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EDITORIAL

Streets as Platforms of Public Life

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Abstract

Streets are emerging as vibrant platforms of public life. While mobility continues to be the dominant function of these spaces, streets are being reconfigured by various stakeholders to promote multifunctional benefits, including socialisation and inclusion, play and rest, political action, economic opportunities, biodiversity, and cultural expression. This thematic issue includes a wide range of contributions to address how streets are being (re)configured as public spaces. The contributions build upon existing scholarship that addresses the role and governance of public space in cities, including notions of the "right to the city" and everyday life. These perspectives inform the rising concerns about privatisation and securitization of public space in cities globally, and about the diminishing emancipatory potential of streets for urban residents. At the same time, there are increasing calls to design more people-centred cities and enhance the safety and wellbeing of urban residents by transforming vehicle-centric streets into multifunctional spaces—actions often driven by local governments. The contributions to this thematic issue demonstrate how these strategies are playing out in a wide range of contexts, highlighting the emancipatory potential of street transformations for residents, practitioners, and scholars.

Keywords

public space; sociocultural change; streets; urban transformation

1. Introduction

Streets and sidewalks are prominent and visible public spaces in cities (Bain et al., 2012; Banerjee, 2001; Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2011; Mehta, 2013). They are traditionally designed, built, and managed to facilitate the circulation of people and goods primarily by motorised transport (Bertolini, 2020). Since the

1990s, urban sustainability and liveability agendas around the world have called for the enhancement of the cultural and social dimensions of streets while deprioritising car-based mobility (Sheller & Urry, 2000). Local governments have responded by planning and implementing a wide range of concrete interventions to reduce vehicle traffic on urban streets (Bonnel, 1995; Kuss & Nicholas, 2022) and to promote social, cultural, and economic opportunities through alternative uses of these environments. Such actions catalyse broader urban transformations by inducing change in hyperlocal environments and shaping cities that are better equipped to meet the demands of the 21st century.

Conceptually, streets as platforms for public life build upon two cornerstones of urban studies: Lefebvre's "right to the city" (Purcell, 2014) and Jane Jacobs' observations about "eyes on the street" (Perrone, 2019). These concepts have inspired decades of urban activism and research about the social aspects of streets and sidewalks (Bain et al., 2012; Fyfe, 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris & Ehrenfeucht, 2011; Mehta, 2013; Mehta & Bosson, 2021; Von Schönfeld & Bertolini, 2017). The domination of street environments by motorised vehicles is framed as a profoundly political choice (Mattioli et al., 2020; Prytherch, 2022) that feeds into growth-based urbanism while alternative uses of street space directly resist that agenda. Streets are sites of informality, economic survival, and solidarity, and where collective potentials can be realised. However, streets as public and social infrastructures are not neutral; they are subject to power relations and "structural antagonisms" that invite questions about whom cities are for (Horton & Penny, 2023).

At the same time, local authorities are engaging in interventions and experimentation while balancing competing interests and shrinking budgets under austerity urbanism (Evans et al., 2016; Tonkiss, 2013). Whilst the established policy framing of "hegemonic" pedestrianisation initiatives restricts car-based mobility, particularly in central locations (Villani & Talamini, 2021), the opposite can be true in more peripheral suburban housing estates where street interventions can lead to increased traffic volumes. This is typical of post-war housing estates across different parts of Europe that are characterised by social segregation and a lack of social encounter that lively streets are meant to enable (Legeby et al., 2015). Therefore, street interventions can disrupt places of play and conviviality, as well as create them. Undoubtedly, street interventions play a significant role in shaping the city's metabolic and circulatory system that supports particular social, political, and economic orders. Unintended consequences are a familiar challenge for urban planners; the same applies for street interventions that fail to deliver the desired outcomes.

2. Articles in This Thematic Issue

This thematic issue is composed of six research articles with concrete examples from multiple geographical contexts and urban settings from central to peripheral. The articles focus on different types of street environments, including residential streets, urban streets, major arterial roads, and elevated walkways, while also covering a rich spectrum of social practices and functions, ranging from everyday social and economic interaction to political resistance and tourism-oriented activities.

The first three articles include cases from Southeast Asia and Latin America. García and Vergara-Perucich (2026) present their findings on communal "survival kitchens" in Santiago that emerged as a response to a crisis of inequality and food security in Chile. Volunteers transformed streets into arenas of collective care and political resistance through cooking and eating practices. The case emphasises how streets can be

reclaimed as political arenas to promote solidarity in times of crisis. Turner and Ngô (2026) discuss the experiences of female delivery drivers in Hanoi, Vietnam, and how their app-based work provides flexibility while introducing significant risks. The authors emphasise how arrangements of power are manifested in gendered encounters in public spaces, infrastructural neglect, and the platform-mediated rhythms of service provision. The drivers have developed individual and collective coping strategies to navigate these challenges. Sintusingha's (2026) case study, also located in the busy streets of Southeast Asia, focuses on a street intervention in Bandung, Indonesia. The city's mayor funded the design and construction of an elevated walkway over a busy streetscape to reduce tensions between informal vendors and tourists. The "Skywalk" was intended to solve local congestion issues while elevating the city to the international stage through comparisons to New York City's High Line project and Bangkok's globally renowned street vendor policies. Instead, it exposed tensions between formality and informality, and the intended and unintended consequences of streetscape reconfigurations.

The next three articles bring contemporary evidence from varied European contexts. Bruzzese (2026) examines a programme of 60 tactical interventions to streets and squares in Milan, Italy, that has reclaimed 55,000 sqm of public space since its inception in 2018. These interventions close streets to car traffic, particularly near schools, and are implemented through participatory methods. They introduce new street furniture that encourages pedestrian lingering and interaction, and incorporate attractive, light touch, and low-cost design features. Emanuel et al. (2026) provide a parallel study of street experiments in Stockholm, Sweden over the last decade, where different actors instigated temporary street changes, including pop-up parks and pedestrianised summer streets. The authors propose four "experimental logics" to characterise the influence of actors, how they instigate changes, and the outcomes of their activities. Both articles contribute to wider debates about the implications of tactical urbanism, the contradictions of institutionalisation, the limitations of temporariness, and the challenges of socio-spatial justice, long-term maintenance, and the governing of the commons (Karvonen & Bylund, 2023). Nordberg et al. (2026) present a Danish case study of post-war housing estate renewal in Copenhagen and Aarhus. They describe how the national government imposed controversial legislation to address perceived socio-economic and ethnic segregation in particular housing estates by introducing new streets to increase circulation. The case highlights the frictions between national priorities and local needs, and how changes to streets can produce uneven benefits and undesirable conditions.

The six articles share a similar focus on urban streets but diverge in their change processes and the key actors who are triggering these changes. Streets are often considered to be part of the public realm and are controlled by local authorities. The Milan, Stockholm, Bandung, and Copenhagen/Aarhus case studies demonstrate how local governments leverage their authority and influence to reorganise social conditions to align with their visions of the "good city." In contrast, insurgent and everyday street activities emerge from individuals and informal groups who transform street environments through social interaction, sometimes in direct response to state failure. The Santiago and Hanoi case studies illustrate such subaltern forms of urban transformation where ordinary and everyday experiences are mobilised to navigate gendered and economic power relations. It is significant to note that in both articles, women are the primary agents, highlighting how streets are infused with gendered power hierarchy (Beebeejaun, 2017). While it is tempting to categorise street transformations as either top-down and bottom-up, these actions draw upon a combination of institutional and grassroots actions to produce differentiated gradations of governance arrangements and modes of action (Villani & Talamini, 2021).

In addition to diverging modes of change, the articles in this thematic issue present different interpretations of space. Each street environment is strongly influenced by the specific spatial, social, and economic contexts in which it is embedded, a condition that affects both the nature of the transformation process and its potential outcomes. The predominance of mobility-related uses, which only partially modify the street's traditional circulatory function, or, conversely, of activities oriented toward dwelling, social interaction, collective care, or tourism, which more radically reconfigure street uses, can be understood as two ends of a spectrum. The spatial imaginary can be anchored in a particular locale, such as a block or specific street, where different interventions are staged to produce impacts. The Milan, Stockholm, Santiago, and Bandung case studies involve the reconfiguration of bounded streetscapes. Conversely, streets can be understood as metabolic conduits where interventions leverage these circulatory aspects to mobilise change. This is evident in the case studies of Hanoi and Copenhagen/Aarhus, where movement and flux are a central component of lived conditions.

These two dimensions of urban streets—change processes and spatial interpretations—can be superimposed upon one another to produce a typology of street transformation (Figure 1). The upper right quadrant includes the cases of Bandung, Milan, and Stockholm, which involve processes of anchoring by local authorities. The bottom right, represented by Santiago's street kitchens, is similarly anchored but is driven by the bottom-up, everyday practices of active residents. In the bottom left quadrant, the experiences of women delivery drivers in Hanoi personify a circulatory, bottom-up perspective. Finally, the top left quadrant demonstrates how top-down forms of steering can leverage the metabolic character of streets, as personified by the case studies in Copenhagen and Aarhus. Collectively, the typology offers multiple pathways or trajectories of how streets are being reconfigured as platforms of public life.
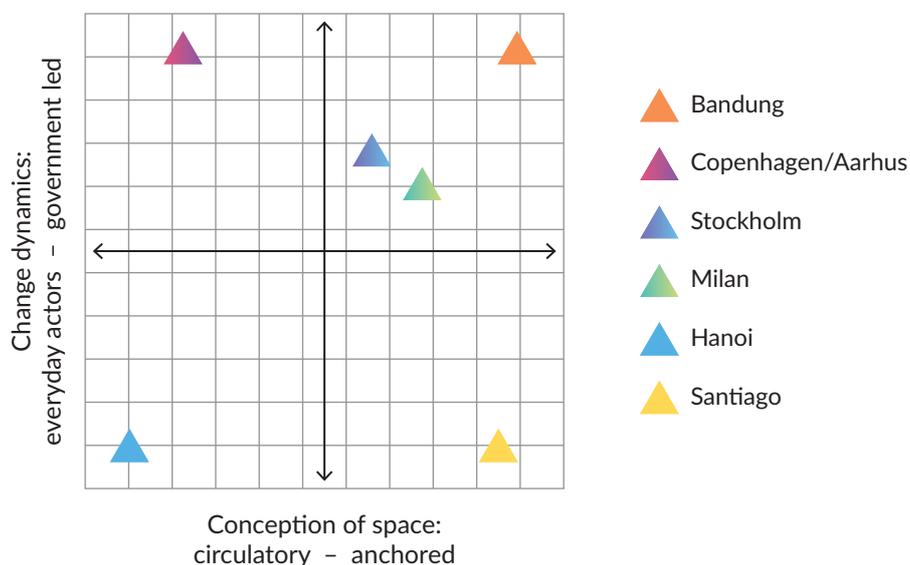

Figure 1. Typology of street transformation.

3. Conclusions

Streets and sidewalks are not a neutral backdrop to urban public life; instead, they mediate relations of power and define the boundaries of who can circulate, assemble, and assert belonging in the city. Streets

have always been contested and evolving, and these dynamics will continue in the coming years. The introduction of autonomous vehicles, the rise of civil society protest movements, and increasingly frequent climate disruptions and economic shocks are some of the many ways that streets will continue to play a central role in the everyday life and long-term liveability in cities of the future. The articles in this thematic issue provide contemporary insights on the change dynamics and spatial assumptions that underpin street transformations and the multiple impacts to broader urban development processes (Bertolini, 2020). The public, collective character of streets is at once a reflection of the heterogeneous values expressed in streetscapes, as well as an opportunity to interrogate these values and work towards aligning the built environment with them.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

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