

EDITORIAL

Rethinking Public Spaces in Africa. The Necessity for the Centre on African Public Spaces

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The struggles for land and spatial justice feature very strongly in the modern history of the African continent, which has not only deeply shaped the continent's history, but continues to shape its present and unfold in its future. In such contexts, geographic space as well as public space is layered with physical, symbolic and political meanings. Who has access to the benefits and resources of the city and who does not, who is able to flourish and who cannot, are therefore part of much larger historical and societal questions, reflecting the beliefs and values we hold and pursue as communities, governments, nations, and perhaps also as Africans.

The centrality of public spaces in Africa informed the formation of the Centre on African Public Spaces (CAPS). Initially established by the City of Johannesburg metropolitan municipality in response to the 2018 Africities Summit's call for a regional knowledge-sharing platform on public spaces, CAPS is the first multidisciplinary initiative formed through international collaborations with the 'UN-Habitat Global Public Space Programme' and the 'GIZ Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention Programme'. CAPS also brings together municipalities and provincial governments across the continent, universities and civil society organisations.

CAPS is dedicated to sharing and advancing knowledge and growing expertise related to African public space. It does this through advocating for progressive policies, planning frameworks and facilitating related research, education, skills and practices with the vision of creating African cities that are filled with shared, inclusive and sustainable public spaces.

One of the most significant programmes that CAPS undertook in its formation was to engage with young people across the continent, to get a sense of their interpretations, experiences and vision for public spaces. The objective of this undertaking was two-fold. Firstly, Africa has the youngest population in the world. According to the *State of African Youth Report*, more than 60 percent of Africa's population is under the age of 25 and by 2030, young Africans are expected to constitute 42 percent of global youth (AU Commission, 2019). This indicates that African youth plays a profound role in defining the socio-spatial dialectic on the continent. Secondly, a key principle at CAPS is that

knowledge about public spaces must be developed by those who live within and experience these spaces.

The establishment of CAPS was necessitated by multiple interlinked economic, political, social and cultural factors that define African societies. Urbanisation is one the most significant transformations that the African continent is confronted with in the 21st century. According to UN-Habitat (2023) the continent's rate of urbanisation increased from 15 percent in 1960 to 40 percent in 2010 and is projected to reach 60 percent in 2050. It is expected that urban populations in Africa will triple in the next 50 years, leading to the transformation of the profile of the region and the reconstruction of its urban space.

Secondly, while discourse on spatiality has found expression at a global scale, published knowledges about public spaces in particular have emerged largely from scholars and researchers in the global North and transposed to the experiences of the global South. But public space, both at a definitional level and in terms of its experiences, has particularities that are specific to local forms within African communities. This means that public spaces in Africa must be understood as cross-cultural notions and as socio-spatial phenomena. It is especially so because "African indigenous aesthetics and conceptions of form and use remain present, while merging with the changes brought on by colonisation, industrialisation, and ongoing modernisation" (Harteveld *et al.*, 2018: 10).

Thirdly, the question of public spaces is directly linked to that of democracy. As Africa experiences rapid urbanisation, the response is often to privatise public spaces. Across the continent, there are growing levels of gentrification which not only displace vulnerable communities, but also impedes on people's right to the city (Mahlatsi, 2022). This has implications for freedom of movement and by extension, freedom of both expression and association. Furthermore, in an increasingly privatised world, public spaces will only increase in importance as refuge for people to meet, converse and share experiences that build and shape democracy (Gehl, 2010).

Finally, countries across the African continent are grappling with urban policy formulation and the governing of urban spaces, both public and private. According to Pieterse (2018), urban governance policy discourses are now connecting urban investments, and regulation with macroeconomic imperatives. However, these imperatives are silent on the value of the creative industry in the fashioning of a transformed urban reality. The implication is that the re-imagination of urban forms, including public spaces, remains firmly rooted in neo-liberal ideations and constructions. It is for this reason that CAPS believes in the leveraging of scholarship, culture, activism and creativity for the construction of inclusive and sustainable public spaces in Africa. This special issue of *The Journal of Public Space*, with its focus on public space and placemaking in African cities, is an expression of the dynamic and diverse communities that are critical in the discourse on African public space. It is a collection of research articles by scholars and researchers, case studies and photo essays by artists, community activists and public space practitioners – all of whom are a motive force for inclusive, sustainable and equitable public space that African communities are constructing. It serves as a foundation on which further debates about the meanings and experiences of African public space will be built. Ultimately, the African cities that CAPS envisages are vibrant, safe, inclusive and accessible, with quality context-sensitive public spaces at the heart of their development.



Fig. 1. A public space in Johannesburg.
Credit: GIZ VCP, Inclusive violence and crime prevention programme.
<https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/118252.html>

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