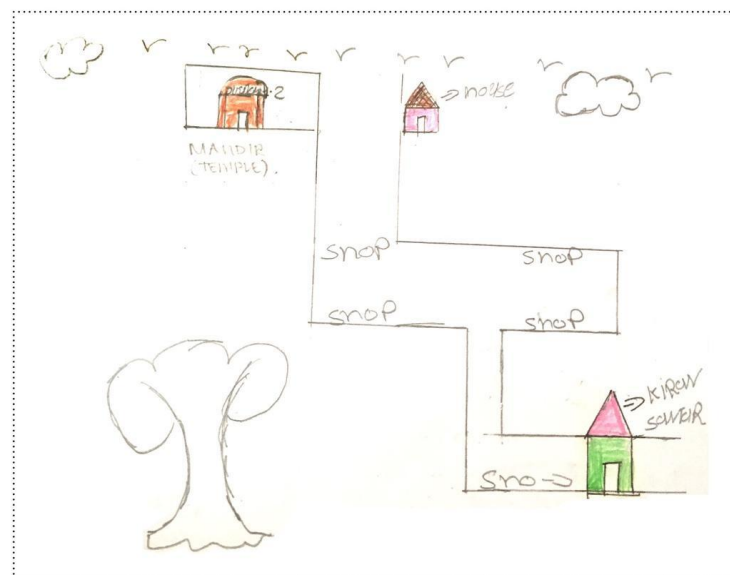
Figure 5: map of people's movements on a neighbourhood street in Ramapir No Tekro between 6-6.15pm on September 12, 2017 (by author)

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.

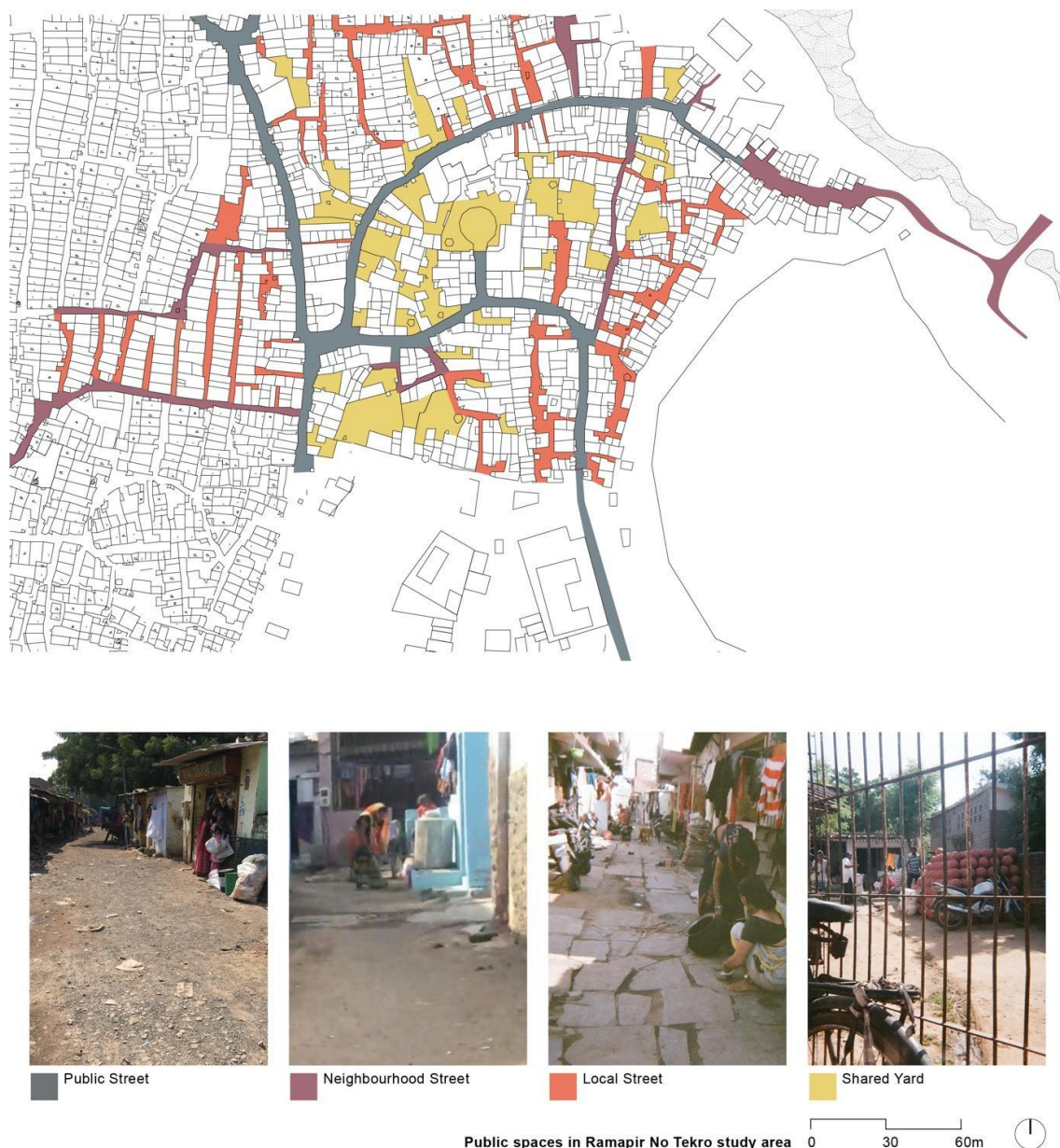


Figure 8: Map and photographs of public space types open to the sky in Ramapir No Tekro study area (by author)

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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The School Street as Extended Cognitive Space. A Participatory Framework for Evaluating Temporally Activated Public Spaces

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Abstract

Contemporary cities face a paradox: as urbanization intensifies, children's access to public space contracts. Vehicular dominance, parental safety concerns, and digital shifts in social behaviour converge to produce spatially dispossessed childhoods: not merely a mobility issue but a cognitive and developmental crisis. Children's growth depends on embodied exploration, unstructured play, and independent navigation, yet prevailing evaluation frameworks privilege permanent features and adult priorities, failing to capture how spaces serve children's cognitive and social development. This paper proposes a theoretical and methodological framework conceptualizing public space as cognitive infrastructure: urban streets function as distributed cognitive systems when activated through tactical, temporary, and participatory interventions. We focus on school streets, those regularly closed to traffic near schools to enable children's free play and interaction and argue that reconceptualizing the street as cognitive infrastructure carries direct methodological consequences, since conventional, feature-based evaluation tools are structurally unable to capture these dynamic and relational processes. In response, we develop a four-dimensional evaluation framework based on spatial-cognitive affordances, temporal rhythms, participatory co-design, and perceived safety, which is operationalized through participatory, practice-based methods that position children and families as co-researchers rather than research subjects. We grounded the framework in an early-phase action-research project in Pescara, Italy, where a street in a working-class neighbourhood is being transformed. Findings from the preparatory phase already begin to corroborate the framework's core premises, indicating that the methodology is a logically derived structure under test rather than an untested proposal. The framework equips municipalities, designers, and communities with actionable tools to evaluate interventions that reclaim streets for children's development.

Keywords: school streets, extended mind, children's autonomous mobility, public space, living painting

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I. Introduction

The relationship between childhood and public space is among the most urgent and least theorized challenges facing contemporary urban design. Across European and North American cities, this relationship has significantly shifted. Evidence from the United Kingdom reveals that only 9 percent of primary school children were permitted to travel to school unaccompanied by the early 1990s, a sharp decrease from 80 percent in 1971 (Hillman, Adams & Whitelegg, 1990). Most industrialized countries, Italy included, have seen this trend intensify (Shaw et al., 2015).

The causes are multiple and interconnected: the priority assigned to vehicular traffic in the urban design of spaces between buildings, the shift in parenting cultures and increase in anxiety over children's safety, the expansion of structured and supervised childhood activities, and the progressive displacement of physical sociality towards digital environments (Gill, 2007; Malone, 2007).

This spatial dispossession affects not only mobility and urban planning but also children's cognitive and developmental capacities. It amounts to a cognitive and developmental crisis. A substantial body of evidence from developmental, environmental, and cognitive psychology demonstrates that children's intellectual, social, and emotional development depends fundamentally on embodied exploration, unstructured play, and autonomous navigation of complex environments (Hart, 1979; Heft, 1988; Kytä, 2004). When children lose access to the street as a public space, they lose the opportunity to draw upon an infrastructure for motor, cognitive, and socio-emotional development that cannot be adequately replaced by indoor, supervised, or digital alternatives.

Practice-based evaluation positions children as active co-designers and evaluators. This approach acknowledges children's unique spatial knowledge and their interpretations of walkability and urban design elements, which often diverge from adult-centric expert intentions. This departure is crucial because children, particularly during the concrete operational phase, perceive and interact with their environments differently, exhibiting heightened sensitivity to environmental stimuli that shape their learning and navigation (Lefebvre, 1991). This participatory paradigm therefore moves beyond viewing children as passive recipients of urban planning, valuing their insights as critical to developing inclusive and responsive urban environments. It involves incorporating their expressed preferences for street design, such as green barriers, wider sidewalks, and reduced litter, which contribute to perceived safety and aesthetic appeal. This active involvement in urban design enhances their sense of competence, self-esteem, and communication skills, and fosters a deeper connection to their community and attachment to places. Such co-creative methods, previously explored in broader public open space design, demonstrate the efficacy of integrating adolescent perspectives to generate nuanced, user-sensitive urban interventions.

Yet the evaluation of public space quality continues to overlook the importance of child-centred design and its capacity to shape thoughts, behaviours, and social interactions in public spaces for youngsters (Gruosso, Del Signore, Di Cinzio, 2025). Dominant assessment tools, from the Project for Public Spaces' Place Performance Evaluation to various municipal liveability indices, privilege permanent physical features, adult-use patterns, and quantifiable metrics such as pedestrian counts or maintenance standards (Carmona, 2019). They fail to capture the dynamic, relational, and cognitively constitutive role that public spaces play in children's lives. Moreover, they are poorly equipped to evaluate temporary, tactical, and participatory interventions, precisely the kind of low-

cost, reversible actions that many cities are exploring as alternatives to large-scale infrastructural projects.



Figure 1. "Piazze Aperte Project" at the intersection of Via Spoleto and Via Venini, Milano, Italy
(© Comune di Milano)

In this paper, we propose an original theoretical and methodological framework for understanding and evaluating school streets as the practice of temporarily closing streets adjacent to schools to vehicular traffic on a regular and predictable basis, to enable children's free play, social interaction, and autonomous navigation. Drawing on extended and embodied mind theory (Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Gallagher, 2005; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991), the school street is interpreted not as a mere traffic-calming measure but as an external structure that, when reliably coupled with children's internal cognitive processes, becomes a constitutive component of cognition itself. In this paper, we propose an original theoretical and methodological framework for understanding and evaluating school streets, the practice of temporarily closing streets adjacent to schools to vehicular traffic on a regular and predictable basis, to enable children's free play, social interaction, and autonomous navigation. Drawing on extended and embodied mind theory (Clark & Chalmers, 1998; Gallagher, 2005; Varela, Thompson & Rosch, 1991), the school street is interpreted not as a mere traffic-calming measure but as an external structure that, when reliably coupled with children's internal cognitive processes, becomes a constitutive component of cognition itself. This theoretical repositioning carries direct methodological consequences. If the street functions as cognitive infrastructure rather than merely a physical backdrop, then conventional evaluation tools, which privilege

permanent features, static audits, and adult-centred metrics, are structurally inadequate for capturing what school streets do. What is required instead is a framework that measures dynamic, relational, and temporally embedded processes: how children couple with space over time, how routines form and stabilize, and how participatory co-design constitutes a cognitive act in itself. Accordingly, we develop a four-dimensional evaluation methodology, encompassing spatial-cognitive affordances, temporal rhythms, participatory co-design, and perceived safety, that positions children and families as co-researchers rather than research subjects, and integrates longitudinal, mixed-methods data collection with community-defined indicators. This comprehensive assessment integrates multiple dimensions to capture the dynamic interplay between the built environment and children's developmental needs, thereby offering a more holistic understanding of urban spaces (Mehta, 2013). The framework addresses a critical gap in current research by focusing on how temporary street closures can transform urban thoroughfares into dynamic environments that support children's cognitive and social development, moving beyond traditional safety and active travel evaluations. It integrates participatory design principles with robust evaluation metrics to assess how school streets function as extended cognitive spaces, thereby contributing to children's holistic development and well-being.

The testing phase of the proposed model is defined by a 24-month action-research project currently underway in Pescara, a medium-sized city on the Italian Adriatic coast (Whyte, 1980), where the street fronting a primary school in the working-class neighbourhood of Santa Filomena will be activated through a combination of regular traffic closures, participatory design interventions, environmental education, and community mobilization. The project, entitled "Pescara Feet on Colors", was developed in partnership with the Municipality of Pescara, the Department of Architecture of the University G. d'Annunzio, and local third-sector organizations, and builds upon preparatory community engagement work conducted by the Department of Architecture from 2025.

The paper is organized as follows.

Paragraph 2 defines the theoretical framework by articulating the connections among extended mind theory, environmental affordances, and children's spatial cognition.

Paragraph 3 presents the urban context and the genesis of the Pescara project.

Paragraph 4 describes the spatial and material design strategy.

Paragraph 5 details the four-dimensional evaluation methodology.

Paragraph 6 discusses the early implementation phase and stakeholder mobilization.

Paragraph 7 examines the framework's implications for public space evaluation.

Paragraph 8 offers conclusions and directions for future research.

2. Theoretical Framework: The Street as Cognitive Infrastructure

2.1 Extended and Embodied Cognition

If cognitive processes are not confined within the brain but extend into the environment (Clark & Chalmers, 1998), then external structures that reliably couple with internal mental processes qualify as components of an extended cognitive system. Following this theory, a notebook regularly consulted for memory, a calculator used for arithmetic, or a familiar spatial layout navigated for orientation all qualify as components of an extended cognitive system, provided they satisfy requirements of reliability, accessibility, and trust.

This positions cognition as a distributed, situated, and materially embodied process. The tradition of embodied cognition, developed by Varela, Thompson, and Rosch (1991) and extended by Gallagher (2005), complements this view by emphasizing that cognition is fundamentally shaped by the body's sensorimotor interaction with its environment. Perception, action, and thought are not separable processes but aspects of a single embodied engagement with the world: even social cognition, the capacity to understand others' intentions, emotions, and perspectives, is grounded in embodied face-to-face interaction rather than abstract mentalization processes.

These theories help illuminate the relationship between children and public space. If cognition is extended and embodied, then the environments in which children move, play, and interact are not mere backdrops to development but active components of it. A street that a child walks daily becomes part of their spatial memory system. A place where social encounters are repeated becomes part of their social cognition. The textures, sounds, and spatial configurations of urban environments are not stimuli processed by an isolated brain but materials through which cognition constitutes itself.

2.2 Environmental Affordances and Children's Spatial Agency

The concept of affordance (Gibson, 1979), applied to children's environments (Heft, 1988), provides a crucial bridge between extended mind theory and public space design. Affordances are action possibilities that emerge from the relationship between an organism and its environment, not properties of objects in themselves, but relational structures that depend on the perceiver's capabilities, intentions, and developmental stage. A low wall affords sitting for an adult but climbing for a child; a puddle affords avoidance for a pedestrian but splashing exploration for a young child (Mastrodonardo & Nanni, 2024).

The degree of independent mobility is the strongest predictor of affordance actualization. Kytä (2004) distinguishes between potential affordances, those objectively present in an environment, and actualized affordances, those that children actually perceive and use. Children who can move freely within their neighbourhood discover and utilize a significantly greater number of environmental affordances than those confined to supervised spaces.

Children who walk to school autonomously develop richer and more accurate cognitive maps of their neighbourhood than those driven to school, even when controlling for exposure time (Rissotto & Tonucci, 2002). The act of autonomous navigation, making decisions at intersections, calibrating speed and attention, and reading environmental cues, constitutes a form of distributed spatial cognition qualitatively distinct from passive transport.

2.3 Temporary Design and Tactical Urbanism

The concept of tactical urbanism (Lydon & Garcia, 2015) describes low-cost, temporary, and often citizen-initiated interventions in the built environment that aim to catalyze long-term change. Unlike conventional urban planning, which operates through permanent infrastructure and top-down regulation, tactical urbanism works through reversible, iterative, and participatory actions, painted crosswalks, temporary plazas, and pop-up parks that test possibilities, build community consensus, and demonstrate alternative uses of space before committing to permanent transformations.

School streets represent a fertile testing ground for tactical urbanism. Originating in Italy,

where they are linked to the Pedibus tradition (Tonucci, 1996), and subsequently adopted across Europe, school streets involve the regular and temporary closure of streets adjacent to schools during arrival and departure times, and, in some cases, for extended periods during the day. Unlike permanent pedestrianization, this temporal activation creates rhythmic patterns that structure collective expectations while maintaining the flexibility needed for adaptation and learning. The predictability of the closure, the same street, at the same times, on the same days, is itself a cognitive resource, enabling children, families, and communities to develop routines, anticipations, and shared practices around the activated space. Where environmental and social conditions allow, the school street can serve as a preliminary intervention type leading to the complete and permanent closure of a street, returning it to the community.

3. Context: Pescara, Santa Filomena, and the Genesis of the Project

3.1 The Urban Context

Pescara is a city of approximately 120,000 inhabitants on the Adriatic coast of central Italy, in the Abruzzo region. Like many medium-sized Italian cities, it was characterized during postwar development by rapid and largely unregulated building expansion that prioritized residential density and vehicular circulation over public space quality. The result is a morphologically and socially fragmented urban fabric, marked by physical and social barriers that separate places and people (Pozzi, Potenza 2008).

The project area is located in the Santa Filomena neighbourhood, at the city's northern edge bordering the municipality of Montesilvano, a neighbourhood characterised by a concentration of social housing, a proportion of families with children significantly above the municipal average (approximately 15–17 per cent), and a cluster of collective services along and near Via Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa: a nursery and a primary school (Piano T), nationally and locally prominent civil-society organisations (Misericordia di Pescara, etc.), the parish church of the Visitation of the Blessed Virgin Mary, sports facilities, and a weekly neighbourhood market.

Via Carlo Alberto dalla Chiesa presents a paradox characteristic of the Italian periphery: a wide street with low traffic, a dual carriageway with parking on both sides, narrow sidewalks, and little greenery. The generous road width, dimensioned for a vehicular capacity never realized, coexists with a minimal provision of pedestrian comfort and spaces for sociality. Architectural barriers and spatial fragmentation reduce the street's quality as public space and its capacity for meaningful interaction with the surrounding urban context.

3.2 Project Structure and Partnership

"Pescara Feet on Colors" is an iterative learning project. At present, the project is in the first six months of the preliminary phase, dedicated to participatory co-design with the community and stakeholders. Regular traffic closures begin immediately afterward and continue until the end of the project, with spatial design interventions introduced progressively following the co-design phase. A second phase of participatory engagement and dissemination allows for intermediate adjustments based on observed use patterns and community feedback, while also proposing systemic and permanent interventions and new urban areas to test the same solutions. The final months will be dedicated to evaluation, public restitution, and documentation of a replicable operational model.



Figure 2. Suggestion and insight from the first meetings in Pescara, Piano T school, May 2026.
(Photo by La cabina di regia)

4. Proximity Design Strategy

4.1 Conceptual Approach: Phases, Time, Space, Colour, Matter

The project's spatial design strategy is grounded in a conceptual approach that treats public space as a painterly work: a veritable canvas upon which layers of colour, graphic marks, functional areas, and urban furniture elements are progressively stratified. This metaphor is not merely aesthetic but operative, structuring a design methodology in which the road surface (the parterre) becomes the primary design element, and transformation occurs not through a single definitive intervention but through a slow process of layering and accumulation unfolding over time.

Like a painting, the space is constructed through glazes and superimposed layers, built up gradually, as a formal transformation requiring time to balance solids and voids, presence and absence, permanence and transience. This approach foregrounds what might be called the slowness of spatial creation, underscoring how meaningful places are not produced instantaneously but emerge through iterative processes of making, inhabiting, observing, and adapting. The design strategy is intrinsically aligned with the participatory methodology: each layer responds to what was observed, used, and desired in previous phases. This conceptual position is inscribed within a tradition of contemporary public space design that uses colour and graphic intervention on ground surfaces as tools of spatial reconfiguration. International precedents (from the Superkilen project in Copenhagen to the chromatic interventions of LMN Architects and Boamistura) demonstrate that chromatic treatment of horizontal surfaces can radically alter the perception and use of urban space without requiring heavy infrastructure. Colour operates simultaneously as an aesthetic element and a spatial organizer: it defines zones, suggests uses, slows traffic, and constructs visual identity. The transformation is not only physical but cultural: the urban landscape becomes a “living painting,” in progress, capable of welcoming and stimulating social interaction.



Figure 3. Superkilen project in Copenhagen, BIG architect (Photo by Luciana Mastrodonardo)

4.2 The Parterre: The Ground as Design Project

The first fundamental dimension of the design intervention concerns the road surface. Through chromatic fields, patterns, and graphic marks applied with non-toxic, removable paints, the road surface is progressively transformed from an exclusively vehicular surface into an active, legible, and multifunctional horizontal plane. Colour is not merely decorative: it functions as a design tool that organizes space, suggests differentiated uses (pedestrian areas, rest zones, play zones), and visually decelerates traffic. The continuity of the ground-level design creates a new visual identity for the street, reinforcing the sense of belonging and activating new urban practices as an externalized cognitive map. The chromatic differentiation of zones provides environmental cues that children internalize through repeated use: the blue area is for quiet activities, the coloured pathway leads to the play zone, and the decorated surface marks the boundary of the activated space (Heller, 2004). Over time, these visual signs reliably couple with children's spatial expectations and behavioural routines, functioning as distributed memory and orientation systems.



Figure 4. A preliminary conceptual idea of the new coloured parterre in Santa Filomena neighbourhood, Pescara, Italy. (image processed by the authors)

4.3 Urban Furniture: Light, Modular, and Flexible Elements

The second dimension of the design strategy concerns urban furniture, conceived as a system of light, modular, and flexible elements that dialogue with the ground's graphic design without overwhelming it. The furniture system includes linear seating (modular benches with clean geometries), folding tables, mobile planters with vegetation on self-locking wheels, outdoor poufs and cushions for informal rest, and play elements (table tennis, table football, obstacle-course components, bouncing balls). These elements are not arranged hierarchically but distributed diffusely throughout the space, encouraging free and spontaneous use.

The furniture's chromatic and material language maintains a deliberate neutrality, with muted tones that leave the coloured ground surface as the principal role in constructing visual identity. The furniture thus operates as a discreet yet fundamental support, structuring the space without competing with the parterre design. The perimeter areas function as traffic barriers through the arrangement of planters that provide greenery and shade, while the central zone remains open and reconfigurable.

This approach to urban furniture is informed by the concept of 'affordance density'. The project aims to maximize the diversity of actions available in the space: sitting, lying down, climbing, hiding, gathering, reading, playing formal games, and practicing informal sports. The modular and mobile character of the elements is particularly important from the perspective of participatory co-design, since it allows children and the broader educating community to reconfigure the space according to their own needs and desires, a form of spatial agency that is itself a process of cognitive and social learning.

4.4 Thematic Zones and Programmatic Flexibility

The spatial organization of the activated street is not conceived as a fixed plan but as a flexible framework of thematic zones capable of accommodating diverse and simultaneous uses. These include a sports area (aligned with the existing sports facility and activated one afternoon per week), a free-play area (activated one afternoon per week), zones for quiet activities (reading, studying, conversation), and, crucially, a generous undesignated space that resists programmatic determination and remains available for spontaneous appropriation.

The existing ground-floor arcades of the adjacent residential buildings are incorporated as covered spaces usable in adverse weather, extending the temporal arc of the intervention beyond favorable conditions. This strategic use of existing architectural elements exemplifies the tactical approach: rather than building new infrastructure, the project activates latent spatial resources in the urban fabric that are currently underutilized or unrecognized.

5. Evaluation Framework: Four Dimensions of Spatial-Cognitive Assessment

The evaluation methodology is designed to capture the multidimensional character of the school street as an extended cognitive space, integrating four interconnected dimensions: the framework positions children and families as co-researchers rather than research subjects, consistent with the project's participatory methods and with methodological developments in childhood studies (Christensen & O'Brien, 2003).

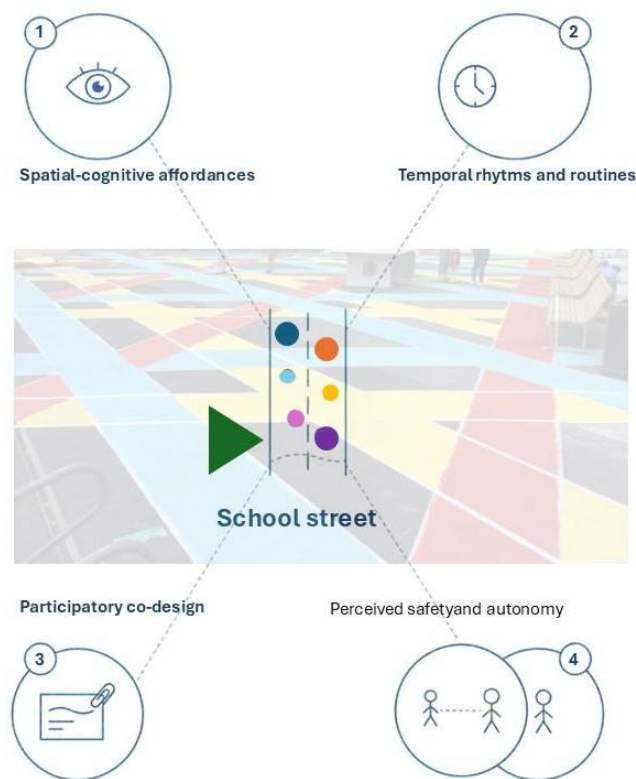


Figure 5. Four Dimensions of Spatial-Cognitive method. (image processed by the authors)

5.1 Dimension 1: Spatial-Cognitive Affordances

This dimension assesses the action possibilities that emerge from the coupling between children's cognition and environmental features. Following Heft's (1988) functional taxonomy of children's environmental affordances and Kyttä's (2004) distinction between potential and actualized affordances, we employ three complementary methods:

1. Child-led mapping exercises, in which children aged 6 to 14 are invited to draw, annotate, and narrate their experience of the activated street, identifying places they use, routes they follow, and activities they engage in.
2. Observational analysis of spontaneous play, conducted by trained observers using a structured protocol adapted from public life studies (Gehl, 2011), recording the types, locations, durations, and social configurations of children's activities during traffic-closure periods.
3. Sensory audits are co-conducted with children to document the qualitative and multisensory experience of the space, what children see, hear, smell, and feel tactilely, capturing dimensions of spatial experience that conventional metrics do not register.

5.2 Dimension 2: Temporal Rhythms and Routines

This dimension assesses how regular activation pattern's structure collective memory and expectations. The temporal predictability of the school street closure, daily at school arrival and departure times, once weekly in the afternoon, is theorized as a cognitive scaffold that enables anticipation, planning, and routine formation. It is evaluated through longitudinal participation tracking (attendance registers over the 18 months of activation) and narrative analysis of anticipation and memory through semi-structured interviews with children and parents at three time points.

5.3 Dimension 3: Participatory Co-Design as Cognitive Coupling

The third dimension treats the co-design process as a form of distributed cognitive activity. When children participate in designing their own street, choosing mural colours, proposing play configurations, deciding where to position furniture, they are not simply providing input to a design process but performing a collaborative cognitive act that couples their imagination, spatial reasoning, and social negotiation capacity with external material resources (paints, furniture, spatial layouts) to produce new environmental configurations. This is extended cognition in participatory practice.

We document this dimension through design workshops using age-appropriate methods (drawing and model-making for younger children, mapping and discussion for adolescents), analysis of child-initiated space modifications during activation periods (spontaneous furniture rearrangements, invention of new games, creation of informal rules), and feedback boards where children and families can propose, evaluate, and vote on spatial changes. The intermediate participatory phase is specifically designed to integrate these observations into iterative design adjustments, creating a feedback loop between use, reflection, and redesign.

5.4 Dimension 4: Perceived Safety and Autonomous Navigation

The fourth dimension addresses the subjective dimension of safety as the precondition for cognitive extension. Children's autonomy depends not only on objective safety conditions but on the perception of safety held by both parents and children (Tonucci, 1996). Parental questionnaires measure willingness to permit unsupervised play at three time

points; semi-structured interviews with children explore their sense of safety and spatial confidence; and behavioural observation of supervision distances, the physical distance between parents and children during activation periods, is used as a proxy for the evolution of trust in the space's safety.

This dimension is theoretically crucial because perceived safety functions as a gating mechanism for cognitive extension. An objectively safe street perceived as dangerous by parents will not generate the conditions for autonomous exploration; conversely, a space perceived as safe enables the relaxation of supervision necessary for children to interact freely with the environment and develop the spatial-cognitive competencies described in Dimension 1.

5.5 Methodological Integration

The four dimensions are not evaluated in isolation but through a mixed-methods design that integrates quantitative tracking (pedestrian counts, attendance registers, time-use diaries), qualitative ethnography (field observation, photo-voice, video documentation), and participatory action (design workshops, feedback boards, collective sense-making sessions). Data collection occurs at three principal intervals corresponding to the project phases: baseline and co-design, intermediate monitoring, and final evaluation. This longitudinal, multi-stakeholder approach aims to generate locally grounded indicators that reflect community-defined values rather than imposed universal standards, an approach consistent with the invitation in this special issue to reinterrogate theoretical frameworks and evaluation modalities of public space.

6. Preliminary Findings: validating and refining the methodology

Although the activation phase is not yet complete, the preparatory and early-implementation work already constitutes a first empirical test of the proposed framework. Rather than reporting outcomes of the interventions themselves, this section examines what the preparatory process reveals about the effectiveness and internal coherence of the methodology, treating the four-dimensional framework not as an untested hypothesis but as an analytical structure whose premises can be progressively corroborated, calibrated, and refined through engagement with the field. Three findings are particularly instructive.

First, the stakeholder-mapping process validates the methodological premise that participatory co-design (Dimension 3) is a viable and generative cognitive activity in this context. The mapping revealed a dense, differentiated network (the school community, civil-society organizations with complementary competencies, religious institutions, and sports associations) concentrated within a compact urban area. This density is not merely an encouraging contextual feature: it confirms that the co-design dimension can draw on the distributed social resources the framework presupposes, and that working-class neighbourhoods, often characterized by strong local ties and traditions of collective self-organization, supply the relational substrate on which participatory cognitive coupling depends. The finding thus substantiates a load-bearing assumption of the methodology rather than simply describing the site.

Second, the preparatory engagement corroborates the theoretical link, central to Dimension 4, between perceived safety and the suppression of children's spatial agency. Community meetings, informal conversations, and preliminary spatial analysis conducted

before the project in 2025 revealed a strong latent demand for safe outdoor space: parents consistently reported that their children have limited opportunities for autonomous outdoor play and expressed willingness to participate in creating and maintaining such spaces. This pattern is consistent with the literature on parental safety anxieties and their constraining effect on children's autonomy (Gill, 2007; Malone, 2007), but its methodological significance is greater: it demonstrates, in advance of activation, that perceived safety operates as the gating mechanism the framework theorises, and that the instruments designed to measure it (Dimension 4) are addressing a live and decisive variable rather than a hypothetical one. It also yields an early, testable prediction that community-supported tactical interventions can shift parental risk perception, which the longitudinal design is specifically structured to capture.

Third, the construction of the participatory activity calendar has empirically confirmed and forced a refinement of the framework's treatment of temporal rhythms (Dimension 2). Scheduling workshops, meetings, and initial closure tests required aligning the intervention with the daily rhythms of school, work, and domestic life. This practical constraint did more than complicate logistics: it demonstrated that temporality is not an incidental characteristic of the activated space but a design parameter that determines accessibility, inclusion, and the formation of routine, precisely the role Dimension 2 assigns it. The finding has already fed back into the methodology, prompting the temporal dimension to be operationalized not only as an *outcome* to be measured (do routines form?) but also as a *precondition* to be designed (does the activation schedule afford participation?). This is an instance of the framework being derived and corrected through practice rather than imposed.

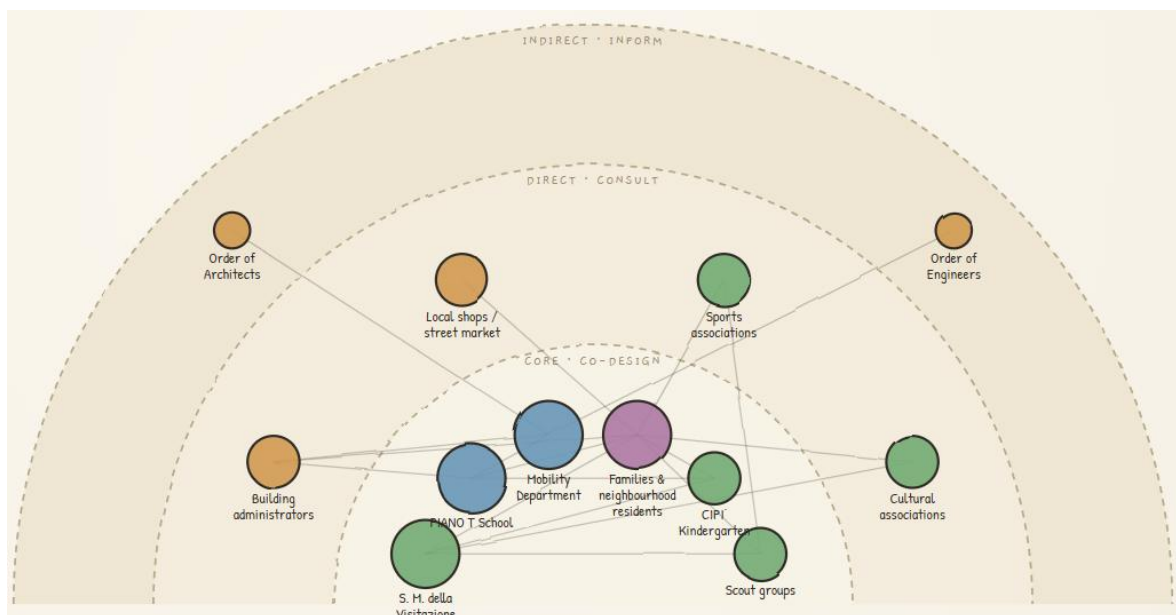


Figure 6. Stakeholders map. (image processed by the authors)

Taken together, these findings indicate that the methodology is not a speculative proposal awaiting data but a logically derived structure whose constitutive assumptions are already being borne out, and whose dimensions are being calibrated, through systematic

engagement with the field. The activation phase will extend this process from the validation of premises to the measurement of outcomes, but the evaluative architecture itself is, in a meaningful sense, already under test.

7. Discussion: Implications for Public Space Evaluation

The framework presented in this paper offers three interconnected contributions to the ongoing debate on public space evaluation, each responsive to concerns raised in the broader literature and by the call for papers of this special issue.

The framework provides a starting point for arguing that public space quality cannot be reduced to physical attributes or quantifiable metrics. If streets function as cognitive infrastructure, extending children's memory, spatial reasoning, social cognition, and executive functions, then evaluating them requires methods capable of capturing these dynamic, relational, and subjectively experienced processes. This reconceptualization shifts the evaluative question from "what features does this space have?" to "what cognitive and social processes does this space enable?" This is a fundamentally different orientation, foregrounding use, experience, and developmental impact over design compliance or maintenance standards.

Furthermore, the four-dimensional evaluation framework provides a replicable structure for assessing temporally activated public spaces, adaptable to diverse urban contexts, cultural settings, and community capacities. The framework's emphasis on mixed methods, longitudinal observation, and participatory co-research responds to the critique, voiced by Carmona (2019) and others, that conventional public space metrics privilege snapshot evaluations over processual understanding, and expert judgment over lived experience. By positioning children as co-researchers and integrating their perspectives through age-appropriate methods, the framework holds that public space quality is not an objective property to be measured but a relational outcome to be documented, interpreted, and negotiated.

The Pescara test project demonstrates a model of tactical urbanism that is financially sustainable, institutionally embedded, and designed for replicability. The deliberate choice of reversible, low-cost interventions makes it accessible to municipalities with limited resources. At the same time, its connection to long-term planning objectives ensures that tactical experimentation feeds into strategic urban transformation rather than remaining an isolated initiative.

A critical question concerns the tension between local specificity and generalisability. The framework is deliberately grounded in a specific place, community, and institutional context. The indicators it generates are locally defined, reflecting the values, priorities, and capacities of the Santa Filomena community rather than universal standards. This is a strength in the context of critiques of evaluation frameworks, yet it raises questions about transferability. We suggest that what is transferable is not the specific indicators but the evaluative structure, the four-dimensional framework, the participatory methodology, and the theoretical lens of extended cognition, which can be adapted to generate locally meaningful indicators in different contexts.

Finally, the framework raises important questions about temporality and sustainability. The school street model depends on regular, predictable activation to function as cognitive infrastructure. If closures are irregular or discontinued, the conditions for cognitive extension (reliability, accessibility, trust) are no longer met. This observation has

implications for urban policy: school streets are not one-off events but institutional commitments requiring ongoing support. The Pescara project addresses this challenge by investing in community capacity building and documenting a replicable operational model, but the long-term sustainability of such initiatives remains an open question, warranting further research.

8. Conclusion

This paper has proposed a framework for understanding school streets as extended cognitive spaces, external structures that, when reliably coupled with children's internal processes through regular activation, become constitutive components of cognition itself. Grounded in extended and embodied mind theory, affordance theory, and tactical urbanism, the framework integrates four evaluation dimensions through a mixed-methods, longitudinal approach that positions children and families as co-researchers. The "Pescara Feet on Colors" project, treating the street as a slowly evolving painting through layered chromatic interventions and modular furniture, demonstrates that low-cost tactical actions can produce richly affordant, cognitively enabling, and aesthetically compelling public spaces. As the project advances through its implementation phases, empirical data will test and refine the theoretical propositions advanced here. The core contribution is a shift in evaluative logic: from asking what features a space possesses to asking what cognitive and social processes it enables. What is transferable across contexts is not any specific set of indicators but the evaluative structure itself: a replicable architecture for generating locally grounded assessments of how ephemeral, participatory, community-driven interventions produce spatial justice and developmental flourishing for children. Future publications will report longitudinal findings on how temporally activated school streets shape children's spatial cognition, social development, and autonomous mobility.

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AI Tools Disclosure

In accordance with the journal's authorship and AI tools policy, we disclose that AI language tools were used in a supporting capacity during the preparation of this manuscript. Specifically, AI assistance was employed to improve the English translation and phrasing of certain passages, and to support the production of the methodology diagram and the stakeholder map included in the paper. The authors remain fully responsible for all content, interpretations, and conclusions presented in the manuscript.

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The Public Space Service System (PSSS) Method. A Systemic, Service-Based and Actor-Oriented Evaluation Framework

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Abstract

This paper presents the PSSS - Public Space Service System method, an innovative approach to assessing and interpreting the value of public space, its services, and systemic features, incorporating stakeholders' perspectives. In recent decades, investment in public spaces has grown in many cities, becoming more important in public policies and in daily users' activities. With recognition comes the need to evaluate the performance of public spaces, whether in decision-making or design contexts. However, public space is inherently complex, diverse, and multifunctional, which complicates the task of defining what makes a good public space. Additionally, different actors view space differently, generating multiple values (sometimes contradictory) rather than a single universal one. To address this, the PSSS method moves away from conventional practices centred on predetermined attributes to acknowledge subjectivity, treating the values generated by public space as context dependent. The method is structured around four fundamental dimensions: System (spatial relations and connections), Service (benefits provided by public spaces), Actors (users, producers, and regulators), and Value (diversity of recognised values). The paper details the method's development, explaining how the main concepts respond to the new assessment demands and how they are applied within the framework and workflow. The practical implementation is illustrated through case studies from diverse urban settings - historic cores, consolidated cities, suburbs, and dispersed areas - in both European and Latin American contexts, demonstrating its adaptability across different geographies, scales, and urban dynamics. The method proposes an interpretive and collaborative process, emphasising problem identification and resolution within a learning-and-transformation logic, combining interests and viewpoints through interdisciplinary dialogue. This approach responds to the complexity and subjectivity inherent in contemporary urbanism by providing tools that facilitate communication, participation, and collaboration among the diverse actors involved in the production, management, and use of public space, thereby fostering more targeted public policies.

Keywords: public space, assessment method, value of space, actor-oriented framework, interdisciplinarity

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Introduction

Interest in public space has been growing because of its importance in improving quality of life, delivering public services, and implementing public policies in social, mobility, and environmental areas. Several projects have achieved political and iconic success, whether in terms of citizen, visitor and investor satisfaction. Typically sustained by images of success - such as vibrancy, vitality, attractiveness, intense socialisation - this practice promotes a notion of public space value based on 'exceptionality' and on universal qualities and criteria, rather than addressing everyday experiences in ordinary public spaces. Although increased awareness has a positive effect on available investment resources and social relevance, mainstream concepts tend to narrow the representation of public space values.

Additionally, the expansion of urban spaces and lifestyles across territories has resulted in a myriad of public space typologies and associated problems, which are not restricted to the city's traditional references (Carmona, 2010). Thus, values will differ across disparate urban contexts and cultures. In complex societies with multiple interests, how can rationales and criteria for evaluating public spaces be identified across various actors? How can an integrated understanding of public space issues be promoted through interpretive and interdisciplinary methods?

In pursuit of these answers, the PSSS Public Space Service System¹ research aimed to develop an assessment method that acknowledges the complexity and context-dependent nature of public spaces. This intention stems from the recognition that, despite widespread acknowledgement of the importance of public space, there is a lack of conceptual tools to engage with the diversity of public space types, their various roles within built environments, and the subjectivity inherent in the evaluation process. Rather than eliminating these multiple perspectives and interpretive readings, they should be rationalised.

To this effect, the PSSS develops an assessment rationale that addresses public space (Brandão and Brandão, 2018, 2019): organised as an urban system; as a service provider responding to ordinary spatial needs; as being subject to the interests of different actors involved in spatial production; and as a generator of plural values. These four dimensions - system, service, actors, values - build the main framework of the method and are operationalised in several analytical steps. Rather than rating the space's performance, the intention is to foster dialogue among the actors involved in an interactive (and iterative) process, enabling all those involved in public space to express their values, issues and concerns. This approach enables a more comprehensive understanding of public space impacts, particularly in supporting context-sensitive policies and planning decisions across diverse urban and territorial settings.

The paper is organised into five sections that detail the method's development and application. The first section explains the rationale behind our approach to public space evaluation, highlighting key problems and opportunities. The second introduces the method's core concepts - system, service, actors, and values - and the third provides a description of the PSSS workflow. The fourth section presents several examples of application. Before the conclusions, we provide a critical discussion of the method, examining its potential, limitations, and pitfalls in relation to the evaluation issues.

¹ Project developed between 2016-2019 at Instituto Superior Técnico, Lisbon University

The purpose of the PSSS Method

Public space has been the object of intense study in academic and professional literature (Madanipour, 2023), reflecting its growing importance for the overall quality of cities (UN-Habitat, 2015), alongside tools and methods for analysing and understanding it. Early studies (Alexander, 1965; Appleyard, 1981; Gehl, 1987; Jacobs, 1961; Lynch, 1960; Whyte, 1980) often start with the question "What attracts people?", seeking to understand users' choices and to identify reasons why some spaces are used while others are not, i.e. 'what works and what doesn't' (Carr et al., 1992; Gehl, 2010). These approaches often use simple tools and methods, such as direct observation, mapping users' activities and behaviours, complemented by interviews and involvement in the space's activities (Gehl and Svarre, 2013), relying on the sense of observers' judgment, to address the setting's complexity and simultaneous activities.

Later, the socio-geographical debate on urban globalisation (Harvey, 1990; Sennett, 1992; Zukin, 1995) brought new insights into the economic and social contradictions surrounding public spaces. As its place in public policy becomes increasingly disputed, research seeks to legitimise its importance in the functioning of cities. Much of the argument focuses on the benefits public spaces deliver, particularly high-quality public spaces, linking them to wealth creation, environmental benefits, social connections, and other positive outcomes. This perspective is supported by analysis on urban design quality and its links to space performance and value generation (CABE, 2001, 2006; McIndoe et al., 2005).

In general, the evaluation of public space aims at comprehensive objectives, seeking to determine "what makes a good public space" (Project for Public Spaces, 2000), addressing its quality through features and assets (usually quite extensive) that a successful public space must have or provide. Drawing from several studies on the matter, Carmona et al. (2008) synthesised a list of universal positive qualities for public spaces: "clean and tidy; accessible; attractive; comfortable; inclusive; vital and viable; functional; distinctive; safe and secure; robust; green and unpolluted". To further the assessment, some approaches turn these qualities into measurements (Southworth, 2003) by decomposing them into identifiable objective quantitative attributes of the built environment² that can be described, quantified and ranked on quantitative (e.g., 0-100, from minimum to maximum) or qualitative scales (e.g., very poor to excellent). Quantification can be useful for comparing various evaluated items: it allows classification based on a given "performance" and aggregates a wider range of determining factors into a single result. However, turning holistic concepts into quantitative measures cannot be accomplished without losing something along the way.

So, although these attributes may express the 'qualities' that a space must satisfy, they do not necessarily work well as performance measures; in the same way, it is not possible to dissociate them from the urban, social, environmental, economic, or other contexts in which they are integrated. This means that a universal understanding of the concept of 'spatial quality' does not exist (Khan et al., 2014), and that "relative judgements about the importance of various qualities are matters of individual perception, and different users will value different qualities more or less highly. Consequently, the emphasis placed on

² In these areas, there is a recent exponential growth of methods that deploy extensive data from social networks, aerial and street imagery, etc, to produce automated research assessments and analysis (Cui et al., 2021; Zhou et al., 2025; Li et al., 2022; Zhu et al., 2025).

different qualities by local public space services will be matters for local judgement” (Carmona et al., 2008: 15).

In this regard, some methods place special emphasis on users' perspectives. Selected approaches focus on the design process and space management, aiming to incorporate aesthetic objectives with economic requirements and users' preferences. These methods combine guidelines and project recommendations with qualitative assessments of the space's success, highlighting stakeholders' engagement, especially users (Brandão et al., 2002; Marcus and Francis, 1998). Others are specifically designed for community users to address public space issues. They are mainly based on on-site diagnostic tools that gather perceptions to initiate debate among diverse actors, to identify problems and seek improvements in spaces (CABE, 2007; Cowan, 2001).

If public space itself is rendered as a subject of quality perception, we may ask: are spaces of perceived quality the same everywhere? The variety of spatial contexts is undeniable. The problems affecting public space in African or Latin American cities with high growth rates are certainly different from those affecting public space in hyper populated or hyper-capitalised Asian cities, which in turn differ from those in historic, consumerist European cities. These multiple perspectives demand a more dynamic, context-informed interpretation of public space.

Given this panorama of existing methods, what new perspectives should be included in evaluating public spaces? The PSSS puts forward a hypothesis that:

- ✓ addresses the contextual dependencies and relational character of public space by taking a systemic perspective, in which public space is viewed as a system of places with interactions and interdependence on the built, natural, and social environment;
- ✓ considers public space not in terms of the qualities it should possess, nor in terms of the commodities it could generate, but through the services it provides to its users, taking a multidimensional approach;
- ✓ recognises that public space is the result of different actors, agents, processes, and contexts, sometimes competing, other times collaborating, a dynamic process that can be made more understandable and intelligible;
- ✓ assumes that there is no such thing as “value-free knowledge”, hence the assessment should be an exploratory, learning and knowledge-sharing process between stakeholders, recognising pluralism and negotiating values (Khakee, 2003).

Hence, the PSSS method strives to make public space, its services and values visible, inviting citizens, decision-makers and researchers to engage in a debate supported by a framework for interpretation and evaluation.

PSSS Framework – System, Services, Actors and Values

The rationale for assessing public space is articulated within a framework comprising four key concepts: system, service, actor, and value.

System

Under the concept of 'system', the PSSS inquiries about the relationship between a public space and other spaces. Too often, in assessment frameworks as well as in urban development itself, individual places have become the focus, without considering their context or their integral role in a broader social fabric.

Most definitions of system emphasise a 'complex whole', a 'set of connected things or parts', and a 'group of objects related or interacting so as to form a unity' (McLoughlin, 1969). In this set of interconnected parts, each part can be seen individually and also considered within a wider system. The interaction between different parts and the system's complexity ensures its functioning as “The whole is other than the sum of the parts”. Several references to a systemic approach to cities and urban development can be found, viewing the city as a living organism (Geddes, 1915), or an evolving system (McLoughlin, 1969), understanding urban complexity (McLoughlin, 1969) and studying its functional and spatial structures (Hillier and Hanson, 1984). So, if the city can be understood as a system, then the fundamental structure that ensures relations and dynamics must be public space. For instance, in studies of territorial design, there is a special role for the reading public and open spaces as systems, and for considering them as active agents in the shaping and restructuring of the territory (Santos et al., 2024; Secchi and Viganò, 2011; Tardin, 2008). As a lasting element, the public space system is relational – it establishes relations between other spaces, both public and private, it receives a variety of overlapping functions, from the most functional to the most symbolic, as well as its users. For the PSSS method, public spaces should not be considered as isolated spaces, but as a network of places (Pinto and Remesar, 2015), with a shared set of properties, interdependences and interaction (Figure 1). The system is therefore the object of the evaluation. It comprises two components: anchor spaces, nodes of attraction and focal points that host vital functions and promote urban dynamics; and the public space network, the grid of free-access spaces that are connected and interact with one another. The territorial scope, the scale, and the components to be assessed are not matters of typological selection or limit setting but are contingent on the purpose of the evaluation.

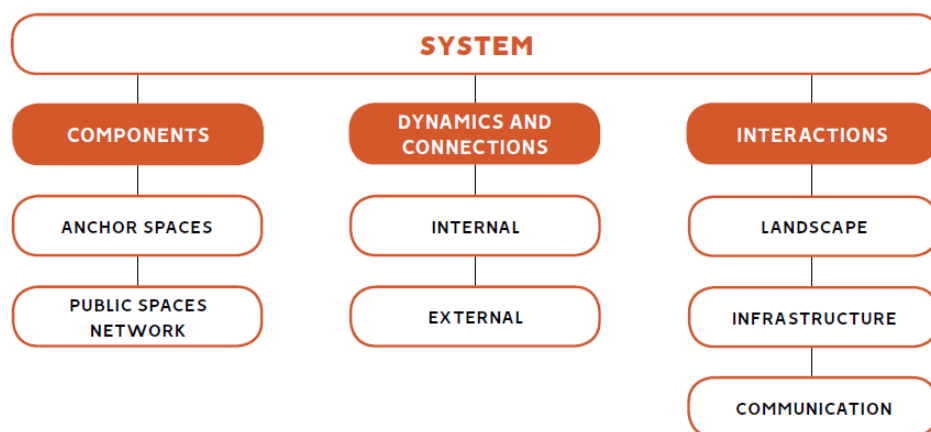


Figure 1. Criteria for public space system identification. Source: Authors

This perspective on public space complexity views it as “a system of systems, where layers of functional networks – infrastructural, cultural, economic, and environmental – intersect and complement each other in a mutually reinforcing and beneficial way” (UN-Habitat, 2015). These interactions, whether physical connections, functional dynamics, or

even meaning relations, may occur either within the system itself (internal dynamics) or between the system and its surrounding environment (external dynamics), and show how the system works.

As an interactive urban element, public space connects and coexists with other urban systems – infrastructure, landscape, communication (Brandão and Brandão, 2017) - integrating hardware and software perspectives. Some examples illustrate this easily: a street is still a public space even if it extends for miles (as in Manhattan, Paris or Barcelona), if it integrates intermodal transport, includes sewage networks, or is a tree-lined street hosting different bird species. Nor do we discard a public space perspective on many transport systems, or on park systems.

So, landscape is addressed as a socio-spatial system sharing elements with public space, both in natural features and life-supporting systems in the city, such as wildlife, watercourses, green structures, pathways and habitats, as well as cultural practices and spatial identity elements present in the urban environment. Infrastructural views of public space include, by definition, the many sectoral systems and utilities that frame and support urban life (such as roads, transport, sewage, drainage, energy, etc.). Communicative elements in public space convey meanings and important messages for symbolic and identity purposes and also shape relationships between people and activities (such as street and traffic signage, official notices, advertising, and civil and political communication).

Service

Under the heading 'service', the method explores the role of public space by questioning its purpose and what it offers to its users. The concept of service stems from an attitude towards public space that underpins its public character - practices and uses enjoyed and shared by all, the common goods of a community. Therefore, it is vital to ask: what services for the community are promoted by urban space? As a collective space open to everyone, public space supports the social usufruct of public assets, where many activities - social, economic, leisure, political, and dislocation - overlap, thus ensuring the services that are essential and valued by all.

The term 'service' is derived from an analogy with the concept of ecosystem services, developed in ecology to conceptualise and highlight the value of natural capital and to create an analytical framework (Costanza et al., 1997), in order to understand the impacts of changes within these systems. For public space services, it recognises the benefits people can gain from the various functions of public spaces, making them more identifiable and simpler to analyse. By using the term service, it is not intended to reduce public space to a narrow, functionalistic view, nor to promote it as a platform for economic value exchange, but to problematise its rationale, shedding light on what might be uncritically assumed or cynically hidden.

Services are benefits that a specific public receives. In this context, the public space system can offer more than one service, resulting in a multidimensional service. Needs and services can be interconnected - a street serves the movement of people, vehicles, and goods, providing mobility and responding to a core need for accessibility. However, streets' public spaces also offer other services, such as shade and climate regulation through their trees, access to commercial areas in surrounding buildings, or access to symbolic features and meanings.

The different roles of public space in urban daily life form the foundation for organising public space services (Figure 2). Recognising that public space must be seen not only as a physical element of urban structures but also as a social and symbolic domain (Carmona et al., 2003; Madanipour, 1996), the framework is organised into three main groups: support services, interaction services, and reference services.

Support services regard the physical and morphological dimensions of public space, provided by natural or built structures, as a frame and support for urban life and basic needs. Interaction services include the usages and multidimensional relationships that public space facilitates, serving as a place for social practices, encounters, and movement. Reference services convey a sense of place, ownership, and belonging, enabling cultural expression and the display of meaning, relating to subjective and intangible aspects of public life.

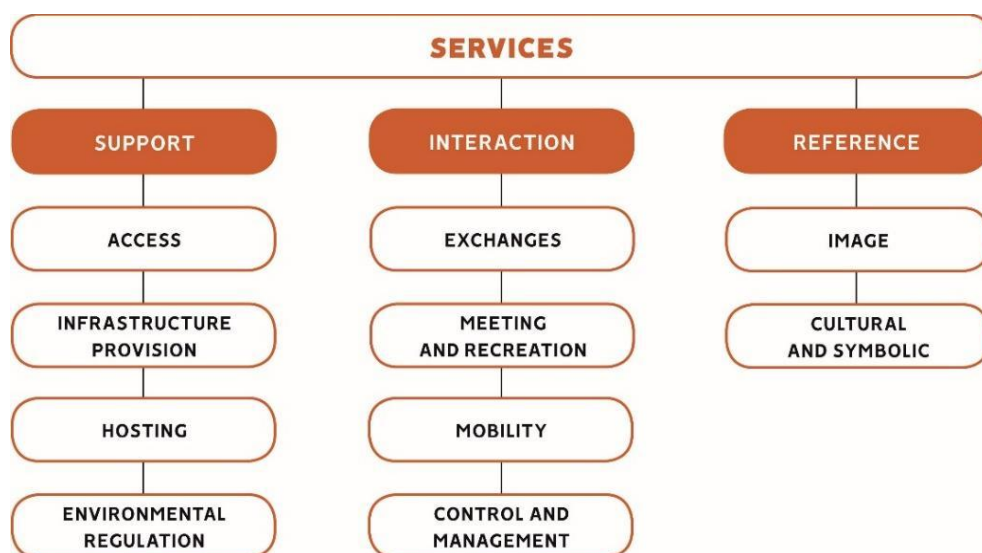


Figure 2. Public space services framework. Source: Authors

Actors

Under the question of 'actor', the analysis recognises the diversity of agents and stakeholders who participate in the production, management, and use of public space, recognising that the uses and values of public space cannot be separated from who perceives it and that "making places is everyone's job" (Friedmann, 2017). In this sense, production means not just the building of physical spaces but also social production (Lefebvre, 1974). Dealing with this multiplicity in assessment means integrating diverse groups and their perspectives rather than reducing them to a single point of view, signalling who takes place in how space is conceived, in the actual spatial practices, and in how it is directly lived by users.

In general, judgements concern the interests or benefits arising from public space. Personal and collective interests depend not only on the characteristics of the space itself but also on the actors themselves, their needs, and perceptions of the space's performance, being socio-spatially and socio-ecologically embedded (Khan et al., 2014). Additionally, this implies the ability to deal with subjectivity: what may be important to

one actor may be irrelevant to others; this is not a matter of imprecision but of diverse opinions.

These actors may be organised by their role in the urban development process (Madanipour, 2006) – users, producers, and regulators –, distinguishing patterns of interest and dynamics in public space, even though each category encompasses various groups of actors. They include, first and foremost, those who make direct use of the space – because they live, work, have fun, visit, or provide services in or near their surroundings – holding a wide variety of stakes depending on the way space meets their particular objectives (Carmona et al., 2002). They may be those who best know and understand how public spaces function, having important knowledge gained through use. However, the connection to public space is not merely instrumental; it also includes important social and symbolic meanings.

Producers play a role in the (physical) production, building public space, either directly or indirectly. They include those involved in its construction – developers, professionals such as designers and engineers, construction companies and workers, etc. – as well as those with decision-making capacity and the ability to influence public opinion. As for regulators, they manage and control space intervening in the planning, licensing, supervision and/or management of these spaces.

Addressing the needs, interests, and even the expectations of different actors, and understanding the broad context in which these differences of opinion and values emerge (Khan et al., 2014), makes them readable. The method proposes an inclusive process that exposes their perspectives and roles, the causes they advocate for, and how they may overlap or collide, bringing to light the conflicts or alliances inherent in public spaces.

Table 1. Types of Actors related to public space. Source: Authors

Users	Producers	Regulators
Residents	Designers	Parish councils
Traders, Workers	Developers and investors	City councils
Customers	Contractor's and builders	Regional administrations
Visitors and tourists	Property owners	Ministries
Associations and civil society groups (residents, sports, religious, NGO's....)	Real estate agents	Public institutes
Equipment, infrastructure, and service managers	Politicians, Political party organisations	District management organisations
Drivers, pedestrians, cyclists	Public or Collective services companies	Civil protection and police authorities
Age or gender groups	(transport, parking, water, sanitation, energy, communication, waste, ...)	Private administrators of collective spaces
Media		
...		

Values

Finally, under the heading of 'value', the method draws attention to the range of values that public space may hold, expressing directly one of the aims of an evaluation process – to appraise the worth of something. We adopt the definition of value as a 'disciplined representation of meaning,' which means it acts as a tool that enables the communication

and understanding of what is important and relevant about public spaces, articulating it and making it visible (Keeney, 1992).

In this perspective, value only exists when it is recognised by someone (Munn, 1986 apud. Graeber, 2001); it does not reside in the object being evaluated (it is not inherent to it), but in the mind of the person assigning value to it. Therefore, who makes the assessment is also a key factor in the valuation, reflecting their system of preferences, depending on their age, social status, life experience, or economic, cultural, or educational background, etc.

The idea that space generates value is widely assessed in terms of its economic value, meaning calculating the (economic) benefits a given space generates, which may be expressed in terms of exchange value or return value, always monetary, but may also refer to use value. Other notions of value do not come from a quantitative approach but have more qualitative or symbolic characteristics. For the PSSS approach, different types of value were considered useful (CABE, 2001, 2004, 2006; Woolley, 2003):

- ✓ Economic value (as exchange) - a measure of the benefit (expressed in monetary units) that public space provides, as it can involve important investments and generate economic returns, capital gains and competitiveness for agents.
- ✓ Use value - public space's ability to satisfy the needs of its users and its appropriateness for the functioning of the city.
- ✓ Social value - public space benefits towards the welfare, the satisfaction of collective needs or the development of communities.
- ✓ Environmental value - public space contribution for the environment, especially that related to natural systems.
- ✓ Cultural value - public space participates both relationally and physically in the expression and construction of identity and in the promotion of a culture shared by a community.
- ✓ Image value - public space contributes to conveying a message of distinction that is recognisable, memorable, and understandable.

Hence, the value of public space is not limited to a single number or outcome; it extends well beyond economic factors, encompassing both tangible and intangible aspects, including (and not reducing to) different types of socially constructed values, which may often be contradictory and conflictual, expressing its relevance to stakeholders and society at large. Thus, one objective of accepting the diversity of values present in a given process must be to make explicit and rationalise the implicit interests and meanings (and how they relate to one another).

Assessing Public Space through the PSSS method

The next stage in the development of the method involved creating a workflow to enable the practical application of the conceptual framework. This stage included several cycles of empirical, trial studies of public spaces, alongside theoretical discussions among the research team, aimed at refining and fine-tuning the method. These studies were instrumental in developing the different stages of the process, translating them into accessible guidelines, and testing the empirical applicability of the method's underlying concepts.

The workflow was designed to align with the research's positioning on evaluation and assessment methods, i.e., an open process to better understand and interpret public spaces, accessible to anyone interested. Rather than following a linear procedure, the method proposes a flexible workflow organised into four main phases, which can be developed sequentially or iteratively, depending on the context and emerging insights. These phases are not rigid: while identifying the system or characterising actors, for example, aspects relevant to other parts of the analysis may emerge immediately. Continuous interaction with the site and the actors ensures the process remains dynamic, responsive, and context sensitive.

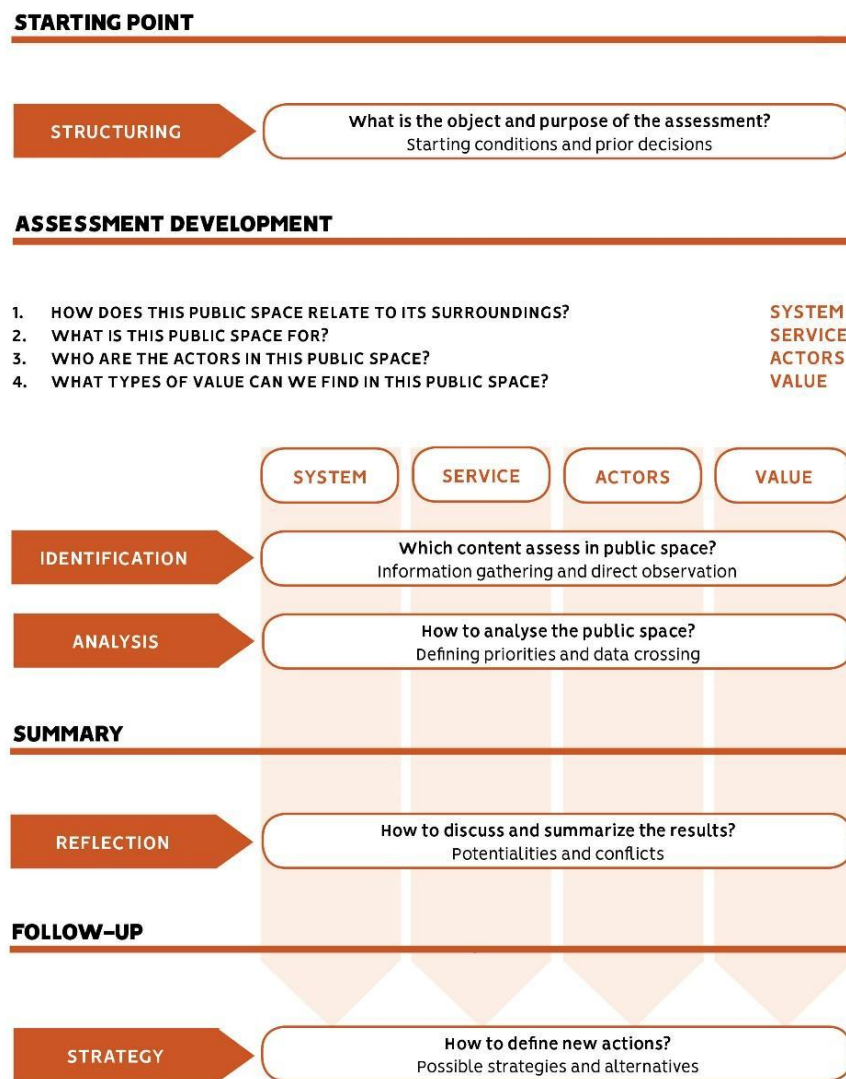


Figure 3. PSSS Roadmap. Source: Authors

The method (Brandão and Brandão, 2018) includes two complementary elements:
(1) a roadmap (Figure 3), which outlines the overall framework, phases, and content of the assessment; and

- (2) guidelines, which provide detailed descriptions of essential content, practical recommendations for addressing each issue, and a definition of the concepts applied. Each guideline specifies the objectives of the stage, the tasks to perform or questions to consider, and the underlying concept(s) being addressed.

Workflow Phases³

The roadmap organises the assessment into four main phases, each comprising one or more stages: (1) Starting Point, (2) Assessment Development, (3) Summary and (4) Follow-up.

1. Starting Point structures the assessment by defining: the object - what is being assessed; the purpose - why the assessment is conducted; and the conditions - how the assessment will take place.

2. Assessment Development forms the core of the method and begins with four guiding questions derived from the PSSS rationale:

1. System. How does this public space relate to its surroundings?
2. Service. What is this public space for?
3. Actors. Who are the actors in this public space?
4. Value. What types of value can be found in this public space?

These kick-off questions are applied across two stages: identification and analysis.

The identification stage involves recognising and describing the elements that respond to the four main concepts. Detailed knowledge of the assessment object is required, and data are collected through quantitative and qualitative methods, including observation, interviews, mapping, and other techniques.

System ID.

Assessment begins with identifying and characterising the public space system: its constituent elements (anchor spaces and public space network); how they function (internal and external connections), and their interactions with other systems (landscape, infrastructure, communication). The surrounding urban context and its evolution over time are also considered, thereby situating the assessment's purpose in time and space.

Service ID.

The assessment then focuses on how the public space “serves”, with a description and mapping of the services provided, including support, interaction and reference services. Characterisation should specify not only what services are offered, but also where, how and when they are provided, who can enjoy them, and how intensely. While some services may be evident to all stakeholders, others may only be recognized by a few.

Actors ID.

This stage identifies actors relevant to that specific public space system, bringing multiple perspectives into the assessment process. They may have either a visible presence or

³ This section succinctly outlines the phases and stages of the PSSS method in the context of this paper. However, more detailed guidelines are available (Brandão and Brandão, 2018) and should be preferred when applying the method to assessment cases.

more subtle ties and connections to the space; they may engage with the entire system, or just a part of it. Categorisation may follow a functional or sector-based approach and should cover both their interests and points of view.

Values ID.

Finally, the recognition of values derives from both physical/tangible qualities and how spaces are perceived. In this sense, the identification of these values encompasses different types (economic, use, social, environmental, cultural, image), the spatial components linked to each, as well as the actors who recognise them and with what intensity.

The analysis stage focuses on determining the most significant aspects to interpret and on fine-tuning an analytical framework for the case at hand. Establishing priorities should align with the assessment's original purpose and the actors' expectations. In this light, the collected data is analysed by addressing the four topics simultaneously, seeking links and implications among them. It may also be grouped by dominant themes, scanned for major flaws and examined for signs of symbiosis or contradictions. Specific dimensions – diversity, connectivity, forms of interaction, scales of influence, intelligibility – are suggested, not as qualities that the public spaces must attain, but as lenses that steer the analytical process, reflecting the different aspects of the public space system.

3. Summary

This phase entails a holistic synthesis of the process, combining the previously analysed parts and dimensions to evaluate the whole. The analysis results are discussed in terms of how they align with the initially defined purposes and the variety of value judgements identified. The synthesis addresses: conflicts and problems encountered; aspects requiring improvement; potential for development; and who benefits from the generated values. At the end of the stage, from a reflexive perspective, it is important to consider whether the assessment met its intended purpose.

4. Follow-up

This phase corresponds to an optional development of the process. If appropriate, recommendations and possible actions can be put forward based on what has been learnt. With a more strategic focus, possibilities, resources and actors can be identified, thus ensuring their relevance to any subsequent action and interaction. The aim is to close the cycle by re-evaluating the strategy and emphasising the importance of learning through continuous and pluralistic experimentation.

Demonstrating the method – results from multiple cases

During the method development and after its completion, the PSSS was used in assessment cases across a variety of urban contexts to test the tool's versatility and usability. In this section, we present several of these experiences by (1) describing the full process and the results of the application of the method in a suburban area outside Lisbon; and by (2) depicting its adaptability to different realities and contexts through specific, briefly outlined examples.

The method in practice. The case of a new suburban centrality in Agualva-Cacém, Portugal

Part of Lisbon's suburbs, the city of Agualva-Cacém experienced rapid, dense and partly deregulated growth spurred by road and railway connections to central areas, functioning as a commuter town. Built in rugged terrain with little consideration for environmental features and a deeply disordered urban structure, the area presented a rundown urban image, with a lack of public spaces and public facilities. At the beginning of the 2000s, it was selected as one of the projects from the POLIS programme, a state-led nationwide initiative for urban and environmental regeneration. The urban project focused on developing a new central area. Actions such as the environmental restoration of the Jardas stream and the creation of an urban park, the restructuring of the road network, the redesign of ordinary public spaces and the upgrading of existing facilities, such as the public transport hub, and the old public market into a Citizen Service Centre⁴, had positive effects in linking the city spaces and improving liveability in terms of the environment and urban experiences.

This case was selected for its opportunity to assess the results of a large-scale redevelopment in a peripheral, yet ordinary context. The complexity of the area, with multiple built and natural structures intertwined, posed a challenge for the systemic approach, while the considerable effects of the regeneration project feed the discussion on the creation of new services, the increase in diverse values, and the positioning of different actors.

The assessment process took place over a period of two months and was carried out by a team of six members. Following an initial insight into the study area, the team decided that the evaluation would focus on understanding the effects of the POLIS programme, with the question: Did the POLIS intervention lead to the restructuring of urban systems and the creation of a new centre? This completed the Starting Point phase.

Entering Phase 2, in the identification stage, specific guiding questions, linked to the assessment goal, were raised to collect and then organise the information:

- ✓ How are public spaces organised and connected?
- ✓ What are the main flows and connections?
- ✓ Which spaces are used most frequently and why?
- ✓ Which locations are key reference points for users?
- ✓ What are the perceptions of the various stakeholders regarding the interventions under the POLIS programme?

An initial site visit, led by the coordinating team of the urban project, was complemented by documentary and cartographic collection and analysis. This was followed by office-based working sessions and on-site observation visits, accompanied by team meetings. The fieldwork involved direct observation (at different times of day and week), photographic records, and flow mapping. The process also involved interaction with local stakeholders: a survey of local traders aimed at the impact on the local economy of the POLIS; a survey of urban park users collected the reasons for using the space and its importance in daily life; informal conversations with the Citizen Service Centre and the interface users pointed out the usability and the scale of its reach. Finally, interviews with the regulators' agents gathered their perceptions and expectations about the project outcomes.

⁴ A one-stop shop for public and collective services.

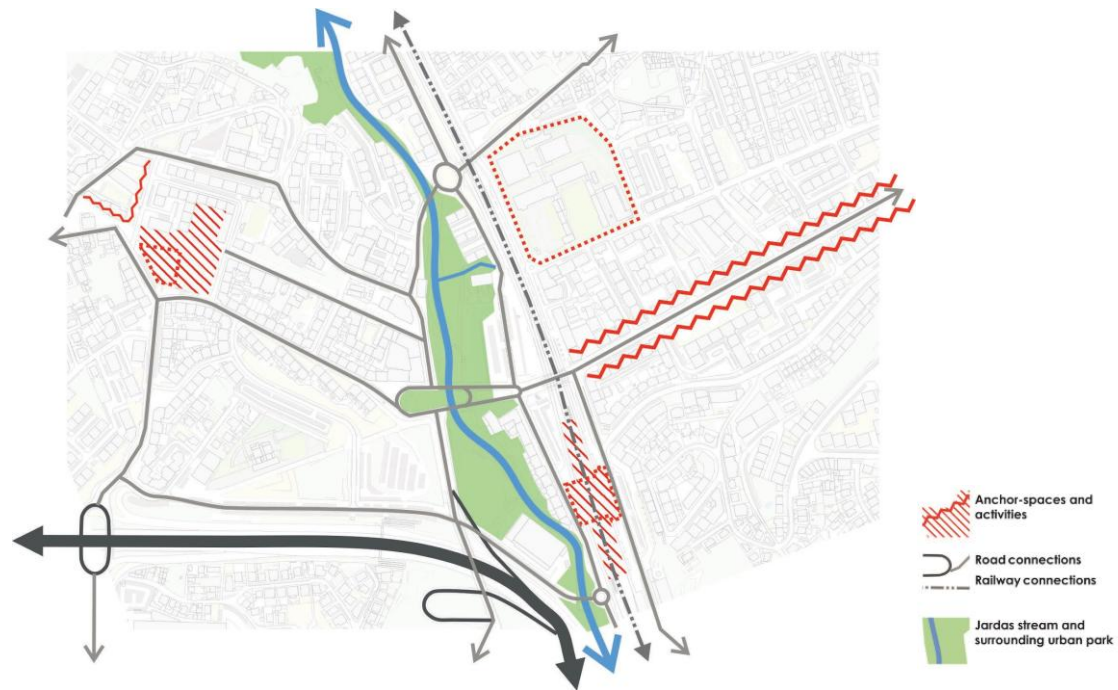


Figure 4. POLIS project system components and dynamics scheme. Source: Authors
By linking the system and service components, spaces were identified whose services, diversity, and functions (retail, services, transport, socialising, environment, recreation, and leisure) linked to central functions, and their usage dynamics and flows were examined (Figure 4).

Key stakeholders were identified across the park, the transport interface, and the commercial areas, including users, regulatory entities, and service providers such as traders and public transport companies. At a broader level, the Sintra City Council, the parish council, and the police play central roles in regulating public space. From the stakeholder's perspective, the project incurred high costs but generated limited economic and real estate value, with no significant impact on local economic dynamics. However, it enhanced social and use value by enabling diverse activities, highlighting the park as a social space, bringing together diverse publics and generations, and delivering important environmental benefits (climate and flood risk mitigation) through the restoration of the Jardas stream. Additionally, the intervention improved the area's image value, reinforcing its role as a local reference point. During the analysis, the different centrality areas were characterized: the urban park, as a link between the different components of the system and a key hub for socialising and leisure; the public transport hub as a reference point with a diverse range of users; the Citizen Service Centre, a hub for commerce and services; and Bons Amigos Avenue as an reference axis with important crossing and passage flows. All of these are key spaces that are heavily used and, in the opinion of their users, have contributed to improving the city's image and urban environment.



Figure 5. Agualva-Cacém main centrality areas: urban park and transport interface. Source: Authors

By engaging with different stakeholders, the assessment revealed differing perspectives on the effects of the POLIS project, in terms of safety perceptions - non-users of the park identify the lack of safety of this space, its users consider it a safe place; and in terms of the expectations regarding the initiative - users and regulatory bodies refer to the benefits, while shopkeepers stress disappointment.

In summary, the POLIS project had positive effects on restructuring the urban system, reconciling environmental, infrastructural, and social components, with the space being valued and widely recognised by users, thereby enhancing the city's image. However, some constraints to the fulfilment of the new centrality were also identified, evident in unfinished spaces and temporary solutions.

The follow-up phase addressed the “incomplete” centrality, looking for how current development is addressing it. As efforts focus on urban rehabilitation and improving connectivity within the ecological system, it remains uncertain whether these actions will address existing shortcomings. Future interventions require coordinated public and private investment, as well as effective management of expectations. Here, the method proved useful in linking the results of the post-occupancy evaluation of the urban project to the openness of future interventions.

The scope of the method's applicability. Examples from various urban settings.

The PSSS method was designed to evaluate any type of public space, whether a local street or square, or larger places or combinations of places, such as a neighbourhood or a system of parks. In all cases, small or large, the method will look for systemic connections, meaning no space is viewed in isolation.

This perspective was examined in Baixa-Chiado, Lisbon's historic centre's Enlightenment district, which is benefiting from public and private investment in urban regeneration, reversing a long period of decline. At the historic district level, i.e. encompassing the network of different public space types, the assessment looked at the new activities and use patterns accompanying this revival, questioning the dominance of tourism, leisure, and consumption activities and their impact on public space use. It addressed how these consumerist activities benefit from public space systems connectivity, linking local and city-wide structures and how they shape the place's liveability by exposing conflictual views from public space users, residents vs tourists (Brandão and Negrão, 2018).



Figure 6. Intense tourist activities in Baixa. Source: Authors

In Vila Nova de Gaia, a city just across the river from Oporto, whose territory is composed of many disconnected urban structures, the method addressed an even wider territorial scope, an entire municipality. By taking the case of blue and green infrastructures, specifically the stream systems flowing to the river and seafront, the assessment focused on the existing and potential public space usage of these structures, fostering urban connections. This approach discussed a multi-scale perspective on public space, linking metropolitan, city-wide and local views of these ecological structures and showcasing the conditions for alignment between environmental and use values.



Figure 7. A walkway along a recovered stream in Vila Nova de Gaia. Source: Authors

A broad appreciation for what is considered public space is also at the heart of what was the method's development - the core of social space, a space of co-presence and a

defining element of society as a whole, defined by its accessibility (Madanipour, 2023). This means recognising and assessing spaces based on their free access, shared use, and meanings, even if they don't conform to typical representations.

In the Portuguese Northwest, where dispersed urbanisation is typical, the method was used to identify which elements make up the public space system. In two parishes of Santo Tirso, Burgães and Rebordões, urban living coexists alongside agricultural and industrial areas and the everyday practices associated with them. In this case, the method's openness to different spatial configurations was determinant. In an apparently uniform urban fabric, the study found a system made of points – the churchyard, the school, the café, the crossroads, the annual festival at the top of the hill, the urban park - linked by the road network or the ecological system, frequently featuring a basic layout, but ensuring a diffuse provision of services.



Figure 8. Near an intersection, a small public space in Rebordões. Source: Authors.

The case of Antofagasta in northern Chile, a port and mining city situated between the Atacama Desert and the Pacific coastline, showcased how public space delivers services in informal development settings. Despite its intense economic activity, the city is spatially and socially segregated, with the migrant population living mostly in *campamentos* in the upper part of the city. In the absence of properly designed spaces and infrastructure, these communities take matters into their own hands and build solutions for accessibility, water and energy provision, socialisation, street-vending and even natural risk mitigation. Rather than focusing on their non-compliance with design standards the method captured how these spaces are most important for the functioning and liveability of these areas. Although highly precarious in their physical condition, they provide a wide range of public space support and interaction services: basic access and infrastructure provision, exchange, meeting, and recreation.



Figure 9. Informal public space with water and energy provision and play area. Antofagasta, Chile. Source: Authors.

Public spaces do not merely have a physical dimension; they also encompass symbolic and referential aspects, memories and meanings, whether contentious or consensual. These are intangible elements of the public spaces system that can be represented in various forms (monuments, rituals, place names, etc.), as elements of perception and meaning within an urban cognitive map.

This issue was the focus of the assessment of Francoist memory spaces in Barcelona.

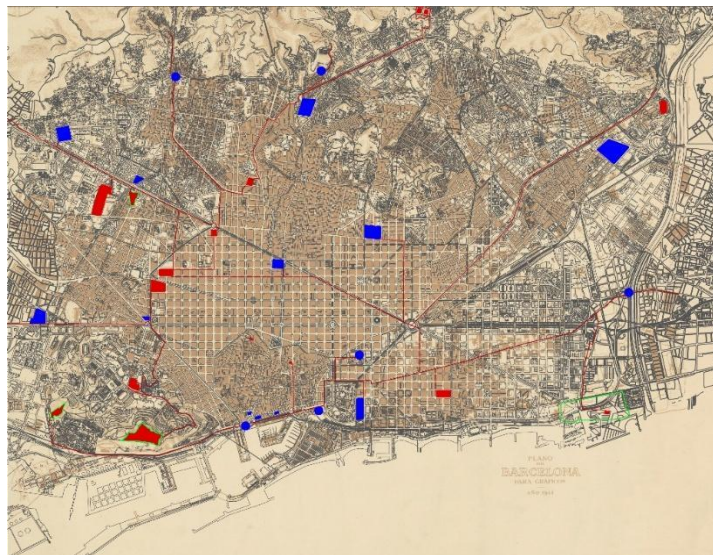


Figure 10. Barcelona map of repression spaces. Source: Authors

During the dictatorship, a network of spaces functioned as a system of social and political repression, strategically located in the city's fabric, affecting different areas of daily life, lasting until the 1978 democratic elections, and then replaced or forgotten over time. The

study questioned whether these spaces could initiate a public communication system that conveys and interprets the memory of this historical period, making it accessible to everyone. The assessment engaged with both physical and symbolic places, in the system's comprehension and in its significance. Results show how historic and traumatic memories can be expressed in public space, bringing together past events and the creation of new meanings, and communicated through rituals (anniversaries, tributes), itineraries (signage, and placenames) and landmarks (heritage, monuments).

The adaptability of the method concerns not only its application across a wide range of urban and geographic contexts but also the prioritisation of the assessment's specific goal; i.e., the method defines the evaluation purpose within its workflow, allowing it to be applied to various public space issues and approaches.

Ponta Grossa, in the southern state of Paraná, is a Brazilian medium-sized city whose urban development was influenced by its strategic geographic location, intense hydrographic network, and rugged terrain (Madalozzo, 2022; Madalozzo and Monastirsky, 2016) resulted in scattered, disconnected urban patterns and unequal spatial distribution of the population. The method was used in case studies across the city to capture differences in low-density urban areas with significant social and cultural differences, which are missed by social indicators from existing traditional quantitative surveys. While the official neighbourhood boundaries follow spatial landmarks such as waterbodies and infrastructure, they disregard urban dynamics and informal occupation patterns. In a primarily horizontal occupation, where informal housing is interspersed in middle-class areas, this means that neighbourhood units in official surveys may include completely different patterns; there are clearly data invisibilities. PSSS has proven effective as a potential complementary source of official records, specifically by identifying different user groups and the way they value spaces, leading to more informed, targeted public policies.



Figure 11. Contrasts. Informal housing area and high-rise residential buildings, Ponta Grossa, Brazil.
Source: Authors.

Discussing the relevance and limitations of the PSSS method – when and why to use it, and what it is not for

At this stage, a critical reflection about the adequacy of the method is due. To do this, we return to the discussion of the purpose of evaluating public spaces to frame the method's limits and potentials (Silva, 2019).

In this regard, it is important to understand what it means to evaluate, or, more specifically, why to evaluate. From a simplistic perspective, to evaluate means choosing from a set of alternatives, sorting into categories, ranking according to preferences, or, conversely, rejecting the worst alternative. More complex approaches view evaluation as a process of: (1) portfolio reasoning, selecting a subset of alternatives, taking into consideration their synergies and interaction; (2) design, seeking, identifying or creating new alternatives; (3) description or learning, intending at a greater understanding of what can and cannot be achieved (Belton and Stewart, 2002; Keeney, 1992).

For PSSS, evaluation is not just about effectiveness and performance, but a learning process, "a form of interactive discourse where all those involved can explain their values, problems and concerns" (Khakee, 2003: 347). This approach to evaluation aligns with other planning and design debates, regarding planning as a process of mutual learning (Friedmann, 1973), and later evolving to a process of communication (Innes, 1995) and negotiation (Healey, 1997). Specifically, it speaks to the urban design process itself: "Urban design is not ever a singular value, or even a set of values about complex issues held by one person, but a configuration of values held by multi-stakeholders ('people') about multiple complex issues ('place')" (Chiaradia et al., 2017). Evaluation is seen as a tool for understanding the public space, for identifying and solving problems, and for building new knowledge that can be used to define new creative actions rather than being closed in itself.

In this sense, the method can (and should) be included within other planning and design processes, as part of official planning and design actions (policies, plans, projects, programs), at different scopes from the regional design (Neuman and Zonneveld, 2018), to local design schemes, participatory endeavours, collaborations between stakeholders, community or civil society actions and even insurgent practices.

However, some of the method characteristics can be viewed as limitations. The first relies on flexibility; the method was developed as a process that can be tailored to situations and resources. This may lead to adaptations that deviate from the original conceptual rationale and dismiss the critical thinking essential to the assessment. Also, comparing results from independent assessments may be inappropriate.

The second is linked to its "methodological openness"; the set of guidelines is designed to inform a structured discussion about public spaces, rather than as a step-by-step methodology for retrieving and processing information, which may weaken its reproducibility, namely in scientific studies. In this matter, even if the method itself does not specify tools for data collection and spatial analysis, their incorporation is straightforward and welcomed.

The third is linked to the incorporation of subjectivity and differing views into the process, which, if not critically examined, can disrupt it. On the one hand, this can lead to an opportunistic takeover of the assessment by an interest group, imposing their view; on the other hand, it may lead to an inconsequential process in which all points of view are valid but evened out.

In summary, the PSSS method, while not aiming to develop a comprehensive, hyper-descriptive evaluation framework, encourages holistic, interpretive assessment. While it may be impossible to know everything about a public space, it is essential to have a good understanding of what constitutes it, how it works, and how it should work, based on judgments from those linked to it, and to hold convictions about how to act in it.

Conclusion

“To think about the city is to hold and maintain its conflictual aspects: constraints and possibilities, peacefulness and violence, meetings and solitude, gatherings and separations, the trivial and the poetic, brutal functionalism and surprising improvisation.” (Lefebvre, 1996)

The paper introduced the PSSS method, a novel framework for evaluating public spaces that incorporates subjectivity, context, and the diversity of actors involved in creating, regulating, and inhabiting these spaces. It addresses the need for tools that engage with the increasing complexity of urban environments and public spaces, intertwined with urban, economic, and social dynamics on which they rely and also sustain. Public space is too significant and contested to be evaluated by a single measure or from just one perspective.

In this regard, the method is structured around four mutually reinforcing concepts, system, service, actors, and value, which together offer an integrated reading of public space: situating any given place within a broader spatial network, identifying the range of benefits it provides to its communities, recognising the diverse agents who shape and use it, and articulating the multiple, often competing values attached to it. The method is designed more as a ‘way of thinking and discussing’ than as a ‘way of doing’, treating assessment not as a scoring exercise but as a process of inquiry, dialogue, and collective learning.

The practical applicability of the method has been demonstrated across urban settings, both geographically and typologically. The case studies show the method’s capacity to surface issues - spatial disconnections, unrecognised services, marginalised actors, latent values - and to adapt to specific contexts in order to engage meaningfully with the diversity of contemporary urban conditions.

Looking ahead, further advancements may include: the development of a toolbox to supplement the assessment guide, with techniques useful for data collecting and processing in the evaluation, to strengthen its operational guidance; the application within design and planning processes, in participatory arenas or post-occupancy monitoring to inform project, management, and policy decisions; and the use by communities wanting to raise awareness and discuss the adequacy of their surrounding public spaces.

Lefebvre’s injunction - to hold the city in all its contradictions - captures something essential about the spirit of this method. The PSSS does not seek to resolve the tensions inherent in public space, but rather to make them legible and to create conditions for collective, constructive engagement. To create truly public spaces, the legitimacy of design or management choices cannot stem solely from formal aspects, metrics or political decisions, but also requires tools that facilitate communication, participation and collaboration. In this sense, the method is as much a contribution to the practice of urban governance as it is to the theory of spatial evaluation. Public space belongs to everyone; its assessment should too.

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Evaluating Public Space Land Allocation through Inequality.

Public Space and Socio-spatial Differentiation in Curitiba, Brazil

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Abstract

Public space is a fundamental component of urban life, supporting social interaction, collective activities, and democratic coexistence. However, its distribution within cities is uneven, often reflecting and reinforcing socio-spatial inequalities. A key challenge in public space research is developing methods that link its physical availability to broader socioeconomic conditions. This article addresses this issue by examining the relationship between the land allocation of public space and household income in Curitiba, Brazil. The study builds on the development of the Public Space Coefficient (PSC), an indicator that measures the proportion of physical public space - streets, squares, and parks - relative to the total area of a given territorial unit. Using census data and intra-urban divisions, the PSC is compared with income levels to identify patterns of social and spatial inequality. The results show that the relationship between public space and income is not absent but varies by the type of space considered. While streets are widely distributed and dominate the aggregate indicator, they primarily reflect basic urbanization conditions, masking deeper inequalities. In contrast, squares exhibit a stronger association with income levels, with lower-income areas showing significant deficits. Parks, although unevenly distributed, are more influenced by territorial constraints than by socioeconomic patterns. These findings demonstrate that aggregate measures of public space can hide structural inequalities if different types are not examined separately. The study emphasizes that public space allocation should be understood as an unevenly distributed urban resource, and that disaggregated indicators are essential for revealing socio-spatial disparities. By linking spatial metrics to social variables, the article contributes to the development of more precise analytical tools and supports more equitable urban planning strategies.

Keywords: public space evaluation, socio-spatial inequality, public space land allocation, urban indicators, Curitiba

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In most Western cities, public space is a defining element of the urban fabric, making it difficult to conceive of any urban settlement without it, as Kostof (1991) notes. However, its distribution across the urban territory is not uniform, and thus public space holds significant potential as an indicator of social and spatial inequality. Although this assumption is often taken for granted, there remains a lack of studies that systematically map this spatial correspondence.

In contrast, the presence and distribution of urban facilities - such as schools - have been widely examined to understand the territorialization of social vulnerability. Ribeiro et al (2016), for example, provide an overview of how social organization in metropolitan territories is shaped, particularly regarding the educational impacts on children and youth resulting from the spatial distribution of school infrastructure. This perspective is directly informed by the work of Kaztman (2001), who investigates the mechanisms that sustain the unequal integration of the urban poor into society, often manifested as social isolation. According to the author, one of the key processes underlying this condition is the progressive reduction of public spaces - sites where recreation and collective leisure can foster informal interactions among individuals from different socioeconomic backgrounds, potentially mitigating the effects of asymmetric social structures.

In this context, these studies provide the foundation for the present article, which aims to demonstrate how the distribution of public space relates to spatial patterns of inequality, as measured through income indicators. The main argument is that certain types of public space may be more closely associated with socio-spatial segregation. According to Maricato (2003), inequality and social exclusion can be assessed through multiple dimensions, including informality, poverty, low levels of education, and limited access to citizenship. In this sense, public space can be added to this set of indicators, with its spatial absence serving as a potential marker of inequality. It is acknowledged, however, that the mere presence of public space does not guarantee its equitable, safe, or effective use, as qualitative aspects must also be considered. Furthermore, different types of public spaces enable distinct forms of appropriation; nonetheless, their existence is essential for fostering empathy and solidarity, which help shape society's sociocultural fabric.

This article is part of an ongoing research agenda aimed at understanding the distribution and quality of public space in Curitiba and its relationship to socio-spatial inequality. The research process has progressed through successive stages, beginning with a quantitative, spatial assessment of public space allocation in the city (Rosaneli, 2021) and an initial exploration of its relationship to income indicators (Rosaneli et al, 2017). Building on these earlier contributions, the present article advances the discussion by applying the Public Space Coefficient (PSC) as a socio-spatial indicator and examining its association with income distribution patterns across the municipality. In this sense, the article represents a further step in the development and testing of an analytical framework intended to support public policies aimed at improving human settlements, positioning public space as a key element of everyday urban life. To achieve this, the article begins with a brief conceptual discussion that defines the notion of public space adopted here, followed by a description of the methodology and the presentation of the results.

A Particular Approach to Public Space

The growing and widespread interest in issues related to public space over recent decades has been highlighted by many scholars. Mehta and Palazzo (2020) argue that, in an

increasingly urbanized and heterogeneous world, there is little doubt regarding the relevance and resurgence of this agenda, which has been addressed in an expanding body of literature (Madanipour, 2019), even if it sometimes causes a certain “disorientation” (Rosaneli, 2019). Mitchell (2017) identifies the 1990s as a turning point in this scholarly work, due to the political and economic transformations experienced globally, particularly in the context of “neoliberalization” (Peck, Theodore and Brenner, 2012).

The socio-spatial relevance of the material expression of public space has been described as “a key component in the urban vocabulary” and as something that is “in the DNA of urban life” (Madanipour, 2020, p. 7). Public spaces are thus central to everyday life, as they constitute “prominent sites for advancing political issues, due to their accessibility, openness, and symbolic significance,” becoming spaces that are “essential for democracy and collective well-being, a resource that [...] becomes the stage and substance of struggle, negotiation, and ultimately, care” (Low, 2023, p. 24). However, the importance of the common domain extends beyond political life. Mehta (2023, p. 171) argues that public spaces hold a unique capacity to address the three major global crises - climate emergency, social injustice, and public health - since they can be conceived as spaces of “restoration, emancipation, and healing.”

At the same time, public space has also been mobilized within a “promotional rhetoric,” becoming an “instrument for investment returns and profit maximization” (Madanipour, 2019, p. 39), serving processes of urban reappropriation by real estate capital and undermining its political essence in favor of a civic-oriented ideology (Delgado, 2011). Despite these risks, this broader perspective supports the argument that public space can be understood as a “visible ethical compass of society” (Mitrašinović and Mehta, 2022), a “cluster concept” (Kohn, 2004), and a means to achieve socio-spatial justice in multiple dimensions (Low and Iveson, 2016). In other words, it constitutes a fundamental spatial category for understanding contemporary urban life and an essential tool for promoting more just, inclusive, equitable, healthy, innovative, and sustainable cities.

For the purposes of this study, public space is understood as a public good, grounded in its material dimension and generally regulated by legal frameworks that govern social, personal, and property relations, such as ownership and contracts. In Brazil, the Brazilian Civil Code (Articles 98 and 99) establishes the category of “assets for common use of the people,” including beaches, streets, squares, and parks. Although this is a restrictive definition given its juridical nature (Konzen, 2010), it allows the identification of a typical set of public spaces commonly found in Western cities.

In this context, Curitiba, one of the 15 metropolises in Brazil (IBGE, 2020), does not differ significantly from its national counterparts, despite being a Brazilian municipality with a consistent history of achievements in urban planning and management, as can be seen in the recent research for the 5.570 Brazilian municipalities (Wilm *et al*, 2026). However, according to a major international study examining the complex social, political, economic, and cultural dynamics of urban environments, Curitiba was ranked among the 20 most unequal cities worldwide (UN-Habitat; Instituto de Pesquisa Econômica Aplicada, 2010). The structuring of this socio-spatial inequality is closely linked to the process of metropolitan expansion that began in the 1970s and was shaped by public policies and planning decisions. This situation stems from the implementation of the 1966 Comprehensive Plan, which profoundly transformed Curitiba’s urban development model. The plan adopted a linear pattern of urban expansion structured around major transport corridors, concentrated vertical development along these axes, and incorporated

innovative policies for urban planning, environmental protection, and the creation of public spaces that gained considerable international recognition. It may be argued that this spatial model remains in force to the present day, despite several revisions to urban planning legislation over the years. Although some authors have suggested that these initiatives contributed to the construction of urban myths (Oliveira, 2000), subsequently amplified through political marketing strategies (Garcia, 1997), it seems undeniable that the historically established public spaces have placed Curitiba in a privileged position within the Brazilian - and even Latin American - urban context. Furthermore, many of these public spaces continue to exhibit a remarkable and enduring level of collective appropriation, a condition that remains relatively uncommon in Brazilian cities. However, Souza (2001) argues that Curitiba's urban planning model contributed to granting locational advantages to middle- and upper-income groups, displacing lower-income populations to the urban periphery and, especially, to neighbouring municipalities. More recent research by Moura and Firkowski (2014, p. 30) indicates that "urbanization concentrated population, economic activity, and income generation, particularly linked to industrial development, following broader transformations in the productive structure." As a result, in Curitiba, higher occupational categories remain concentrated in central areas, while middle-income groups occupy peripheral neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, informal housing has intensified through the densification of consolidated informal settlements, often located near socially distinct residential areas. These dynamics reveal a pattern of increasing residential segregation in Curitiba, even as the traditional centre-periphery model becomes more heterogeneous.

Methodology

The Public Space Coefficient (PSC) was conceived as a spatial indicator with broad potential for replication in the Brazilian context and, possibly, in Western cities more generally, as discussed in Rosaneli (2021). Due to its simple, quantitative, objective, relative, and descriptive nature -focused on measuring resource availability - it can be easily calculated as the ratio of the total area of all types of public spaces to the total area of a given territorial unit.

With values ranging from 0 to 1, this dimensionless measure can be used to compare different territorial realities, enabling the identification of both the presence and distribution of public space. It was conceived as a practical instrument of measurement, relying exclusively on secondary data sources and requiring no fieldwork. In the case of Curitiba, publicly available datasets were used across different spatial units, including census tracts, neighbourhoods, and Human Development Units (HDUs) - territorial divisions based on the similarity of socioeconomic conditions among census tracts, as illustrated in Figure 1. Public spaces were grouped into three main categories for comparative grading: streets, squares, and parks, primarily to facilitate visualization and, in some way, to reflect the processes of creating public space in Brazilian cities. In this sense, it has some conceptual limitations, particularly because these spaces serve distinct urban functions in mobility, sociability, recreation, and environmental quality.

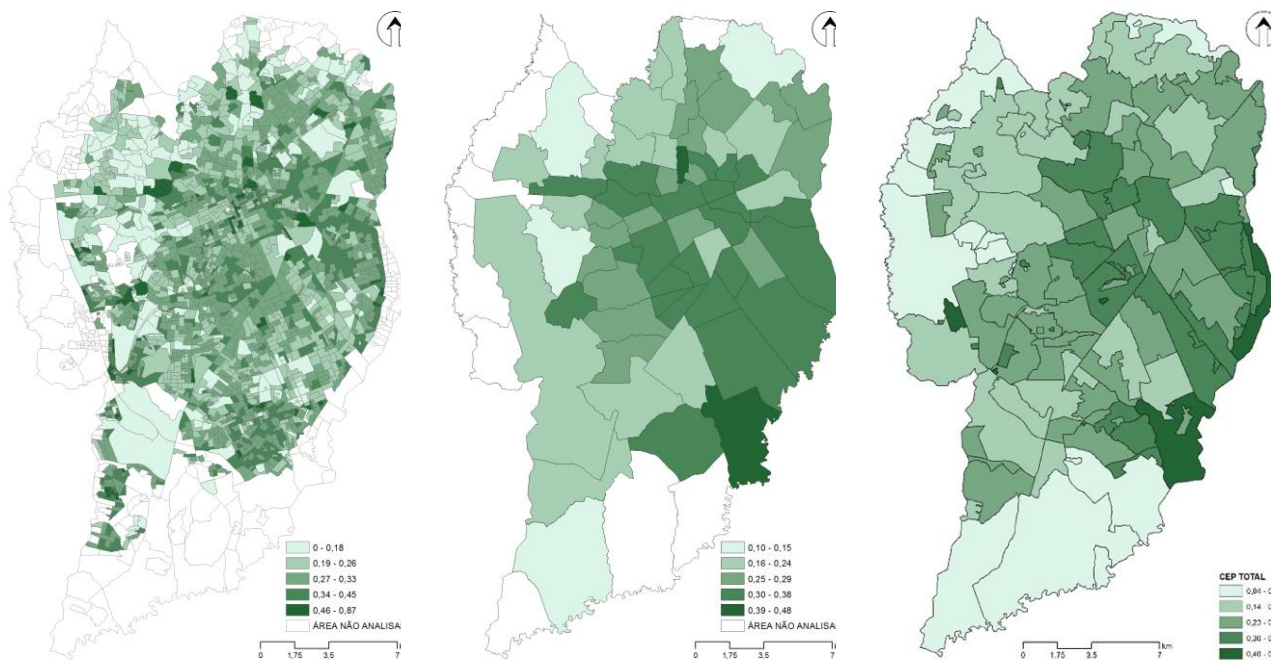


Figure 1. Maps of the municipality of Curitiba showing the PSC (total), divided into five classes (Jenks natural breaks) for census tracts (a), neighbourhoods (b), and HDUs (c). Source: Rosaneli (2021).

The use of territorial units as a visual framework for spatial data enables comparison with other indicators, particularly those that incorporate social variables such as income, education level, and gender. These data are typically collected and organized by public agencies responsible for geographic information, such as the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE).

Although social indicators are often more dynamic than spatial ones - posing a temporal challenge for data alignment - and differ in nature, their comparison can reveal important insights into the conditions of urban space production and consumption. To do this, a linear normalization of values was applied, converting the data into a common scale. Equal-interval thresholds were defined for both the Public Space Coefficient (PSC) and per capita income: low (0–0.33), medium (0.33–0.66), and high (0.66–1).

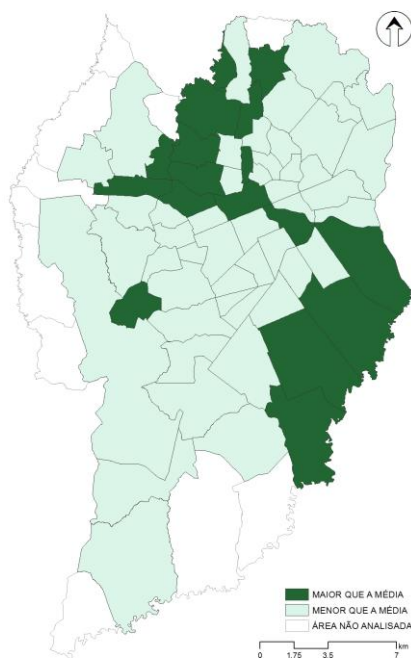
Socioeconomic data were obtained from the 2010 Demographic Census conducted by the IBGE and compiled at the HDUs level, based on work developed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the Institute of Applied Economic Research (IPEA), and the João Pinheiro Foundation (FJP). The choice of per capita income as the main indicator is justified by its use in the composition of the Human Development Index (HDI) and its capacity for immediate synthesis, despite its well-known limitations as an average measure calculated over a given period.

For visualization, spatialization was performed using the Jenks natural breaks classification method, divided into five classes. To analyse income distribution, a cluster analysis was conducted, generating a similarity matrix based on Euclidean distance — the straight-line distance between two points. This procedure grouped similar values (high or low) and highlighted spatial outliers. It is important to note that this initial exploratory analysis,

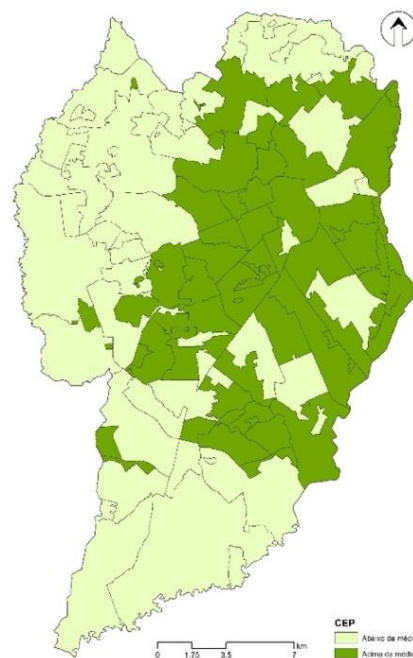
based on clustering by spatial similarity, has methodological limitations, and a more refined statistical approach that accounts for spatial autocorrelation and spatial regression could strengthen the conclusions. However, its advantage lies in the ease of data processing, which enables its use in formulating or correcting public policies in different administrative contexts. Finally, to correct, rephrase, and proofread the final document, Grammarly IA tools were used.

The Spatialisation of Inequalities

In Curitiba, public space is neither equally present nor uniformly distributed across the urban territory. A clear way to illustrate this inequality is to divide PSC (total) values into those above and below the average, as shown in Figure 2. This distinction highlights that the municipal periphery is generally the least well served in terms of public space land allocation, except in the eastern part of the city. This concentration in the eastern area can be explained by urban conurbation, characterized by an extensive street network, as well as by the presence of a linear park along the Rio Iguaçu, which runs along the municipal boundary and is recognized as one of the largest urban park systems in Brazil.



Source: Rosaneli (2021).



Source: Rosaneli et al (2017).

Figure 2. Maps of the municipality of Curitiba showing the PSC (total), spatialized into two classes (above and below the mean) for neighbourhoods (a) and HDUs (b).

When observing the spatialized data for Human Development Units (HDUs), the PSC (total) reaches 0.213, with PSC (streets) at 0.177, PSC (squares) at 0.007, and PSC (parks) at 0.029. For neighbourhoods, the values are as follows: PSC (total) 0.253; PSC (streets) 0.211; PSC (squares) 0.008; and PSC (parks) 0.034. Despite numerical variation, there is a

proportional consistency among the different PSC components across both territorial units. Therefore, the choice of spatial units for studies in other municipalities should consider data availability and accessibility.

An attempt to better contextualise these values is to compare them with findings from a UN-Habitat (2013) study that analysed more than 100 cities worldwide. The report indicates that, despite regional differences, cities in Africa, Asia, and Latin America and the Caribbean tend to have the lowest proportion of land allocated to streets - about 15% in central areas and 10% in peripheral zones. In this context, the PSC (streets) values observed in Curitiba can be considered relatively favourable compared with the global averages reported in that study for both neighbourhoods and HDUs.

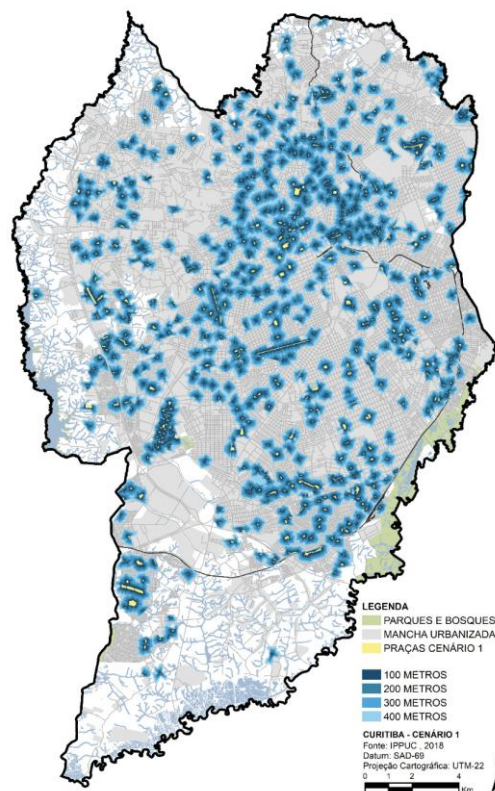


Figure 3. Square coverage map, with distance buffers of 100, 200, 300, and 400 meters.
Source: Oenning (2019, p. 96)

A limitation inherent to this type of indicator arises from the artificial nature of the territorial base on which it is constructed, particularly when census units - originally designed to measure population - are used. Moreover, such indicators cannot capture the actual service area of certain types of public spaces, like squares and parks, because administrative boundaries do not reflect how these spaces are experienced in daily life. To address these conceptual limitations, Oenning and Rosaneli (2020) propose a specific coverage calculation method for squares, which estimates their spatial reach and the population they serve based on walking distances. It is important to note that one of the premises of this study was to consider only squares that allow some form of public use.

Two scenarios were developed: first, the exclusion of squares incorrectly registered by public authorities, which reduced the dataset by approximately 33% (Figure 3); and second, a more restrictive scenario excluding squares lacking adequate conditions for public use, resulting in the removal of 47% of the total.

The spatial distribution shown in the map indicates a greater concentration of squares in the central areas of Curitiba, alongside a more dispersed pattern in peripheral zones, except for a notable concentration in the southern region, corresponding to more recently developed neighbourhoods. Overall, at distances up to 400 meters, approximately 44.55% of the territory is served by squares. Despite this coverage, the distribution of public spaces remains uneven across the urban territory. Thus, both analytical approaches (Rosaneli, 2021, and Oenning, 2019) point to similar spatial patterns in Curitiba.

On another analytical level, comparing social indicators with the PSC provides insights into the population's ability to access shared public spaces. By analysing the link between the resident population and the area of HDUs, as shown in Table 1, it becomes clear that the HDUs with higher PSC (total) values - making up 71% of the units - hold the majority of the municipal population (83%), even though they occupy a smaller part of the land (59%). This indicates that although the distribution of public space is uneven, most of Curitiba's residents can access some form of public space, especially streets.

Table 1. Classification of PSC (total) into ranges, indicating absolute number of units, total resident population, total HDU area, and population density.

Source: Rosaneli et al. (2017).

Classification	HDU	%	Total Population	%	Total Area (ha)	%	Population Density (inhab./ha)
High PSC	55	41%	744.919	47%	12.108	28%	61,53
Medium PSC	40	30%	570.708	36%	13.403	31%	42,58
Low PSC	38	29%	256.921	17%	17.978	41%	14,29
Total	133	100%	1.572.549	100%	43.489	100%	36,16

For the central analysis of this article, it is important to highlight some initial considerations regarding the variables used: per capita income and public space. Income dynamics are often more volatile than spatial dynamics because they are influenced by macroeconomic factors (such as inflation, earnings fluctuations, tax exemptions, etc.) and microeconomic conditions (such as savings, indebtedness, and changes in household composition), leading to variations in average growth rates. In contrast, urban form—especially in relation to the creation of public spaces, which is even more limited in cities of the Global South - tends to change more slowly. For example, according to the revision document of the Curitiba Master Plan prepared by the Instituto de Pesquisa e Planejamento Urbano de Curitiba (2026, p. 389), the compound annual growth rate of “green leisure areas” was 1.51% per year (between 2014 and 2025). Therefore, in general, territorial units tend to maintain relatively stable PSC values over time, while income shows greater variability. However, studies by Oxfam Brasil (2017, 2024) indicate that economic inequality in Brazil remains persistent.

To address this fundamental asymmetry, a temporal adjustment was applied to both dimensions to align the datasets: for PSC and income, data from 2010 were used. Following linear normalization, the income variable was classified into three ranges: low (R\$ 439.73 to R\$ 1,349.09), medium (R\$ 1,397.90 to R\$ 2,206.36), and high (R\$ 2,272.42 to R\$ 4,645.60). Within this framework, 68% of the HDUs in Curitiba fall into the low-income category, covering 58% of the population and 64% of the territorial area. This pattern is typical of Brazilian cities, where high-income areas tend to exhibit higher densities (often associated with verticalization), while low-income populations occupy lower-density zones due to urban sprawl. The spatial distribution presented in Figure 4, based on the data from Table 2, reveals a concentration of income in the central area and extending toward the northern region of the municipality. This trend becomes more evident when compared with the similarity-based clustering map (Figure 5), which highlights spatial groupings of units with similar values. In this case, a cluster of 19 high-income units appears in the aforementioned region, with an average income of R\$ 3,350.00. At the opposite extreme, a cluster of 10 units in the southern part of the municipality exhibits low income, with an average of R\$ 561.00.

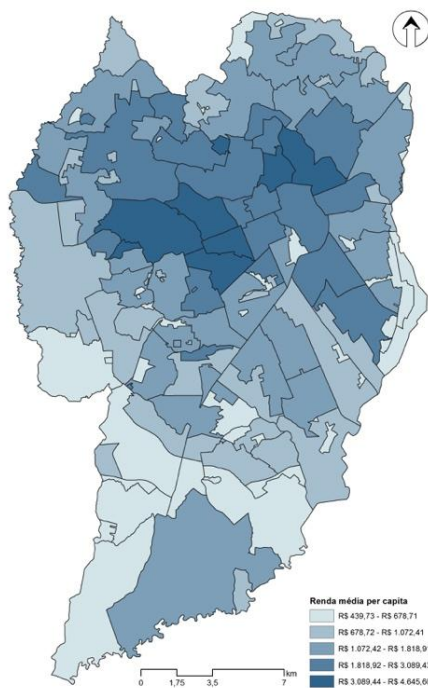


Figure 4. Map showing the distribution of average per capita income across HDUs in the municipality of Curitiba, classified into five intervals (Jenks natural breaks).
Source: Rosaneli et al (2017).

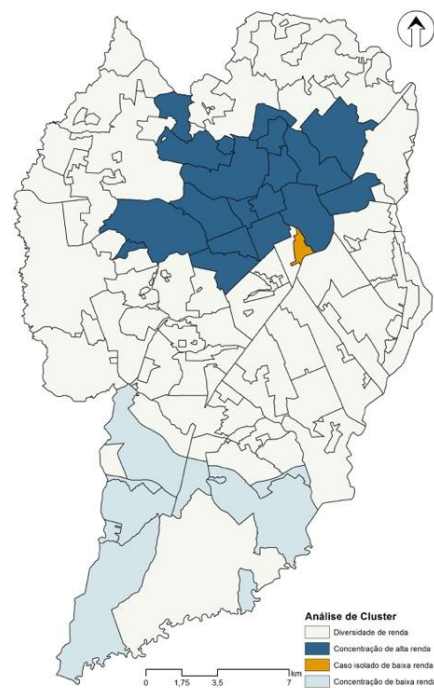


Figure 5. Map illustrating the distribution of average per capita income across HDUs in the municipality of Curitiba, grouped by similarity.
Source: Rosaneli et al (2017).

Table 2. Distribution of HDUs, population, and area by income classification and its subdivisions, related to street presence. Source: Rosaneli et al. (2017).

Classification	HDUs	%	Population	%	Area (ha)	%
High income	21	16%	336.914	21%	7.281	17%
Medium income	21	16%	318.408	20%	8.176	19%
Low income	91	68%	917.227	58%	28.032	64%
Total	133	100%	1.572.549	100%	43.489	100%

For the analysis of the relationship between income data and public space, the study was based on a hypothesis derived from the adopted theoretical framework - namely, that there is a correspondence between a locality's level of social development and the availability of urban infrastructure. Accordingly, if the distribution of public space in Curitiba follows this hypothesis, HDUs with higher average per capita income should also present a greater availability of such spaces, and vice versa. To broaden the understanding of this phenomenon, the analysis was structured into four dimensions, based on the PSC (total) and on the disaggregation of its components: streets, squares, and parks.

Regarding the relationship between street presence and income levels, a consistent pattern of inequality in urban structure becomes clear. In high-income HDUs, there is a high level of connectivity and urban fabric consolidation. In contrast, low-income HDUs exhibit a more dispersed distribution, indicating lower infrastructure density and potential accessibility limitations. A key figure illustrates this pattern: among residents in high-income HDUs, only 1% live in areas with low street presence, compared with 15% in middle-income HDUs and 25% in low-income HDUs. These findings suggest that street presence is directly associated with income levels, reinforcing the link between higher income and better conditions of connectivity and territorial development.

The analysis of the relationship between the presence of squares and income levels reveals a clearer pattern of inequality in the allocation of public space. In high-income HDUs, although the total number of squares is relatively low, there is a strong concentration at intermediate levels, indicating a more balanced and qualitatively structured supply. In contrast, middle- and especially low-income HDUs are mainly characterized by low availability of squares. High levels of square land allocation are residual across all income groups, but they are particularly scarce in middle-income areas and limited in low-income areas. These findings show that the distribution of squares is fundamentally unequal, with greater shortfalls in lower-income areas, reinforcing the link between socioeconomic vulnerability and reduced access to spaces for social interaction and leisure.

Regarding parks, given their historical and geographical concentration, the data reveal a markedly uneven distribution, generally characterized by a predominance of low availability across all socioeconomic strata, but with a particularly pronounced absence in lower-income areas. In relative terms, higher levels of park allocation remain residual across all groups, though they are also present in lower-income areas. Unlike the pattern observed for streets, the limited presence of parks appears to be a structurally widespread condition in the city, affecting all income levels, but with greater intensity and territorial extent in middle- and low-income areas, thereby reinforcing inequalities in the distribution of this larger-scale, environmentally significant public space.

Finally, when considering the aggregate of all public spaces through the PSC (total), the comparison with income - presented in Table 3 and visualized in Figure 6 - reveals a pattern strongly conditioned by the dominance of streets. Streets account for 83% of the total ($PSC = 0.177$ out of 0.213), decisively shaping their territorial distribution and, consequently, masking more nuanced inequalities observed in other types of public space. In high-income HDUs, there is a strong concentration in higher PSC levels, with 57% of the units accounting for 76% of the population and 52% of the total area. This indicates a strong association between higher income and greater relative availability of public space, although this result is directly linked to the high prevalence of street infrastructure. In middle-income HDUs, intermediate conditions predominate (52% of units, 68% of the population, and 71% of the area), suggesting a more balanced pattern of urbanization, albeit still largely dependent on the street network. In low-income HDUs, a more heterogeneous distribution is observed, with a significant presence in both high PSC areas (41% of units and 44% of the population) and, more notably, in low PSC areas, which account for 56% of the total area within this income group. This indicates that although a substantial portion of the low-income population is located in areas with higher PSC levels, there remains a substantial territorial area with limited public space allocation. Thus, because the PSC is predominantly composed of streets, it tends to reflect the capillarity of the road network rather than the supply quality of open public spaces. As a result, it may attenuate or obscure deeper inequalities related to the distribution of squares and parks, particularly in lower-income areas.

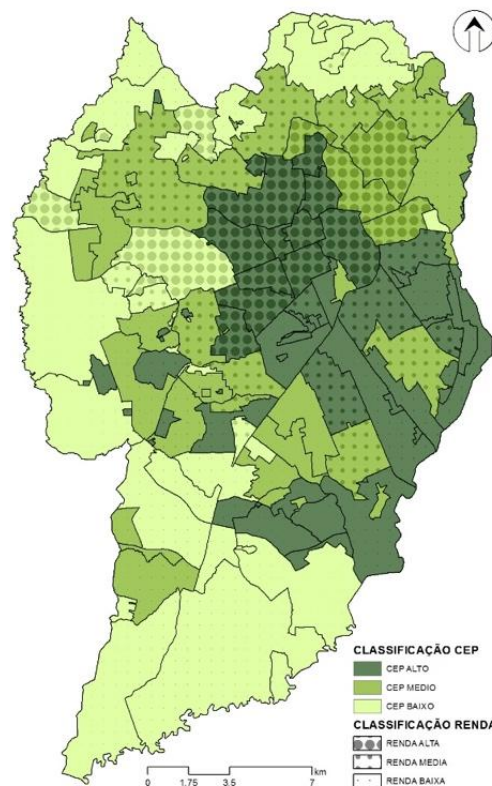


Figure 6. Map illustrating the spatial relationship between per capita income and PSC (total) in the municipality of Curitiba. Source: Rosaneli et al (2017)

Table 3. Distribution of HDUs, population, and area by income classification and its subdivisions according to the Public Space Coefficient (PSC).

Classification	HUDs	%	Population	%	Area (ha)	%
HIGH INCOME	21	16%	336.914	21%	7.281	17%
High PSC	12	57%	254.430	76%	3.790	52%
Medium PSC	4	19%	56.552	17%	1.801	25%
Low PSC	5	24%	25.933	8%	1.691	23%
MEDIUM INCOME	21	16%	318.408	20%	8.176	19%
High PSC	6	29%	91.110	29%	1.915	23%
Medium PSC	11	52%	215.390	68%	5.769	71%
Low PSC	4	19%	11.909	4%	492	6%
LOW INCOME	91	68%	917.227	58%	28.032	64%
High PSC	37	41%	399.380	44%	6.403	23%
Medium PSC	25	27%	298.768	33%	5.833	21%
Low PSC	29	32%	219.080	24%	15.796	56%
Total	133	100%	1.572.549	100%	43.489	100%

Based on the data presented, it is plausible to argue that squares constitute a more sensitive and revealing indicator of socio-spatial inequality than streets and parks, provided that this claim is accompanied by appropriate analytical qualifications. First, streets exhibit a relatively capillary distribution across the urban territory and account for the largest share of the PSC (total). As a result, this indicator is strongly influenced by an infrastructure that, although unequal in quality, is nearly universal in physical presence. This reduces its capacity to discriminate finer differences across income groups, functioning more as a basic indicator of urbanization than of equity in the allocation of qualified public space.

By contrast, parks rely on specific conditions for their implementation - such as the availability of large land parcels, environmental constraints, and planning regulations - which makes their distribution less directly associated with the everyday socioeconomic dynamics of urban space production and more linked to structural territorial factors. Therefore, although relevant, parks do not consistently capture inequalities in the everyday availability of public space.

Squares, however, occupy an intermediate - and therefore more strategic - position. As smaller-scale spaces embedded within the everyday urban fabric and more directly connected to residential areas, they are more closely tied to daily urban life. The data show that their low availability is strongly concentrated in middle- and low-income areas, in terms of number of units, population, and especially territorial extent, revealing a clearer pattern of unequal distribution. Unlike streets, they are not universalized, and unlike parks, they do not depend on exceptional conditions to exist.

In this sense, squares tend to more directly reflect public investment decisions, planning priorities, and the historical patterns of urban space production. As a result, they serve as a particularly effective indicator for revealing inequalities in the presence and distribution of public spaces dedicated to everyday social interaction, leisure, and sociability.

Final Considerations

Brazilian metropolitan areas materialize deep socioeconomic inequalities in their territorial configuration. This study has sought to demonstrate that public space, beyond its physical and functional dimensions, also constitutes a concrete expression of these inequalities. The case of Curitiba is particularly relevant to this discussion, given its historical recognition in urban planning, which would, in principle, suggest a more equitable distribution of urban resources.

The analysis shows that the relationship between public space and income cannot be fully understood through aggregate terms. When considered as a whole, the Public Space Coefficient does not exhibit a significant connection with income levels, a result largely influenced by the predominance of streets in its composition. In this sense, the aggregate indicator tends to reflect the capillarity of the road network, functioning more as a measure of urbanization rather than a sensitive indicator of socio-spatial inequality.

However, when the indicator is disaggregated and its components are examined separately, clear patterns of inequality become apparent. While streets are widely distributed across the urban territory and parks are shaped by specific territorial constraints, squares show a more direct association with income levels. Their lower availability in low-income areas highlights an unequal allocation of public spaces dedicated to everyday social interaction, leisure, and sociability.

In this regard, the study suggests that different types of public spaces have distinct capacities to reveal social and spatial inequalities. Streets, due to their widespread presence, tend to hide disparities; parks, since they depend on specific conditions, do not directly reflect socioeconomic dynamics; and squares, due to their embeddedness in the scale of everyday urban life, prove to be particularly sensitive to public investment decisions and the historical processes involved in urban space production.

It is important to note that the analysis is limited to the quantitative dimension of public space allocation and does not incorporate qualitative aspects such as conditions of use, maintenance, safety, and social appropriation. To address these aspects, further investigations must be conducted, primarily through fieldwork and qualitative analytical approaches, to provide a basis for future work. Moreover, the study does not consider influence areas or the effective coverage of these spaces, which represents a significant limitation in understanding true access. Nevertheless, the use of Human Development Units proved appropriate for the proposed analysis, enabling greater coherence between spatial and socioeconomic data.

This study emphasizes the importance of linking spatial indicators to social variables in urban analysis, demonstrating that public space should be understood as an unevenly distributed resource throughout the territory, despite its statistical simplicity. By highlighting the role of squares as a particularly sensitive indicator of socio-spatial inequality, the research opens new possibilities for improving analytical tools and developing public policies more oriented toward territorial equity.

Finally, it is argued that the construction of more equitable cities depends not only on increasing the quantity of public spaces but, above all, on their balanced distribution across the territory, to ensure fair conditions for coexistence, sociability, and access to urban life.

Declaration

During the preparation of this manuscript, the author used ChatGPT (free version) and Grammarly (paid version) to support language revision and English translation. The author subsequently reviewed, edited, and validated all content in accordance with academic standards and takes full responsibility for the integrity and accuracy of the work.

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Curitiba, Rua XV de Novembro. Area with high per capita income and high Public Space Coefficient.
Photo by Felipe Schiarolli.

Seen, Felt, and Lived.

Design Principles for Socially Sustainable Public Spaces

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Abstract

Public spaces are increasingly expected to address complex societal challenges, from climate adaptation to social fragmentation. Yet, while the technical performance of public space has received considerable attention, its social sustainability remains less clearly defined and operationalized. This article, developed within the STEPS project funded by the Dutch Research Council, explores how social sustainability can be translated into design-oriented principles for public space. The contribution focuses on three interrelated dimensions of social life in urban environments: social cohesion, social encounter, and social learning. Social cohesion concerns the ties that connect people to places and to one another through trust, participation, and shared values (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2018; Asadollahi Asl Zarkhah et al., 2025; Hartevelde, 2017, 2020; Lai et al., 2024; Schiefer & van der Noll, 2017). Social encounter addresses the capacity of public spaces to foster meaningful interactions across difference, moving beyond co-presence towards genuine exchange (Askarizad & He, 2022; Ferreira et al., 2021; Horgan & Liinamaa, 2023). Social learning refers to collective processes of reflection, knowledge creation, and problem-solving that enable communities to develop civic literacy and transformative capacities (Bandura, 1977, 1986). Rather than treating these dimensions as isolated categories, the article approaches them as relational qualities that emerge through the immersive experiences in public space. In this perspective, public spaces are more than their physical form or functional assets. They are social infrastructures where belonging, encounter, and collective learning continuously take shape and give live to interactions of bodies in space. Building on a co-creative and interdisciplinary research process, the article proposes a conceptual and design-oriented framework that translates debates on social sustainability into operational principles for analysis and design. In doing so, it challenges approaches centred primarily on technical performance and advocates for a more holistic understanding of public space, towards subjective, symbolic, and culturally embedded dimensions.

Keywords: social cohesion, social encounter, social learning, public space design, design principles, immersive experience

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Public Space as Relational and Sensory Infrastructure

Public space has long been recognised as one of the primary frameworks through which urban societies organise collective *life*. Streets, squares, parks, and promenades are not only tangible components of the city - they are arenas where people move, interact, and give shape to everyday practices (Gehl, 2011; Jacobs, 1961). Yet public space extends far beyond its physical form. It is a relational infrastructure, a living medium where social, cultural, ecological, and political processes are enacted, experienced, and continuously negotiated (Lefebvre, 1991; Low & Iveson, 2016). It is where belonging, difference, and even exclusion become perceptible through interaction and presence (Madanipour, 2004, 2015; Massey, 2005). In this sense, public space is effective. Through bodily presence, sensory perception, and interaction, people construct an understanding of themselves in relation to others and to the broader urban environment (Brislin & Pallasmaa, 2012; Thrift, 2004). The smell of coffee drifting from a café, the rhythm of footsteps on cobblestones, the laughter of children in a park - these are not merely incidental; they shape how individuals perceive safety, connection, and inclusion. Public space, in short, is where the city comes alive as a social and emotional experience (Carmona, 2019, 2023). Today, the role of public space is more critical - and more precarious - than ever. Rapid urbanisation, socio-economic fragmentation, and rising inequality are reshaping who uses public space and how they use it (Sandercock, 2003; UN-Habitat, 2020). Mass tourism and global mobility introduce temporary rhythms that can enrich or overwhelm local life (Smith & Hetherington, 2013). Climate change threatens to make open spaces inhospitable at times, while environmental degradation undermines the health and vitality of urban ecosystems (Beatley, 2014). Politically, public space is often contested terrain - where protests, surveillance, and privatisation intersect, determining whose presence is welcome and whose is suppressed (Mitchell, 2003). Economically, market pressures can erode inclusivity, privileging consumption over collective life (Gehl & Svarre, 2013). AI is altering the very fabric of urban experience by reshaping what we perceive as real and trustworthy (Crawford, 2022; Floridi, 2019). Deepfakes, hyper-personalised information flows, virtual simulations, and AI-generated environments make it increasingly difficult to distinguish authentic interactions from manufactured ones. In this context, public space has become a rare domain where reality can still be directly experienced and socially validated, allowing humans to negotiate trust, authenticity, and presence in ways that digital interfaces alone cannot provide (Kitchin, 2017; Townsend, 2013). Today's challenges make the role of public space more urgent. It is not enough to design for function or aesthetics; we must cultivate spaces that foster social cohesion, enable meaningful encounters, and support collective learning (Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 1991; Carr, Francis, Rivlin, & Stone, 2006; Gehl, 2011). Social cohesion emerges from repeated interactions, rituals, and shared rhythms that give people a sense of belonging. Encounters - whether brief or prolonged - allow differences to be perceived and appreciated, creating the conditions for empathy and mutual recognition (Low & Smith, 2005; Oldenburg, 2023). Learning happens as people navigate these interactions, interpret their environment, and adapt their behaviours in relation to others. These three dimensions - cohesion, encounter, and learning - operate simultaneously, creating the heartbeat of urban life. Planning and design play a crucial role in enabling these processes. Material interventions such as seating, pathways, lighting, and green infrastructure matter, but only when conceived as part of a broader relational and sensory ecology (Carmona,

2019, 2023; Gehl & Svarre, 2013). Equally important is the social dimension: the design of opportunities for co-presence, improvisation, and interaction; the cultivation of spaces where people feel safe, visible, and included; and the recognition that public life is shaped as much by affective and cultural norms as by physical structures (Low & Iveson, 2016; Low & Smith, 2005; Madanipour, 2004, 2015). When planning accounts for these dimensions, public space becomes more than a stage - it becomes an active participant in urban life, capable of sustaining relationships, generating shared knowledge, and opening possibilities for collective imagination.

Understanding public space in this way shifts the lens of urban design from static form-making to the creation of *conditions for experience*: dynamic, adaptive, and inclusive. The city is meaningful not merely because it exists, but because it supports the continuous interplay of bodies, environments, and feelings in space. By foregrounding cohesion, encounter, and learning, we can design public spaces that respond to contemporary challenges, nurture collective life, and make urban experience not just visible but deeply felt. In experiential terms, these dimensions may be evoked through the city as felt, seen, and lived. These terms are not intended as fixed categories, but as shorthand for broader relational processes: cohesion is *felt* through belonging, comfort, and shared presence; encounter is *seen* through co-presence, visibility, and recognition of others; and learning is *lived* through participation, adaptation, and the continuous exchange of knowledge in everyday space.

Over the past decades, urban design scholarship has developed various quality criteria for the design of public space, identifying valuable conditions that support public life, indicators that assess social performance, and explanations of how design influences human behaviour. (Gehl 2011, Metha 2014, PPS, 2024). Recent UN-Habitat (2020) offer guidance for inclusive, safe, accessible, and sustainable public spaces. Margaret Crawford (2015) and Setha Low and Kurt Iveson (2016) elaborated on the political and cultural aspects of such approaches, emphasising the underlying right to public spaces. While they tend to approach social cohesion, social encounter, and social learning as parallel or partial concerns, this article reframes public space through interconnected social processes linked to experiential dimensions. As such, the originality of the contribution does not lie in introducing entirely new categories, but in reorganising and operationalising existing interdisciplinary debates into an integrated framework for design practice. The proposed triad — cohesion, encounter, and learning - is therefore intended as both an analytical lens and a design framework that connects the experiential, relational, and socio-spatial dimensions of public space. In this sense, the article positions itself between conceptual reflection and actionable design thinking, contributing to ongoing discussions on spatial justice, inclusion, and socially sustainable urban transformation.

STEPS towards Experiential, Relational, and Socio-Spatial Dimensions of Public Space

The article builds on a co-creative and interdisciplinary research process developed within the STEPS project.¹ The project produces practical design guidelines through

¹ The STEPS (Sustaining the Social: Design Guidelines for Sustainable Public Space) project, funded by the Dutch Research Council NWO, is a collaboration between TU Delft, Artenders and Smartland. It aims

literature review, cross-disciplinary research, guideline development, and the co-creation of a design catalogue for urban designers, architects, and policymakers. The narrative review of academic literature (2015–2025) has focused on person–environment relationships, particularly examining how public space design influences social cohesion, social encounter, and social learning, across 200 articles available through Worldcat. Search strings were developed by combining these three key concepts with the primary search concept of ‘public space’. Literature has varied across disciplinary and scholarly settings. Through an inductive thematic synthesis and a cross-disciplinary analysis, we identify recurring themes, concepts, and design-relevant patterns. As design thinking addresses complex, open-ended problems by reframing them and using abductive reasoning to develop actionable solutions (Dorst, 2011), the guidelines were developed abductively, through a preliminary derivation of design principles via thematic coding and conceptual clustering of recurrent findings across the multidisciplinary evidence base. Across urban design, architecture, and policymaking, 8 professionals in training and 22 established practitioners in the Netherlands tested the translation and validation of design principles through two collaborative workshops. The participants contributed iterative feedback, enabling the refinement and contextualisation of the design principles. The refinement workshop took place in the academic setting of Delft, and the contextualisation workshop took place at the design firm Arttenders, co-creating the guide's effectiveness in a specific context provided by the Rotterdam municipality and a commissioned consultant.

The second workshop used the Sportcampus Rotterdam, a 12-hectare planned redevelopment adjacent to De Kuip football stadium, as a case study in public space design. The municipal brief combined a work-living environment and multimodal mobility infrastructure, with recreational amenities and event-related facilities at the intersection of urban and social design. Rather than treating social cohesion, social encounter, and social learning as separate objectives, participants explored how these dimensions can reinforce one another through everyday spatial experiences and design interventions. A central finding was that movement can connect social cohesion, encounter, and learning. Inviting walking and cycling routes, playful elements, visible facilities, and other subtle design nudges encourage physical activity while creating opportunities for people to meet, observe, and interact, as can also be onboarded from the established quality criteria. Yet, through drawing and discussing, movement was understood not simply as mobility in and through the neighbourhood but as an experiential process that fosters the three dimensions of social sustainability. With this, participants highlighted the value of relatively simple design interventions that make public space accessible, engaging, and open to appropriation.

The workshop emphasised that social sustainability emerges through the lived experience of everyday public life. Active ground floors, inviting routes, flexibility, and spaces for diverse users were reaffirmed as mutually reinforcing elements of a vibrant public realm. In addition, the participants highlighted how everyday sensory and social experiences - being among others, encountering familiar faces, and participating in shared routines - contribute to comfort, safety, belonging, and collective identity. Participants also stressed that public space should be an adaptive social environment

to integrate social sustainability with the social value of public spaces -
<https://www.nwo.nl/en/projects/kdemp89433>

responsive to daily rhythms. Through an open and inclusive design, public spaces can answer the brief, while the atmosphere of the place, shaped by movement, visibility, openness, greenery, and activity, would influence how people experience, interpret, and value public space. These cognitive angles reinforced findings from the narrative review and underscored the interconnectedness of social cohesion, encounter, and learning. The case demonstrated how modest spatial interventions can create richer experiences that strengthen socially sustainable public space.

Social Cohesion: Public Space as a Field of Embodied Intimacy, Belonging, and Coexistence

Although public space is collective by definition, it is fundamentally experienced through the body (Alami Fariman, Lee, Hakiminejad, & Mehan, 2025). In this sense, cohesion may be understood in terms of what is *felt*: the sensory and affective dimensions of belonging, emotional attachment, and the everyday comfort of sharing space with others. The presence of others is mediated through proximity, movement, and caring. Everyday actions - walking, sitting, observing, waiting - generate subtle forms of interaction and experiences that shape how individuals relate to one another and within space.

This introduces a critical dimension: intimacy within public space. Intimacy is often associated with private environments, yet it emerges wherever bodies negotiate visibility and proximity. Public space becomes intimate when individuals feel able to exist among others without discomfort, when they can just be there, observe, or participate without being excluded or overexposed (Cattell, Dines, Gesler, & Curtis, 2008; Hahn, 2024).

As Patnaik (2019) suggests, public space becomes meaningful when individuals, particularly those historically marginalised, claim visibility within shared environments (Patnaik, 2019). These acts of presence challenge spatial norms and reveal how public space is continuously produced through use. This resonates with Foucault's (1977) understanding of space as a field for the materialisation of power, where norms are imposed but also reinterpreted through alternative practices (Schumann, 1980). Intimacy is therefore not a fixed condition but a negotiation, shaped by spatial atmospheres. Royfee (2017) emphasises that public intimacy emerges through multisensory engagement between body and environment (Royfee, 2026). Elements such as material textures, soundscapes, lighting conditions, and microclimates influence how individuals position themselves in space and relate to others.

Pallasmaa (2012) argues that architecture is experienced through the full spectrum of the senses, yet contemporary design often privileges visual form over embodied experience (Brislin & Pallasmaa, 2012). Spence (2020) further demonstrates that sensory environments directly influence emotional and physiological responses, affecting how long individuals remain in space and how they interact with others (Spence, 2020). These conditions operate through spatial affordances - invitations to act embedded within the environment (Rathod & Wagner, 2021). Benches, edges, thresholds, and open surfaces create opportunities for sitting, observing, gathering, or retreating. When these affordances align with human-scale design principles (Gehl, 2011), they encourage lingering and repeated co-presence. It is through this repetition that social cohesion begins to emerge. The success of public space is often measured through simple

indicators: people staying, interacting, and sharing space comfortably (Silverman, 1982). Repeated encounters generate familiarity, and familiarity fosters trust. Cohesion, therefore, is not imposed but gradually constructed through those processes of interactions.

Belonging extends these processes over time. It emerges when individuals perceive themselves as legitimate participants in a shared environment and develop emotional connections to a place. Haim-Litevsky, Komemi, and Lipskaya-Velikovsky (2023) show that belonging is closely linked to meaningful daily participation, while Cankurt Semiz and Özsoy (2024) highlight the role of memory in sustaining these relationships (Cankurt Semiz & Özsoy, 2024; Haim-Litevsky, Komemi, & Lipskaya-Velikovsky, 2023). Public spaces accumulate memories, becoming repositories of collective stories. As Corboz (1983) describes, urban landscapes function as palimpsests - layered surfaces shaped by successive uses, adaptations and re-interpretations. Braudel's (2017) notion of the *longue durée* further emphasises the importance of temporal depth in shaping spatial attachment (Braudel, 2017; Corboz, 1983).

These temporal dimensions are particularly evident in environments shaped by environmental dynamics, such as water landscapes, in port cities. Russo (2016) and Krause (2017; 2022) show how these territories are structured by rhythms of water, in which space is not permanently fixed but continuously transformed by changes in water dynamics. In such contexts, belonging is both spatial and temporal, emerging through repeated encounters across changing conditions (F. Krause, 2017; Franz Krause, 2022; Russo, 2016).

In contemporary cities characterised by hyper-diversity (Tasan-Kok et al., 2013), public space becomes the arena where differences are also negotiated. Diversity today extends beyond socio-economic or cultural categories to include varied lifestyles, mobility patterns, and spatial practices (Tasan-Kok, Kempen, Raco, & Bolt, 2013). Cohesion, therefore, cannot rely on homogeneity; it must accommodate multiplicity.

Aparici and Hartevelde (2025) argue that this requires engaging with everyday and tacit knowledge, recognising that users actively shape space through practice (Aparici & Hartevelde, 2025). Public space becomes a negotiated commons, where identities are expressed, and differences are held in productive tension.

Social Encounter: Public Space as a Space of Possibilities

Encounter lies at the heart of public space. The presence of others, experiences of co-presence, and the recognition of difference make collective life perceptible and open to negotiation. In this dimension, what is *seen* serves as a metonym for the social visibility of urban life. Encounter is a spatially and socially produced condition that emerges through the interaction of design, behaviour, and environment. Public space functions as the fundamental layer of urban life. As Aelbrecht and Stevens (2023) emphasise, public space operates as social infrastructure, enabling interaction across differences while maintaining openness to unpredictability (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2018, 2023).

Moments of crisis reveal the essential nature of this role. During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, public spaces became extensions of domestic life, supporting social interaction despite restrictions. Streets and parks functioned as “urban living rooms,” demonstrating that encounter is fundamental to collective well-being (Askarizad & J. He, 2022; Hartevelde, 2020).

Yet most encounters are not intentional. They occur through routines, rituals and weak ties. Ferreira, Ferreira, and Bos (2021) describe how repeated co-presence in spaces such as cafés creates familiarity without requiring direct engagement (Ferreira et al., 2021). These weak ties are essential for social cohesion, as they foster recognition across differences.

Spatial conditions strongly influence these dynamics. Visibility, porosity, and permeability encourage people to remain in space, increasing the likelihood of encounter. When individuals feel comfortable lingering, they become part of a shared environment of observation and interaction. Play and improvisation further activate these spaces. As Isik, Reicher, and Sezer (2023) note, public space is continuously reshaped through activities such as playing, performing, or gathering that transform space into playgrounds, revealing their openness to reinterpretation by their users (Isik, Reicher, & Sezer, 2023).

Hybrid spaces - where multiple functions coexist - enhance this condition (Abdullah Ali, 2018). By overlapping uses and temporalities, they attract diverse groups and increase the probability of interaction. Conversely, overly regulated environments restrict spontaneity and limit encounters. Ambiguity is equally important. Open-ended spatial configurations allow multiple interpretations and uses, encouraging collective negotiation (Gaver, Beaver, & Benford, 2003). Historical urban forms such as porticoes and courtyards exemplify this condition while contemporary interventions reintroduce similar principles.

The concept of porosity further expands this understanding. Several authors have used the concept in urban studies to refer to the permeability of urban systems, allowing flows of people, activities, and ecological processes to pass through and interact (Hein, 2021; Stevens, Daly, & Dovey, 2024; Viganò & Secchi, 2009; Viganò, 2018). Porous environments generate thresholds where different worlds intersect, fostering encounter and exchange. More than a spatial condition, porosity also speaks to ways of living - a certain theatricality of urban life - where individuals move through, occupy, and reinterpret unexpected cavities within the layered palimpsest of the city.

In the context of climate change and multi-risk, encounter is also shaped by environmental conditions (Libera Amenta & De Martino, 2026; Belland, Kausan, Kooy, & Zwarteven, 2025; De Martino, Ferraioli, Maragno, & Musco, 2026; Maragno, 2025). Climate-responsive public spaces - incorporating shade, water, and vegetation - support both ecological resilience and social interaction (Forczek-Brataniec & Jamioł, 2024; Krebs, Boutin, & Boonstra, 2025). These spaces demonstrate that encounter is not only social but also environmentally mediated.

Social Learning: Public Space as Living Laboratory

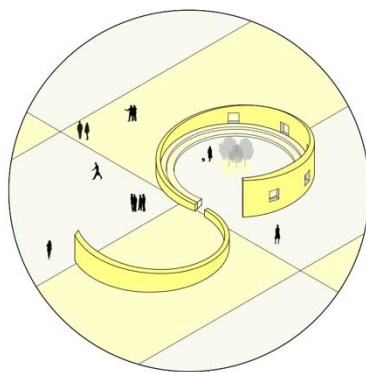
Beyond encounter, public space functions as a distributed learning environment in which knowledge is produced through collective learning. *Lived* captures the practical and experiential dimension of collective life: the ways people participate in, interpret, and adapt to shared conditions in their everyday activities. Learning in this context is not formal or institutional but emerges through observation, participation, and shared experience.

Urban learning begins at the scale of spatial interfaces. Edges, thresholds, and ground-floor conditions shape how individuals engage with their environment. Active and

permeable edges encourage interaction, while inactive boundaries limit engagement (L. Amenta & De Martino, 2018; Libera Amenta & De Martino, 2026; Libera Amenta & Van Timmeren, 2018; Castigliano, De Martino, Amenta, & Russo, 2020; De Martino, 2022; Gehl, 1986). Through these interfaces, individuals observe urban life and develop an understanding of social norms and practices. Proximity-based planning reinforces these dynamics (Guzman, Oviedo, & Cantillo-Garcia, 2024). By organising daily activities within walkable distances, cities foster repeated encounters and localised knowledge (Alberti & Radicchi, 2022). Public space becomes an urban classroom, embedded in people's routines.

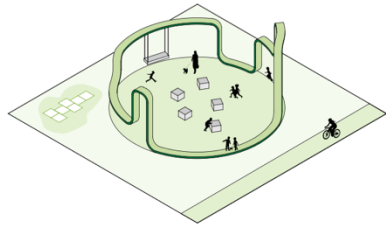
Learning also occurs through experimentation and cultural expression. Public art, performances, and participatory interventions transform public space into a platform for reflection and dialogue (Balug, 2019; Lee, 2021). Museums and cultural institutions increasingly extend into the urban realm, functioning as open environments for collective interpretation (Redaelli, Hansen, & Djupdræt, 2025). Observation plays a critical role in this process. Public space acts as a social laboratory, where patterns of inclusion and exclusion become visible (Gouvea & Mont'Alvão, 2013). Gendered behaviours, for example, reveal differences in safety and access, highlighting the need for inclusive design (Valera & Casakin, 2022).

Technological developments further expand the scope of learning. Digital platforms and augmented environments create hybrid spaces where physical and virtual interactions intersect (Abella, Fruttero, Tas, & Taj, 2020; Yacoub & Alkinani, 2024; Đurić, Righetti, Zoppolat, Saura, & Schneider, 2025). These environments enable new forms of engagement but also introduce challenges related to equity and access (Rösner, Winter, & Krämer, 2016). Through these processes, public space becomes a civic ecology - a system through which knowledge circulates, communities evolve, and societies learn to navigate complex challenges together.



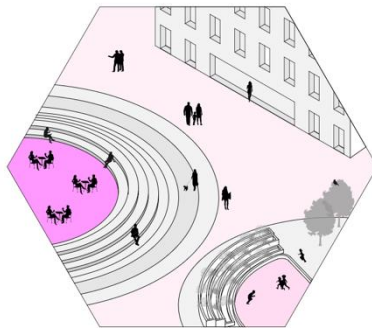
BELONGING

Belonging is emotional: it's about who feels welcome, who feels seen, and who senses that a place speaks to them. Public space becomes meaningful when it invites people in—when it allows presence, recognition, and shared ownership. Public space is both a "learning and living lab", where values are negotiated through everyday life. Designing for belonging means creating conditions for encounters, embracing ambiguity and plurality. It also means protecting what matters, community identities, fragile ecosystems, and cultural practices, so that places remain home rather than becoming sites of displacement or gentrification. Belonging is also tied to power. Social, cultural, economic, and institutional forces shape who controls space, whose voices count, and who feels allowed to participate. These dynamics determine how resources are distributed and whether public space strengthens or weakens social cohesion. Design for belonging means listening to people, their emotions, memories, and ways of living.



PLAYING-HAPPENING

Understanding the city as a playground—or through the activity of play grounding—can invite new ways interventions that acknowledge the uneven and multisensorial ways we inhabit the world.” Playing in public spaces is not only for children; it is a form of happening together. It is about recreation, delight, and spontaneity that emerge alongside the city’s functions. Design interventions become invitations: invitations to notice textures, sounds, smells, and rhythms; invitations to stumble into encounters with others; invitations to play collectively. A space for the *homo ludens* supports social learning by providing a shared space where children, people of all ages, develop communication, cooperation, and conflict-resolution skills through play and interaction.



BORDERS - EDGES

Social learning deals with designing the boundaries where different types of spaces, activities, and social groups meet, interact, or conflict. Edges often serve as transitional zones between different functional areas. The edge can be a place of tension but also a social arena, where different groups collaborate and share experiences. To foster social learning through everyday interaction, designers can create soft borders, or transitions that encourage social encounters while maintaining a level of comfort or safety. These soft borders could be designed in different ways: Spacing and buffers introduce zones between uses, like planting strips between a playground and café seating. Overlaps for dynamic use create flexible areas for multiple groups at different times, such as plazas that host markets, seating, or performances throughout the day. Zones for neutral behaviour are transitional spaces—spillover areas in front of shops, stoops, widened sidewalks, or front yards—that invite informal encounters without privileging any group.

Figure 1. From the catalogue of principles, Belonging, Playing-Happening, and Borders-Edges were selected as illustrative examples, because they exemplify the framework's three core dimensions and also different social mechanisms and design foci: Belonging fosters social cohesion through mechanisms of recognition, inclusion, and ownership, which translates into a design focus on meaning, representation, and stewardship. Playing-Happening promotes social encounter through participation, spontaneity, and enjoyment, challenging design foci on invitations, affordances, and multisensory engagement. Lastly, Borders-Edges support social learning through negotiation, exchange, and adaptation, whereas in design interfaces, thresholds, overlaps, buffers, and alike should matter.

Experiencing Design as a Next Step

The resulting catalogue presents a flexible design support framework that can be adapted to different socio-political, cultural, and environmental contexts. The principles are therefore not isolated design solutions, but as relational strategies that require contextual interpretation. Particular attention was given to tensions and trade-offs between dimensions. For instance, spaces that foster social cohesion through familiarity

and belonging may simultaneously risk reducing openness to diversity and encounters. Similarly, highly programmed spaces designed for learning and participation may unintentionally limit spontaneity or informal appropriation. Recognising these tensions is essential to understanding social sustainability not as a fixed condition, but as a continuous process of negotiation between competing spatial, social, and environmental dynamics.²

Still, the interconnection of the three dimensions discussed is not merely where the city happens - it is where life is *seen, felt, and lived*. It might be the gentle hum of conversation drifting across a sunlit square, the thrill of a spontaneous moment of connection along a winding path, and the quiet comfort of knowing you share a place with others. Such an atmospheric vignette, serving as an evocative description of an imaginative experience, weaves invisible threads of connection that nurture cohesion, spark encounters, and open minds to learning through living together. Hence, to design for this is above all to design for *experience*: to create places that invite people to linger, to stumble upon each other, to feel curiosity and care in equal measure. It's about creating nooks that cradle intimate conversations, wide avenues that host collective energy, and moments of surprise that awaken empathy. Here, differences are not barriers but invitations to understanding, and every gesture - sharing a bench, pausing at a fountain, watching life unfold - is a building block of social life.

In a world frayed by isolation and uncertainty, public spaces are rare sanctuaries where collective life can be experienced. Their power lies in their ability to make shared feeling tangible: to let people sense that they belong, that their presence matters, and that together, they shape the rhythms and stories of the city. The next steps are straightforward: to test the catalogue across a wide range of design contexts and to validate its principles against users' in-situ experiences. By designing for cohesion, encounter, and learning, we can transform urban spaces into living, breathing canvases - cocreated places where relationships spark, differences dance, and the future is imagined together

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² The broader STEPS design catalogue expands this work further through visual tools, case studies, and applied design examples.

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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-macao/>

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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VIEWPOINT

UN-Habitat and its Public Space Mandate. From Programme to Network

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Abstract

Over the past fifteen years, public space has gained increasing prominence within global urban policy discussions, particularly in relation to climate adaptation, urban liveability, and sustainable development goals. Despite growing recognition of its importance, cities continue to face increasing pressures from rapid urbanisation, land scarcity, and unequal access to quality public spaces. This paper gives a panorama of the evolution of the global public space agenda, with a particular focus on UN-Habitat's role in advancing policy frameworks, measurement systems, and operational programmes. It highlights the consolidation of SDG indicator 11.7.1 as a Tier I metric and explores persistent regional disparities in access to open public space. The analysis further traces the development of the Global Public Space Programme (GPSP) and its transition towards a more decentralised Global Public Space Network (GPSN). Finally, the paper discusses emerging priorities in legislation, governance, and financing as critical pillars for ensuring the long-term accessibility, inclusiveness, and resilience of public spaces.

Keywords: UN-Habitat, public space, Global Public Space Programme, Global Public Space Network, sustainable urban development

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The Mandate of Public Space

Over the past fifteen years, cities have entered a period of intensified environmental and social transformation. Awareness of climate change and the need for cities to become more resilient to future shocks has increased significantly. At the same time, concepts such as liveability, wellbeing and quality of life have moved to the forefront of urban policy discussions, supported by an expanding range of indicators and frameworks that help cities assess and improve their performance.

However, these advances have been accompanied by growing pressures on urban areas. Rapid urbanisation, rising land values and increasing competition for urban land continue to challenge the provision, protection and management of public space. Globally, housing insecurity remains widespread, affecting billions of people, while access to high-quality public space continues to vary significantly across and within cities (UN-Habitat, 2025a).

In this context, public space has shifted from being treated primarily as an urban design concern to being recognised as a structural component of inclusive and resilient cities. Against the backdrop of declining access to quality public spaces, the goals established through SDG 11 and the New Urban Agenda remain as relevant as ever.

A key milestone occurred in 2011, when Member States at the 23rd Session of the UN-Habitat Governing Council formally called for stronger institutional attention to public space, through resolution 23/4 (UN-Habitat, 2011). This mandate encouraged a broader programme of work spanning policy development, technical support to cities, knowledge dissemination, and partnership building across different levels of governance (UN-Habitat, 2011).

Since the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2015, particularly SDG 11.7, which calls for universal access to safe and inclusive green and public space, public space has evolved into a key concept and a measurable indicator for achieving sustainable development. As custodian of SDG 11.7.1, UN-Habitat has continuously advanced the way public space is understood, measured and integrated into urban policy and practice.

Global Monitoring and the State of SDG 11.7.1

Over the last two decades, there has been a concerted effort to measure progress towards SDG 11.7 globally. Collective engagement, campaigning and data strengthening by UN-Habitat and our global partners meant that in 2018 SDG 11.7.1 was upgraded to a Tier II indicator, and again to a Tier I indicator in 2023.

As a Tier I indicator, SDG 11.7.1 has been identified as conceptually clear with an internationally established methodology. It is now widely implemented, with regular reporting from a large share of countries across all regions where the indicator is relevant. Data is regularly produced by at least 50 percent of countries and of the population in every region where the indicator is relevant. This achievement reflects the programme's impact on strengthening global monitoring and policy commitments to embed public space within the global development agenda. The indicator is now widely reported, with coverage extending to more than 180 countries and over 1,500 cities (United Nations, n.d.).

Despite this progress, significant challenges to monitoring remain. Much of the available information is still aggregated at city scale, which limits the ability to understand spatial

inequalities within urban areas. As a result, disparities in access at the neighbourhood level often remain invisible in planning and policy processes.

Global assessments indicate that access to open public space remains uneven. Recent data show that globally 16% of the built-up area in cities is open public space for all. Globally only 45% of people have convenient access to open public space within 400 meters of walking distance along the street network. Regionally, strong disparities remain in access to open public spaces within 400 meters (UN-Habitat, 2023). Australia and New Zealand show the highest levels of accessibility, with the majority of cities reporting that over 75% of their population has access to public spaces within 400 m. In contrast, Sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern and South-Eastern Asia, and Oceania excluding Australia and New Zealand tend to have lower accessibility levels, where a large proportion of cities have less than 50% of residents have such access. Latin America and the Caribbean and Northern America and Europe display a substantial share of cities providing access to between 50% and 75% of their populations. On the other hand, Western Asia and Northern Africa, as well as Central and Southern Asia, present more heterogeneous patterns, reflecting considerable variation in accessibility levels across cities within these regions.

Diverse initiatives are being explored to tackle this gap, like the establishment of a Global Public Space Observatory, using UN-Habitat's existing urban observatory methodology (GUO-Net). These and other efforts are part of a commitment by UN-Habitat to strengthen the planning, monitoring, and management of public spaces worldwide, through UN-Habitat's Global Public Space Programme (GPSP). Over time the GPSP evolved from raising awareness about the importance of public spaces to developing comprehensive frameworks, tools, and partnerships aimed at improving their accessibility, quality, and inclusiveness across different urban contexts with the objective to create a wider public space network.

New perspectives: From Programme to Network

After the Governing Council provided UN-Habitat with the formal mandate to deliver on public space in 2011, the Global Public Space Programme was established. Since 2012, the Programme has supported the implementation of more than 150 safe and accessible public spaces in over 100 cities. In total 15.2 million people have benefited, 25,500 have been engaged, and 3,600 have been trained in public space assessment, design and maintenance methods (UN-Habitat, n.d.), with the Programme directly contributing to the upgrade of the 11.7.1 indicator to Tier 1.

Over the years, UN-Habitat GPSP developed a portfolio of practical tools to support cities and neighbourhoods in assessing, understanding and preserving their public spaces. This includes the Global Public Space Toolkit, the Public Space Site-Specific Assessment¹ and the City-wide Public Space Assessment Toolkit² as well as demographically focused methodologies such as the Her City Guide, supporting gender-inclusive urban planning and Block by Block, supporting youth-focused engagement and urban design. More

¹ More information: [Public Space Site-Specific Assessment: Guidelines to Achieve Quality Public Spaces at Neighbourhood Level | UN-Habitat](#)

² More information: [City-wide public space assessment toolkit: A guide to community-led digital inventory and assessment of public spaces | UN-Habitat](#)

recent collaborations include the normative work on Public Facilities as Enablers of Resilient, Sustainable and Adequate Housing for Urban Communities in collaboration with the Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

As a transformative programme, the GPSP aimed to systematise knowledge, create tools and support local governments to achieve goals for the accessibility of public space. Nevertheless, as UN-Habitat enters a new phase focused on decentralisation, the GPSP has progressively shifted towards a network that empowers partners, regional offices, and country offices to take the lead through collaboration, co-production and partnerships (UN-Habitat, 2025b), capturing the dynamics and value of public space as they have transformed over the years to adapt to evolving global needs.

Optimizing this natural shift towards network building and capacity building, the Global Public Space Programme officially transformed into the Global Public Space Network (GPSN) in 2026. Focusing on strengthening existing partnerships, the Network has solidified a core group of regional experts acting as focal points across each region. Together, partners have worked with UN-Habitat to identify strategic priorities that will be taken forward over the coming years.

From data collection to professional capacity building, the GPSN seeks to consolidate expertise from more than 800 global members who work across academia, government, civil society and community-led organizations. Convening knowledge sharing activities and consolidating inspiring practice into guidelines and tools the GPSN aims to mainstream and focus on building local capacities on the role of public spaces in sustainable urban development.

Emerging Priorities

Cities increasingly rely on public spaces to provide shade and shelter in the face of a changing climate, bring diverse communities together to foster social cohesion and connection, and transform housing developments into sustainable, liveable, thriving neighbourhoods.

To meet these growing expectations, legislation, governance and finance have been defined as central pillars of effective public space delivery. Moving beyond a sole focus on design and construction, cities must consider how collaborative governance, long-term stewardship and strategic resource allocation can maximise the social, environmental and economic value of public spaces throughout their lifecycle. This requires thinking not only about short-term funding, but also about sustainable financing mechanisms that can support ongoing maintenance, adaptation and improvement. Protecting the lifecycle of public spaces and securing the greatest return on initial investments depends on ensuring that resources remain available long after a project is delivered.

To address these challenges, UN-Habitat (2025c) has recently identified four strategic goals and three main objectives to guide local governments' future action on public space. The Network's goals are: 1) 'Enhancing accessibility and inclusivity', 2) 'Building Public Trust and Transparency', 3) 'Sustainable Funding and Resource Allocation', and 4) 'Resilience to Climate Change'. Additionally, the three objectives aim to 1) 'Strengthen Legal Frameworks' by addressing gaps and inconsistencies in legislation and enforcement that limit fair and effective public space management in cities; 2) 'Enhance Governance Models', to support better coordination among stakeholders and promote multi-level

governance alongside decentralised decision-making; and 3) 'Ensure Sustainable Financing', to ensure public spaces remain active, well-maintained, and accessible through a variety of long-term funding mechanisms and models. These strategic goals and objectives aim to offer a roadmap for local governments to address emerging challenges and ensure that public spaces contribute effectively to sustainable urban development and community well-being.

The evolving landscape of public spaces around the world demands a corresponding evolution in the public space agenda. Legislation, governance and financing must sit alongside design as core priorities. Ultimately, the next chapter of the public space agenda is not only about creating more public spaces but about ensuring they remain vibrant, inclusive, resilient and well-managed assets for generations to come.

Looking Ahead: Public Space in a Changing Urban Future

As we enter a new phase of public space delivery, the challenges facing cities continue to evolve. Ten years after the adoption of the New Urban Agenda in Quito, the Quito+10 process provided an important opportunity to reflect on progress, identify persistent gaps, and renew commitments to creating more inclusive, resilient and sustainable urban environments. At the same time, with the 2030 deadline for the Sustainable Development Goals rapidly approaching, it is increasingly clear that while significant advances have been made, many of the ambitions set out a decade ago remain unfinished.

Looking ahead, the Network aims to provide a platform to build on the achievements of the past decade while responding to emerging priorities. From financing and governance to climate resilience, housing, digital innovation and social inclusion, it will continue to connect practitioners and decision-makers working to ensure that public space remains central to sustainable urban development.

Although progress over the past decade is evident, significant challenges remain. The future effectiveness of public space policy will depend not only on expanding access, but also on ensuring durable governance systems, stable financing, and long-term resilience. In this sense, the next phase is less about defining new principles and more about strengthening the conditions required to implement them effectively.

Authors' statement on materials and methods

AI tools were used in the rephrasing and proofreading of the article.

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