

Co-producing the Public: (Un)Learning Public Space in the Global South

According to sociologist Jürgen Habermas (1992), the term *public* encompasses all dimensions of human existence that carry shared relevance and are therefore subject to processes of social negotiation and regulation. From this perspective, public space emerges as a setting for meaningful encounters, the negotiation of interests, and the management of conflict. Ever since Henri Lefebvre (1968) called for a collective struggle for the city and its public spaces, the topic has remained central both to urban planning practice and to scholarly debate—not only in the Global North, but also across the Global South. In this context, the public remains a concept in the making, shaped by histories of colonial domination, repression, and political conflict. Public spaces, in turn, have played a crucial role as sites of resistance, negotiation, and social transformation.

Urban informality, a defining feature of cities in the Global South, plays a central role in shaping and experiencing the public sphere. While it is often associated with disorder and insecurity in public space, it can also—without romanticizing the phenomenon—foster innovative urban dynamics. Informality activates public space through practices such as tactical urbanism and community-based placemaking, generating spaces of collective encounter that contribute significantly to the everyday production of the public realm.

There is therefore an urgent need to collectively explore and redefine the meaning of the public and public space from the perspective of the Global South. We invite readers to understand public spaces as resources and platforms for collaborative learning, where society is shaped, citizenship strengthened, critical knowledge co-produced, and a sense of community cultivated. Processes of collective learning and co-production unfold continuously, unpredictably, and spontaneously (McFarlane, 2011). Yet they also raise fundamental questions: Under what conditions does public space become a regenerative site of collective learning? What forms of knowledge are co-produced in these spaces? And which of these forms of knowledge help us rethink our understanding of public space?

Guided by these questions, this first thematic call—*Co-producing the Public: (Un) Learning Public Space in the Global South*—selected eight articles that examine ongoing initiatives for the co-production of the public and public space from a variety of perspectives, approaches, and methodological standpoints, highlighting the complexity and richness of the phenomenon. Together, they offer examples that may guide us toward a more contextualized understanding of the public and, in its physical manifestation, of public space.

Carlos Quedas Campoy and Cleide Izidoro open the discussion through their exploration of the concept of *peripheral placemaking*, which, according to the authors, holds the potential to become a new “insurgent urban epistemology.” Their work points toward alternative ways of producing urban space rooted in the dynamics of working-class neighborhoods located in peripheral urban areas. To this end, the authors examine an informally built neighborhood on the outskirts of São Paulo, Brazil. Drawing on this case study, they deconstruct placemaking—a concept largely shaped within European planning traditions—and reconstruct it from a Latin American perspective. They conclude that the dynamics, strategies, and forms of knowledge emerging from peripheral territories can be scaled up to other urban contexts “without losing their territorial grounding.” Their work invites us to rethink the city through local urban dynamics, recognizing peripheral areas as spaces of co-production and collective learning.

Beyond the physical dimension of urban space, the public realm is also shaped by the impulses, activities, and narratives that animate it. Public space is deeply influenced by the ways in which we narrate and conceptualize the public itself. Gianluca Perseu, Celma Paese, and Lucas Balteiro explore this dimension by examining how public space is constructed and reproduced through narratives. Through an analysis of public narratives surrounding three waterfront parks in Brazil, the authors identify recurring terms and concepts that continue to reproduce vertical power structures and neoliberal models of urban development, while marginalizing ideas such as spatial justice and social inclusion. Their study demonstrates how public spaces are configured,

co-produced, and reproduced through dominant narratives within the planning community. In doing so, the authors underscore the importance of language in shaping both the public realm and public space.

Along similar lines, Irene Quintáns-Pintos and Lupicinio Íñiguez-Rueda, in their study “Care and Languages of Public Action Linked to the Built Environment,” analyze narratives of care promoted by the public sector in contrast to those articulated by urban activist collectives working in the field of urban mobility, examining how these narratives shape the collective production of the city. Their comparative study of Amsterdam and Barcelona focuses on two initiatives led by critical urban movements within local cycling communities that emerged in response to tragic incidents in public space. The authors examine how these events have influenced public policy and public discourse surrounding the notion of the caring city. Although centered on two European cases, the article highlights the potential for applying this perspective within the Global South. It also develops an exemplary methodology for deconstructing established narratives surrounding traditional notions of care and their relationship to public space, with a view toward reconstructing them through that same methodological lens. In relation to the theme of this issue, the article raises important questions about whether we are sufficiently aware of the multiple ways in which public space is co-produced, and whether adequate attention is being paid to vulnerable groups within these processes.

These concerns lead directly to the work of Luis Sánchez Castañeda and Carlos Ricardo Aguilar Astorga, who examine the degree of democratization embedded in public planning instruments. Their study critically analyzes the formulation of two governmental urban planning programs in Mexico City from a human rights perspective, contrasting local public policies with civil society movements and initiatives aimed at territorial resistance. Guided by Arnstein’s ladder of participation, the study reveals the still limited degree of citizen participation in the formulation and implementation of these programs. At the same time, local civil movements demonstrate the capacity to challenge

dominant planning logics, revealing alternative and community-based mechanisms for co-producing the public realm. According to the authors, there remains “a structural gap between the ideal of democratic planning and the reality of technocratic practice.” While the study acknowledges the strength of civil society initiatives, it concludes that improving technical planning tools alone is insufficient; it also calls for a broader shift in the values underpinning urban policy toward social and environmental justice.

In her contribution, Dayra Vargas Ardila foregrounds the different perspectives and interests that converge in the co-production of public spaces, configuring them as arenas of diversity, conflict, and consensus. Her article examines three cases of urban revitalization in Colombia in which former industrial landscapes were transformed into public spaces. According to her study, these processes of recovery—shaped by the competing interests of the actors involved—often generate spaces of conflict and debate. Within the framework of this publication, the author raises the following questions: What are the different interests shaping our public spaces? And how much visibility and attention do we grant to the various stakeholder groups and needs involved?

Along these same lines, the following two articles focus on initiatives emerging from civil society and grassroots urban movements. Both demonstrate how public space can be co-produced by citizens and, in doing so, acquire a certain degree of resilience. Adriana Sansao Fontes, Carolina Resende Ferraz, and João Pedro Oliveira Pompeu de Pina present a comparative study of three initiatives aimed at reclaiming public space for people. Located in Brazil, Colombia, and Chile, these initiatives are promoted by organized civil society groups. Drawing on the methodology of tactical urbanism, the authors analyze the three cases by identifying their spatial elements, central challenges, and project objectives. They conclude that “actions invented by the community represent forms of citizen empowerment and, when accompanied by appropriate instruments and institutional recognition, increase their potential for multiplication, replicability, and permanence,” while calling for a combination of “invented spaces” and “invited spaces.”

Wagner Rezende, meanwhile, examines an experience in collaborative urbanism involving students from the Federal University of Goiás and two neighborhood groups working together to create a public park in the peripheral areas of Goiânia, Brazil. This case study serves as a framework for exploring the collaborative production of a community public space. At a theoretical level, the article examines the concept and role of the urban commons within the framework of Henri Lefebvre's right to the city. Supported by empirical data, this theoretical exploration enables the author to emphasize the concept of insurgent citizenship, understood as a crucial dimension in the collaborative construction of the public through the active integration of local communities. According to Rezende, the creation of public spaces extends far beyond physical planning; it is a complex process involving interactions among physical space, urban commons, lived experience, and citizenship, among other factors.

To close this thematic issue, we incorporate a historical perspective on the co-production of public spaces and their transformation over time. Henry Farkas and Jane Victal apply Marc Augé's concept of the *non-place* to Praça Patriarca in São Paulo, a public square redesigned by Paulo Mendes da Rocha in 1992 and marked by a complex historical trajectory. Building on this concept, the authors analyze the current condition of this specific public space and the processes through which it acquires meaning for citizens despite its condition as a non-place. From this conceptual tension, they propose a compelling framework for rethinking the public realm from the perspectives and lived experiences of the Global South and its materialization in public space. Might this offer a path forward?

The selected articles reveal the urgent need to reflect critically on this topic while also demonstrating a wide range of possible approaches: from theoretical inquiry to forms of practice-based activism, and from community action to public policy. Together, they offer insight into the current state of efforts to democratize planning processes in the pursuit of inclusive public spaces. At the same time, they highlight the diversity of urban actors and interests that,

although often generating tensions within co-production processes, also open possibilities for resilience and community-driven initiatives.

The contributors invite us to question established concepts—such as placemaking, tactical urbanism, and the non-place—and to adapt and rethink them in relation to the contexts in which we operate. They also call for reflection on how narratives within planning discourse are constructed, deconstructed, and reproduced, underscoring the importance of consciously using language to foster inclusive and decolonial forms of discourse. Exploring the public and public space from a decolonial perspective requires us to interrogate the narratives through which these phenomena are understood: how we speak and write about them in ways that shape readers' perceptions and strengthen the critical capacity of discourse itself.

The narratives we promote shape the futures we build, while also raising questions about which social groups participate in the co-production of public spaces in our cities and which continue to be excluded. Taken together, all of the contributions emphasize that the co-production of the public must operate across multiple scales and levels, requiring a critical reassessment of our conceptual frameworks and perspectives if we are to enable deep, comprehensive, and long-term transformation. Diverse forms of learning and co-production are already taking shape across the Global South; the challenge lies in how to make them visible and how to integrate them into practice.

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