

Public Spaces in Transition: Emerging Perspectives and Future Directions

Rajjan Man Chitrakar 

Department of Business and Construction, Melbourne Polytechnic, Epping Campus, Cooper St & Dalton Rd, Epping, Melbourne, VIC 3076, Australia; rajjanchitrakar@melbournepolytechnic.edu.au

1. Introduction

Public space is an essential component of urban life, serving as a common platform for social interaction, cultural expression, and everyday urban experience. Deeply rooted in the spatial structure of towns and cities, public spaces have been traditionally associated with accessibility, inclusivity, and democratic participation [1,2]. In doing so, they underpin the notion of the “right to the city,” facilitating citizens’ ability to access, occupy, and actively shape urban spaces [3,4]. However, in contemporary cities, the role and quality of public spaces have changed considerably, turning them into the subject of increasing scrutiny. The effects of rapid urban growth and transformation in the post-war era, combined with market-driven development and the evolving nature of governance structures have significantly reshaped both the provision and management of public spaces [5]. In many cases, public space has been treated as a residual space rather than a central element of approaches to urban design and planning, receiving the least priority in the development process [6,7]. Despite several decades of research highlighting the benefits of public spaces for social interaction, inclusion, health and well-being, and the overall quality of life (see [2,8–21]), contemporary cities continue to experience significant challenges in their provision, quality, and use.

This Special Issue of *Urban Science* examines how contemporary cities are responding to these challenges with the aim of advancing scholarly understanding of the development and management of public spaces across diverse global contexts. Bringing together a diverse set of contributions, this collection explores theoretical, empirical, and methodological dimensions of public space, highlighting emerging trends while identifying gaps in knowledge and practice.

2. Recent Developments in Public Space Research

Recent developments in public space research reveal a notable theoretical shift, moving beyond the traditional understanding of public space as a static physical setting to conceptualise it as a dynamic socio-spatial construct continually produced through interactions among people, governing bodies, and the built environment [22,23]. In other words, public spaces are increasingly understood as sites where social identities are formed, negotiated, and contested. Within this evolving dialogue, approaches such as placemaking, everyday urbanism, and tactical urbanism have emphasised the role of lived experience, informal practices, and community-led initiatives in shaping urban spaces [24–26]. These perspectives challenge conventional top-down planning approaches by advocating more participatory, adaptive, and context-responsive frameworks for the planning, design, and management of public spaces.



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At the same time, the changing modes of governance and management of public spaces have emerged as another important development in contemporary urban discourse. Public spaces are increasingly governed through diverse governance arrangements involving public–private partnerships, private-sector stakeholders, non-profit organisations, and community groups, reflecting a shift away from traditional state-dominated management models [21,27]. Although such new forms of public spaces may appear publicly accessible, they are often subject to privately determined rules, surveillance practices, and behavioural regulations that can result in subtle forms of control and exclusion and restrict opportunities for public expression and social interaction [28–30]. Consequently, there are growing questions around who has the right to access, govern, and shape public spaces, and how these arrangements influence the inclusivity and democratic character of urban life [23,31].

The rapid advancement of digital technologies has further transformed the nature and experience of public space. The proliferation of smart city initiatives, data-driven urban governance, and digitally mediated forms of social interaction has given rise to hybrid socio-spatial environments in which physical and virtual realms are increasingly intertwined [32–34]. These transformations have expanded opportunities for real-time urban management, citizen engagement, and the delivery of responsive public services. However, they have also generated new concerns regarding surveillance, data privacy, and the growing commodification of urban life [35]. Furthermore, the increasing mediation of social interactions through digital platforms raises important questions about social inclusion, publicness, and the potential fragmentation of collective urban experiences, challenging traditional understandings of public space as a site of face-to-face encounter and democratic engagement [36,37].

The COVID-19 pandemic has added another layer of complexity to contemporary public space discourse, while simultaneously reaffirming the importance of public spaces as essential urban infrastructure. During the pandemic, cities around the world implemented a range of temporary and adaptive urban intervention measures, including street closures, pop-up parks, outdoor dining areas, and expanded pedestrian and cycling networks to support public health outcomes and maintain opportunities for social interaction and physical activity [38]. These initiatives demonstrated the capacity of public spaces to accommodate flexible and responsive uses in times of crisis, highlighting their critical role in enhancing urban resilience [39]. At the same time, the pandemic exposed significant disparities in access to quality public spaces and green areas, particularly among socially and economically disadvantaged communities, highlighting the need for more equitable, inclusive, and health-oriented approaches to public space planning, design, and governance [38,40].

In recent decades, the integration of public spaces within broader environmental sustainability agendas has received growing attention in both research and practice. Public spaces are increasingly understood as integral components of urban green infrastructure, providing benefits such as climate change adaptation, biodiversity conservation, and improvements in health and well-being [41,42]. Emerging approaches such as nature-based solutions and blue-green infrastructure have further expanded the functional role of public spaces repositioning them as critical assets for enhancing urban resilience and ecological performance rather than merely serving recreational and aesthetic purposes [43–45]. More recently, concepts such as regenerative urbanism and green Transit-Oriented Development (TOD) have advanced this discussion by advocating the integration of public spaces, ecological systems, and sustainable mobility networks. These approaches suggest that public spaces can play a transformative role in restoring ecological functions, strengthening climate resilience, enhancing social well-being, and supporting the transition towards more sustainable, environmentally responsive, and socially resilient urban systems [46–49].

3. Key Knowledge Gaps in the Literature

Despite advances in public space research, several critical knowledge gaps remain. One of the most persistent challenges is the disconnect between the design, development, and long-term management of public spaces [5,17]. While considerable attention has been paid to issues of physical design, spatial quality, accessibility, and placemaking, comparatively less emphasis has been placed on the operational governance and ongoing management of public spaces and the ways in which these practices shape user experiences, place quality, and long-term spatial outcomes [19,50]. Growing evidence suggests that the success of public spaces depends not only on their design attributes but also on effective stewardship, maintenance, stakeholder coordination, and adaptive management throughout their lifecycle [17,51]. This gap highlights the need for more integrated conceptual and practical frameworks that recognise public space as both a physical product and a continuous socio-spatial process requiring sustained governance and management beyond the initial stages of planning and design.

Another important knowledge gap concerns the underrepresentation of perspectives from the Global South in public space research. Much of the existing literature and many influential theoretical frameworks have been developed in and for cities of the Global North, often overlooking the distinct socio-spatial realities of rapidly urbanising regions in Asia, Africa, and Latin America [52,53]. Consequently, prevailing concepts and planning approaches may inadequately account for the complexities of informality, socio-economic inequalities, cultural diversity, and governance constraints that shape public space production and use in these contexts [54,55]. Recent scholarship has highlighted the need to decolonise urban theory and broaden public space discourse by recognising locally grounded knowledge, practices, and experiences from the Global South [52,53]. Addressing this gap requires more context-responsive and cross-cultural studies that comparatively examine how public spaces are planned, managed, and experienced across diverse urban settings, thereby contributing to the development of more globally relevant theories of public space.

Issues of social equity and inclusion also remain insufficiently addressed within public space scholarship. Public spaces are often conceptualised as open and universally accessible physical environments. However, growing evidence suggests that patterns of access, participation, and use are shaped by factors such as gender, age, ethnicity, income, physical ability, and cultural background [21,56]. As a result, many public spaces inadvertently reinforce existing social inequalities, with marginalised and vulnerable groups frequently encountering physical, social, cultural, or psychological barriers that constrain their ability to engage fully in public life [31,50]. Recent research has emphasised that experiences of inclusion and exclusion are often context-dependent, requiring greater attention to the ways in which multiple social identities intersect to influence perceptions of safety, belonging, and accessibility [57]. Addressing these challenges calls for more nuanced and equity-oriented approaches that move beyond universal assumptions about public space to recognise the diverse needs and experiences of different user groups.

Methodologically, there are challenges that continue to hinder efforts to assess and compare public space quality across different contexts. Although numerous evaluation tools, indicators, and audit frameworks have been developed, there remains no universally accepted approach capable of comprehensively capturing the multidimensional nature of public space, including its physical, social, functional, experiential, and environmental dimensions [50,58]. Existing assessment methods often prioritise measurable physical attributes while giving less attention to subjective experiences such as sense of belonging, social interaction, inclusivity, and perceived well-being [59,60]. Furthermore, the diversity of conceptualisations and measurement criteria has limited the comparability of findings

across geographic contexts [50]. Another important limitation is the scarcity of longitudinal research examining how public spaces change over time in response to shifts in demographics, governance arrangements, environmental conditions, and patterns of use. As a result, understanding of the long-term performance, adaptability, and resilience of public spaces remains relatively underdeveloped [51,58]. Addressing these methodological gaps will require more robust, interdisciplinary, and longitudinal approaches capable of integrating objective indicators with users' experiences and perceptions through quantitative methods.

4. Contributions of the Special Issue

This Special Issue brings together eight diverse contributions that collectively advance our understanding of the development and management of public spaces in contemporary cities. The papers cover multiple geographic contexts, methodological approaches, and thematic concerns, offering a rich and multifaceted perspective on the challenges and opportunities shaping public spaces in contemporary cities.

4.1. Governance and Management Innovations

Governance and management emerge as central themes in this Special Issue. The study by Upreti, Shrestha, and Chitrakar [61] provides a comparative analysis of urban parks in Kathmandu, demonstrating how operational governance structures, institutional coordination, and management practices directly influence the quality, accessibility, and usability of public spaces. The findings highlight the importance of adaptive governance frameworks that respond to local social and political contexts. Similarly, Tawil et al. [62] examine urban contestation in migrant settings in Aachen, Germany, introducing the concept of “fluid planning” as a means to enhance resilience in socially dynamic environments. Their work underscores the need for flexible and inclusive governance approaches capable of accommodating diverse user groups and evolving spatial practices. These contributions collectively reinforce the argument that governance is not merely administrative but fundamentally shapes the inclusivity, adaptability, and long-term sustainability of public spaces.

4.2. Public Space Use and Social Dynamics

Two papers focus on user experience, perception, and social interaction in public spaces in this collection. First, García-Ramírez et al. [63] explore citizen perception and acceptance of pedestrianisation in Loja, Ecuador, revealing how public attitudes, behavioural patterns, and local context influence the success of urban interventions. Their findings emphasise the importance of community engagement and planning based on user perception in shaping public space strategies. Next, Jiang and Manfredini [64] examine “third places” in urban China, analysing how informal practices and non-spatial behaviours can blur the boundaries between public and private realms. Their study highlights the dynamic and negotiated nature of publicness, demonstrating how users actively reshape spatial meanings through everyday practices. These contributions provide valuable empirical insights into how public spaces are experienced and appropriated, moving beyond design intentions to capture the lived realities of urban environments.

4.3. Urban Form and Spatial Transformation

The relationship between urban form, housing, and public space is explored in the study by Cumpănaş and Popa [65], who investigate large housing estates inherited from the communist era in Romania. The authors evaluate their compatibility with the European Green Deal, highlighting the challenges of retrofitting existing urban forms to meet contemporary sustainability and liveability standards. This work demonstrates that public space quality is deeply embedded within broader urban structures and historical development

patterns, reinforcing the need to integrate public space considerations into large-scale urban regeneration and policy frameworks.

4.4. Emerging Typologies and Ecological Approaches to Public Space

Emerging forms and functions of public space are addressed through ecological and landscape-based approaches. Cobeñas et al. [66] present the concept of an ecological public corridor in Iquitos, Peru, as a strategy for riverfront recovery, urban comfort, and integrated public space management. Their study illustrates how public spaces can simultaneously address environmental, social, and infrastructural challenges through nature-based solutions. This contribution expands the scope of public space research by positioning it within broader ecological and climate-responsive urban strategies, highlighting its role as critical urban infrastructure.

4.5. Post-Conflict Recovery and Resilient Public Space Development

The complexities of public space development in post-conflict contexts are examined by Noaime et al. [67] in their study of Aleppo in Syria. The authors argue against rebuilding cities from “scratch” and advocate for approaches that recognise pre-existing urban structures, institutional memory, and socio-cultural continuity. Their work highlights the importance of historically informed and context-sensitive planning in post-crisis environments, where public spaces play a crucial role in social recovery, identity reconstruction, and community resilience.

4.6. Methodological and Technological Innovations

The study by Kiros et al. [68] demonstrates advancements in analytical and methodological approaches to public space research, which introduces a novel framework using few-shot transfer learning and spatiotemporal graph models to map pedestrian level of service across cities. This approach enables scalable and data-driven assessment of public space performance, addressing limitations in traditional evaluation methods. This contribution is particularly significant in advancing quantitative and technology-driven approaches to understanding public space dynamics and offers new tools for planners and researchers.

4.7. Summary

The eight contributions in this Special Issue address several critical knowledge gaps in the field previously identified in this paper. Their authors provide new insights into governance and management practices, highlight the importance of user perception and social dynamics, and examine the influence of urban form and historical context on public space outcomes. They also expand the conceptual boundaries of public space through ecological, post-conflict, and hybrid spatial perspectives, while introducing innovative methodological tools for analysis.

Notably, the geographic diversity of the case studies, covering regions such as Europe, the Middle East, Asia and the Pacific region, and Latin America, contributes to a more global examination and understanding of public space. This also helps to address the overrepresentation of Western perspectives in the existing literature and highlights the need for comparative and cross-cultural approaches. At the same time, the contributions reveal areas that require further investigation, particularly in relation to long-term management, equity and inclusion, and the integration of digital and ecological systems.

5. Future Research Directions

Building on the insights of this Special Issue, several directions for future research emerge. First, there is a need for more integrated approaches that link the design, development, and long-term management of public spaces, recognising them as continuous

and adaptive processes. Second, the role of public space as green infrastructure should be further explored, particularly in relation to climate resilience, ecological restoration, and emerging concepts such as green TOD and regenerative urbanism. Third, future research should place greater emphasis on equity and inclusion, adopting participatory and community-based approaches to better understand diverse user needs and address inequalities. Fourth, the interaction between digital technologies and public space demands deeper investigation, particularly in relation to governance, behaviour, and ethics. Fifth, more longitudinal and evidence-based studies are needed to assess the long-term performance of public spaces and to inform policy and practice. Finally, comparative and cross-cultural research will be essential for developing more adaptable and context-responsive frameworks, while advancements in metrics and evaluation tools can support more effective planning and management.

6. Conclusions

Public spaces remain critical yet contested elements of contemporary cities. Beyond their role as physical settings for social interaction, they are increasingly recognised as critical urban infrastructures that support resilience, sustainability, social inclusion, mobility, and effective urban governance. However, their development, management, and long-term sustainability continue to present significant challenges. Addressing these challenges requires interdisciplinary collaboration and integrated approaches that combine high-quality design with effective governance, adaptive management, technological innovation, and meaningful community engagement. This Special Issue contributes to these efforts by bringing together diverse perspectives and advancing scholarly and practical debates on the planning, design, development, and management of public spaces. It is hoped that the insights presented in this collection will inform future research, policy, and practice, and support the creation of more vibrant, inclusive, resilient, and sustainable urban environments.

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