

EDITORIAL

**‘Here is a table’.
Considering Contemporary African Public Spaces**

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This special issue of *The Journal of Public Space* on “Public Space and Placemaking in African Cities” raises awareness and articulates the importance and value of urban public space in the context of the African continent. A key contemporary driver of such issues is the context of Africa's urbanisation, which is exponentially faster than comparable processes in the Global North. A vibrant, diverse and supportive public life in these contexts will increasingly become a critical public good, which will depend on the conceptualisation, design, development, process and maintenance of public space. Already the continent's vast diversity of communities and cultures is visible in the utilization of public open spaces such as streets and markets and the congestion of pedestrian activities therein. The so-called ‘informality’ of many of these urban conditions is indicative of the increasing imperatives of public space. Such spaces are often faced with extraordinary demands, not easily visible in cities of the Global North. They are often expected – or forced – to accommodate extensive forms of cultural diversity, from street markets and food and drink, to outdoor gyms and children's playgrounds, to dance and ceremonies, and even the urban presence of cattle and livestock. Yet a lack of appropriate planning can also lead to conflict and an exacerbation of incidences of urban insecurity.

Therefore, this special issue of *The Journal of Public Space* provides a collection of unique content aimed at developing an articulation of African contexts to public space. The special issue is a result of a north-south collaboration: between the ‘Centre on African Public Space’ and the local City of Johannesburg government (through its arms of ‘Joburg City Parks and Zoo’ and ‘Johannesburg Development Agency’), in partnership with the Italian non-profit organisation ‘City Space Architecture’ (the publisher of *The Journal of Public Space*) and ‘UN-Habitat’. Following an open and multi-disciplinary call across the continent for African public space-related contributions and reviewers, a large number were received from multiple disciplines, and ultimately eighteen different countries on the continent are represented in this issue of the journal. The large

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volume of submissions is perhaps indicative of the current level of interest, engagement and topicality of such questions and themes.

Most authors and chapters focus on city contexts and projects that are familiar (rather than distant), but comparisons and reflections between cities in Africa are not uncommon, and there are also several north-south authorship collaborations. Perhaps indicative of the weight of challenging social contexts, both broadly and specifically, a wide variety of social and cultural themes feature most strongly through the chapters. Several chapters also deal with theoretical and pedagogical approaches. While environmental dimensions are present in many chapters and certainly not neglected, it is noticeable that the types of approaches tend toward more implicit or less foregrounded ones than what may oftentimes be the case in western or other contexts.

Ultimately this special issue of *The Journal of Public Space* is the creation of a collaborative platform, as a neutral space to develop thought, discuss critical interventions and inspiring case studies, and offering recommendations or lessons that can contribute toward developing more responsive and people-centred public spaces in Africa.

A global conversation

Rather than viewing public space in Africa as an essentialist or parochial issue, we believe that any developments in thought, policy or practice from the continent would, in turn, contribute to the broader global conversations on public space. In this sense, this special issue initiates and deepens a cross-cultural understanding of public space, both in Africa and globally, as a moving and unfixed signifier of the meanings and practices of collective life.

The calling of attention to cross-cultural nuance and to different kinds of historical processes and contemporary conditions in particular contexts – whether in African contexts or elsewhere – should not come as a surprise. Even in western historical contexts alone (let alone in relation to other times and places), public space has never been a stable category. The development of Ancient Greek public space types, particularly the agora, are typically considered archetypes or a kind of 'ground zero' of public space in the western imagination, particularly where as a public political space they bear resemblances to modern notions of citizenship. Such spaces in the Greek city (i.e. Athenian, Hellenic, and Hellenistic) were contained in a three-part concept of a zoned city, namely the zone associated with religion (such as represented by the Acropolis or 'high city'), that associated with the affairs of state and economic activities (such as represented by the agora), and then finally a private domestic zone of the city.¹ But the more practical market functions of the agora also had its detractors. In further delineations of the concept and functions of a city, Aristotle for example held that the public life of the agora should be associated purely with higher political activities of assembly and debate, and separated from places of mere commerce – and in Athens the latter to be transferred to the city's port of Piraeus some 10 kilometres outside the city:

"The temples and government buildings should occupy a site towering over the city, as becomes the abode of virtue. Near this spot let there be an agora for freemen, from which all trade should be scrupulously excluded. There the gymnastic exercises of the elder men may be performed in the presence of some of the magistrates, while others

superintend the exercises of the youth in another place. There must also be a traders' agora in some other spot—this should be easily accessible both by land and sea” (The Politics of Aristotle, Book VII).²

In practice, everyday activities did indeed shift towards the harbour of Athens during the classical period of Ancient Greece in the late fifth century, while popular assemblies also shifted from the agora to a nearby hill outside the city proper called the Pnyx.³ Despite the centrality of Greek concepts and forms of public space in western thought and their ubiquity across global architectural and urban design curricula, still the question remains whether these models of urban form and public life really are the normative and appropriate models for grounding and driving public space in contemporary African contexts.

Not unlike notions of the Greek city, another core aspect of design notions of public space are city-making concepts derived from renaissance and baroque periods in western Europe, particularly in cities like Florence, Rome and Paris. These too are considered the normative features and forms of public life across global curricula, and yet they are also indicative of the lack of stability of public space as a category. In Florence, the introduction of perspectival space and the related conception of the 'ideal city' – ultimately derived from optical or visual theory (*'ilm al-manazir'*, or 'the science of what appears') in classical Islamic culture⁴ – would lead to the attempt since the fourteenth century to physically construct it into the medieval urban form of the city over several centuries, through elements such as the realignment of streets and the construction and termination of views.⁵ Beginning especially with the redevelopment of *Piazza della Signoria*, this approach would ultimately be expanded to tie together several key public open space sites and monuments across the city, in an attempt to create a unified aesthetic and experience of the entire city (Figure 1).

Following the lead of Florence, at the same time in Rome a Counter-Reformation pope, Sixtus V (1521 –1590), would also employ perspectival tools of urban space to similarly create a unified field for the whole city. In an attempt to stem the tide of the Reformation, it was thought that reshaping the religious experience of urban space through theatrical perspectival devices would make the church more open, accessible and appealing to popular opinion. These ideas of public space and 'the image the city'⁶, including an equestrian statue on a pedestal as an integral feature of a public space (from the 16th century precedent of *Piazza del Campidoglio* in Rome), would all become normative touchstones for cities and public spaces all across the western and colonial world. But despite this ubiquity, again, still we may ask: are these models for a single unified aesthetic, religious and cultural experience of the city normative, appropriate or even possible in contemporary African urban contexts? Indeed, in almost any large and complex city anywhere in the world today with a significant level of social diversity, it would be hard to imagine where such a unified world would be possible. Unlike when western cities were once emerging from older medieval forms, the sheer scale and extents of modern cities – both physically and socially – and rates of urbanisation now also make this kind of vision seem dated and impractical, if not altogether inappropriate. Similar spatial and aesthetic tools to Florence and Rome were also adopted in Paris. Major sixteenth century projects such as the Tuileries Garden, the *Place Dauphine*, the *Place Royale*, the *Palais Cardinal*, and the *Hotel du Luxembourg*, and followed in the

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seventeenth century by royal *places* such as the *Place des Victories* and *Place Vendôme*, were all built to serve the uses of elites of royalty and nobility and not the 'public'. New kinds of public space in Paris would only emerge in the nineteenth century after the upheaval of the French Revolution and the confiscation of the properties of the Crown and the Church, when these grand and sumptuous grounds of the elite – a character these spaces still continue to exude even to the present day – would become 'public'.

So again, we may ask: are the public space-making models which originated (rather undemocratically) through extremely powerful and wealthy figures and institutions – such as the wealthy families of Florence, the papacy in Rome, and the kings of France – appropriate or even possible in contemporary African contexts? As a somewhat analogous contemporary case, do private developer-driven urban developments constrain urban social life and diversity more than they enable it? Further, are violent confiscations of spaces for public purposes, such as those which built the public realm of Paris, appropriate or desirable in the context of contemporary cities, of a democratic ethos, and a human rights culture? Few today, for example, would wish for a return of the kinds of public life that made such public spaces. It was a world where public executions in public space for instance were regular occurrences. Of the 2,498 persons guillotined in Paris during the French Revolution, 1,119 were executed on the *Place de la Concorde*, 73 on the *Place de la Bastille* and 1,306 on the *Place de la Nation*. Likewise in Rome during the reign of Pope Sixtus V, according to legend it is said that there were more heads on spikes across the *Ponte Sant'Angelo* than melons for sale in the marketplace.⁷

Many of the more unpleasant historical aspects of public life that often shaped the public spaces that are globally considered normative have today faded into history. In many cases these have been replaced by global international policy frameworks for cities and public spaces (such as the UN's 'Sustainable Development Goals' or UN-Habitat's 'New Urban Agenda') or present-day global human rights discourses. However, although taking the form of universal declarations and standards, these emerge through political processes.

Tensions between declared universalisms and the particular kinds of politics and power, which are at

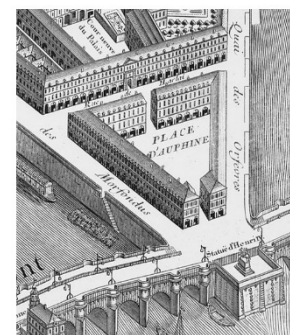
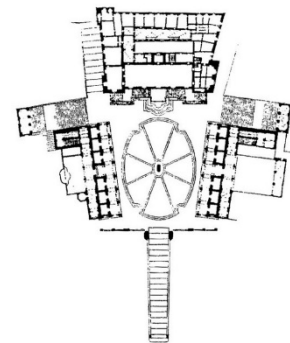
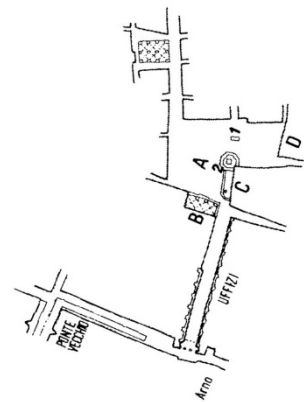


Figure 1. (From top) Shaping urban space through aesthetic perspectival tools in Florence (Piazza della Signoria), Rome (Piazza del Campidoglio), Paris (Place Dauphine), and to create a unified field for the entire city of Rome. Source: Morris, 2013.

play in their formation, is not new. Already from the mid-nineteenth century onwards, human rights discourse had many very different meanings in different historical contexts, having legitimated both revolutionary practices (e.g. the French Revolution, the American Revolution, etc.) and counter-revolutionary practices (e.g. the alignment with liberal politics, capitalist development and neo/colonialism).



Figure 2. Imagining African public spaces – artwork by Sechaba Maape (used with permission).

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Within the late colonial era of the last century, after Europe was ravaged by two wars whose effects had an impact across the globe due to colonialism, human rights discourse was formalised as a major universal declaration in the form of 'The United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights'. But this Declaration only recognised individuals and States (and not the many peoples, nations, and communities that had no State when the Declaration was adopted) and, although collective rights have very slowly become part of the political agenda since then, today there remains the ongoing contradiction or tension between collective and more individualistic conceptions of human rights.⁸ Further, international and global agendas and standards do not emerge from the living traditions, religions or cultures of the world, and so as a driver of global contemporary public space-making also tends to be more an applied than a grounded theory or practice, and hence can often lack in direct cultural or spatial translations. The purpose of pointing to the conditions of power, politics and historicity (rather than ontological or canonical 'truth') of conventional international frameworks and global human rights discourse – and one that has been largely western-based both culturally and politically – is to understand that these tensions are not confined to abstract debates but often also have corollaries in practice, where liberatory or counter-hegemonic currents often find little tangible uses for it in their struggles. For example, twentieth century national liberation movements against colonialism, like the socialist and communist movements, did not invoke the human rights grammar to justify their causes and struggles. Still across the world today, and evident in movements like 'Black Lives Matter' in the United States and 'Rhodes/Fees Must Fall' in South Africa which challenged past and present injustices, not only was the conventional discourse of human rights almost non-existent, it was impossible for these concepts and visions of justice to be articulated through its grammar. Instead, other grammars of human dignity like 'decolonisation' found expression, which also appeared more embracing of indigenous concepts and historical experience.

Like the shifting historical and conceptual terrain within global conceptions and forms of public space, and the politics and historicity of dominant forms of policy frameworks and discourses which increasingly underpin them today, there is also an increasing recognition that much has been left out of the modern and western understanding of the world. This must now point us to the critical need for new kinds of dialogue and conversations that include other conceptions of human dignity and the (spatial) practices that may sustain them. This will imply making not only public spaces but 'spaces of publics', where the various and diverse publics across the African continent or elsewhere are not only more centred, but also more themselves the makers rather than the objects of meaning and practice (Figure 2). If cities entail densities of urban populations (i.e. peoples or publics), then almost by definition 'public' spaces also entail *people or publics-centred* environments – organized around people and people organized around space.

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In 'Here is a table'⁹, the title of a book of contemporary African critical philosophy, 'a table' is conceived as a metaphor for a range of normative discourses and practices. It also implies the possibility of other 'tables', whether 'here' or elsewhere. What then could be considered as 'a table' of concerns and questions for public space in cities in

African contexts? Such questions, which are attentive to African contexts and histories, should not imply 'Africa' as a monolithic, essentialist or mystifying condition. Rather, here they seek to understand the broader range of questions and issues that such contexts are confronted with or enabled by. Our provocation then is not an iteration of a counter-normative African uniqueness or inherent difference (be it 'un-western', 'un-modern', 'in-formal', etc.), but rather a foregrounding of a range of questions, challenges and considerations, and the appreciation of the compound existence of both general and specific, and both historical and contemporary conditions and challenges.

While Africa's urbanisation is in many respects unprecedented, as will be the level of challenges in social and infrastructural responses, this does not preclude other similarities or learning and adapting from global best practice. In this regard, in cities like Johannesburg and Kigali various projects and programmes already exist that draw from global best practice models for transit, density, mixed-use or public open space. Further, much of mainstream contemporary discussion around public space since the second half of the twentieth century can be traced to critique and responses to the effects of modernist designs, suburbanization and urban sprawl, and hence increasing focus on topics such as spatial reintegration and social integration. These public open space contexts still remain relevant and pressing challenges, as do considerations of social diversity in the context of its erosion through modernism, globalization, and powerful economic forces.¹⁰ Hence global and regional/local scales are in many ways interrelated and interdependent.

At the global scale, it is also undeniable that international organisations play a critical role in promoting the development of public spaces across the world. 'Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 11: Target 7' seeks to ensure by 2030 the "universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces particularly for women and children, older persons and persons with disabilities". At the continental level, this is reflected in the African Union's Agenda 2063, which aspires for cities to be "safe and peaceful spaces for individuals, families and communities." At the continental or regional scale, it is therefore logically expected that national governments/organisations not only domesticate/localize global concepts and aim to optimize on the benefits they may offer, but reconfigure or adjust these to speak to African and local contexts, toward context-specific urban development interventions that are tailored to the needs of its residents/people.

While acknowledging similarities and interdependencies, there is also much that cannot be adequately conceptualised, articulated or engaged at international framework and policy levels. These include layered historical and social contexts, such as the long development of inequalities, class, race, gender, or other constructs that have shaped societies and the urban fabric, as well as cultural forms and norms, and different social and economic conditions and prospects. Many urban contexts also face questions of safety, which could result from forms of modernist planning, dislocation or lack of social integration. In all of these contexts and conditions, global best-practice models and frameworks cannot be formulaic or they risk being ineffective even on their own terms – even the internationally recognised Bus Rapid Transit model is in some cases an example of this. Unlike more secular or post-Christian norms in western contexts, belief and ritual also remain integral in many African contexts – not only as part of lived realities, identities and communities to which any framework should be sensitive, but as important parts of a wider ecosystem or biosphere of responses to global challenges.

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In addition to the various kinds of similarities and differences, public space contexts can also suggest or compel redefinitions of thought and practice. Redefinition can apply even to the shape of questions regarded as universal, such as environmental degradation and sustainability. Much of the greatest impact on climate change for instance will be felt across the Global South and within relatively religious societies. For example, there are distinctly strong concentrations of Muslim populations in regions that are particularly affected by global warming, such as in Northern and Sub-Saharan African regions which are particularly vulnerable to rising heat stress and shrinking fresh water availability, as well in many parts of central and south-east Asian countries vulnerable to extreme weather events. These and other similar African contexts suggest that high-technological green solutions will not in all cases be where the answers lay, but may also lay in re/defining more indigenised solutions and responses.

Other examples of important redefinitions can relate to notions of 'informality' beyond conditions of lack, but rather as sets of relations between 'hard' and 'soft' infrastructures, in the physical services that operate through softer human and non-human interfaces and networks and the various kinds of opportunities that these can facilitate.¹¹

Thus, we may ask: is public space a new concept in African contexts? Our answer is no. Are global models of public space appropriate in African contexts? Yes and no. Within reconfigurations and redefinitions, and similarities and dissimilarities, building this kind of 'table' within African contexts implies a double work – that is both global and local, both a learning and an unlearning, and which both includes but also stretches beyond a simple adoptive mode of application of global discourses and international policy frameworks into local settings. This 'table' is a "science of cities ... for the planning, construction, development, management, and improvement of urban areas" as stated in the 'New Urban Agenda'¹². However, it should also involve a practical and diverse ethical imagination.

Challenges for new directions

In addition to underpinnings in diverse cultural factors, public space is also thoroughly transdisciplinary in concept, and cross-sectoral in its production. There are therefore, for example, diverse professional and multidisciplinary approaches and engagements with public space. In some cases, urban planners may conceptualize public space as a piece of carpet-like landscape, which functions as a spatial situation that people can access and interact with like a park or a square. In other cases, social scientists may see public space as a process or an action or an arena of politics, capturing the spirit of the people, allowing performances, or enabling social cohesion. All of this compounds the complexity of the issues and the difficulty of developing fuller and more integrated thought, policy and models of practice.

The linguistic diversity of the continent presents a second challenge. Research articles in African Studies and politics for instance has tended to cluster heavily on a small number of more populous and English-speaking countries, and from these generalising to the continent (such as Francophone and other linguistic regions). This is even more the case for researchers based at institutions outside of Africa, as they are more likely to generalise to the continent than are researchers based at institutions in Africa.¹³

This special issue of *The Journal of Public Space* is also confronted by similar kinds of challenges, and largely reflects general norms of Anglophone over-representation despite efforts to the contrary (with smaller representation by Francophone and Arabophone countries). Diversification therefore requires active future Africa-based institutional initiatives. Indeed, it may be in the space created between new conversations, linking Africa with itself as well as with the globe, that may prove to be fertile grounds for new knowledges, approaches and directions to take shape. If there are no shortages of challenges for developing integrated urban public space models in African contexts, then by contradistinction a third challenge is that the resources, institutions and platforms to develop these are few. Bridging urban theory in academic disciplines with government and policy, the 'African Centre for Cities' (ACC) is an interdisciplinary urban studies programme based at the University of Cape Town and is one of few such examples on the continent. More recently, and similarly recognising the importance of inter/trans-disciplinarity as well as bridging a cross-sectoral space, the 'Centre on African Public Space' (CAPS) was formally launched across diverse platforms in 2022, internationally (at the 11th World Urban Forum in Katowice, Poland), continentally (at the 9th Africities Summit in Kenya), and finally at local government level at it is based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Building closely on the work of ACC, CAPS extends these questions into the space-related and design disciplines, while bringing greater focus on public space-related questions and processes, from conceptualisation through to implementation and maintenance. Necessarily collaborative in its work, CAPS was instrumental in putting together the current special issue of *The Journal of Public Space*. Such African-based intuitions – spanning across the thinking, making, and organising of core components of urbanism and city-making – are crucial in a rapidly urbanising continent. Developing required institutional capacity may also help to address another challenge, which is that the various emerging roles of public space is perhaps not yet fully appreciated, both culturally and politically. The authors and articles in this special issue present public space in Africa as a complex 'table' of questions, concerns, challenges and opportunities. Composed of social, economic, political, cultural, religious, environmental and geographical realities, in challenging contexts public space might serve as a crucial public good, and aimed at transforming the African city towards the betterment of the lives of all its inhabitants.

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