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and Andrew Karvonen

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## 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

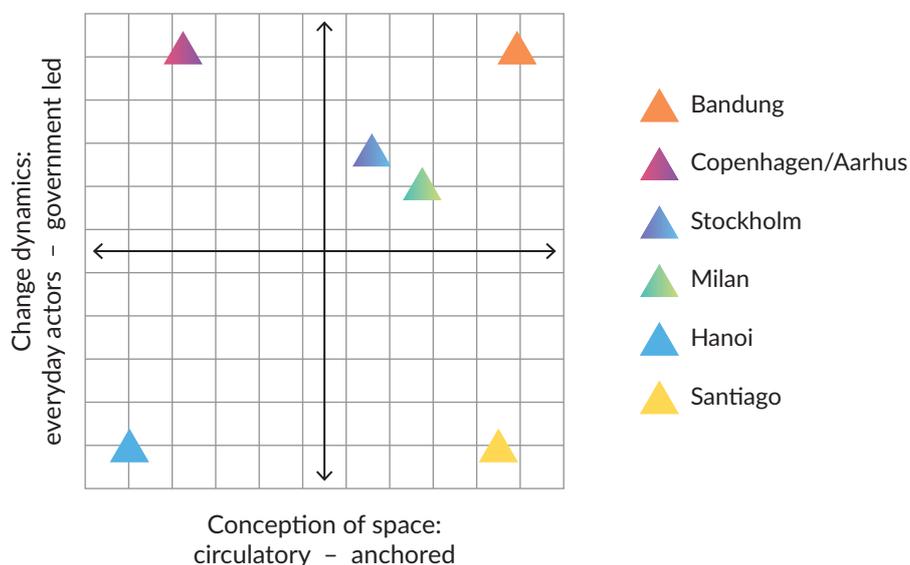
reclaimed as political arenas to promote solidarity in times of crisis. Turner and Ngô (2026) discuss the experiences of female delivery drivers in Hanoi, Vietnam, and how their app-based work provides flexibility while introducing significant risks. The authors emphasise how arrangements of power are 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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# From Survival to Solidarity: Reclaiming Santiago's Streets and Plazas Through Food, Care, and Collective Resistance in *Ollas Comunes*

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## Abstract

Lefebvre conceptualises streets as spaces imbued with political meaning, where mobility, everyday life, and resistance dynamically converge. This conceptualisation was vividly manifested during the 2019 social revolt in Santiago, Chile, when citizens appropriated streets and plazas as territories of collective struggle against entrenched inequalities. In this context—and subsequently amplified during the Covid-19 pandemic—*ollas comunes* (community-led survival kitchens) appeared as grassroots responses addressing food insecurity. Historically spearheaded by women from marginalised urban communities, these initiatives embody not only immediate survival strategies but also profound acts of spatial and political resistance. By providing free communal meals, *ollas comunes* actively disrupt the prevailing neoliberal governance of urban space, reclaiming streets as arenas of collective care, mobility, and embodied everyday democracy. Whilst scholarship identifies food struggles within public spaces as integral to asserting the right to the city (Purcell & Tyman, 2015), it has primarily focused on urban agriculture. Conversely, initiatives centred on collective food consumption remain significantly understudied. Framed by Lefebvre’s dialectics and drawing on qualitative data from interviews, focus groups, and participant observations, this article examines how *ollas comunes* in Santiago contest the dominant logic of neoliberal governance and ownership within public space. Findings demonstrate that cooking and eating in the street not only transform physical streetscapes and mobility patterns but also produce emergent publics, meanings, and solidarities. By foregrounding these practices, this article enriches scholarly understandings of streets as contested platforms where food solidarity, care, and resistance converge to challenge neoliberal urban imaginaries.

## Keywords

food sovereignty; *ollas comunes*; plazas; politics of urban space; right to the city; streets

## 1. Introduction

Chile currently ranks among the Latin American countries with the highest income per capita (OECD, 2021). However, this economic performance coexists with deep-rooted social disparities, making Chile the most unequal country in the region (De Rosa et al., 2020). These contradictions came to a head in October 2019, when a social revolt erupted that profoundly disrupted daily life and reconfigured the political meaning of urban space. Unrest was sparked by a metro fare increase of 30 pesos, and protesters quickly broadened their demands to centre on “dignity” as a normative principle, rooting claims in decades of neoliberal policies and inequality (Hiner et al., 2021). The widely repeated slogan “It’s Not About 30 Pesos, It’s About 30 Years” captured the collective frustration over a post-dictatorship democratic transition, which had deepened the neoliberal model and failed to address structural injustices (Arias-Loyola, 2021).

During this period, Santiago’s streets and plazas were transformed into spaces of resistance. Massive demonstrations occupied key streets, filled with *cacerolazos* (pot-banging protests), barricades, and acts of civil disobedience, including the burning of buses, metro stations, and critical infrastructure. Amid the upheaval, grassroots initiatives emerged under the slogan “*El Pueblo Ayuda Al Pueblo*” (in English, the people help the people), reclaiming public space as a site of mutual aid and political expression. In neighbourhood plazas and streets, assemblies and *cabildos* (public deliberative gatherings) proliferated, fostering new forms of citizen-led public deliberation (Guerrero Jiménez & Pérez Mora, 2020). Alongside these, *ollas comunes* emerged as social infrastructures of survival and solidarity. While a few were established in epicentres of protest such as Plaza Dignidad (renamed by protesters but formerly Plaza Italia), many more appeared across peripheral neighbourhoods where formal food infrastructure was absent or disrupted (Fuentes et al., 2022).

The global Covid-19 pandemic in early 2020 abruptly interrupted Chile’s political awakening. Alongside its global public health impacts (Nicola et al., 2020), the pandemic caused significant disruption to food systems (Singh et al., 2021) and exacerbated existing inequalities in cities (Sharifi & Khavarian-Garmsir, 2020). In Chile’s already fragile social context, it deepened a multidimensional crisis, marked by unemployment, a contracting informal economy, and a rising cost of living (Arias-Loyola & Vergara-Perucich, 2021). Food insecurity became a widespread concern, affecting not only the poorest people but also segments of the middle class. According to FAO et al. (2024), approximately 700,000 people (3.8% of the population) experienced severe food insecurity, while around 2.9 million people (15.6% of the population) faced moderate or severe levels.

In response, *ollas comunes* re-emerged on an unprecedented scale, filling the void left by a weak and delayed state response. By mid-2020, more than 1,500 community kitchens were operating across the Santiago Metropolitan Area, collectively serving an estimated 235,000 meals daily—about 150 per *olla* (Valenzuela-Levi et al., 2024). With historical roots in the urban housing movements of the 1960s (Gallardo, 1985) and in the survival strategies of *poblaciones* (low-income settlements) during the Pinochet dictatorship in the 1980s (Hardy, 2020), these soup kitchens embodied political tools of grassroots resistance and mutual care through food. By providing free communal meals in contested spaces during and after the pandemic, *ollas comunes* challenged the dominant neoliberal logic of urban governance, reclaiming streets and plazas as arenas of collective reproduction, mobility, and everyday democracy. Recent scholarship has highlighted not only the resurgence of *ollas comunes* but also their intersection with long-standing practices such as *mingas* (collective work rooted in mutual aid for planting and harvesting; Hiner et al., 2022).

Within this context, Lefebvre's (1996) concept of the right to the city becomes particularly pertinent. He conceived this right not only as access to urban space but also as a claim to its appropriation, symbolic meaning, and transformation. For Lefebvre, public space is a crucial arena for constructing urbanity. He particularly emphasised the importance of *autogestión* (self-management) in everyday life as a pathway to reclaiming urban spaces (Purcell, 2008). Thus, *autogestión* is central to realising the right to the city, whereby collective practices challenge commodified urban imaginaries and create space for emancipatory alternatives (Purcell & Tyman, 2015).

This article also engages with feminist and decolonial critiques of public space, which challenge idealised notions of universality and foreground the gendered and racialised dimensions of visibility, access, and belonging (Lyra, 2023; Mirafteb & Huq, 2024). In doing so, it distinguishes between “streets” (linear public corridors of mobility, commerce, and social interaction), “plazas” (open public squares), and “public space” (the broader category encompassing both). This distinction is central to our analysis of how different urban spaces mediate the political and social functions of *ollas comunes*.

Although community struggles over food in cities are increasingly acknowledged in recent literature (Hammelman et al., 2024; Morrow et al., 2023), most studies have focused on urban agriculture and community gardening to assert the right to the city (Purcell & Tyman, 2015; Tornaghi & Certomà, 2019). In contrast, practices centred on communal food consumption in public spaces, such as *ollas comunes*, remain significantly under-explored. Nevertheless, similar contemporary collective cooking initiatives have emerged across diverse contexts; from soup kitchens in low-income neighbourhoods during the pandemic in Latin America (Leetoy & Gravante, 2021) and Sierra Leone (Osuteye et al., 2020) to more “radical” kitchens operating in the UK (Gennari & Tornaghi, 2020) and Germany (Hübl, 2024).

Drawing on qualitative research methods—specifically interviews, focus groups, and participant observation—this article examines three case studies of *ollas comunes* in Santiago. It explores how these community kitchens can challenge established systems of ownership, governance, and social reproduction, arguing that cooking and eating in public spaces transform the urban landscape, create new communities, foster solidarity, and generate alternative urban narratives. By doing so, this research places *ollas comunes* in Santiago within a broader transnational context of food solidarity and spatial resistance, thereby contributing to discussions on grassroots urbanism, spatial justice, and the transformative potential of collective care.

## 2. The Street and Plaza as a Stage: Self-Management, Care, and the Politics of Urban Space

The urban street, in its most conventional sense, is a space of flows. It is a network of thoroughfares designed to guide the movement of people and goods, the primary stage upon which the theatre of urban life unfolds (Dovey, 2024; Mehta, 2013). Prevailing discourse often cloaks the street in a veneer of neutrality, framing it as a common ground that is accessible and open to all, a functional platform for social interaction and economic activity (Carmona, 2003; Mehta, 2024). This framing, however, frequently overlooks the profound extent to which streets are shaped by socio-spatial inequalities and embedded power structures (Stavrides & De Angelis, 2016). The assumption that streets inherently serve a universal public interest fails to reckon with the insidious ways in which neoliberal urbanism has reconfigured public space into a site of commodification, control, and exclusion (Harvey, 2013). In cities governed by speculative

development and privatisation, streets are increasingly managed to prioritise profit and order over inclusivity and democratic expression. This disproportionately affects marginalised groups, who face not only material displacement but also a symbolic erasure from public life (Purcell, 2008; Vergara-Perucich & Arias-Loyola, 2021). The street, far from being a neutral conduit, is thus a deeply contested terrain where rights, visibility, and citizenship are negotiated daily.

Feminist and decolonial critiques have also challenged idealised notions of public space. Kern (2021) discusses how urban spaces are gendered, with their design and infrastructure producing unequal opportunities for engagement. McKittrick (2006) reveals how racialised geographies structure belonging and exclusion, underscoring that urban space actively enforces marginalisation. Recent scholarship builds on these critical insights, emphasising that visibility, access, and participation in public life are shaped by the intersection of gender and race-based exclusions (Lyra, 2023; Miraftab & Huq, 2024). These perspectives are particularly relevant to *ollas comunes*, historically and contemporarily led by women and often emerging in marginalised urban territories (Hiner et al., 2022). Their practices of care and collective provisioning reconfigure the meaning and function of public space, foregrounding reproductive labour as a central dimension of urban life.

The emergence of Santiago's *ollas comunes* within this contested terrain places them in a broader current of grassroots urban initiatives that are fundamentally reconfiguring citizen-state relations across Latin America and beyond. These projects deftly balance autonomy with institutional interaction. In Chile, *ferias libres* (street farmers' markets) function as residual spaces of citizen sovereignty (Salazar, 2004), meeting weekly urban demand for fresh, affordable produce while reinforcing popular self-determination. Similarly, Valparaíso's street vendors assert their presence in public spaces under divergent regimes—some with municipal permits, others without—drawing attention to infrastructure neglect (e.g., toilets, waste bins, etc.) that systematically excludes their needs (Ojeda & Pino, 2019). In Cusco, Peru, street vendors deploy personalised forms of political agency to navigate state regulation in tourism-saturated zones, illustrating why some are better positioned than others to resist repressive policies and benefit from the global tourism economy (Steel, 2012). These practices are not mere reactions to precarity but are, more profoundly, active forms of constructing popular sovereignty from the ground up, challenging a logic of neoliberal governance that so often excludes and fragments citizens. In this sense, they operate as veritable laboratories where citizenship is exercised through daily material practice, reclaiming the right to the city not as an abstract slogan but as a tangible, ongoing achievement.

Recent scholarship documents show how such movements navigate the complex dialectic between autonomy and negotiation with formal institutions. In Mexico City, for instance, housing organisations have forged autonomous management practices that, whilst providing immediate solutions, can also lead to a form of “fragmented citizenship” when interacting with the state apparatus (Rodríguez Cortés, 2017). Conversely, resident-managed housing projects in Brazil have shown a remarkable potential to empower communities and catalyse wider civic participation, transforming local governance from below (Donaghy, 2024). Beyond resource management, these movements often strategically adopt the language of human rights, shifting the arena of claims-making from the nation-state to the municipality in what has been termed a “local turn” that challenges traditional paradigms of rights (Fernandez-Wulff & Yap, 2020). Viewed collectively, these experiences reveal how, particularly in contexts of austerity or state withdrawal, citizen-led self-management emerges as a pragmatic alternative that not only claims rights but actively redefines urban citizenship itself.

Within this universe of contestation, collective food practices are particularly significant. When applied to the urban context, food sovereignty transcends the technical goal of food security to become a political framework for a more just and ecological urbanism (Resler & Hagolani-Albov, 2021). Its full potential, however, is realised when it is articulated with a robust “food democracy” that enables genuine stakeholder deliberation and fosters community efficacy (López Cifuentes & Sonnino, 2024; Resler & Hagolani-Albov, 2021). This conceptualisation aligns directly with an expansive vision of the right to the city, one that encompasses not just access to services but the fundamental right to participate in the very production and appropriation of urban space (Islar & Irgil, 2018). The *ollas comunes* insert themselves into this conversation, yet they do so by shifting the analytical focus from production to consumption, suggesting that the collective act of cooking and eating together in public is an equally potent and politicised facet of urban food sovereignty.

This politicisation of consumption is anchored in a specific and highly symbolic arena: the street. When the everyday practices of care and social reproduction are deployed in public space, they can radically reconfigure its dominant logic. Conventional urban planning, with its focus on mobility and commerce, typically renders the labour of social reproduction invisible. Yet, as studies on the mobility of low-income women in Colombia demonstrate, the imperatives of care constantly reveal and challenge the priorities of transport planning (Oviedo Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016). Similarly, their experiences during the Covid-19 pandemic highlighted the persistent friction between their care responsibilities and their patterns of mobility (Orjuela & Schwanen, 2023). It is precisely this friction that grassroots initiatives can transform into a political tool. For example, such initiatives have been conceptualised as a “politics of dwelling,” a mode of resistance grounded in an ethics of care and the spatial practices of everyday life (Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2022). This “politics of dwelling” stands in stark opposition to a model of capitalist urban development that systematically marginalises care work through processes of gentrification and informalisation (Miraftab & Huq, 2024). From this vantage point, care practices cease to be a mere backdrop to urban life and are revealed as a powerful motor of spatial politics, actively reassembling the meaning and function of the street.

The protagonists of this “politics of dwelling” are, overwhelmingly, women. Their labour of care and social reproduction, by spilling out from the domestic sphere and occupying public space, constitutes a direct challenge to the patriarchal division between the public and the private. Capitalist urbanism does not just marginalise care; it does so in gendered ways that reinforce existing inequalities (Miraftab & Huq, 2024). Nonetheless, it is precisely through their reproductive responsibilities that women negotiate and shape their urban experience, a dynamic observed in the mobility and access patterns of Colombia (Oviedo Hernandez & Titheridge, 2016). Collective urban experiments led by women across Latin America have been crucial in asserting that the realisation of the right to the city is inextricable from the recognition and valorisation of reproductive labour (Fisher, 1993; Lyra, 2023). The act of installing a kitchen on a public pavement, therefore, is not merely a survival strategy; it is a profound act of spatial politics, performed by women, that redraws the urban landscape and subverts deeply entrenched boundaries.

It is crucial to analyse the temporal and political horizon of these initiatives that so often erupt in moments of rupture. The literature on social movements explores how grassroots responses to acute crises can evolve into durable platforms for political mobilisation (Blanco & León, 2017; Boonstra et al., 2023). The concept of “fertile soil” is useful here, describing the complex social context—marked by diversity, tension, and contradiction—that enables such initiatives to flourish (Sekulova et al., 2017). Often, it is a *drasis*—an

unexpected event unfolding in a specific time and place, such as the 2019 social revolt or the subsequent pandemic—that acts as a catalyst for transformative organising, generating new assemblages of resistance and socio-spatial solidarity (Daskalaki, 2018). The durability of these movements hinges on a combination of factors, including social capital, organisational resources, and government support (Boonstra et al., 2023). Their most radical potential, however, may lie in their capacity for what has been termed “prefigurative politics” (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020): a mode of action that does not simply oppose the existing order but builds and practises, in the here and now, the social relations and democratic forms it hopes to achieve. The *ollas comunes*, in their articulation of co-presence and contestation, precisely embody this potential, operating as microcosms of a society grounded in solidarity and mutual care—what Ferguson (2021) terms the social obligations emerging from the shared condition of being together.

It is Lefebvre’s seminal body of work that offers the foundational grammar for deciphering the profound political and spatial significance of Santiago’s *ollas comunes*. Lefebvre’s famous declaration that the right to the city is a “cry and a demand” resonates powerfully with the emergence of these kitchens, which represent a tangible enactment of this right not as a gift from the state, but as a practice seized from the street (Lefebvre, 1996). To operationalise this framework, this article employs a tripartite theoretical apparatus drawn directly from Lefebvre’s thought. Firstly, the analysis is underpinned by his theory of the production of space (Lefebvre, 1991). This lens allows us to dissect the street as a product of three interlocking dialectical moments: the spatial practice (perceived space) of the olla’s daily routines of procurement, cooking, and distribution; the representations of space (conceived space) of urban planners and authorities, who frame the street as a zone of transit and commerce; and, most crucially, the spaces of representation (lived space), where the street is symbolically re-appropriated and experienced as a site of solidarity, dignity, and resistance. The analysis focuses on the tensions and contradictions between these three moments. Secondly, this is complemented by the more subtle tools of rhythm analysis (Lefebvre, 2004). The article will explore how the *ollas* introduce a new cadence into the urban environment—a choreography of care whose daily and weekly cycles interrupt and overlay the dominant rhythms of the capitalist city. By analysing these intersecting polyrhythms, we can understand how the temporal logic of social reproduction challenges the homogenising pulse of capital. Finally, these concepts are understood within the broader context of the urban revolution (Lefebvre, 2003), which posits a continuous struggle to prioritise the “use value” of the city over its “exchange value.” In this view, *ollas comunes* are more than just survival initiatives; they are fleeting but potent microcosms of this revolution, prefiguring an alternative urban life grounded in collective practice and mutual aid.

### 3. Methodology

To explore the role of *ollas comunes* in contemporary urban food systems, this article follows a qualitative, multi-method design, grounded in a constructivist epistemology and an ontology of relational assemblages. The research proceeds from the assumption that social realities are co-constructed through everyday practices and that material-semiotic relations—encompassing people, spaces, ingredients, infrastructures, and discourses—assemble dynamically to produce collective action (Latour, 2005; Müller, 2015). This investigation, therefore, adopts a constructivist-interpretivist stance in which knowledge is understood to be generated through a dialogic engagement between the researcher and participants (Charmaz, 2014). Reality is viewed as contingent, multiple, and processual; *ollas comunes* are consequently treated not as fixed entities but as fluid assemblages whose boundaries, actors, and purposes crystallise only through practice.

This position legitimises the use of thick description, sustained reflexivity, and iterative theorisation, whilst fully acknowledging the politically situated nature of both the fieldwork and its subsequent analysis (Denzin, 2018). The enquiry aims not to derive universal laws, but rather to understand the situated meanings, power asymmetries, and political possibilities that emerge around these community kitchens in post-pandemic Santiago.

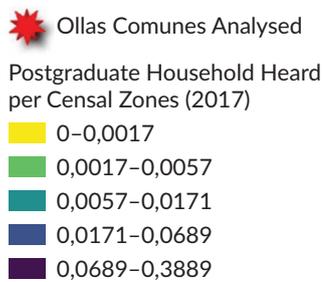
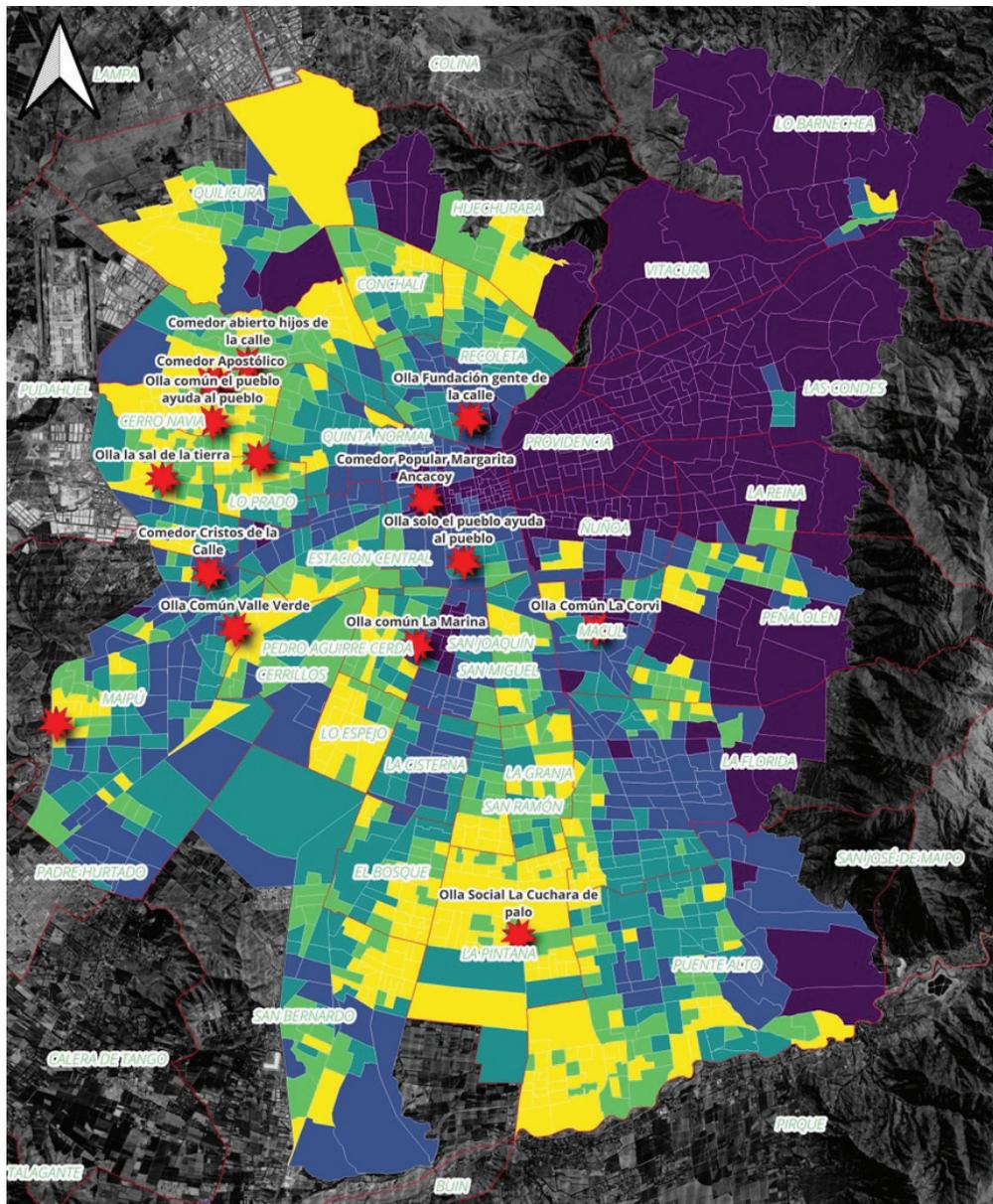
This epistemological commitment directly informs the selection of a comparative multiple-case study logic, chosen to capture variation across diverse urban territories whilst permitting analytical rather than statistical generalisation (Yin, 2018). Three specific cases—Comedor Popular Margarita Ancacoy (CPMA; central Santiago), Olla Común La Ruta de la Cuchara (OCRC; Cerro Navia), and Olla Común El Pueblo Ayuda al Pueblo (OCPAP; Cerro Navia)—were selected through maximum variation sampling to represent different trajectories of organisation, resource ecologies, and territorial precarities. Each case constitutes an embedded unit of analysis, comprising a network of organisers, volunteers, eaters, and allied institutions such as municipal officers, NGOs, and local food retailers. The empirical investigation unfolded over a 13-month period from January 2024 to January 2025, following iterative cycles of immersion, provisional coding, and theoretical sampling. Four complementary techniques were employed to generate a rich, multi-perspectival dataset. Firstly, 45 in-depth, semi-structured interviews, averaging 45 minutes in length, were conducted with organisers ( $n = 18$ ), regular volunteers ( $n = 13$ ), and external stakeholders ( $n = 14$ ). These interviews combined narrative prompts with targeted probes on governance, resource mobilisation, gendered labour, and perceptions of food sovereignty. Secondly, the first author undertook extensive participatory and ethnographic observation, volunteering weekly in procurement, cooking, and distribution shifts. This generated 100 hours of detailed field notes focused on mundane routines, affective atmospheres, and conflict-resolution practices, whilst the shadowing of key actors during supply pickups helped map the socio-material networks extending beyond the kitchen itself. Thirdly, two focus group discussions (with 15–17 participants each) were convened, first to create collective timelines of each *olla's* evolution and post-pandemic challenges and second to facilitate debate on the research findings and explore further alliances between *ollas*. Finally, to contextualise these micro-level findings, spatial indicators of food accessibility were retrieved from Chile's National Socio-Economic Survey and the Ministry of Health's retail registry, triangulating perceived and measured food insecurity by overlaying GIS data with the *ollas'* catchment areas (Jara Nercasseau, 2021).

The analytical procedures were underpinned by a constructivist grounded-theory protocol (Charmaz, 2014). An initial phase of line-by-line coding remained close to participants' own language, after which a focused coding phase clustered actions and meanings into higher-order conceptual categories, such as “solidarity logistics,” “the politics of care,” and “infrastructures of improvisation.” Through a process of constant comparison across interviews, focus groups, observations, and GIS outputs, abductive insights were generated into how relational food scarcity shapes organisational forms. To ensure the trustworthiness of these interpretations, credibility was enhanced through method triangulation, prolonged engagement in the field, and member validation workshops where preliminary findings were collectively debated. Transferability was supported by the provision of rich, contextual thick description, while dependability relied on a clear audit trail of coding decisions stored in NVivo. Reflexive journals were maintained throughout to document the researchers' affective responses and potential biases, explicitly acknowledging the intersections of class, gender, and academic privilege that shaped the research encounter. Formal ethics approval was obtained from the University College London (Ref. DPU2022-004(02)), and informed consent,

reinforced verbally before each interaction, guaranteeing confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw up to six months after the interaction.

Whilst this qualitative design affords considerable depth and contextual nuance, its limitations must be acknowledged. The non-probabilistic sampling strategy necessarily restricts any claims to statistical generalisation. Furthermore, the secondary spatial data on food deserts, though valuable for triangulation, employ administrative units larger than the *ollas*' immediate catchment areas, which may potentially dilute the visibility of neighbourhood-scale disparities. These constraints are, however, consciously mitigated by the study's comparative logic and reflexive epistemology, which privilege the generation of transferable analytical insights over the pursuit of statistical representation.

Figure 1 and Table 1 show that the demographics of the 16 *ollas comunas* mapped across eight districts of Santiago occupy census zones characterised by multiple, overlapping forms of vulnerability. The average population per zone is on average 3,900 inhabitants, yet the socio-economic indicators are more telling. Except for CPMA (13.3% of residents holding postgraduate degrees), every zone records postgraduate attainment below 3%; several, including Maipú's El Ensueño and Renca's Comedor Abierto Hijos de la Calle, register 0%. Using postgraduate presence as a proxy for high income, this confirms that *ollas comunas* anchor themselves outside Santiago's affluent quarters and within districts historically marked by lower household earnings. The demographic mix underscores their strategic role in low-income territories. Migrant concentrations peak in Recoleta (53.6%) and in the centrally located but still precarious Santiago census tract hosting Olla Solo El Pueblo Ayuda Al Pueblo (45.3%), signalling that *ollas comunas* often double as points of cultural as well as nutritional support for recent arrivals. Indigenous self-identification exceeds 14% in seven zones, foregrounding an intersection of ethnic and class marginalisation. Finally, an ageing profile is evident: half the zones show senior-headed households above 35%, reaching 47% in Pedro Aguirre Cerda where Olla Común la Marina is located. Census zone data reveal that *ollas comunas* have value as critical community infrastructures within Santiago's low-income districts, bridging material scarcity for populations simultaneously shaped by advanced age, migrant status, and indigenous heritage.



**Figure 1.** Map of the *ollas comunes* interviewed in the Santiago Metropolitan area. Note: The authors used QGIS to create this figure.

**Table 1.** Summary of demographics on each census zone (2017) where *ollas comunes* are placed.

Organisation	District	People living in the census zone (INE, 2017)	Percentage of people with postgraduate studies in the census zone (INE, 2017)	Percentage of migrants in census zone (INE, 2017)	Percentage of Aboriginal community descendants in the census zone (INE, 2017)	Percentage of senior household heads (60 to 100 years old) in the census zone (INE, 2017)
Comité Social y Vecinal El Ensueño	Maipú	5,093	0%	2.30%	14.72%	19.04%
Olla Común Valle Verde	Maipú	4,305	1.14%	3.33%	11.10%	14.79%
Olla Común la Corvi	Macul	3,358	2.84%	5.78%	12.51%	34.76%
Comedor Cristos de la Calle	Maipú	4,308	2.64%	3.44%	9.70%	29.19%
CPMA	Santiago	1,218	13.26%	14.08%	9.16%	14.44%
Comedor Abierto Hijos de la Calle	Renca	2,509	0%	4.77%	16.24%	33.38%
Comedor Apostólico	Cerro Navia	3,622	0.10%	1.51%	14.76%	38.87%
Olla la Sal de la Tierra	Pudahuel	2,801	0%	3.47%	15.61%	34.78%
OCRC	Cerro Navia	3,622	0.10%	1.51%	14.76%	38.87%
OCPAP	Cerro Navia	5,047	0%	9.67%	13.24%	37.91%
Olla Común la Marina	Pedro Aguirre Cerda	2,113	2.49%	3.16%	10.68%	46.98%
Olla Común Social Popular Violeta Parra	Renca	3,417	0.21%	7.93%	11.21%	35.77%
Olla Social la Cuchara de Palo	La Pintana	4,888	0.23%	1.76%	14.98%	37.51%
Olla Solo el Pueblo Ayuda al Pueblo	Santiago	5,562	2.29%	45.26%	8.38%	8.22%
Olla Fundación Gente de la Calle	Recoleta	5,169	1.80%	53.62%	11.26%	14.18%
Olla Coordinadora Nacional de Inmigrantes	Recoleta	5,169	1.80%	53.62%	11.26%	14.18%

Note: Authors' data is based on INE (2017) and Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia (2022).

## 4. Results and Findings

### 4.1. CPMA: Asserting Autonomy and Cultivating Sovereignty

CPMA emerged in the aftermath of Santiago's October 2019 social uprising. Amid spontaneous neighbourhood assemblies that coalesced in public spaces throughout the city, work commissions formed organically. One of CPMA's founders became actively involved in one such commission, which, following the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, shifted to an online format. In these virtual exchanges, the intensifying socio-economic crisis became starkly visible, particularly through rising levels of food insecurity. As the organiser recounted: "It was imperative to generate actions of solidarity and mutual aid among neighbours during the pandemic, similar to those seen during the crisis in Chile in the 1980s, which could take the form of *ollas comunes* or *comedores*."

For that purpose, the first challenge faced by CPMA was identifying a suitable location from which to coordinate food donations and support vulnerable neighbours. Initially, given their lack of legal status, the organisers sought to collaborate with the local neighbourhood committee. However, mounting friction over decision-making led them to pursue an autonomous route. Having secured an informal agreement with a university workers' union, CPMA began operating from the union's facilities, which provided access to a warehouse, kitchen, utensils, furniture, and basic utilities such as water and electricity.

Located near La Moneda—the presidential palace—and surrounded by university buildings and daytime commercial activity, the *comedor* was named in honour of Margarita Ancacoy, an indigenous cleaning worker at the University of Chile who was tragically murdered in route to work in the early morning hours. In contrast to dominant representations of *ollas comunes* as initiatives led by urban-poor women, CPMA's organising team was comprised of middle-class, gender-balanced, and university-educated volunteers.

To sustain operations, CPMA employed a diverse repertoire of resource-mobilisation strategies. Flyers soliciting food and monetary donations circulated in local shops and were posted on neighbourhood murals. Businesses placed donation boxes for customer contributions while residents and volunteers redirected portions of their state-issued food aid boxes to the *comedor*. Fundraising efforts also included selling calendars and organising cultural events such as *peñas*. Although sporadic, universities, churches, and the private sector also contributed donations during the height of the pandemic. Digital platforms enabled CPMA to coordinate collective activities such as bingo and raffles, mechanisms that raised funds while simultaneously amplifying public discourse around food injustice. Political actors occasionally donated food during election periods, yet, as one organiser remarked, "politicians came to donate food, but in reality, they were looking for a photo with us for electoral reasons, which we always refused."

In alignment with food sovereignty principles, CPMA launched two initiatives that extended beyond cooking and food distribution. First, they set up a purchasing model that involved buying legumes and grains in bulk directly from rural producers at affordable prices. This also led to the creation of a consumer cooperative, allowing neighbours to pool resources and lower costs. Second, they developed two community gardens, one on university grounds and the other at the Salvador Allende Museum. These actions were encapsulated by the slogan "Cooking and Growing, Another Way to Struggle." Though these gardens contributed symbolically to cooking, their primary purpose was educational. As one organiser reflected:

My commitment is to connect this task with multiple opportunities in the garden, such as learning and training, as well as maintaining a link with institutions interested in sustainability. It also relaxes us and helps us personally. From my perspective as a mestizo and Mapuche, it involves connection with the land, which I value very much.

Between 2020 and 2023, CPMA prepared approximately 21,000 meals, averaging 200 servings per day, distributed every Thursday and Sunday. Effective operation required a minimum of five kitchen volunteers, four for food distribution and two for door-to-door delivery, totalling roughly 12 volunteers per day. Cooking at scale posed logistical hurdles, as one volunteer shared: “We knew how to cook, but not how to cook for so many people.” Menus alternated between vegetarian and meat-based options; however, vegetarian meals often carried an intentional political message. “For a short time, we had the chance to serve meat once a month, but it is usually expensive, so we prioritise more affordable vegetable protein,” one volunteer explained. At day’s end, volunteers shared the same lunch, exchanging experiences and planning next steps. These moments of conviviality reinforced CPMA’s guiding ethos: everyone cooks, everyone eats. During summer and holidays, operations paused, and food boxes were distributed until services temporarily resumed.

Following the pandemic, the informal agreement with the union dissolved and donations decreased markedly, prompting discussions around institutionalising the CPMA. Proposals included registering it as an NGO or corporation to access formal funding streams. Yet the possibility of formalisation remained contested. While some advocated for integration and sustainability, others resisted in favour of retaining autonomy and flexibility. Despite ongoing tensions, CPMA adapted. Volunteers now meet intermittently in the centric plaza Manuel Rodríguez, preparing sandwiches at an organiser’s home before transporting food and equipment to the plaza, where meals are shared with neighbours and eaters. Here, banners articulating political views on food justice and the right to food are prominently displayed (Figure 2). Through this spatial



**Figure 2.** Political canvas created by CPMA in Plaza Manuel Rodríguez, central Santiago, saying: “Food Should Be a Right From Birth.”

reappropriation, volunteers reaffirm the plaza not as a passive node of circulation, but as a site of socio-spatial struggle (Stavrvides & De Angelis, 2016), where visibility, solidarity, and collective presence redefine urban belonging.

#### 4.2. OCRC: Reclaiming Streets and Enacting Care

The OCRC arose in response to the socio-economic crisis triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic, led by a woman whose personal history is deeply rooted in caregiving. Having first cared for her mother, and later volunteering in a hospital to support older adults, she channelled her commitment to care by establishing an *olla común* outside her home, transforming the pavement into a site of encounter and solidarity for neighbours in need.

Initially named Fleming por ti, in reference to the street where the organiser resides in Cerro Navia, the initiative was gradually renamed by its eaters as La Ruta de la Cuchara (in English, The Spoon Path). This name evokes the everyday struggle of those living on the streets who traverse the city in search of food. Located in one of Santiago's most socioeconomically vulnerable districts, Cerro Navia is home to over 130,000 residents facing poverty, service deficits, and urban inequality (Ministerio de Desarrollo Social y Familia, 2022).

With support from her teenage daughter and husband, the woman organiser began preparing small batches of meals at home, distributing them from a modest table on the pavement. "I started with a small table outside. At first, only a few people came, but then I asked my husband to make me a bigger dining table, and now many people come here to eat," she explained. As participation grew, the initiative expanded onto the street itself, with salvaged materials used to construct dining tables, chairs, and a canopy to shield eaters from sun and rain (Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Eating space located over a street occupied by the OCRC in Cerro Navia.

This spatial appropriation unfolded without initial municipal authorisation. “During the pandemic, I cooked on the pavement outside my house so as not to bother any neighbours with traffic,” she explained. But as the *olla* grew and began to block vehicle circulation, she formally requested permission to close the street on Saturdays from 9 am to 5 pm. Community responses have been mixed. While some residents donate food and volunteer their time, others view the presence of outsiders with suspicion. The organiser reflected:

My area is good and quiet, but not very sociable or supportive. Everyone says what I do is nice, but sometimes they call me crazy. It’s seen as an interesting act, but the neighbours do not help much, despite how vital it is for the eaters.

OCRC draws on two primary food sources. First, the Cerro Navia Food Bank, established in 2019 as Chile’s first municipal initiative of its kind, is central to weekly operations. Rescuing surplus food destined for disposal, the food bank redistributes produce, packaged goods, bread, and hygiene products directly to *ollas comunes*, micro-food banks, and vulnerable families. Deliveries arrive one to two days ahead of cooking, often consisting of aesthetically imperfect yet nutritious items. Second, *ferias libres* (street farmers’ markets) serve as key supply channels for many low and middle-income neighbourhoods. With over 400 operating in the metropolitan region, these municipal and informal markets offer affordable access to produce and household goods. The OCRC organiser participates in a community initiative known as *Minga*—a Quechua and Mapuche term denoting solidarity-based work—where women from Cerro Navia (including caregivers, unemployed women, and household heads) rescue food from *ferias libres* to promote grassroots entrepreneurship. Much of this food is then routed back through the municipal food bank and redistributed to local *ollas*.

Contributions also come directly from eaters. As the organiser shared: “Sometimes they give me bags of legumes and say: ‘I’ll bring them to you because I live on the street, I don’t have anywhere to cook, but I eat with you here on Saturday, so I prefer to bring them to you.’” She also maintains a small community garden in the communal passageway outside her home, with composting as part of the practice. However, this space has recently been reduced due to street closures: “I have grown potatoes, tomatoes, and peppers. But now the municipality has closed the street, and they’ve taken away part of the garden.”

OCRC now prepares around 100 meals per day, distributed in rotating shifts depending on seating availability, typically accommodating 30 eaters at a time. Some eaters bring their own containers to take away leftover food. But the organiser’s vision of care extends beyond meals. On Saturdays, donated clothing and shoes are arranged in a designated corner for eaters to browse and take. Moreover, during holidays such as Easter and Christmas, this *olla* hosts special meals that foreground celebration and shared joy. “Many get excited about these activities because they’ve never been given a chocolate egg before, for example,” she shared. These gestures reinforce the *olla*’s role not only as a nutritional lifeline but as a space of recognition, ritual, and collective belonging.

### 4.3. OCPAP: A Joyful Resistance in the Plaza

The OCPAP was established in Cerro Navia amidst two converging crises: the mass social uprising of October 2019 and the economic collapse triggered by the Covid-19 pandemic. Its name, borrowed from the protesters’ cry “El Pueblo Ayuda Al Pueblo” (in English, the people help the people), captures both

neighbourhood autonomy and the state's failure to secure basic rights. "People in the streets needed the basics every human deserves. That's why I decided to join the olla," one volunteer reflected. In claiming this slogan, OCPAP reclaimed public voice and space, asserting food as a fundamental human right.

When lockdown measures stripped many residents of formal and informal work, hunger became a visible crisis on Cerro Navia's streets. The leader of a local neighbourhood committee mobilised her networks, particularly to support the elderly, by pooling small donations for gas, lighters, cookware, and ingredients. Cooking alternated between the committee's kitchen, the adjacent Plaza Yugoslavia, and volunteers' home kitchens. Yet every meal was distributed in the plaza: three times a week, about 150 hot meals were handed out to an ever-growing queue.

Like its sister initiative—OCRC—OCPAP depends on two primary supply channels. First, the Cerro Navia municipal food bank delivers variable but vital donations. "One week we might receive potatoes or onions; the next, sausages or chicken; sometimes nothing at all," admits an organiser. "Still, without those crates, we'd have nothing to cook." And second, *ferias libres* vendors set aside misshapen fruits and vegetables, ensuring a steady influx of fresh produce. When protein donations run low, volunteers chip in pocket money. "Each of us puts in a few pesos so we can buy meat," one organiser confides. "It's not much individually, but together we cover our needs." Two further strategies amplify these grassroots efforts. One organiser uses her local radio show, *Cambalache*, to broadcast live weekly donation appeals. Another organiser, who works in gas sales, supplies cooking gas for free. In both cases, informal social ties and local expertise act as vital infrastructure.

By early 2024, donor fatigue and volunteer burnout forced OCPAP to reconsider its model. Freed from the neighbourhood committee's umbrella, members formalised OCPAP as a *persona jurídica*, which means having legal status, electing its own board to unlock private sponsorships, expanded food-bank quotas, and municipal grants. This legal status carried new administrative duties, including convening assemblies and maintaining financial records.

Under this new governance, an Ecuadorian migrant, OCPAP's elected president, offered his home as the primary kitchen. His modest patio now hosts Wednesday cooking sessions. Despite this shift, women volunteers continue to drive the culinary work: early mornings find them chopping onions, peppers, and herbs for the *sofrito*, while 50-litre pots of water heat on gas burners to cook *porotos con riendas* (beans with noodles). Before distribution, volunteers share the same meal they will later serve. "Cooking and eating together helps me fight my depression," admits one participant. These communal meals become moments of mutual support and reflection, where personal stories intertwine with political analysis.

By noon, Plaza Yugoslavia transforms into a communal eating space (Figure 4). Neighbours and street people arrive carrying pots, containers, or plastic bags to collect extra portions. Volunteers manage the line with care: older residents receive priority, and each person takes only two or three servings plus a piece of fruit to ensure fairness. "We try to be just," explains an organiser. "No one should leave hungry, but we also have to stretch every ingredient." As plates are filled, the president's lorry, used to transport large pots of cooked meals, stands ready to haul away leftovers and empty containers.



**Figure 4.** OCPAP's volunteers distributing meals, fruits, and bread in Plaza Yugoslavia, Cerro Navia.

Each Wednesday, this plaza becomes a stage for what a nearby mural calls “joyful resistance,” a space where sharing food is both an act of survival and a powerful assertion of community solidarity. In OCPAP, the people truly help the people, turning public space into a living canvas of care.

## 5. Discussion

The spatial practices of the *ollas comunes* radically reconfigure the street's dominant logic, subverting the paradigm of public space as a neutral conduit for circulation and commerce. They achieve this by strategically interrupting the rhythms of traffic and economic activity to centre on the temporalities of collective care and political solidarity. For instance, OCRC physically appropriates the street, transforming a thoroughfare into a communal dining area, first through informal occupation and later legitimised by a municipal permit to block vehicle circulation. Similarly, but in plazas, OCPAP turns Plaza Yugoslavia into a predictable infrastructure of sustenance, while CPMA repurposes Plaza Manuel Rodriguez into a stage for political expression, displaying banners that articulate food as a fundamental right. These examples highlight the importance of distinguishing between streets and plazas: while both are public spaces, their physical and social characteristics shape the forms of collective action and care that emerge within them.

This spatial contestation transforms the street from a mere conduit into what Lefebvre terms an *œuvre*—a lived and collectively produced work of urban life. The rhythmic, ritualised practices of cooking, distribution, and communal dining are deliberate claims to visibility by populations—the elderly, migrants, and those in precarious employment—who are often systemically erased from the sanitised, neoliberal urban imaginary. OCRC’s renaming as La Ruta de la Cuchara creates a new landmark on a cognitive map of survival, while OCPAP’s framing of its work as “joyful resistance” underscores a performative reclamation of dignity. These acts articulate a profound political statement, with CPMA’s overt messaging on banners complementing the subtler, yet equally potent, politics of making care work visible in the public realm. Yet, although *ollas comunes* embody solidarity within neighbourhoods, their practices are not always rooted in reciprocal obligations. Instead, the sense of care and belonging seems to arise primarily from the mere fact of being together in a shared space or condition (Ferguson, 2021).

While the physical settings of the case studies vary, their reconfiguring of public space is consistently rooted in an interaction with the urban street network. Plazas do not exist in isolation; they function as critical nodes that draw life from surrounding streets. For CPMA and OCPAP, the street is the essential infrastructure that enables their work: it is the channel through which supplies from *ferias libres* arrive, the path that participants and volunteers travel, and the conduit for public visibility. When CPMA displays banners articulating food as a right, its audience is the public in motion on the streets adjacent to Plaza Manuel Rodríguez. The choice of a plaza is therefore a strategic one that leverages the street’s role as a network for access and communication, amplifying the social and political resonance of the *ollas*’ actions.

The organisers’ narratives expose a dialectical tension between a fiercely guarded autonomy and pragmatic engagement with municipal structures. This dynamic mirrors broader Latin American struggles over urban citizenship, reflecting both the “fragmented citizenship” seen in Mexico City’s housing movements (Rodríguez Cortés, 2017) and the empowerment trajectories observed in Brazil (Donaghy, 2024). While all three *ollas* emerged from autonomous grassroots efforts—with CPMA pointedly refusing co-optation by politicians—their sustainability often depends on negotiating with the state. The reliance of both Cerro Navia *ollas* on the municipal food bank is a key example. OCPAP’s decision to formalise as a *persona jurídica* (legal entity) is a prime case of this tactical negotiation, consciously trading a degree of informality for access to municipal grants and expanded resources. This pragmatism demonstrates that autonomy and institutional engagement are not mutually exclusive but are strategically intertwined to maximise grassroots agency.

This complex negotiation reveals the insurgent character of the *ollas comunes*. Their practices can be understood as a form of insurgent citizenship (Holston, 2008), operating in the grey areas of regulations—from public-health codes to commercial licensing—that were never designed for such collective, non-commodified actions. This rule-breaking is often born of necessity. OCRC’s initial, unpermitted occupation of the street is a clear example: a direct claim on public space that challenges the state’s ownership. OCPAP’s later decision to formalise is not a capitulation but a strategic manoeuvre to legitimise its insurgent claims from within the system, thereby sustaining its challenge to the established governance of food distribution and social welfare. These actions assert a form of popular sovereignty over the use and meaning of urban space, framing the *ollas* as quiet but powerful laboratories of an alternative urban order.

Furthermore, these initiatives advance a consumption-centred urban food sovereignty agenda (López Cifuentes & Sonnino, 2024; Resler & Hagolani-Albov, 2021). Rather than focusing on production, the *ollas*

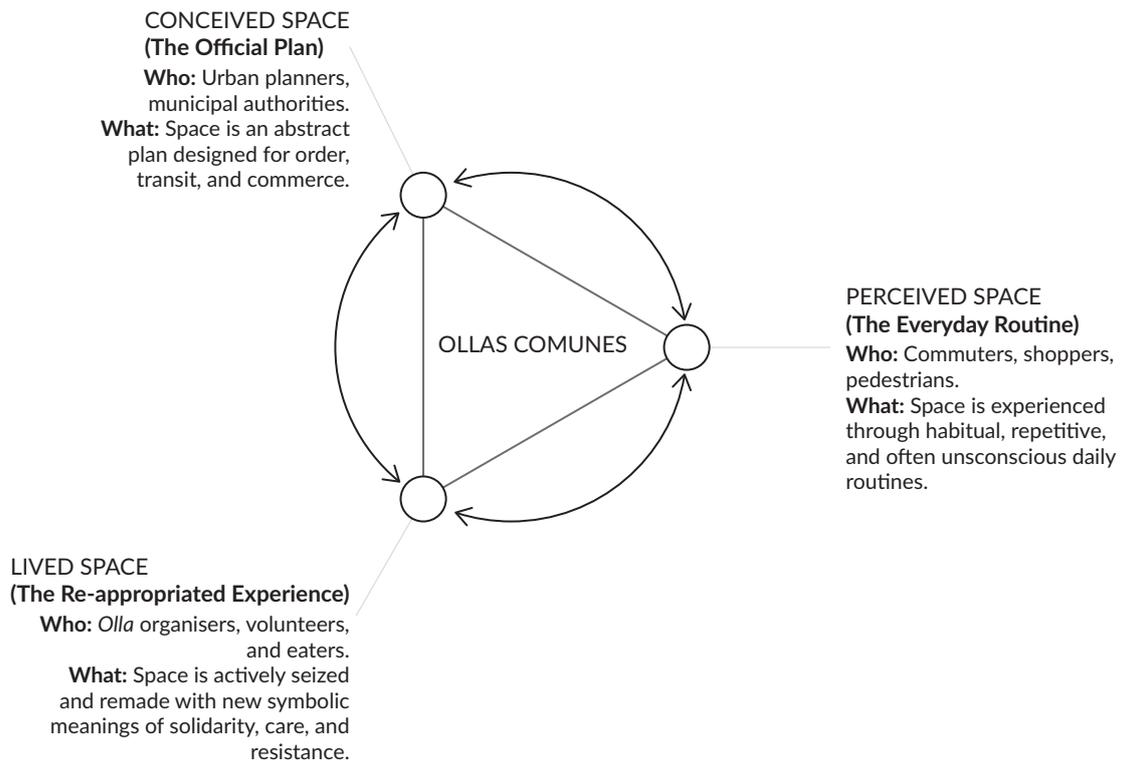
*comunes* politicise the act of collective consumption. The public communal meal becomes a political act, asserting that food is a right, not a commodity. CPMA's model is the most explicit, integrating food sovereignty principles through direct purchasing from rural producers, consumer cooperatives, and educational community gardens, all under the slogan "Cooking and Growing, Another Way to Struggle." This praxis redefines urban citizenship around collective care rather than individual consumerism.

The deliberative routines within the *ollas* embody elements of food democracy, yet these are perpetually in tension with state regulation. OCPAP's governance through an elected board and assemblies, and its careful management of distribution to ensure fairness, are clear democratic practices. However, these grassroots systems confront a web of regulations that threatens to criminalise their work. The removal of part of OCRC's community garden by municipal authorities is a stark illustration of this friction, representing a form of sanitisation that enforces a normative vision of public space and curtails the *olla's* spatial footprint.

Central to this transformative potential is the gendered labour of care, performed overwhelmingly by women. By moving domestic work from the private sphere onto public pavements and plazas, participants enact a powerful "politics of dwelling" (Gutiérrez Sánchez, 2022). The work of the OCRC leader, a lifelong caregiver, is a testament to how the ethics of care can be scaled up into a tool for community-building and spatial reclamation (Miraftab & Huq, 2024). This act makes reproductive labour hyper-visible, mounting a direct challenge to a patriarchal capitalist urbanism that systematically marginalises it. These findings resonate with feminist and decolonial critiques of public space, which emphasise that access, visibility, and participation are always shaped by intersecting axes of power (Lyra, 2023).

These interventions materially enact Lefebvre's triadic theory of space, creating a direct conflict between different spatial logics. The conceived space—that of urban planners and municipal authorities—frames streets as orderly zones of transit, governed by a neoliberal logic. The daily routines of commuters and consumers, in turn, constitute the perceived space—a set of habitual paths that reinforce this order. The new mobility patterns generated by *ollas comunes* directly disrupt this perceived space. The routes traced for procurement—rescuing food from *ferias libres* or coordinating with municipal food banks—and distribution create logistical choreographies rooted in solidarity, not efficiency. These care-driven mobilities powerfully interrupt the conceived and perceived space by producing a vibrant lived space (or space of representation), which re-appropriates these sites and imbues them with new, symbolic meanings. For OCRC, the street becomes a communal dining room, for OCPAP, the plaza a site of joyful resistance, and for CPMA, a stage for political expression. It is in this lived, experiential dimension that the right to the city ceases to be an abstract demand and becomes a tangible, collectively produced reality. This dynamic is visually summarised in Figure 5.

The claim that *ollas comunes* challenge commodified urban imaginaries and established systems of ownership is borne out by their specific practices. For instance, CPMA actively resisted co-optation by refusing to be photographed with politicians, thereby challenging a system where aid is often a tool for political gain. The dominant function of public space as a commercial or passive zone is directly transformed by OCRC, which secured a municipal permit to block vehicle circulation every Saturday. This act introduces a new choreography of care that replaces the dominant rhythm of traffic with the cadence of setting up tables, serving meals, and fostering community. This transformation is also evident in new mobility patterns rooted in solidarity. The dominant pattern of individual commutes is overlaid with collective, care-driven logistics:



**Figure 5.** Triad of the production of space by *ollas comunes*.

volunteers travel to *ferias libres* to rescue food, coordinate with municipal food bank, and make door-to-door deliveries to those who cannot travel. The very name La Ruta de la Cuchara illustrates this, creating a new cognitive map of the city oriented around survival and mutual support rather than commercial landmarks. By moving the labour of social reproduction from the private home to the public plaza and pavement, as seen in all three cases, the *ollas* challenge the gendered division of space and make collective care a visible, central feature of urban life.

Finally, the political narrative of the *ollas comunes* is enriched by a strategic oscillation between local claims-making and the mobilisation of national discourses. They engage in the “local turn” by negotiating directly with municipal bodies for resources, while simultaneously invoking the language of national struggles (“It Is Not About 30 Pesos, It Is About 30 Years”) and universal human rights. In doing so, they function as laboratories of “prefigurative politics” (Raekstad & Gradin, 2020), enacting in the present—through norms of co-presence and mutual aid—the alternative urban futures they hope to achieve.

## 6. Conclusions

This article contributes to contemporary debates on the right to the city, food sovereignty, and the politics of care by showing how grassroots practices of collective consumption and spatial appropriation can generate new forms of urban belonging and resistance. The case of Santiago’s *ollas comunes* illustrates the transformative potential of everyday acts of care, solidarity, and co-presence in reimagining the city as a space of justice.

The resurgence of *ollas comunes* between 2019 and 2024 revives a long Latin-American genealogy of grassroots infrastructures that surface whenever crisis strikes. In Chile, such facilities have re-emerged cyclically, often in the wake of the devastating earthquakes that shake the country roughly every decade. Moments of upheaval prompt networks of mutual aid that carve out alternative urban orders—spaces of solidarity, collective protection, and communal provision that temporarily override normally dominant individualist logics. Crisis, then, becomes fertile ground not only for speculative capital but also for affective ties and communal life.

This article demonstrates that *ollas comunes* are not merely survival strategies but insurgent practices that challenge dominant systems of urban governance and ownership. By emphasising collective care and the re-appropriation of both streets and plazas, these initiatives enact alternative forms of citizenship and spatial justice. These solidarity-based episodes are equally legible through a feminist political ecology lens of the “care commons.” Here, *ollas comunes* offer a material counterpoint to the patriarchal underpinnings of capitalism and the profit-driven calculus of neoliberal governance. By foregrounding gendered practices of care, they fortify novel spatialities of citizenship, advancing tangible alternatives to prevailing neoliberal regimes and shifting the emphasis from individual self-interest towards effective and viable collective strategies.

Governance, however, remains a thorny issue. A dense web of regulations—from public-health codes to commercial licensing—threatens to criminalise these kitchens in Chile. Hygiene rules demand industrial standards of food preparation; commercial laws frown upon “free” distribution that undercuts established traders. Such normative frameworks cast *ollas comunes* as insurgent, yet their insurgency is one of survival rather than spectacle. How far can regulatory regimes structure everyday life without stifling organic survival strategies? Can rule-breaking born of urgent need be accommodated without sliding into illegality? Democratic polities must grapple with these tensions, lest initiatives akin to the *ollas comunes* be demonised simply for failing to tick every bureaucratic box.

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# “Can She Handle It?” Women Delivery Drivers and the Gendered Politics of Hanoi’s Streets

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## Abstract

On Hanoi’s crowded streets, women app-based motorbike delivery drivers carve out precarious yet essential roles in the city’s mobility landscape. In this article we examine these drivers’ everyday experiences, highlighting the gendered challenges they face in a profession still widely male-dominated. Drawing on 34 in-depth interviews, we explore how these women navigate public scepticism about their capabilities, manage the physical and logistical demands of street-based work, and respond to harassment by male customers. Our study reveals that women drivers develop a range of tactics to sustain their livelihoods and ensure personal safety, from carefully selecting passengers and routes, devising deliberate narratives for questionable customers, to forming informal peer networks. By centring the perspectives of women delivery drivers, we contribute to broader debates on the gendered dimensions of platform livelihoods and urban mobility. We position Hanoi’s streets not only as sites of economic activity but as contested public spaces where safety, access, and belonging are unevenly distributed. Tracing how women drivers tactically navigate harassment, infrastructural shortcomings, and algorithmic control, we engage with concerns about the (re)configuration of streets as multifunctional yet exclusionary environments. These drivers’ experiences reveal the persistent gendered frictions embedded in Hanoi’s streets, raising critical questions about whose needs, security, and visibility are prioritized in emerging urban mobility futures.

## Keywords

digital governance; everyday resistance; gendered mobility; gig-work precarity; Hanoi; mobility justice; platform economy; streets; women delivery drivers

## 1. Introduction

Across Asia, the growth of platform-economy work has created new opportunities for women while also reinforcing longstanding gendered constraints. As the mobile gig-economy expands, particularly through ride-hailing and delivery services, scholars have begun to trace how gender mediates both access to and experiences of such work. Such research highlights both the structural risks women face and their tactics of navigation, resistance, and solidarity (see, for example, Baruah, 2017, in Delhi; Evangelista et al., 2023, in Bulacan, the Philippines; Hamal & Huijsmans, 2021, in Kathmandu). It also contributes to broader debates in mobility studies and feminist political economy regarding the unequal conditions under which people move and labour in contemporary Asian cities. A recurring theme is that women's gig work remains shaped by entrenched patterns of gendered mobility and social reproduction. In India, for instance, Chaudhary (2021) finds that platform work does little to offset spatial constraints rooted in gender norms, a pattern echoed in China, where women drivers often limit their travel radius to remain close to home (Zhuang et al., 2025). In these contexts, domestic responsibilities often continue to shape spatial labour practices, revealing embodied frictions that shape women's livelihood mobilities.

Specifically examining women drivers' working conditions, Kwan (2022a, 2022b) documents how in China women navigate male-dominated spaces while shouldering caregiving duties. Evangelista et al. (2023) similarly highlight the exhaustion of women drivers in the Philippines juggling customer demands with family care, challenging celebratory narratives of platform-mediated flexibility. Safety concerns are also prominent in this literature. Zong et al. (2024), drawing on data from China, Taiwan, and Singapore, find that harassment from customers and bystanders is common in women's delivery work. Other studies from Asia further challenge assumptions of technological neutrality, with Li and Niu (2022) showing how algorithmic controls intensify women's work pace and reduce autonomy.

Questions of intersectionality and precarity run through this scholarship. Studies from India, Bangladesh, and Indonesia show how gender intersects with class, migration status, and access to digital tools (Frey, 2020; Ghosh et al., 2021; Hamal & Huijsmans, 2021), while livelihood shocks like Covid-19 have further deepened precarity for many women drivers. In Bandung, Indonesia, Juddi et al. (2024) found that company responsiveness to women's concerns worsened during Covid-19, causing greater income loss, while in Shanghai, Zhang et al. (2024) reported that emotional and cognitive stress compounded the burden of platform work among women drivers during the pandemic. Yet, women drivers are not passive. Kwan (2022a) shows that digital platforms like WeChat and TikTok provide crucial spaces for women drivers to share tactics, build support, and foster collective dignity and subtle resistance. From mutual aid in Nepal (Grossman-Thompson, 2020) to feminist labour organising in Ecuador (Hidalgo Cordero & Salazar Daza, 2021), women drivers develop tactics to navigate and resist systemic inequalities. With these studies in mind, we ask: What is the situation for women gig-economy delivery drivers in Hanoi, Vietnam? How do they navigate an urban landscape shaped by infrastructural shortcomings, gendered expectations, and everyday risks such as traffic, pollution, and harassment? In doing so, we open a dialogue with urban planning scholarship concerned with creating more inclusive and equitable street environments, inviting reflection on how gendered experiences of mobility can inform more socially just approaches to urban design and policy.

Recent research on Vietnam's rapidly expanding delivery sector highlights precarious working conditions, safety risks, and shifting labour politics, but focuses on male drivers. Studies emphasize that food and parcel

delivery involves long hours, high exposure to traffic hazards, and frequent mobile phone use while riding, contributing to fatigue, stress, and crash risk (Nguyen et al., 2023; Nguyen-Phuoc et al., 2022; Truong & Nguyen, 2019). Job burnout is a central predictor of risky behaviour, with organizational factors including weak safety climates and poor managerial support exacerbating these conditions (Nguyen et al., 2023, 2024; Nguyen-Phuoc et al., 2025). In contrast, social support networks and performance feedback are shown to improve safety behaviour, suggesting possible solutions (Nguyen-Phuoc et al., 2024). Research in Ho Chi Minh City (HCMC) further shows that financial hardship and job pressure during Covid-19 pushed many drivers to adopt riskier behaviours, particularly when company support was lacking (Nguyen et al., 2023; Tran et al., 2022). Beyond safety, Gibert-Flutre et al. (2024) argue that platformisation in HCMC has reshaped motorbike drivers' political subjectivities through self-organization, wildcat strikes, and rider teams that contest both corporate governance and state control. Together, these studies show that while gig-economy motorbike work is increasingly central to Vietnam's urban mobility and logistics infrastructure, it remains largely unprotected. It is also understudied in relation to gendered experiences (though see Dinh & Tienari, 2022, for a compelling social media analysis of how male drivers in Vietnam articulate their experiences and perform masculinities online). Moreover, these studies rarely consider how the physical design, management, and organization of street space shape drivers' working conditions, safety, and access.

Our article works to address this gap by focusing on women app-based delivery drivers in the country's capital city, Hanoi. While Vietnam's platform economy has expanded rapidly, little is known about how these changes affect women gig-workers' mobility, working conditions, or tactics of care and survival. To our knowledge, this is the first study to examine the intersection of gender, mobility, and platform-based delivery work in Hanoi or anywhere in Vietnam. In exploring these dynamics, we also engage the central concerns of this thematic issue, showing how Hanoi's streets function not only as mobility corridors but as sites of negotiation, exclusion, and everyday urban struggle.

This research draws on 34 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with women working for a range of app-based delivery and ride-hailing platforms in Hanoi, conducted between October 2024 and April 2025 (interviewee profiles in Supplementary File). Interviews were designed by the first author, piloted by both authors, and primarily conducted by the second author, with the first author participating during her fieldwork time in Hanoi. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 63 and had between one month and 10 years' experience as drivers. Fifteen focused exclusively on parcel delivery, while 19 transported both passengers and goods. Two participants had left platform companies to freelance as independent drivers. Interviews lasted between 45 and 75 minutes, and many participants expressed appreciation for the opportunity to share their experiences with an empathetic female interviewer. The second author also attended a GrabBike appreciation event for women drivers held in conjunction with International Women's Day.

While our analysis centres on these women's narratives, we also conducted 18 interviews with men working for app-based platforms between November 2021 to April 2022, as well as 64 interviews with informal *xe ôm* motorbike taxi drivers between December 2016 and August 2017 (all men, as we could not find any women *xe ôm* drivers). These additional interviews provide comparative context for understanding the gendered dynamics within Hanoi's mobility landscape. The first author also consulted three Vietnamese scholars with expertise in gender, mobility, and urban transport. Data were analysed thematically using constant comparative and axial coding procedures undertaken by both authors and then independently reviewed and compared for consistency and rigour.

Next, we outline our conceptual framework, before situating our research within the broader context of Hanoi's platform economy and mobility landscape. Our results and analysis focus on the everyday experiences of women app-based delivery drivers, beginning with their pathways into platform work and the structural constraints shaping their participation. We then reveal the gendered burdens of care and exhaustion they carry, before analysing the forms of harassment they encounter while navigating urban spaces. In the final results section, we interpret the tactics women drivers use to manage risk, assert control, and maintain safety. These findings inform our discussion of how streets, though often framed as spaces of opportunity, remain highly uneven terrains for women app-based drivers.

## 2. Conceptual Framework

We bring together three bodies of literature to frame our analysis: the political economy of gig labour and precarity, critical mobility studies, and debates concerning situated agency and everyday resistance. We do so while paying particular attention to gender relations and politics, and to how streets function as gendered and contested public spaces.

### 2.1. *The Political Economy of Gig Labour and Precarity*

The rise of app-based mobility services has introduced new constellations of everyday movement on urban streets, bringing together people, vehicles, goods, and data through digital infrastructures. These platforms are enabled by the convergence of smartphones, telecommunication technologies, digital finance, and logistics (Brail, 2020; Richardson, 2020). Yet, despite the promises of flexibility, entrepreneurialism, and inclusion, critical scholars highlight the exploitative labour practices underlying much of the platform economy (Surie, 2020; van Doorn, 2017; Zhou, 2024; see also Stehlin et al., 2020). In many settings, including urban Southeast Asia, platforms have disrupted existing mobility ecologies, notably displacing informal actors and reshaping mobility behaviours (Nguyen & Turner, 2023; Tan & Gong, 2024).

For women, entry into platform labour is often shaped by precarity. Researchers have highlighted how gendered responsibilities, lack of institutional protections, and the opacity of platform governance systems compound this vulnerability (Juddi et al., 2024; Kwan, 2022b; Zhang et al., 2024). Platform logics, driven by data and algorithms, frequently obscure workers' rights and amplify insecurity through variable pay, uncertain scheduling, and punitive rating systems (Gibert-Flutre et al., 2024). In doing so, these systems often restrict the formation of peer-to-peer support networks, further isolating workers (Sun & Chen, 2021). Despite state and private sector claims of inclusivity and efficiency (Anwar & Graham, 2020), research increasingly questions the role of platforms in promoting socially just urban mobility (Nguyen, 2024). These literatures sharpen our analytical lens by situating women's platform-based labour on Hanoi's streets within these broader critical commentaries.

### 2.2. *Critical Mobilities Scholarship and the Frictions of Movement*

We also engage with critical mobilities scholarship (Cresswell, 2010; Hannam et al., 2006; Sheller & Urry, 2006) while foregrounding the street as a site where power, infrastructure, gender, and algorithmic governance intersect. Rather than focusing solely on movement, this work examines how mobility is shaped by power, infrastructure, and meaning (Elliott & Urry, 2010; Sheller, 2018). As Prytherch and Cidell (2015), Sheller (2018),

and others argue, mobility is unequally distributed, produced, and constrained through interlocking systems of race, gender, class, and embodiment. The concept of mobility justice highlights this uneven freedom to move (or be stopped), and urges critical reflection regarding the conditions that enable or constrain access to public space (Sheller, 2018; see also Turner, 2020; Verlinghieri & Schwanen, 2020). With this framing, Hanoi's streets become a terrain of mobility justice where uneven capacities to move are socially manifest.

We draw particularly on Cresswell's (2010, 2014) notion of friction here. Friction operates on multiple levels: it can refer to the literal slowing or stoppage of movement, as when navigating Hanoi's congested alleyways or adverse weather, but it also points to deeper structural barriers, or what Cresswell (2014, p. 108) terms "arrangements of power" that dictate who moves, when, and how. In Hanoi, such frictions emerge through gendered encounters in public space, tensions between platform-mediated flows and local urban rhythms, and infrastructural neglect, including limited access to clean toilets and shelter (Chowdhury, 2021; Kasera et al., 2016; Peters, 2019).

### **2.3. *Situated Agency and Hidden Transcripts***

Our analysis is also informed by scholarship on situated agency and everyday resistance, which examines the subtle, improvised, and context-specific tactics workers employ to navigate structurally unequal conditions. The concept of situated agency helps to highlight how individual decisions are shaped by social, spatial, and institutional constraints (Parsell & Clarke, 2019), moving beyond binaries such as victim versus agent, or risk versus resilience (Choi & Holroyd, 2007). Understanding how women drivers enact agency, whether in response to social expectations, harassment, or other unsafe conditions, requires attention to the physical, social, and emotional environments in which they experience risk.

Finally, building on James Scott's (1990) concept of "hidden transcripts," we examine the subtle forms of resistance women drivers employ. Rather than overt defiance, "hidden transcripts" comprise covert practices and everyday tactics that emerge in private, semi-private, or fleeting public moments. These may include refusal, evasion, storytelling, selective engagement, or micro-level forms of solidarity (Scott, 1990). Although often fleeting, these acts are critical to understanding how resistance and adaptation unfold in everyday spaces, not only in response to labour discipline but also in relation to gendered bodily vulnerability, urban exclusion, and infrastructural challenges. In the context of the street, such practices reveal how power is negotiated within the micro geographies of movement and work.

## **3. Context**

Over the past decade, app-based mobility services have become woven into Hanoi's daily life, reshaping how the city's streets are used and contested. The arrival of global platforms like Uber and Grab in 2014, followed by Grab's acquisition of Uber's Southeast Asian operations in 2018 (Goel & Lim, 2018), was the start of a rapid expansion of such services. Grab now dominates Hanoi's market, though Vietnamese platforms such as Be and XanhSM have become strong local contenders. Meanwhile, Indonesia's GoJek, which entered Vietnam under the GoViet brand, withdrew in 2024 (VOV, 2024). This competitive landscape has fuelled a proliferation of platform-based services, from motorbike taxis and parcel deliveries to food drop-offs and e-commerce logistics, which play out visibly on the city's streets.

Hanoi offers a fertile setting for platform labour, shaped by its youthful, tech-savvy population and a longstanding reliance on motorbike transport. With nearly 8.3 million residents (almost 10 percent of Vietnam's national population), the city provides a large pool of potential consumers and workers (General Statistics Office Vietnam, 2023). Motorbike-based services are especially functional in both the dense urban core and spontaneously developed peripheries, where many areas remain accessible only by foot or two-wheelers, including older alleyways and informal settlements (Khuat, 2006; Turner & Ngo, 2019). As a result, motorbikes remain vital to everyday mobility, accounting for over 80 percent of all trips in the city (Hansen, 2017; Jamme, 2024; Turner & Ngo, 2019), and sustaining a street-based mobility economy.

Yet, despite their ubiquity, motorbike-based mobilities and the drivers who depend on them are increasingly marginalised through both infrastructural change and urban governance agendas. Since the early 2000s, Hanoi's authorities have pursued an ambitious "modernisation" project aimed at transforming the city into a global metropolis through large-scale infrastructure investments, including ring roads, expressways, and an urban rail system (Leducq & Scarwell, 2018; Turner et al., 2024). Heavily influenced by urban development models from Singapore and South Korea, planning documents such as the Hanoi Capital Construction Master Plan to 2030 and Vision to 2050 promote a vision of satellite cities connected by green corridors and high-speed transit (Perkins Eastman Architects, 2011). Within this vision, motorbikes are frequently cast as incompatible with a "civilised" and "modern" urban future. Officials and planners routinely portray motorbikes as outdated, disorderly, and obstructive to traffic flow, an image reinforced by rising investments in car infrastructure and the growing status associated with car ownership among affluent residents (Hansen & Nielsen, 2019; Jamme, 2024; Tran, 2019). Plans to ban motorbikes from central districts starting in July 2026 have further entrenched the sense that motorbike users are peripheral to the city's desired trajectory (Hanoi People's Committee, 2017; Pham, 2025).

For app-based drivers, such state rhetoric and related politics create a rather confusing terrain. Although platforms like Grab and Be are framed by policymakers as advancing e-commerce and urban sustainability goals (Thanh Van, 2020), the regulatory environment remains deeply ambiguous. Labour law does not formally recognise these drivers as employees, excluding them from formal protections and benefits. As "independent partners," they face irregular incomes, limited recourse in disputes, and little to no access to public insurance or social security (Nguyen, 2023).

Beyond legal precarity, app-based drivers also face daily frictions on the streets. Traffic police (*cảnh sát giao thông*) frequently conduct random checks, often demanding bribes or enforcing rules arbitrarily (Turner, 2020). While these drivers experience less scrutiny than informal motorbike taxi drivers (*xe ôm*) or three-wheel delivery drivers (*xe ba bánh*), these micro-acts of surveillance and extraction still reflect broader dynamics of urban exclusion, with motorbike-based mobilities tolerated but not embraced. Infrastructural challenges, including a lack of public restrooms, shelter, or designated rest areas, further compound the physical and emotional toll of platform labour. The city's streets thus become a battleground of sorts, where competing visions of modernity, class, and belonging are negotiated through both policy and pavement. For women, these challenges are compounded by additional gendered expectations and constraints.

## 4. Results and Analysis

### 4.1. Pathways Into Platform Work

Over two-thirds (24) of the women drivers in our study were lifelong Hanoians, a higher proportion than among male informal motorbike taxi (*xe ôm*) drivers we had previously interviewed, of whom roughly half were from Hanoi and the rest rural-to-urban migrants (Nguyen & Turner, 2023; Turner, 2020; Turner & Ngo, 2019). The women who had moved to the city typically came from nearby provinces. For instance, Đào, in her 40s and driving for Shopee, originally came from Vĩnh Phúc Province (about a 90-minute drive northwest of Hanoi) when she was 15 (all names are pseudonyms). Similarly, Lê (25 years old, AhaMove) relocated from Thanh Hóa Province, roughly 2.40 hours' drive south, and now rents a room in Hanoi's Hoàng Mai District.

The women drivers had entered app-based delivery work due to a range of life and labour transitions. Most had previously held low-wage or informal jobs, often in feminised sectors such as garment manufacturing, domestic work, caregiving, or small-scale retail. These roles were frequently unstable, poorly paid, or incompatible with family caregiving needs. Some women turned to app-based work following a pivotal event like job loss, divorce, or a family health crisis, and entry into platform labour was often facilitated by social networks, including kin, friends, or neighbours. Hồng (36 years old, Shopee) explained:

I was staying at home when my brother-in-law, who worked as a delivery driver, suggested I try this because it's close to home and lets me manage my time. I can go out early to deliver and still pick up my child from school.

Many participants described app-based delivery work not as a step “up,” but as a survival tactic. Several were divorced and solely responsible for their children (discussed further below), frequently emphasizing the importance of the job's flexibility for juggling domestic responsibilities. Trúc (37 years old, Xanh SM) detailed: “I chose this job after running a clothing store that I had to close due to various challenges. This work is more flexible for me to spend time with my family.” She added: “Working in a company felt too time restrictive. Especially with kids and other personal issues, it was hard to take leave. But with this job, the working hours are much more helpful.”

Employment arrangements varied widely among the women drivers we interviewed. Some were formally registered as “partners” with platforms such as Grab, Shopee, Viettel Post, Hey U, or Lazada, while others worked as freelancers. Several had also switched between platforms over time. Dung (39 years old), for example, had started with Grab before shifting to freelance work, while Nữ had transitioned from Giao Hàng Tiết Kiệm to freelancing. Phượng (42) began working for Ahamove and Grab, before changing solely to work for GrabFood. Some were new to delivery, such as Gái (50) who had joined Xanh SM just a month prior to our interview after leaving a job as a hairdresser, whereas Kim had four years' experience with Hey U, following earlier work selling *phở* (Vietnamese noodle soup) from a small street stall. For many, their prior familiarity with Hanoi's streets and neighbourhoods was crucial, not only for navigating efficiency but also for feeling confident and safe while working.

Delivery roles also varied: two-thirds of the women focused exclusively on parcels, with the remaining third transported both passengers and goods. Notably, these decisions were often informed by prior street

experiences. Eight participants chose to deliver only goods after uncomfortable experiences transporting male passengers, a point we revisit below.

#### 4.2. *Work Intensity and Care Responsibilities*

Most participants described their delivery work as physically demanding, involving long hours and minimal rest. They typically worked five to 11 hours per day, often seven days a week, driven by financial necessity and the unpredictable rhythms of customer demands. Kim (49 years old, Hey U), with four years' experience, reported exhausting 11-hour days. Ma (45 years old, Lazada), in this sector for six years, worked a slightly shorter routine of six to seven hours, but stressed that even this "lighter" schedule was taxing due to the difficulties of navigating Hanoi's traffic, dense street networks, and delivery logistics.

Across our interviews, a consistent thread was the burden of caregiving, shaped by the women's roles not only as workers but also as mothers, guardians, and household managers. These gendered obligations frequently influenced decisions regarding work hours, delivery types, and the spatial extent of their routes. Far from being supplementary earners, many were the sole providers in their families. Among the 34 women we interviewed, over two-thirds were divorced, widowed, or single, and two-fifths (14) were raising children without consistent financial or caregiving support from a partner. Gái (50 years old, Xanh SM) supported her teenage son entirely through her delivery earnings, structuring her working day around school drop-offs and pick-ups; temporal demands that limited both her working hours and geographical range. Likewise, Binh (48 years old, Xanh SM), divorced and raising two children, shared: "After work, I still have to prepare meals and clean. My daughter's in university, and my son recently married, but he and his wife leave their son with me since they work far away."

Children's ages shaped daily and weekly working rhythms: Tâm (44 years old, GrabBike and GrabFood), with grown children, managed long 14-hour shifts, while Cúc (37 years old, Viettel Post) who cared for two primary school-aged children, worked six to seven hours a day. The daily logistics of commuting, meal preparation, school runs, and household chores thus often dictated when and where the women could work, limiting availability to specific hours or city zones. Many participants also described the job's intense mental fatigue, stemming not only from physical exhaustion but due to the emotional demands of customer interactions, platform rules, and navigating chaotic traffic. Liễu (33 years old, Shopee) noted: "This job's really hard on my body. I used to manage 10 hours, but now I can only manage a few. It's exhausting." Lam (38 years old, GrabFood) similarly reported: "Some days, I'm too tired, I just stay home, I don't even drive."

Customer complaints and the risk of platform penalties added another layer of stress, shaping women's daily interactions and emotional experiences on the job. Liễu (33 years old, Shopee) detailed wearily: "When they complain, we get in trouble. Even if I just raise my voice, they'll report me for being rude. Some even claim they didn't get the package, even when they did. If I don't get confirmation from them, even when I take a photo, they can still claim they didn't receive it. Then I have to pay for the goods." Our oldest participant, 63-year-old Lương (GrabFood) recalled:

During the pandemic I called a customer to confirm their order and the customer snapped: 'F\*\*k you, why are you calling so much?' It was so discouraging. I'm old, yet they cursed at me. I travelled 7km in the rain to deliver her porridge. She complained about my calls but she hadn't answered earlier! Then she reported me. I got a warning, it was so unfair.

Hanoi's specific street geography, especially its narrow alleyways, intensified both the physical and emotional demands of delivery, making women responsible for navigating spaces that were both spatially complex and socially demanding (Figure 1). Ba (51 years old, GrabFood) explained:

Westerners understand the VND25,000 fee is just for transporting, but many Vietnamese expect full service for that price. If their house is deep down a very narrow lane, a Westerner would walk out, since the app can't show exact alley spots. Same in hotels: Westerners come to the lobby, but some Vietnamese expect full room delivery and give low ratings if refused.

Across interviews, women drivers described the need to perform reliability and cheerfulness for customers while navigating punitive and opaque platform evaluation systems. This heightened the everyday precarity of gig work and often fueled constant anxiety. Despite this, the women continued to work, motivated by financial necessity, caregiving duties, and limited alternatives. Their accounts sharply reflected the structural vulnerabilities of platform labour. Although ride-hailing and delivery services are often promoted as flexible or entrepreneurial, our findings align with critical scholarship that underscores their exploitative foundations (Surie, 2020; van Doorn, 2017; Zhou, 2024). Women app-based drivers in Hanoi shouldered compounded burdens of algorithmic control, unpredictable hours, and exposure to customer ratings, all without labour protection or social security (Duggan et al., 2019; Nowak, 2023). In this way, Hanoi's streets emerged as gendered spaces of constraint and calculation, where daily mobility decisions were shaped by not only platform demands but also familial rhythms and social expectations.



**Figure 1.** Woman delivery driver on white motorbike waiting for a food pick up in one of Hanoi's narrow alleyways. Source: Hạnh Thúy Ngô.

### 4.3. Everyday Harassment Working on the City's Streets

While app-based delivery work provided these women an income stream with flexible hours, it also exposed them to unwanted comments or harassment. Much of this unfolded on the streets, seen as unpredictable spaces where gendered dynamics were felt acutely. Nearly all our participants reported customers expressing surprise that they were women or making judgements, such as: “Where’s your husband? Why are you working at this time?” (Gái, 50 years old, Xanh SM) or “All that sun will ruin your skin; you should make your husband buy you sunscreen! If I had a wife like you, I wouldn’t let her do deliveries” (Kim, 49 years old, Hey U).

Beyond verbal remarks, women described experiences of harassment that, while often downplayed, meaningfully shaped how they moved through the city’s streets and made daily work decisions. Tâm (44 years old, GrabBike and GrabFood) explained: “Male [passenger] customers often ask if I’m married. Even though we’re all covered up [to protect against the sun], they still somehow recognize I’m a woman and flirt. Honestly, I don’t like it” (see Figure 2 for how women drivers often dress to protect their skin and maintain a fair complexion following cultural preferences). Similarly, Trúc (37 years old, Xanh SM) recounted dealing with inappropriate comments and actions: “Especially with drunk passengers at night. They lean on me or act inappropriately, pretending they’re drunk.” Dung (39), who previously accepted passengers for GrabBike but now works only as a freelance delivery driver, recounted an incident in which a male passenger had left her deeply uncomfortable, and how she had coped. She added that such encounters had been a key factor in her decision to transition exclusively to delivery work:

Once I picked up a passenger who handed me a laptop bag. I was nervous because I thought if the bag fell while we were riding, I’d be in big trouble. So I asked him: ‘Can you hold your laptop for me? It’s expensive, and if I drop it, I can’t afford to replace it.’ But instead, he tied the bag to the handlebars and said he always does it like that. Then he hugged my waist tightly. I felt really uncomfortable because he was sitting very close and was overly friendly. While riding, I kept focusing on his hands around my waist, worrying about his actions and the laptop bag. To distract him, I started talking about family. I asked about his wife, and how many kids he has. I kept asking questions to shift his attention. That’s how I try to handle certain customers.

On some occasions, male passenger customers were so uneasy with the idea of being driven by a woman that they insisted on driving. This placed women drivers in a precarious position: either forfeit the ride, lose income, and risk a poor rating, or become a passenger on their own bike, with the customer in control of both vehicle and route.

Most such incidents went unreported as the women drivers had little faith that their complaints would result in meaningful action and worried that speaking up might jeopardise their standing with the platform. Several expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of meaningful institutional support or recognition of the risks they faced. For example, GrabBike introduced a “Female Passenger Priority Feature” to prioritize matching female drivers with female passengers in 2024 (Goh, 2024), yet several participants observed that most ride requests come from men, limiting this feature’s usefulness. A few companies host parties for Women’s Day, but Grab’s event, which the second author attended, was largely symbolic and lacked any substantive engagement with the structural challenges facing female drivers. Phúc (38 years old, ShopeeFood) noted with frustration:

It's the same for everyone, whether you're male, female, old, or young. They calculate based on shipping fees. They don't know or care about you; it's all the same. You only meet the company once to get your uniform. After that, you just use the app. They don't know whether you're old, young, pregnant, or whatever, and they don't prioritize anyone.

Such reflections underscored the absence of gender-sensitive design in platform governance and a broader failure to address the embodied vulnerabilities of women working on Hanoi's streets. Participants' accounts pointed to harassment as both interpersonal and structural. It emerged not only from specific encounters with customers or passers-by, but also from digital platform design, the absence of institutional protection, and enduring social scripts that cast women's mobile labour as secondary or out of place. In this way, the streets functioned not only as sites of economic activity but as a gendered terrain of visibility, judgment, and exclusion.



**Figure 2.** A typically well-covered woman delivery driver waiting for a food pick up. Source: Hạnh Thúy Ngô.

#### **4.4. Tactical Street Use Through Gendered Navigation and Micro-Resistance**

Faced with routine harassment and minimal institutional protection, women app-based drivers relied on a range of everyday tactics to safeguard themselves. These were not overt acts of resistance, but subtle, adaptive approaches shaped by experience, caution, and necessity. Together, they reflect what we term situated agency, namely ongoing, situated responses to unsafe working conditions. With few safeguards or meaningful support from platforms or public authorities, these women took risk management into their own hands, developing what Scott (1990) termed hidden transcripts: covert practices and tactics that unfolded in private, semi-private, or fleeting public moments. These included negotiating mobility through selective engagement with particular spaces, times, and people.

Spatial and temporal avoidance was a common tactic, with many drivers deliberately avoiding certain areas or times they perceived as unsafe. Hai (48 years old, GrabFood/GrabMart) explained:

Back when I delivered packages, I didn't work at night. Now that I'm delivering food, I work evenings, but I make sure I deliver to places where there are houses around, and I don't work too late. By around 9 pm, I'm already home, that way I don't feel too worried.

For passenger drivers, concerns were broader. Trúc (37 years old, Xanh SM) shared:

I finish by 10 pm, or 10:30 pm at the latest, and only take trips in the city at night. Now with more police on the roads [due to a new drink-driving policy], if there's any problem, I can shout for help. But I avoid long or remote trips at night for safety.

She continued: "If a request comes for a remote area in the evening, I just turn off the app. Male drivers might take those, but I avoid them to stay safe." Nang (41 years old, GrabBike/GrabFood) added: "If I see the customer is drunk, I cancel. When they're drunk, they don't know what they're doing, right? They don't even sit properly. Some male drivers have even had drunk customers throw up on them. Imagine how much worse it is for us female drivers."

Spatial familiarity emerged as a key form of protection. Many women worked within neighbourhoods they knew well or had lived in for years. Thăng (49 years old, Shopee) explained how her long-standing presence in the area—"I've been here since I was little"—made her feel more confident navigating the streets and managing customer relations. Such local knowledge helped certain drivers avoid trouble spots, identify safer rest areas, and rely on informal networks when needed.

Load-related risks for those with heavy deliveries or passengers involved different calculations (Figure 3). Some delivery drivers sought on-site help from store workers, like Đào (in her 40s, Shopee), who said: "In the warehouse, I have colleagues who help me to load heavy goods." Others quietly cancelled overly burdensome deliveries or avoided taking passengers or large items due to weight concerns. Rather petite Ba (51 years old, GrabFood) noted: "Just delivering food suits my health. Honestly, I don't like driving passengers; you never know if they'll be heavy or light. If someone weighs 100 kilograms, how could I manage that?"

Other filtering tactics relied on subtle cues, such as declining deliveries or passengers based on their tone of voice or their responses during order confirmation calls. This quiet gatekeeping helped the women drivers avoid risky situations, even at the cost of algorithmic penalties or income. Lam (38 years old, GrabFood) explained: "When I hear a slurred voice, I know they're drunk. I cancel for safety. By hearing their voice, you can guess what kind of customers they are; safe or not. You have to decide yourself what to do." Such choices were not always based on a single negative incident but were grounded in a broader, embodied awareness of vulnerability.

In some cases, women also deployed affective tactics to defuse uncomfortable interactions. Humour and coded language helped to mask discomfort or signal noncompliance without direct confrontation. A number of participants explained that they would laugh off strange questions or respond to intrusive comments with

light sarcasm or jokes. Though seemingly light-hearted, these responses served as subtle methods of boundary-setting, another form of Scott's (1990) "hidden transcripts." Such tactics reflected an affective literacy of urban risk: the ability to remain visible and approachable on the street while carefully managing how one is perceived. Dung (39 years old, GrabBike in the past, now freelancer) shared:

In the streets in the city centre, where it's crowded, they usually wouldn't dare to do much. But when I sensed the situation wasn't safe, I'd start a conversation. I'd also make sure to choose streets I felt were safe for me. I'd talk to them about emotional topics, like family life or children, to appeal to their compassion and distract them. For example, I'd share stories about my family's struggles and how hard life is, so they'd focus on that and not have any bad intentions. By the time we'd reach the destination, I'd have avoided the danger.

Phuong (45 years old, GrabBike) similarly noted: "Sometimes there are drunk passengers in areas where there aren't many Grab drivers. If they get on my bike, I chant Buddhist prayers while driving, without doing anything else."

These tactics were sometimes reinforced through informal peer communication. Although few women reported any platform-led support networks, several stayed connected via messaging platforms like Zalo or WhatsApp groups. These casual groups provided both emotional reassurance and practical guidance. "We have a private group to discuss work-related issues. For example, if someone encounters a scary customer, they share it with others," explained Trúc (37 years old, Xanh SM). Sen (~40 years old, Shopee) added: "Our group is mainly for chatting to pass the time. There's no leader; we just set it up ourselves. If anyone has something to complain about, we'll talk it through to vent." These digital solidarities, although noted less often than by participants in Kwan's (2022a) study of women delivery drivers in China, helped compensate for the isolating conditions of platform labour. The groups were spaces to share tips, express frustrations, and warn about unsafe customers, turning the women's phones into tools not just for delivery,



**Figure 3.** Woman app-based, parcel delivery driver getting ready for her shift. Source: Hạnh Thúy Ngô.

but also for emotional and physical protection. Several drivers also used fake calls or visible texting to deter unwanted attention during deliveries. While none explicitly mentioned using location-sharing or panic apps, their reliance on their phone as a versatile protective device was evident.

These tactics were not fool proof, nor were they signs of empowerment in the celebratory sense often promoted by platform marketing. Rather, they were necessary, pragmatic responses to a system offering no guarantees of safety or support. The burden of risk management was placed squarely on the shoulders of the women workers, reinforcing broader logics of the gig-economy where protection is exchanged for flexibility, and so-called freedom comes with hidden costs.

## 5. Concluding Thoughts: Gender, Precarity, and Gig-Work on Hanoi's Streets

The platform economy is often promoted as an inclusive, flexible work option, particularly for those excluded from formal labour markets. Yet, as critical scholarship has shown (e.g., Surie, 2020; van Doorn, 2017; Zhou, 2024), such work is frequently marked by volatility, algorithmic control, and exploitation. For many women in our study, entry into app-based delivery work was not a step toward empowerment but a response to family constraints or the collapse of other livelihood options. These drivers, many of whom were divorced, widowed, or single mothers, operated under conditions of structural precarity (Bissell, 2018), where platform-promised flexibility rarely translated into genuine autonomy.

In this environment, the frictions the women drivers faced, whether from infrastructural limitations, customer hostility, or environmental exposure, meant that Hanoi's streets functioned less as shared public infrastructure and more as fragmented, often exclusionary spaces (Cresswell, 2014). Their spatial access to the city's streets was shaped by caregiving demands, platform surveillance, and gendered safety concerns. Gender was a key axis shaping these experiences: women were more likely to experience harassment, feel unsafe at night, and restructure their routes to avoid male-dominated or peripheral urban areas. These everyday navigations of mobility frictions, though subtle, illuminate how the city's spatial and digital infrastructures reproduce uneven geographies of mobility, access, and risk. Seen through the lens of mobility justice (Sheller, 2018; Verlinghieri & Schwanen, 2020), these inequalities reveal how the right to move safely and with dignity remains unevenly distributed. Women delivery drivers' constrained mobilities are not only the result of individual risks or logistical challenges, but also of deeper urban processes that privilege certain bodies, vehicles, and rhythms of movement over others. Their experiences underscore how questions of labour, gender, and infrastructure intersect in the struggle over whose mobility counts as legitimate and whose is rendered marginal within Hanoi's evolving urban order.

At the same time, women drivers drew on situated forms of agency through a range of expedient and variegated tactics to shape their work in more manageable and secure ways (Sun & Chen, 2021). These included declining certain deliveries, crafting polite but firm refusals, deploying humour or distraction, and maintaining group chats for emotional support and information exchange. Such approaches align with Scott's (1990) "hidden transcripts," being understated, often invisible forms of resistance through which these women asserted dignity and control within constrained environments. Hanoi's streets thus emerged not only as arenas of economic transaction but as spaces where micro-political agency was continually and quietly negotiated.

Despite platform discourses that equate digital choice with freedom, our findings illustrate how women's delivery work remains physically taxing, socially undervalued, and politically underprotected. Their very visibility while riding motorbikes with delivery boxes or passengers, wearing branded vests, renders them hyper-visible yet socially illegible, exposing them to scepticism and microaggressions. This tension again underscores the mobility injustice occurring, and the unequal right to move safely, with dignity, and on equitable terms, across shared urban spaces (Sheller, 2018).

Finally, when we asked participants what changes they would like to see, their suggestions were grounded in the realities of their everyday work rather than framed as collective demands. They emphasised practical improvements such as safer delivery zones, more responsive complaint mechanisms, access to clean public toilets, and places to rest between jobs. These seemingly modest requests point to the need for a broader rethinking of how street space is designed, managed, and governed. They highlight that mobility justice for these women includes rethinking the everyday infrastructures that sustain movement, such as resting areas, safety measures, and responsive management practices. Policies that recognise delivery workers as legitimate street users could guide more inclusive forms of street governance, integrating attention to gendered experiences of safety, care, and fatigue into transport and urban planning agendas. These grounded insights offer important directions for how the streets might be made more secure, and liveable for women navigating platform work, even in the absence of formal organising or structured advocacy.

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The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### Data Availability

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

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None.

### Supplementary Material

Supplementary material for this article is available online in the format provided by the authors (unedited).

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# Elevating Informality: Street Vending, Design Politics, and the Remaking of Public Space in Bandung

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## Abstract

Teras Cihempelas, an elevated pedestrian walkway in Bandung, Indonesia, presents a unique case of integrating informal street vending into formal urban infrastructure. Designed under former mayor and architect Ridwan Kamil, this project sought to both accommodate and regulate informal traders while enhancing public life in a dense, urban fabric. Unlike conventional pedestrianisation efforts, Teras Cihempelas spatially segregates vendors from the street, creating an urban spectacle that blends informal livelihoods with a curated experience of public space. This article critically examines the design, politics, and socio-economic impacts of Teras Cihempelas, exploring how it reflects broader tensions between modernisation, post-colonial urbanism, and gentrification. The study adopts a longitudinal narrative research approach, drawing on field observations (2015, 2017, 2019, 2025), analyses of municipal documents, and local and national media coverage, supplemented with review-based evidence to trace user and vendor experiences. This allows for a reconstruction of how the project has evolved across nearly a decade of changing leadership, urban policy, and vendor practices, and how they impacted public life. The article situates Teras Cihempelas within global trends of urban informality management, in line with Bangkok’s vendor “reorganisations” and the aestheticisation of public space seen in projects like New York’s High Line. This study asks how the design, implementation, and evolution of Teras Cihempelas reveal the politics of formalising informality in Bandung; how vendors, visitors, and officials experienced and responded to the project; in what ways Teras Cihempelas reflects both the potentials and contradictions of reconfiguring streets as platforms of public life; and what broader lessons it offers for design-led approaches to managing informality in rapidly urbanising contexts. Despite its ambition to legitimise street vending, the project ultimately reveals the complexities of formalising informality and the ongoing struggle for inclusive post-Covid urban spaces. The findings contribute to discussions on how cities can balance economic integration, urban design, and the right to the street in evolving urban landscapes.

## Keywords

design-driven solutions; gentrification; pedestrianisation; public space and life; street vending; urban informality

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## 1. Introduction

Urban informality, particularly street vending, plays a vital role in Southeast Asia's urban economies, providing livelihoods for millions while contributing vibrancy and accessibility to the public realm. In cities like Bandung, Indonesia, street vendors, or *pedagang kaki lima* (PKL), are central to everyday urban life but often face precarious legal and spatial conditions. While critical in sustaining the street-based livelihoods of urban populations across income groups, the PKL are persistently perceived through developmentalist discourses as a transitional or temporary phenomenon, tolerated only until “modern” urban forms and formal employment can replace it.

Public spaces in such contexts serve dual roles: as sites of social interaction and as vital platforms for economic survival. However, rapid urban development turned public spaces into sites of contestations where informal practices are increasingly maligned and threatened, as authorities and private developers seek to modernise cities and reclaim public spaces through policies and processes that often discriminate against street vending. Not coincidentally, the expanding urban middle classes view street vending—one public manifestation of urban informality—as an undesirable urban phenomenon, especially when compared against their social media feeds, proliferated with visual spectacles of urban modernity from cities in advanced economies and fellow aspirant Global South cities.

Against this backdrop, this article examines the Teras Cihempelas project (also referred to as the “Skywalk”)—a 700 metres-long elevated pedestrian walkway that attempts to formally integrate street vendors into a new Bandung urban infrastructure—as a unique case of formalising informality. In contrast to prevailing vendor eradication strategies, Teras Cihempelas attempts to balance regulation with economic inclusion through a design-driven conception, yet reveals new forms of exclusion and spatial marginalisation.

Methodologically, the research adopts a longitudinal narrative approach (Elliott, 2005; Saldaña, 2003) to capture the project's dynamic trajectory. Evidence includes ethnographic field observations (2015, 2017, 2019, 2025), analysis of municipal policy documents, and a systematic review of local and national media reports, supplemented with user feedback through online platforms. As a high-profile, politically driven public space project, Teras Cihempelas has sustained public attention through both news coverage and social media engagements. Selected cases are employed to situate the Skywalk within broader regional and global discourses on elevated walkways and urban revitalisation, informality management, and the aesthetics of urban design. Ultimately, while Teras Cihempelas has been severely impacted and compromised by the Covid-19 lockdowns, the study interrogates whether formalisation can truly reconcile the competing imperatives of economic survival, aesthetic order, and democratic access to the city's streets.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Urban Informality

Urban informality, as conceptualised by Roy (2005), is not merely a residual category outside formal planning but is produced and regulated by the state itself. Similarly, Bayat (2010) positions informality as an everyday form of urbanism—where survival, resistance, and innovation coexist. In this sense, informality represents a flexible mode of urban production and governance that mediates between exclusion and survival, often compensating for the limits of formal planning and economic systems. Bandung’s persistent efforts to formalise urban informality—whether of housing through the redevelopment of dense, low-income residential neighborhoods (*kampungs*) and economic activities through PKL reorganisation (*penataan*)—culminate in the Teras Cihempelas project, which was offered as a model to address the problems of street vending—reflecting the long, complex entanglement of regulation and informality.

Moreover, urban informality’s socio-spatial entanglement is consistent with the practice of public space as a site of contested claims rather than neutral terrain. Low and Smith (2006) emphasise how public spaces are arenas of social struggle, where inclusion and exclusion are actively produced. Recent scholarship situates these contestations within the infrastructural domain, where the design and regulation of urban systems determine who can access, inhabit, and benefit from the city (Graham & McFarlane, 2015; Lawhon et al., 2014). As later analysis shows, the Teras Cihempelas skywalk reproduces these dynamics: While it was conceived as an inclusionary project, its elevated relocation simultaneously generated new forms of exclusion and spatial marginalisation.

The formalisation and pedestrianisation objectives underpinning Teras Cihempelas resonate with Graham and Marvin’s (2001) concept of “splintering urbanism,” where infrastructural investments create new forms of spatial division even as they promise connectivity. Graham and Marvin argue that neoliberal modes of urban infrastructure tend to fragment cities into premium and residual spaces, privileging those who can access networked systems while marginalising others. Subsequent work in the Global South (Graham & McFarlane, 2015; Guma, 2022; Lawhon et al., 2014; Silver, 2014; Simone, 2018) has expanded this argument, showing that fragmentation is not only imposed but also negotiated through everyday infrastructural practices. In African and Asian cities, infrastructures often operate through improvisation, repair, and social cooperation—forms of what Simone (2018) calls “people as infrastructure.” These perspectives foreground the agency of urban residents in maintaining circulation and functionality despite institutional or material instability. Yet, they also reveal how design-led formalisation projects, when transplanted from Eurocentric logics of order, may disrupt these adaptive networks of informality that sustain urban life. This echoes the dilemmas faced by Teras Cihempelas—shared across rapidly developing Global South cities—where the formalisation of informality risks producing new exclusions.

Furthermore, the project’s aesthetic ambition involves revitalisation and gentrification that commodify diversity while displacing marginal groups. Smith (2002) elaborates on the revanchist urbanism that underpins such interventions, framing them as efforts to reclaim city spaces from informal users in the name of security and order. These critiques align with recent analyses of Southeast Asian “beautification” and “touristification” policies, where aesthetic modernisation becomes a moral and developmental project aimed at disciplining the informal (Datta & Shaban, 2017). In Bandung, this reflects a developmentalist ethos among government agencies and middle-class publics, which positions informality as a temporary stage en route to an aestheticised, “orderly” urban public life. The replacement of vendors’ informal surveillance with

technological monitoring further exemplifies how infrastructure modernisation can substitute social vibrancy with technocratic control, echoing wider concerns about the depoliticisation of public space.

While these theoretical frames illuminate the contradictions of infrastructural modernisation, Teras Cihempelas marks a distinctive place-based design-led formalisation of informality. Unlike many earlier (and ongoing) interventions that relied on eviction or relocation to peripheral sites, the government here invested in a purpose-built elevated structure to accommodate and *rebrand* the vendors within the city's tourism and pedestrian infrastructure. The construction of Teras Cihempelas can thus be interpreted as an attitudinal shift—from tolerating informality to selectively recognising it as a cultural and economic asset. Yet, this recognition is conditional and aestheticised: The design seeks to integrate the PKL into Bandung's aspirational image as a creative and tourism city, aligning with broader regional trends of “worlding urbanism” (Roy & Ong, 2011) in which local authorities selectively adapt global design idioms to signal modernity. The objective is to modernise the PKL sector to bridge with middle-class visual and consumption preferences—especially as Bandung is renowned as a local and regional tourist and culinary destination that attracted 8.4 million tourists in 2019, of which 250,000 are international (Badan Pusat Statistik Kota Bandung, n.d.).

In summary, debates on urban informality highlight enduring tensions between regulation and everyday practices, between inclusionary rhetoric and exclusionary outcomes, and between the vitality of informality and the orderliness sought by formal planning. Scholars of Southern urbanism argue that these tensions are not aberrations but constitutive of how cities in the Global South are made and governed—through hybrid arrangements of formal and informal infrastructures that co-produce urban life (Graham & McFarlane, 2015; Lawhon et al., 2014; Simone, 2018). Yet, few studies examine what happens when states move beyond eradication to actively design and build new infrastructures to accommodate street vendors alongside other urban publics. This gap is where the present article intervenes.

Against this backdrop, the aim of this article is to critically examine how formalisation, design interventions, and infrastructural projects are used to mediate access, visibility, and everyday use of streets in rapidly urbanising contexts. In line with the theme of this thematic issue on Streets as Platforms of Public Life, the study further situates design-led infrastructural interventions as attempts to reconfigure congested commercial streets into new types of public platforms.

This aim is pursued through the following research questions:

1. How are design and infrastructural interventions used to formalise informality and mediate street-level order?
2. How do different stakeholders—including street vendors, visitors, and city officials—experience and respond to changed infrastructural conditions?
3. How do changes to street infrastructure influence the dynamics of public life, access, and visibility?
4. What broader opportunities and pitfalls do design-led approaches present for managing urban informality through public space interventions?

By addressing these questions, the article contributes not only to debates on public space and informality management, but also to the critical reassessment of design as an infrastructural mode of governance in the

Global South. Teras Cihempelas in Bandung serves as an illustrative case through which these broader dynamics are empirically explored.

To unpack these dynamics, namely the persistent tension between state-led formalisation policies and the everyday resilience of urban informality, this study adopts a longitudinal, mixed-method approach that traces how Teras Cihempelas evolved across design, governance, and everyday use between 2015 and 2025.

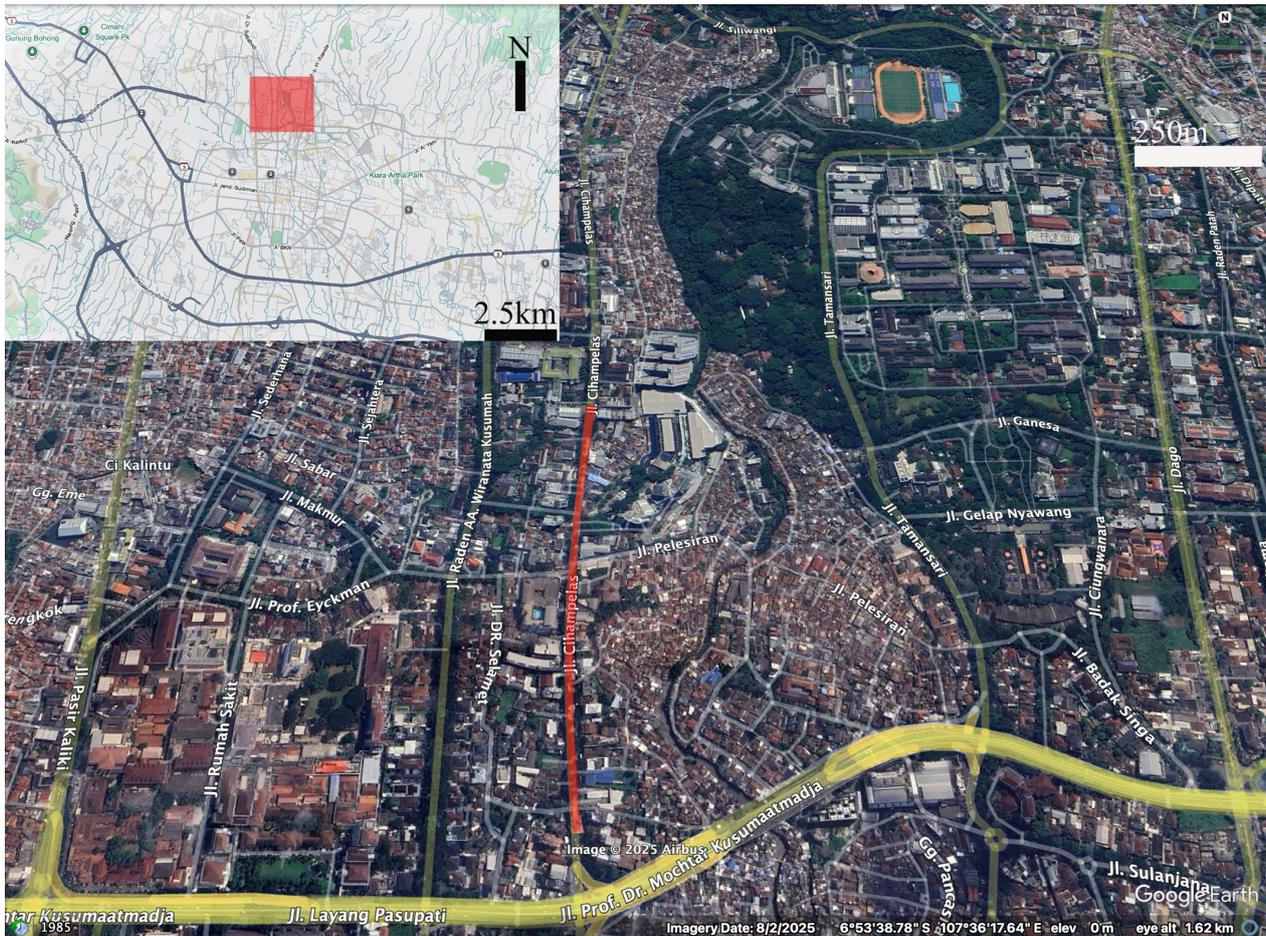
Three interlinked methods were employed:

1. Ethnographic field observations (2015, 2017, 2019, and 2025): Combination of participant observation, systematic photographic transects, informal dialogues with vendors and visitors, and a formal interview with city planning staff. Each round covered both weekday and weekend periods to capture temporal variations in use and activity. Limitations include the episodic nature of fieldwork and the researcher's positionality as both observer and participant, which may shape the interpretation of observed practices.
2. Documents and media analysis: Review of planning documents, city reports, and a longitudinal corpus of Indonesian news articles (*Kompas*, *Liputan6*, *Detik*) from 2015 to 2025. These materials provided official rationales, policy framings, and evolving narratives of success and failure but were limited by institutional and journalistic biases toward formal perspectives.
3. Online visitor reviews from Google Maps and TripAdvisor: Following precedents in urban and tourism studies (Girardin et al., 2008; Mkono & Tribe, 2017; Zuki et al., 2015), these digital traces were treated not as representative samples but as situated, performative commentaries that reveal how non-expert users articulate affective and spatial responses to design interventions. Reviews were screened for relevance, coded inductively, and cross-referenced against field and media data to identify recurring spatial and perceptual patterns.

Coding and analysis followed an inductive thematic approach (Saldaña, 2003), producing five cross-cutting themes: aestheticisation and spectacle, vendor and economic challenges, accessibility and usage concerns, political symbolism and policy instruments, and material decline and re-informalisation. These themes emerged through iterative triangulation across methods, ensuring that interpretive claims were grounded in multiple sources rather than single accounts. The synthesis privileges convergence and contradiction alike, recognising that contested narratives are themselves diagnostic of how formality and informality co-produce urban space.

### 3. Context: Bandung and the Politics of Design

Bandung's urban form exemplifies the *desakota* condition, a dense blending of urban and rural characteristics (McGee, 1991), where *kampung* settlements, informal economies, and planned infrastructure coexist in a dynamic but often conflicted landscape (Sintusingha et al., 2025). This hybrid morphology typifies many rapidly urbanising Asian contexts, where rural-based solidarities and informal economies persist within expanding metropolitan cores. These in-between conditions underpin dense social networks and forms of mutual support associated with rural villages, constituting what Simone (2018) calls "people as infrastructure." Such dynamics manifest as visible public life even within Bandung's highly commercialised tourism precincts, such as Jalan Cihempelas, which directly border huge *kampung* settlements that spill down the steep valleys of the Cikapundung River to the east (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Teras Cihempelas (highlighted red line of Phases 1 and 2) and surrounding urban context. The Skywalk is elevated over Jalan Cihempelas, a popular commercial hub in the foothills of northern Bandung (inset map; shaded rectangle marks enlarged area). Source: adapted from Google Earth aerial and base maps.

In contrast to this phenomenon, the city's colonial legacy—rooted in the Dutch-era planning and its conception as a potential new colonial capital—privileged European-style boulevards and zoning. This left a persistent tension between modernist visions of order and vernacular urbanism. These colonial logics of segregation and visibility can be understood, following Roy (2005) and Graham and McFarlane (2015), as early forms of infrastructural formalisation that sought to discipline the informal city. Their legacies continue through postcolonial governance, shaping the enduring top-down and bottom-up tensions that define Bandung's infrastructural politics of informality.

As Indonesia's second largest city (by population in built-up area), Bandung has long struggled to meet the demands of a rapidly growing city, facing multitudes of recurring urban social, economic, and environmental challenges: pervasive informality in housing and livelihoods, chronic traffic congestion, lack of a mass-transit system, shortages of accessible public spaces, and frequent floodings. Within this context, under the leadership of Ridwan Kamil—an architect turned mayor (in office 2013–2018)—Bandung pursued an ambitious agenda of urban beautification, creative city branding, and design-led governance, positioning itself within global networks of “innovative cities.” Kamil initiated new urban spaces, proposed mass-transit solutions to alleviate congestion, and, importantly, introduced design-led interventions to incorporate the

PKL into the formal city fabric. Alongside Teras Cihempelas, these included the renewal and rebranding of traditional markets as part of a broader strategy to formalise and legitimise informality through aesthetics (Centre for Liveable Cities, 2018, p. 78).

The elevated walkway at Teras Cihempelas was explicitly designed to resolve conflicts between multiple street activities on Jalan Cihempelas: vehicular traffic, pedestrians, and the dense cluster of PKL stalls that had spilt onto the street (Figure 2). By raising vendors above ground level, the project sought to free the street for circulation while still preserving livelihoods. Infrastructurally, the walkway embodies a strategy of spatial segregation—typical of infrastructural formalisation—physically separating conflicting functions while simultaneously rebranding vending as part of Bandung’s urban spectacle.



**Figure 2.** Jalan Cihempelas in November 2015, before the imposition of the Skywalk, was a bustling and chaotic platform for public life, characterised by layered practices of informal—ranging from mobile to semi-permanent businesses—and formal commerce. Local academics branded the presence of the PKL as “slum-like” (“*kumuh*”; Tasya et al., 2022) while pedestrians suffered through the poor footpath condition, street vending, disorganised vehicle traffic and parking, and deluges that accompany tropical rains.

Kamil’s dual identity as a designer and politician facilitated projects like Teras Cihempelas, which sought not only infrastructural improvement but also a reimagining of Bandung’s urban identity (World Cities Summit, 2015). Yet, this design-led approach, while celebrated internationally, has also been criticised for privileging aesthetic and touristic values over the everyday needs of local populations. In this sense, Bandung’s infrastructure politics resonates with global debates on the aestheticisation of informality (Datta & Shaban, 2017; Silver, 2014).

In Bandung’s politicised urban context, infrastructure becomes a tool not merely of service delivery but of governance, visibility, and legitimacy. Projects like Teras Cihempelas thus operate at the intersection of symbolic modernisation, spatial regulation, and electoral strategy—securing visibility for city leaders while introducing new exclusions and vulnerabilities for vendors. As Graham and McFarlane (2015) suggest, infrastructure in such contexts is both material and representational—an assemblage through which governance and citizenship are negotiated. A persistent challenge has been policy and implementation continuity across political cycles. Since Kamil became governor of West Java in late 2018 (to 2023), his urban visions, including Teras Cihempelas, have been reinterpreted and unevenly implemented, particularly during the disruptions of the Covid-19 pandemic. Moreover, design, as both an aesthetic and regulatory practice, functions as an instrument of control—formalising without necessarily empowering.

Importantly, Bandung’s design speculation of an elevated pedestrian corridor (Figure 3) must be situated within a longer global history of elevated walkways as urban design strategies. Since the early 20th century,

cities have experimented with raised pedestrian networks to relieve congestion, protect from poor weather, improve safety, and modernise urban circulation. Examples include the Minneapolis Skyway System constructed from the 1960s (Corbett et al., 2009; WCCO – CBS Minnesota, 2019), Hong Kong’s Central–Mid-Levels Escalator, and Bangkok’s BTS Skywalk network (Cuthbert, 2006). Earlier proposals by architects such as Antonio Sant’Elia and Le Corbusier also imagined multi-level circulation as part of the modernist dream of efficiency and order (Banister, 2008). Scholars note that while these infrastructures promise efficiency and order, they frequently reproduce vertical segregation, privileging commercial and middle-class users while marginalising street-level informality and public life (Cuthbert, 2006; Loughran, 2014). The celebrated High Line in New York City further exemplifies this tendency, functioning primarily as a site of aesthetic spectacle and gentrification rather than everyday accessibility (Loughran, 2014). In Southeast Asia, Bangkok’s extensive skywalk network represents an exclusionary archetype (see video: *In The Moment*, 2025), explicitly displacing vendors from the street level in favour of elevated, privatised pedestrian-commercial networks.



**Figure 3.** The northern main entry to Teras Cihempelas in September 2017, seven months after opening to the public. One can observe street vendors’ opportunistic clustering at the base of the stairs. The space next to the entry served as a tourist bus parking node for visitors and shoppers to Jalan Cihempelas. One can witness the design-driven street imposition that attempts to reorganise and aestheticise the pre-existing messy public life.

Seen against this backdrop, Bandung’s Teras Cihempelas offers an alternative, though equally fraught, place-based design-led formalisation. Rather than pursuing Bangkok-style eradication (although this is practised on other main streets in the city), the project attempted to spatially integrate street vendors into elevated public infrastructure. It thus reflects shared regional rationales—public order, pedestrianisation, and aesthetic upgrading—but implements them through a design-led and ostensibly inclusive strategy. The outcome, however, underscores enduring tensions. Vendors at Teras Cihempelas, despite being offered permanent stalls, reported declining sales and economic fragility. Their relocation severed them from the dense social and commercial flows that sustained their livelihoods, revealing the socio-spatial contradictions of infrastructural formalisation (Thongnoi, 2024).

The design drew on regional and global inspirations, including local night market traditions and Singapore’s hawker centres, yet misread the adaptive, flexible, and low-cost ecology of Bandung’s street vending.

By adopting the elevated corridor typology—celebrated in New York’s High Line and institutionalised in Bangkok’s skywalks—the project prioritised aesthetic spectacle over embedded economic viability. Unlike Bangkok’s integration with transit hubs and malls, Bandung’s walkway remained relatively isolated, limiting footfall and undermining its intended inclusivity.

Ultimately, Teras Cihempelas demonstrates the paradox of infrastructural formalisation: Vendors are accommodated in form but displaced in function. While the project symbolises Bandung’s aspiration for world-class status, its lived outcomes reveal the fragility of formalisation when divorced from the everyday ecologies of informality. In line with the theoretical arguments of Section 2, the case highlights how infrastructures, as material and political assemblages, simultaneously mediate modernisation and reproduce inequality (Guma, 2022; Simone, 2018).

Crucially, informal urbanism remains a prevailing urban condition in Bandung’s public life and attempts at clearance or spatial reorganisation are unsustainable without parallel social and infrastructural commitments. In this sense, the experiences of Teras Cihempelas provide a critical precedent: They highlight both the possibilities and limits of design-led formalisation, and the ways in which political cycles, regulatory gaps, and street-level spatio-temporal practices reshape urban infrastructure over time (Bruzzese, 2019).

#### **4. Teras Cihempelas: Making Space for Formalising Informality and Informalising Formality 2015–2025**

Teras Cihempelas was conceived as a municipal place-based design-led formalisation—a “Skywalk” to elevate Bandung’s iconic jeans vendors from the congested sidewalks of Jalan Cihempelas (Figure 2) to a sleek, pedestrian-friendly platform 4.5 metres above the street (Figure 3). Opened in February 2017, the 450-metre walkway—later extended to 700 metres in 2023—provided shaded walkways, scenic views, and purpose-built kiosks for 192 registered vendors relocated from street level, aiming to improve both vendor livelihoods and pedestrian experiences. The hard infrastructure was complemented with coaching activity (*bimtek*), conducted by the Bandung City Department of Cooperatives and MSMEs (Dinas Koperasi UMKM Kota Bandung), “to arrange and coach PKL to become independent and creative, and subsequently transition them from non-formal vendors to formal vendors so that a safe, clean, and orderly Bandung City can be created” (Tasya et al., 2022, p. 374). The vendors’ completion of training was requisite to securing stalls on the Skywalk. The project was framed as an infrastructural innovation and a symbolic modernisation effort under Mayor Ridwan Kamil’s creative city agenda (Centre for Liveable Cities, 2018). Designed to reflect the area’s topography, the terrace structure stepped downwards from north to south, weaving around mature rain trees, whose canopies provide partial shade (Figures 4 and 5), and symbolically reasserting the image of Bandung as a green, walkable city.



**Figure 4.** The Skywalk combines zones for the relocated street vendors and public open spaces—a pedestrian promenade running the full north–south length with integrated areas for passive recreation. However, seven months after the Skywalk’s inauguration, it was already apparent that the required daily footfall to economically sustain the vendors had not materialised (photo from September 2017).



**Figure 5.** The southern end of Phase 1 offers landscaped passive recreation space with spectacular panoramic views of the iconic Pasupati Bridge and *kampungs* of the Cikapundung River valley (to the left of the image; photo from September 2017).

However, the relocation also revealed unforeseen challenges as vendors experienced a sharp decline in customer traffic once the initial novelty faded, as most pedestrians remained at street level. Accessibility issues, including the limited stairs and absence of functioning lift access, compounded the problem of vendor isolation from passing footfall and from the dense socio-spatial life that had previously sustained their trade (Figure 2). While subsequent efforts promoted the Skywalk as an urban tourist attraction—with curated events and programmed zones—momentum was further disrupted by the Covid-19 pandemic and inconsistent municipal revitalisation and maintenance regimes.

The design of Teras Cihempelas, with its clean lines, controlled vendor layouts, and social-media-ready views, mirrored global precedents such as New York’s High Line, Seoul’s Seoulllo 7017, and Bangkok’s BTS Skywalk, each exemplifying the use of elevated corridors as aestheticised infrastructures of modernity. This created performative civic pride for the globalised visuals of the design (detikJabar, 2024; Priyadi, 2025). Yet, as with similar projects, the walkway’s isolation from the surrounding pedestrian network revealed the fragility of aesthetic-led regeneration in contexts where informality underpins everyday accessibility. Re-informalisation soon followed: Vendors extended beyond assigned kiosks, and installed informal signage,

while informal trade persisted at ground level (Figure 6), underscoring the cyclical relationship between formalisation and informality noted by Simone (2018) and Graham and McFarlane (2015).



**Figure 6.** Visitors can take photos with a cut-out of Mayor Kamil demonstrating how the project is intertwined with politics and political campaigning (left image). Ironically but—in hindsight—unsurprisingly, the iconic Teras Cihempelas and upgrade of footpaths have attracted vendors to the street below, where every space is prime commercial real estate (middle and right images; photos from September 2017).

The following subsections elaborate on the five themes derived from the triangulated methodology (Section 2) that collectively illustrate how design both mediates and destabilises the politics of informality in Bandung. This enables a systematic reconstruction of Teras Cihempelas as both a designed infrastructure and a lived socio-spatial process—where formalisation, adaptation, and decline coexist over time.

#### 4.1. Aestheticisation and Spectacle: Design as Urban Performance

Field observations in 2017 highlighted the project’s ambitious architectural intent and novelty: a steel structure pedestrian bridge lined with uniform vendor kiosks and planters (Figures 3, 4, and 5). Launched in February 2017 following the Bandung City Regional Regulation Number 4 of 2011 concerning the management and development of PKL, the Skywalk was conceived to alleviate street-level congestion, accommodate informal vendors, and offer recreational pedestrian space. It was the city’s first design-led attempt to spatially formalise informal vending with a purpose-built elevated platform. Media accounts at the time frequently benchmarked it to international precedents (Ramdhani, 2017), presenting it as a symbol of Bandung’s modernising aspiration and creative city branding.

Then-Mayor Ridwan Kamil explicitly positioned Teras Cihempelas within a citywide pedestrianisation strategy, envisioning a continuous skywalk network linking Cihempelas to Dago (see Figure 1 map), another major commercial precinct (Nugraha, 2018; Perdana & Assifa, 2019). A phased plan prioritised vending in Phase 1 and explicit pedestrian circulation in later stages (Nugraha, 2018). Phase 2, begun in 2018, was only completed in 2023. While Phase 1 initially thrived as a civic showcase, Phase 2’s delay and reduced funding exposed the dependency of such projects on leadership cycles.

Media coverage from 2017 to 2021 consistently framed the Skywalk as a “Bandung icon,” prioritising its spectacle value over long-term usability (Permadi & Ika, 2021). Local media such as *Detik* and *Jabar Ekspres* praised the project as “Instagrammable,” aligning with Mayor Kamil’s vision of aesthetic urbanism (Centre for Liveable Cities, 2018). Early TripAdvisor (n.d.) and Google Maps (n.d.) entries likewise applauded its design and views. From Google Maps (n.d.), U ART kids (in 2018) described the Skywalk as “Suitable for relieving fatigue from busy city traffic, suitable for bringing the family and the cheapest tour,” while Adi Hadiansyah (in 2020) quipped: “This is a wonderful, creative spot that adds to the allure of Bandung. It also offers pedestrians

more freedom, as they aren't crowded on the sidewalks of Cihampelas Street." FachryMyID (in 2024) recalled that "the first skywalk in Indonesia...is an open space with an inclusive concept...various venues for shows, meetings and children's play...is also friendly for people with disabilities...toilets and a prayer room." These early testimonials underscored how civic rhetoric and public reception converged around an imagery of modernity, accessibility, and creative identity, even as economic integration remained secondary.

Field and online data converge, showing that the Skywalk's spectacle value exceeded its everyday function. Several online reviewers described Teras Cihampelas as a photo spot or an Instagrammable place rather than a vibrant everyday space. Such perceptions affirm the primacy of consumption-oriented visibility in Bandung's design governance. Damels Channel, a frequent photo contributor to Google Reviews, wrote in 2019: "Great place for photos...many sellers weren't selling anymore" (Google Maps, n.d.). In 2020, Dedi Sopandi Sofwan confirmed: "The vendors have returned to the lower levels" (Google Maps, n.d.).

A reflective *Jabar Ekspres* article, marking the eighth anniversary of the Skywalk, highlighted enduring tensions between top-down design and grassroots needs (Priyadi, 2025). While celebrating its ambition and visual appeal, the article critiqued Teras Cihampelas as emblematic of a broader trend in Indonesian cities that prioritises aesthetics over usability and sustainability. To counter this perception, later revitalising strategies—such as the 2025 Sundanese Cultural Festival—sought to re-embed the Skywalk within local cultural narratives that, according to the deputy mayor, showcased "the community's creative wealth...where empowerment of local business actors and cultural preservation go hand in hand" (Priyadi, 2025). These successive framing efforts underscored the municipality's reliance on events to reactivate an otherwise underused structure. Despite attempts at diversification, the Skywalk's function remained episodic—thriving during festivals but dormant otherwise.

After experiencing cycles of decline and renewal, Perdana and Putri (2023) reported that street vendors became cautious and ambivalent to new revitalisation plans. A seller of Sundanese accessories hoped that Teras Cihampelas would not only be busy at the beginning, like before. Another trader desired "more activities so that people want to visit here" while another disclosed that "we only rely on holidays. Most of the buyers are tourists from outside the city" (Perdana & Putri, 2023). These accounts confirm dependence on episodic consumption rather than daily trade.

This tension between image and use reflects Simone's (2018) reading of urban vitality as sustained by informal improvisation rather than fixed form. By constraining such improvisation, Teras Cihampelas prioritised visibility over viability, reinforcing Roy's (2005) critique of planning that codifies but cannot sustain urban life's informal energies. The project's aesthetic framing privileges middle-class spectacle over inclusivity, and exemplifies Graham and Marvin's (2001) notion of "splintering urbanism," promising connection while producing new vertical separations between "displaced" vendors above and those that remained below. Together, media celebration, civic rhetoric, and user commentary demonstrate how design became both a performative instrument of modernity and a mechanism of spatial exclusion.

#### 4.2. Vendor and Economic Challenges

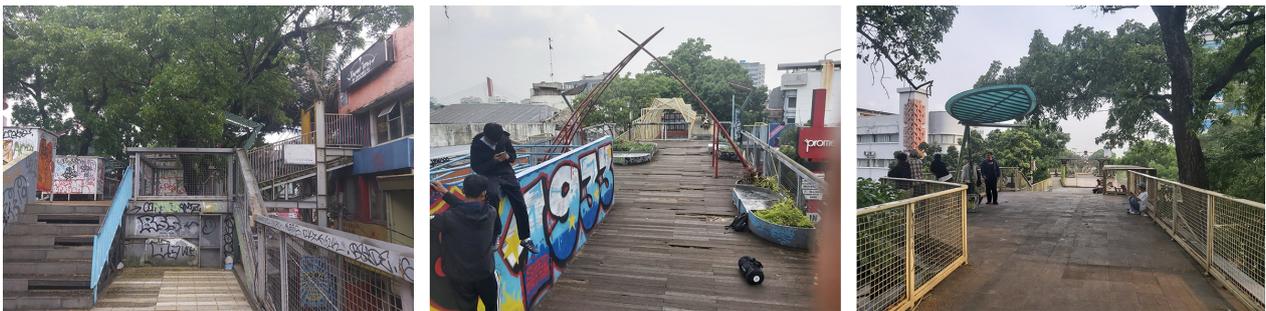
Crucially, the accounts in Section 4.1 point to a structural mismatch between the designed programme of creative, leisure consumption and the informal economy's need for routine, local footfall. Relocation and trade

policies under the Bandung City Department of Cooperatives and MSMEs offered limited rent incentives and vendor training in formal finance, marketing, and legality, but these were short-term and insufficient to sustain relocated traders (Perdana & Putri, 2023; Tasya et al., 2022). Without continuous programming or economic integration, the elevated market's viability faltered.

From the outset, interviews reported in *Kompas* and *Detik* revealed declining sales among relocated vendors, as elevation reduced visibility and footfall, while street-level traders outside the official enclosure continued to attract customers. Field observations in 2019 (see Figure 7) confirmed widespread kiosk vacancies and low activity levels, with further decline observed in 2025 (see Figure 8).



**Figure 7.** Evidence of vendor re-informalisation appears with the suspension of tarps over kiosks and sitting areas to shield from the elements (left image), compromising the global design image. A link to an upper-level restaurant (middle image) offered a clue on how to reactivate the Skywalk and attract more people—vertical intensification and replication of the layers of commerce that characterise the street level. The (then) abandoned Phase 2 southwards extension to Jalan Pasupati contributed to a sense of decline (right image). Kamil's cut-out has been coincidentally removed from the photo frame (compared to Figure 6, left image), reflecting political changes (photos from September 2019).



**Figure 8.** Apart from the food vending terraces, in 2025 the Skywalk's physical conditions have broadly deteriorated since the previous visit in 2019. The restaurant in Figure 7's middle image has closed, and all non-food vendors have abandoned their graffiti-covered stalls (left image). Yet, the graffiti-ridden space signifies appropriation by another neglected group—youth, who are prominent on the Skywalk (middle [Phases 1 and 2 interface] and right images [southern end of Phase 2]). In response and to convey a sense of safety, the Skywalk is now policed—for 24-hours—by security personnel. The terrace's dilapidated and deserted condition produced new, unintended affordances for youth's alternative appropriation (Bruzzeze, 2019)—including skateboarding on the long, smooth surfaces (right image; photos from September 2025).

Online reviews confirmed accounts of kiosks' closure and fewer customers due to the convenience of shopping below. The Skywalk was described as empty or devoid of activity, and with few vendors operating, made the

shopping experience less appealing. From Google Maps (n.d.), Dedi Sopandi Sofwan (in 2020) observed: “At the beginning it was very busy, now it looks quiet and the vendors have gone back downstairs.” More recently, Yayat Ruhiyat (in 2024) commented: “Some street vendors...complained that because their merchandise is quiet, they end up wanting to sell their goods downstairs.” Febryana Febryan (in 2024) added: “Nice place but quiet, even though it’s close to busy places like Ciwalk etc. There needs to be promotions and more interesting food tenants.” Conversely, during curated events the Skywalk becomes lively, substantiating the episodic nature of foot traffic. Mahdi Syahbana A (in 2024) noted: “When I came here there was an event...it was busy and lots of people were selling.”

The Covid-19 pandemic amplified these difficulties. Visitor traffic collapsed, and only 12 of 192 traders—mainly culinary—remained (Ramadhan, 2021). Media headlines described the Skywalk as “empty and lifeless” with a vendor labelling the period as a “disaster” (Permadi & Ika, 2021). Local vendors and citizens interviewed across various news reports voiced frustration, expressing that the project, while innovative in theory, failed to deliver long-term benefits due to inconsistent oversight and lack of inclusive planning. By 2024, one of the eight traders still operating on the Skywalk—all selling food and drinks—lamented: “Previously, I could earn IDR 4–5 million per day (~ USD 245–300; May 2025 exchange rate). During the day my sales were almost gone, now it’s at most IDR 300,000 (~ USD 18), it’s quiet” (detikJabar, 2024).

From late 2021, the municipality responded with reactivation and revitalisation plans, vandalised infrastructure repair, vendor re-engagement, and coordination with PKL leaders to control street-level trade (Ramadhan, 2021). To project a “cool” image, the municipality collaborated with Rotor, a youth creative group. However, progress was compromised by technical issues such as drainage and structural wear (Susanti, 2022). Another revitalisation cycle followed the completion of Phase 2 in October 2023, which introduced themed zones—a fashion show space, RC circuit, historical gallery, and outdoor classrooms—to attract a wider range of publics, diversify visitor experiences, and rebrand the Skywalk as a creative hub (Perdana & Putri, 2023). Acting Mayor Ema Sumarna framed the initiative as an effort “to change the behaviour of consumers who come to Cihampelas to be interested in visiting the street vendors up here” (Perdana & Putri, 2023). These overlapping, but fragmented—and at times conflicting—efforts illustrate the challenge of coordinating diverse objectives: sustaining the Skywalk as public space while also supporting PKL livelihoods.

Taken together, these dynamics reveal how promises of empowerment were undermined by economic exclusion, declining visibility, and pandemic disruption. Vendors adapted by relocating or informally returning to the street, exemplifying Bayat’s (2010) “quiet encroachment.” The Teras Cihempelas experience thus reinforces Roy’s (2005) argument that the state produces and manages informality even while claiming to regulate and empower it.

### 4.3. Accessibility and Usage Concerns

Despite being promoted as a pedestrian-friendly infrastructure, the walkway was poorly connected to the surrounding street network. Field notes recorded multiple entry points accessible only by steep stairs and a non-functioning lift, the lack of shade structures, and a general lack of maintenance. In the 2025 site visit, it was observed that the ramps linking the terraces from Phase 2 had collapsed. On the other hand, heeding vendors’ request, permanent roof structures were erected over the two food vendor terraces—enabling all-weather utility but not access (Figure 9).



**Figure 9.** Along the full length of the Skywalk, there's a single (inoperative) lift access (left image). Phase 2 is wracked with substandard construction that, for instance, renders ramps between terraces unusable (middle image). Heading food vendors' demands, the city government added a permanent roof over the two food vending terraces (right image; photos from September 2025).

Unsurprisingly, online reviewers frequently raised accessibility and usage concerns that make it hard for young families, the elderly, and disabled visitors to comfortably use the facility. Others criticised it for being underwhelming or poorly maintained, noting broken infrastructure and a lack of vibrancy. In 2019, Setyaadi Yonggiawan mentioned: "There are various products here, culinary delights are also fun if it's not raining, it's a shame the lift doesn't work" (Google Maps, n.d.; and, indeed, heavy rain disrupted the users of the Skywalk during the 2025 observation). In 2019, Fernandes Mandasella noted the inaccessibility for those coming by car: "Vehicle parking arrangements need to be improved, and environmental cleanliness issues" (Google Maps, n.d.). These physical access problems undermine the intended inclusivity of the space.

Apart from the construction of the roof structures to improve usability, the municipality addressed accessibility and safety concerns by implementing 24-hours security patrol of the Skywalk, managed by Satpol PP (the vendor enforcement unit). Furthermore, current Mayor Farhan outlined several infrastructural solutions, including routine maintenance, enhancing night lighting, installing escalators for better street connection, and negotiating parking access with private businesses ("Nasib pedagang Teras Cihampelas," 2025; Pramananda, 2025).

Conversely, the evolved conditions enhance accessibility for and afford appropriations by youth users of both genders—whether alone, as couples, or in groups—who were prominent during the 2025 visit relative to other demographic groups (Figure 9). These observations underscore the notion of the "right to the city," where the Skywalk's vertical separation translated aesthetic spectacle into functional exclusion that favoured youth users, revealing how infrastructural form can subtly delimit everyday citizenship in public space.

#### 4.4. Political Symbolism and Policy Instruments

Teras Cihampelas is deeply embedded in Bandung's political iconography. The project served as an urban landmark legacy of then-Mayor Ridwan Kamil, who showcased Teras Cihampelas as proof of design-oriented governance. President Joko Widodo's 2017 visit further legitimised it as a national model for micro, small, and medium enterprises that enhanced Bandung's city brand (Kuwado, 2017). Teras Cihampelas thus functioned as a visual and policy instrument through which leadership sought to link aesthetic modernisation with small-enterprise empowerment.

Online responses (Google Maps, n.d.) captured this symbolic attachment. Marlina Seusilawati (in 2020) expressed gratitude: “Thank you Mr Ridwan Kamil”; whereas Pasir Laut (in 2024), a frequent reviewer, was unflattering: “The RK project actually made Jl. Cihampelas a slum.” Wildan Akbar (late 2024) drew parallels between the uncertainty around Kamil’s political career and Teras Cihampelas.

During the first phase of the project, the Bandung government introduced vendor relocation and support measures—including training programmes for marketing and hygiene, and facilitation of kiosks for 192 traders (“Nasib pedagang Teras Cihampelas,” 2025; Tasya et al., 2022). However, media and vendor reports indicate that these supports were not sustained: Vendors later reported sharp income declines, and many returned to sidewalk trade after infrastructure maintenance and promotional budgets were reduced (“Nasib Teras Cihampelas Bandung,” 2024; Romadhan, 2025). This suggests that relocation was treated more as an administrative repositioning of vendors rather than a sustained economic investment. In their evaluation of the Skywalk, Tasya et al. (2022, p. 378) observed that “changing the mindset and perspective of these street vendors is indeed very difficult, with their low level of education being one contributing factor,” compared to “Small and Medium Enterprises (UKM), who typically produce their own goods, are already independent, and are creative”—openly reflecting formal institutional and socio-economic bias.

As leadership cycles changed, so did interpretations of the Skywalk’s meaning. The current West Java governor, critical of Ridwan Kamil’s legacy project, proposed the extreme option of demolition (Alhamidi, 2025; Romadhan, 2025). By contrast, the current Mayor Muhammad Farhan is committed to renewal plans and has alleviated security concerns with 24-hour policing (“Teras Cihampelas bakal direvitalisasi,” 2025). These were affirmed in the 2025 interview with the Bandung city planners, who mentioned that the Skywalk will be extended—although there are no clear timelines. These divergent stances illustrate how urban infrastructure becomes a medium of political differentiation—both an inherited burden and an opportunity for rebranding.

Recent controversies over the project’s fate illustrate how physical infrastructures become political terrains for contesting leadership legacies (Alhamidi, 2025). While early narratives framed the Skywalk as an economic empowerment corridor, later discourse re-inscribed it as a liability demanding fiscal discipline and security control. Such cycles of appropriation align with Smith’s (2002) “revanchist urbanism,” where urban form is mobilised to perform civic order and leadership visibility rather than inclusivity. The Skywalk thus served simultaneously as infrastructural trial, symbolic legacy, and administrative policy tool—its design inseparable from the political economy of its governance.

#### **4.5. Material Decline and Re-Informalisations**

By the 2019 site visit, signs of decline were evident. Maintenance lapses, vandalism, graffiti, and vacant kiosks coincided with the suspension of Phase 2 construction due to budgetary issues (Perdana & Assifa, 2019), weakening momentum and creating a sense of neglect (Figure 7). An administrator of the Teras Cihampelas Management Board (Badan Pengelola Teras Cihampelas) and PKL representative linked the Skywalk’s quiet condition to the presence of new street vendors under the structure, implicating the city government’s lax enforcement. He opined: “If there are still street vendors below, it’s better for us to go down” (Perdana & Ika, 2020; Figure 6, middle and right images).

The relocation and formalisation programme for the elevated walkway lacked ongoing fiscal and operational backing. A 2024 evaluation by Universitas Padjadjaran found that the programme failed on criteria of effectiveness, efficiency, adequacy, and equity—including inadequate maintenance and reinforcement of the vendor support system (Tasya et al., 2022). Municipal statements in 2025 acknowledged that the project required major funding just to repair damage from vandalism and structure wear (Anshory, 2025; Primananda, 2025).

DetikJabar (2024) lamented:

The charm of Teras Cihampelas, which was once one of the icons of Bandung City, is now fading. The condition...is now truly concerning. In addition to being deserted by traders, various graffiti and the smell of urine emanate from this place.

User reviews from 2024–2025 (Google Maps, n.d.) echoed this deterioration: Complaints of rubbish, graffiti, and broken lights proliferated. Faruq Erfianto “regret[s] going all the way to Bandung to come here...It’s dirty and covered in mold like a horror film.” Such imagery marked a reversal of the project’s original aesthetic promise. Field observations in 2025 confirmed re-occupation of surrounding streets by informal vendors, while the elevated space was quiet apart from new youth “informalising” (Figure 8).

The recurring graffiti, skateboarding, and loitering transformed the Skywalk into an unregulated youth space. This “afterlife” of the infrastructure, though unintended, re-activated it through informal cultural practices rather than trade. Bagus Ari Prihandiyo Utomo (May 2024) lamented:

It’s a shame....Skywalk...used to be an icon of Bandung...a lot of rubbish...which reduces the beauty and comfort of this place. Damaged facilities and vandalism. Hopefully the management can immediately take action to restore the cleanliness and aesthetics of this charming skywalk. (Google, n.d.)

In June 2024, Rumii, a frequent reviewer and photo contributor, penned a long list of grievances, including “the walls and all surfaces are covered in graffiti, vandalism, gang names and sex” (Google, n.d.), signalling the re-informalisation of space. These accounts suggest that informality is not merely economic but social—a response to infrastructural neglect that reclaims abandoned visibility for marginal groups.

This cycle illustrates Roy’s (2005) claim that informality is not eradicated but re-produced through state interventions. Rather than signalling failure, re-informalisation reveals a pragmatic adaptation to shifting regulatory and spatial conditions—as vendors informally reclaim more viable ground-level spaces and youths appropriate the elevated terrain. The attempt to modernise and formalise thus generated renewed and new informalities, demonstrating that spatial order is always provisional.

Taken together, the five themes trace Teras Cihampelas’s evolution from a celebrated design icon to a contested urban platform. They clarify that the state’s capacity to manage informality rests less on design than on continuous economic and administrative engagement. By triangulating ethnographic observation, media discourse, and online visitor commentary, the analysis demonstrates how top-down efforts to formalise informality are continually re-interpreted through everyday practice. Applying Graham and Marvin’s, and Roy’s frameworks clarifies that formalisation is not a linear transition but an ongoing

negotiation between visibility, viability, and power—where the design intervention simultaneously spotlights and reproduces the social contradictions of the urban public realm.

## 5. Reflections on Design, Participation, and Governance

To tackle the issues stemming from Bandung's PKL occupying city streets—including traffic congestion, conflicts with pedestrian flow, and a negative urban image—Mayor Kamil conceptualised a design-driven vision. He envisaged that urban design and aestheticisation could function not only as infrastructure but as a civic spectacle that rebranded the street as a platform for modern, pedestrianised public life. However, while the implemented design demonstrated a clear focus on urban aesthetics, image management, and tourism-led redevelopment, it simultaneously highlighted the dangers of neglecting the dynamics of urban informality, the politics of inclusion and exclusion, and the importance of long-term maintenance and regulation.

Despite the construction of new infrastructure, the design and implementation process was top-down—taking a carrot and stick approach to co-opting vendors, who were included as beneficiaries rather than co-designers. Decisions prioritised tourism and image enhancement over everyday vendor and visitor needs, such as shade, operational lifts, carparks, and sanitation. In effect, some stakeholder needs and agendas (middle-class consumers, tourists, municipal authorities) were privileged, while others (street vendors, daily local users) were suppressed. This lack of inclusive planning (Irawati et al., 2025; “Kata pengamat soal pembangunan Teras Cihempelas,” 2024) compounded systemic barriers, notably accessibility challenges, vendor marginalisation, and a notable resurgence of informal activities around the Skywalk. Moreover, observations in September 2025 reveal the Skywalk's appropriation by youth as a platform for their public life. Based on these narratives and user feedback, various solutions have been proffered. The aspiration for convenient carparks, inspired by the nearby Ciwalk Mall, exposes systemic obstacles such as the exorbitant land values, high-capital investments, and the inability of the city to offer viable public transportation alternatives.

Equally, weak maintenance and enforcement capacity undermined the project's long-term functionality. As municipal attention shifted to new flagship projects, Teras Cihempelas suffered from disrepair, underutilised facilities, and inconsistent enforcement of vendor placement rules. These governance gaps amplified the contradictions between design ambition and lived experience.

Ultimately, Teras Cihempelas exemplifies the gap between ambitious urban design and the realities of governance, community needs, and informal resilience. As Graham and Marvin (2001) and Simone (2018) suggest, such projects in the Global South must go beyond aesthetics, engaging in participatory, adaptive governance that recognises the hybridity of formal and informal practices. The case shows both the potentials and contradictions of reconfiguring streets as public platforms: While the Skywalk promised integration and visibility, it generated new exclusions and vulnerabilities. Whether the Skywalk evolves into a sustainable civic asset or continues its cycle of neglect, even leading to its possible demolition, remains an open question—one that resonates across many rapidly transforming and aspirational cities.

## 6. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Teras Cihempelas offers a compelling, if cautionary, case study of the complexities inherent in formalising urban informality. While ambitious in design and progressive in intent, the project underscores the challenges of balancing economic inclusion, aesthetic order, and democratic access to public space—not to mention electoral contests on the issue. Key findings highlight the five interrelated empirical themes: (a) the aestheticisation of informality through design-driven spectacle that elevated visibility over everyday function; (b) shifting patterns of pedestrian circulation, uneven consumption, and pandemic disruption that compromised the Skywalk's economic base; (c) significant accessibility and usage constraints—stemming from poor vertical connections, dysfunctional infrastructure, limited weather protection, and uneven maintenance—that undermined intended inclusivity and shaped who could meaningfully use the Skywalk; (d) political associations and leadership cycles that produced fluctuating priorities in maintenance, enforcement, and programme continuity; and (e) material decline, re-informalisation, and the adaptive practices adopted by different publics when formal infrastructure fail to sustain routine trade and public life.

Future research could further explore and draw lessons from the longitudinal narrative and outcomes of formalisation efforts, vendor agency in negotiating formalised environments, re- and new informalisations, and comparative studies across other Global South cities undergoing similar transformations. Future studies of streets as platforms of public life in rapidly urbanising Global South contexts could explore these issues by comparing cases with more sustained regimes of maintenance and regulatory enforcement. More importantly, they could investigate how participatory planning approaches—where vendors, visitors, and residents are substantively involved from conception to operation—reshape outcomes. Ultimately, the right to the city must encompass not only the right to appropriate space as part of public life but also the right to sustain livelihoods within it—a principle that remains elusive in current models of urban regeneration.

Governance of public space, as Low and Smith (2006) emphasise, is deeply political, and interventions like Teras Cihempelas must grapple with the competing claims of different urban publics. On the other hand, it is observed that the PKL are acknowledged as urban stakeholders and have been supported by both government and non-government agencies. Their status is best understood as semi-formal, characterised by a negotiated degree of rights and urban access. Consequently, the central issue shifts from the PKL's absolute exclusion to the quality of inclusion—specifically, the terms and conditions under which vendors are integrated into public life. Although largely unsuccessful so far in the quest to balance street vending and public recreation, the Teras Cihempelas case demonstrates that alternative possibilities for public street life exist if local governance adopts an inclusive mindset towards the PKL. Crucially, there is promise when city administrators, planners, and other publics culturally perceive and acknowledge the PKL as a local urban vernacular (albeit in need of modernisation).

In this respect, participatory planning approaches hold promise (Irawati et al., 2025; Yasmeen & Nirathron, 2014). By involving vendors and local publics meaningfully, future projects could produce infrastructures that are more flexible, better connected, and responsive to informal patterns of use. Such engagement could also help build collective responsibility for ongoing maintenance and enforcement, mitigating the cycle of neglect. Finer-scale design engagements and interventions—that accommodate informal adaptations and enhance connectivity with surrounding urban flows—can improve inclusivity without sacrificing the desired urban order and public life. Design has an important role to play in experimenting with platforms for

public life that facilitate and balance the PKL's and pedestrians' access to the street, and Teras Cihempelas can be viewed as one such experimentation. However, design must be employed with a robust understanding and in the service of informal vendors' and other publics' patterns of use, requirements, and needs. The Skywalk's design and subsequent revitalisations could be far more participatory, and have been less effective when utilised to engineer prescribed outcomes.

Finally, the case illustrates both the opportunities and pitfalls of positioning streets as platforms of public life in the Global South. Streets can be reimagined as civic stages that integrate commerce, mobility, and sociability, but only if design is allied to robust governance and genuine participation. A consistent and continuous policy, implementation, and management regime is fundamental. Longitudinal lessons from Teras Cihempelas can be incorporated into future iterations and expansions of the pedestrian skywalk. The Skywalk should not be judged by its current predicaments, since it is a relatively permanent and novel urban infrastructure and public open space. With political and stakeholders' will, there will be creative/innovative appropriations of the space. It is hoped that future revitalisations will heed public criticisms aptly echoed in a reader's post on a *Kompas.com* article that "maintaining is indeed more difficult than creating" (Susanti, 2022).

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# Reclaiming Public Space Through Governance Transformation: The Case of Piazze Aperte, Milan

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## Abstract

This article examines Piazze Aperte—the tactical urbanism programme promoted by the Municipality of Milan—as a policy device that reconfigures how streets can be reclaimed, governed, and collectively used. Drawing on three strands of urban theory—tactical urbanism, temporary uses, and collaborative approaches—the analysis adopts an embedded research perspective to investigate both spatial outcomes and institutional effects. Rather than treating temporary street redesigns as provisional experiments, Piazze Aperte has employed low-cost and reversible interventions to accelerate implementation, stimulate civic initiative, and establish new forms of cooperation between residents, schools, associations, and municipal offices. The programme has contributed to redefining streets as public social infrastructures, linking spatial transformation with shared stewardship and administrative adaptation. The case of Piazzale Bacone—one of its implementations—shows how tactical measures can generate everyday appropriation, conviviality, and visible change within a short timeframe while also revealing material fragilities, quality weaknesses, maintenance challenges, and uneven territorial coverage. These tensions expose the strategic ambiguity of temporary interventions when long-term consolidation is not ensured. The article argues that Piazze Aperte provides substantive evidence for ongoing debates on the institutionalisation of experimental planning practices and on the governance of public space as a negotiated commons. From a policy perspective, the programme illustrates the transformative potential of temporary uses and civic collaboration in reshaping urban spaces, supporting liveability, and reforming institutional practice while simultaneously highlighting two key challenges for future development: ensuring the durability of interventions over time and extending their reach to less organised yet equally disadvantaged urban areas.

## Keywords

collaborative governance; Milan; public space; street reclamation; tactical urbanism

## 1. Introduction

“Public space matters,” affirms Low (2024)—a view widely shared across both research and practice. Public space shapes the urban form and provides the material foundation for collective life, social interaction, and commercial exchange. It embodies and symbolises civic power and spiritual values. The quality of public space reflects, more broadly, the quality of urban life. However, whenever public space is discussed, its urban nature and role must be clarified as these vary according to multiple factors: its spatial and formal characteristics; the geography and history of the contexts in which it is situated; the cultural, social, and economic profiles of its users; as well as the modes of management, maintenance, and care (Carmona et al., 2008; Gehl, 1987; Madanipour, 1996). Public space has long been central to reflections on the city (Gehl, 1987; Hajer & Reijndorp, 2001; Jacobs, 1961; Lefebvre, 1974; Sennett, 1977; Whyte, 1980). In recent years, however, it has re-emerged as a renewed focus of attention, both in academic literature and in planning, regeneration, and design practice. The Covid-19 pandemic, in particular, offered a direct experience of the deprivation of public space, making its importance for everyday life even more evident (Radović et al., 2020) and reinforcing the need for high-quality, accessible, and equitably distributed public spaces (Fainstein, 2010).

Streets constitute one of the largest reservoirs of urban public space: common areas that accommodate both movement and pause, for vehicles and pedestrians alike. The intense industrial development that followed the Second World War unfolded under the dominance of the automobile, reshaping streets around the needs of car traffic and consolidating their perception as car-oriented environments, where pavements and pedestrian spaces were reduced to marginal remnants. In recent years, however, this trend has shifted. Although car ownership levels remain high (particularly in Italy compared with other European countries), interest in sustainable mobility, support for car-free policies, and awareness of the spatial imbalance between cars and pedestrians have all increased. Consequently, the street—or rather, specific streets or portions thereof—has been progressively reinterpreted as a potential site of transformation: a contested space reclaimed for multiple uses and returned to pedestrians (Bertolini, 2020).

Within this trajectory are numerous recent European and North American experiences of pedestrianisation and street-space recovery. Many share experimental, temporary, and low-cost approaches, albeit pursuing different objectives: in Barcelona, the Superilles prioritised the reorganisation of vehicular mobility; in Paris, the “15-minute city” model promoted proximity; and in New York, the DoT Plazas Program aimed to increase the provision of pedestrian areas. Milan has also advanced along this path through the Piazze Aperte programme, launched by the Municipality in 2018, which has since completed more than 50 tactical urbanism interventions across the city using similar experimental, temporary, and low-cost strategies.

This article examines the Milanese programme, with specific reference to several cases located in Milan’s District 3 (*Municipio 3*)—in which the author played an active role, as explained below. The programme is understood here as an “urban experiment” (Evans et al., 2021), undertaken by a public administration through temporary and tactical interventions making use of various forms of citizen collaboration. In progress for seven years, the programme has evolved over time and now enables the identification of institutional learning processes in the governance of street-recovery interventions.

Three closely intertwined areas of research—temporary uses, tactical urbanism, and collaborative practices—provide the theoretical framework guiding three research questions. First, the Piazze Aperte

interventions were realised through temporary uses typical of tactical urbanism. What role do these temporary and tactical uses play in the processes of street-space recovery and the reclaiming of public space? What do they enable, and what limitations do they reveal? Second, the *Piazze Aperte* programme engaged residents in various ways in the process of transforming streets. What form and role does collaboration with citizens take in the implementation of such interventions? Third, the *Piazze Aperte* experience began as an experiment by the public administration and has been ongoing in Milan for seven years, showing a notable evolution. What effects do such experiments have on governance and institutional learning? Together, these questions allow the *Piazze Aperte* case to inform broader reflections on how public administrations reclaim streets as public spaces. Specifically, the case provides useful evidence for considering the significance of urban experiments and their temporalities; the different forms of citizen collaboration involved; the institutionalisation of certain urban transformation practices; and their effects on institutional learning. In doing so, the article contributes to the ongoing debate on the institutionalisation of tactical urbanism, the governance of urban experimentation, and the evolving role of citizens as co-producers of public space.

## 2. Theoretical Framework: Temporary, Tactical, and Participatory Approaches to Urban Space

The *Piazze Aperte* programme—a set of temporary interventions inspired by tactical urbanism and explicitly oriented towards citizen engagement—is relevant to at least three strands of research that, over recent decades, have explored forms of urban transformation within regeneration processes. The first concerns the body of work on *temporary uses*, which in their various forms are increasingly recognised as effective strategies of intervention (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Mehrotra & Vera, 2023). The second relates to *tactical urbanism* and its temporary, low-cost, and originally bottom-up interventions, which are now increasingly adopted by public administrations (Cariello et al., 2021; Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Salvador, 2023). The third addresses *collaborative practices* in the design of public space and in the governance of the commons (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Foster & Iaione, 2016).

These thematic domains correspond to three approaches to urban transformation—temporary, tactical, and collaborative—which are deeply interconnected and frequently overlap or interact. Temporary uses often adopt tactical logics and rely on forms of collaboration; tactical urbanism, by its very nature, is both temporary and collaborative; and many forms of collaboration apply to temporary uses precisely because they are reversible and comparatively easier to put into practice. Although their theoretical frameworks appear distinct, it is precisely in their mutual relations that they offer a valuable lens through which to critically examine the *Piazze Aperte* programme in Milan.

*Temporary use* refers to the short-term activation of urban spaces—buildings, underused sites, or abandoned areas—pending a permanent function or redevelopment. Initially, such uses emerged as informal practices occupying disused spaces or as brief artistic and cultural initiatives (public art, festivals, temporary gardens). On these foundations, the first experiments of the early 2000s in Berlin, Amsterdam, Helsinki, and Vienna took shape (Bishop & Williams, 2012; Overmeyer, 2007), representing genuine forms of urban pioneering (Misselwitz & Oswald, 2013). These initiatives were characterised by lightweight, easily dismantled, and reusable structures, often associated with social creativity and bottom-up regeneration, combining low costs with adaptable urban environments. Over time, and through repeated experimentation, temporary uses have

acquired new functions and meanings. Alongside the *ephemeral* (Mehrotra & Vera, 2023) and the *reversible* condition—in which temporary uses occur in situation A, then cease to exist, returning to situation A—a *transitional* condition has emerged, in which temporary uses occur in situation A, propose new spatial or urban configurations, and lead to a new situation B. In the first case, they fill a spatial and symbolic void; in the second, temporary uses become instrumental to processes of urban transformation, capable of anticipating future functions and testing design hypotheses. Contemporary research now recognises these practices as genuine instruments of urban experimentation, able to generate social and cultural value under conditions of uncertainty (De Smet, 2013; Lehtovuori & Ruoppila, 2012). In parallel, many cities and countries have integrated into their policy frameworks tools that support temporary uses, such as specific permits, transitional clauses, or urban leasing contracts (Andres, 2025; Galdini, 2020; Turku et al., 2023), while others have codified operational procedures (Inti et al., 2014). Within this framework, the process involving temporary uses (situation A → temporary use → situation A; or situation A → temporary use → situation B) is rarely linear, and the duration of the temporary use itself significantly influences the overall process—as the Milan case will later illustrate.

*Tactical urbanism* is, in many respects, a practice that overlaps with temporary uses. Over the past decades, it has emerged as a rapid, light, experimental, colourful, participatory, and low-cost (Finn, 2014; Németh & Langhorst, 2014) form of public-space transformation. Its roots lie in the informal appropriation of underused or degraded urban areas by citizen groups seeking new spaces for sociability and encounter. Between the 1990s and 2000s, these practices gained international resonance, described through expressions such as “do-it-yourself urbanism,” “guerrilla urbanism,” or “pop-up urbanism” (Finn, 2014; Lydon et al., 2012; Lydon & Garcia, 2015). Lydon and Garcia (2015) helped codify them under the term “tactical urbanism.” Originally—as Brenner (2017) observed—tactical urbanism developed under conditions of weakened urban governance, in which neither public institutions nor the market were capable of providing essential collective goods such as infrastructure or accessible spaces. In such contexts, it took shape as a set of bottom-up initiatives driven by diverse cultural, organisational, and ideological motivations. Although institutional actors—designers, public administrations, and developers—could sometimes be involved, the main impulse often originated outside formal structures. Over time, however, these practices have undergone processes of institutionalisation, whereby initiatives that began as “alternative” or “bottom-up” have been adopted and managed by public authorities (Berti, 2021; Fisker et al., 2019). Notable examples include the pedestrianisation of Times Square, launched in 2010 under Mayor Bloomberg and later becoming an international model replicated in numerous cities, and the street-space reclamation projects in Barcelona, implemented within the Superilles mobility framework to promote active and sustainable mobility (Suslowicz & Hillnhütter, 2025). Milan’s *Piazze Aperte* programme fits within this broader trajectory of institutionalising “tactical” practices. This shift entails certain opportunities in terms of institutional learning, but it also demands careful scrutiny, since, when such practices are promoted by public administrations, both the nature of the process and the role of citizens change, with direct implications for the very character of the public spaces being transformed.

The relationship between public administration and active citizens lies at the heart of debates on *collaborative practices* in the governance of the commons—a further analytical lens through which to interpret the *Piazze Aperte* programme in Milan. Research has identified several forms of collaboration between citizens and institutions in urban transformation processes: Collaboration occurs not only at the decision-making stage (co-design), but in many cases—including the Milan experience—also during execution

(co-creation) and subsequent maintenance (co-management; Foster & Iaione, 2016; Manzini, 2015; Ostrom, 1990; Sanders & Stappers, 2008; Voorberg et al., 2015). This is particularly significant when applied to the transformation and upkeep of public space, conceived as a common good, since such collaboration can help redefine both the status of public space itself and the modalities of its management (Carmona et al., 2008). Collaboration—especially in the co-creation and co-management of public spaces—can have an ambivalent nature: On the one hand, it generates belonging and symbolic appropriation; on the other, it risks blurring distinct categories such as *public good*, *common good*, and *collective good* (Borch & Kornberger, 2015; Harvey, 2012; Németh & Schmidt, 2011). Moreover, it can produce implicit forms of exclusion: Communities that take care of a space may, consciously or not, become excluding communities (Bianchetti, 2016, 2020). This risk is particularly relevant in public spaces, where publicness—understood as accessibility, openness, and non-exclusivity—is fundamental (Marcuse, 2004, 2014; Nissen, 2008). This dimension of publicness, albeit expressed in different terms, lies at the core of the *Piazze Aperte* programme, which explicitly declares the goal of pursuing a just city (Fainstein, 2010).

Against this theoretical background—and the critical issues it raises concerning the effectiveness of temporary uses, the institutionalisation of tactical urbanism, and the forms of citizen engagement—the *Piazze Aperte* programme in Milan can be examined as a case from which to draw reflections on the quality of reclaimed street spaces and, above all, on the governance of the processes that produce them.

### 3. Methodology

The case analysis presented in this article adopts a methodological approach that combines participant observation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007) and reflection-in-action (Schön, 1983). This approach is made possible by the author's dual position as both an academic researcher—who has long investigated public space—and, simultaneously, a temporarily elected local administrator (2016–2021) within the Municipality of Milan, serving as councillor with executive responsibility for urban planning, mobility, and public space (the Italian term *assessore* has no exact equivalent in English), and as vice president of District 3 (*Municipio 3*).

The Municipality of Milan is administratively organised into nine Districts (*Municipi*), each governed by a president and an elected council of 31 members. The president appoints three district councillors (*Assessori municipali*), who are entrusted with executive responsibilities in specific policy areas and collaborate closely with the City Council (*Giunta Comunale*) in overseeing local projects and initiatives.

The role of Councillor for Public Space enabled the author, on the one hand, to participate directly in the evolution of the *Piazze Aperte* programme at the city scale, engaging in dialogue with multiple stakeholders and accessing documentation throughout its development; and, on the other hand, to promote and accompany four local projects throughout their entire life cycle (Via Reni, Via Pacini, Piazzale Bacone, and Via De Nora). One of these—Piazzale Bacone—is discussed in detail later in this article. In other words, from a local leadership position, the author directly experienced every stage of the street-space recovery interventions: conception, design, authorisation, support, implementation, and management.

It is also important to highlight that the intermediate nature of the *Municipio* institution—positioned between citizens and the central municipal administration (Bruzzese, 2024)—allowed for close proximity and intense exchange with all the actors involved in the implementation process. This institutional position enabled the

author to observe the formulation of the *Piazze Aperte* programme and to practise the execution of several interventions from an internal, practice-based perspective, continuously between 2017 and 2021. This positioning can be described as that of a researcher–practitioner, in which observation and action are deeply intertwined (Karner & Bobbitt-Zeher, 2018; Schön, 1983). As an institutional actor, the author developed context-specific, expert knowledge (Crosta, 1998); as a researcher, she reflected critically on decisions and interactions as they unfolded. Such a perspective requires prolonged immersion in the field and an awareness that all observation is inherently situated (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007).

The case is presented below at two distinct scales: the urban scale (illustrating the evolution of *Piazze Aperte*, which led to the implementation of more than 50 interventions) and the micro scale (focusing on the specific project in Piazzale Bacone). At the urban scale, the analysis of the citywide programme was conducted using qualitative methods, drawing upon three types of sources: (a) Direct experience, gained in the role of councillor, through participation in different phases of programme definition, attendance at internal meetings and public events, and exchanges with institutional and civic actors; (b) Documentary analysis, including municipal reports, technical documents, and informal communications, aimed at reconstructing decision-making processes; and (c) Observation of outcomes, including monitoring media debates and direct observation of transformed spaces, which, although not systematic, provided valuable insights. Table 1 summarises the activities carried out, the sources employed, the actors involved, and the purposes for which the collected materials were used.

**Table 1.** Sources and materials used for the analysis of the *Piazze Aperte* programme (citywide scale).

Type of source / activity	Specific description	Actors involved	Period	Use in the analysis
<b>Institutional documents</b>	Analyses of official reports by the Municipality of Milan and AMAT: e.g., urban plan PGT 2030, <i>Piazze Aperte</i> call (2019), <i>Piazze Aperte in ogni scuola</i> call (2022), <i>Piazze Aperte</i> report (2022), Public Space Guidelines (2022)	Municipality of Milan, AMAT	2019–2023	Analysis of the programmatic framework and declared strategies
<b>Datasets and technical materials</b>	Analyses of project plans and technical data sheets of interventions	AMAT	2018–2022	Verification of design consistency and spatial transformations
<b>Internal institutional meetings</b>	Participation in operational meetings and technical coordination tables	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, Districts	2017–2021	Reconstruction of decision-making processes
<b>Informal internal exchanges</b>	Exchange of emails, chats, and non-public technical minutes	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, Districts, associations	2017–2023	Understanding of negotiations and micro-decisions
<b>Public meetings and workshops</b>	Active participation in project presentations (Via Reni, Via Pacini, Piazzale Bacone, Via De Nora) at the District 3 Council; <i>Piazze Aperte in ogni quartiere</i> workshop; Triennale (25.01.2020)	AMAT, associations, proponents, District 3 Council	2018–2020	Observation of dynamics of discussion and co-design processes

**Table 1.** (Cont.) Sources and materials used for the analysis of the Piazze Aperte programme (citywide scale).

Type of source / activity	Specific description	Actors involved	Period	Use in the analysis
Local press and social media	Analyses and personal involvement in articles, posts, and public debate	Local media outlets, citizens	2018–2023	Identification of controversies and public perception
Direct observation on transformed sites	Site visits across interventions implemented in all nine Districts; repeated site visits in those within District 3	Public space users	2018–2024	Empirical assessment of uses and spatial vitality

Note: AMAT = Agenzia Mobilità Ambiente Territorio.

At the micro scale, Piazzale Bacone was selected as a case study to be examined in depth, exemplifying specific noteworthy dynamics. It is one of the interventions carried out in District 3 within the Piazze Aperte programme. The author's involvement in this case was even greater as her institutional role enabled her not only to follow but also to influence the entire process. The case is therefore observed through the same embedded, practice-based approach.

Here, the reconstruction of decision-making and design processes took the form of reflection-on-practice and encompassed the activities listed in Table 2, from preliminary exchanges with project proposers and participation in co-design activities to the drafting of institutional documents and responses to comments and controversies arising in local debate. This is complemented by participant observation during the implementation and management phases, as well as ongoing monitoring of spatial use over time.

**Table 2.** Types of activities carried out by the author and other stakeholders, and their use in the case analysis (micro scale).

Type of activity	Specific description	Actors involved	Period	Use in the analysis
Verification of initial reporting and problem definition	Preliminary discussions on road safety issues	District 3, associations, residents	2017	Identification of critical points in the street junction
Participation in the evaluation of proposal	Consultations regarding proposed solutions	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3	2018	Analysis of types of proposed interventions
Co-design of selected tactical projects	Meetings between proponent associations, municipal technicians, and AMAT	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3, proponents	2018	Analysis of the design negotiation process
Collaboration in the development of the final project	Preparation of the definitive plan alongside the tactical phase	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3	2018–2019	Study of the relationship between tactical and consolidated phases
Participation in the implementation of the intervention	Collective installation day with volunteers	Proponents, volunteers, residents, AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3	2019	Observation of the collective activation phase

**Table 2.** (Cont.) Types of activities carried out by the author and other stakeholders, and their use in the case analysis (micro scale).

Type of activity	Specific description	Actors involved	Period	Use in the analysis
Drafting of the resolution supporting the Pact	Institutional approval of the Collaboration Pact	District 3	2019	Study of governance instrument
Review of the Collaboration Pact	Signing of the formal agreement for shared care and maintenance	Municipality of Milan, proponent associations	2019	Study of governance instrument
Informal internal exchanges	Emails and chat communications among stakeholders involved in the case	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, District 3, proponents, associations	2018–2021	Understanding of operational dynamics
Post-intervention monitoring	Verification of maintenance requests	Residents, District 3, Municipality of Milan	2020–2023	Assessment of long-term durability
Responses to feedback and controversies	Complaints regarding parking, safety, and aesthetics	Non-participating residents, local press	2019–2021	Analysis of resistance and conflict
Observation of the space	Repeated site visits in different seasons and times of day	Public space users (children, adolescents, adults, elderly)	2019–2023	Documentation of usage practices

Note: AMAT = Agenzia Mobilità Ambiente Territorio.

The aim of this methodological positioning is not to claim neutrality but to mobilise situated knowledge as a resource for interpretation, bridging research and practice. In this sense, the article seeks to valorise the knowledge accumulated over time and to reframe it through conceptual tools, offering a semi-internal and critically engaged contribution to the debate on public space transformation.

## 4. The Piazze Aperte Programme in Milan

### 4.1. Urban Context and Programme Objectives

For cultural, morphological, and climatic reasons, Milan has not traditionally been perceived—either in academic literature or in the collective imagination—as an extroverted city characterised by a lively outdoor public life. Unlike other Italian contexts, where squares, arcades, or generous pavements host vibrant social activity, Milan’s historical urban fabric and building typologies have long conveyed an image of introversion, centred around private courtyards (Bottoni, 1945; Rossi, 1966).

From the early 2000s onwards, however, a renewed focus on public space began to take shape through a series of large-scale interventions. Among the most significant were the pedestrian areas created as part of the Porta Nuova redevelopment project—which reshaped the city’s skyline with the Bosco Verticale and the Unicredit Tower—and the renewal of the Nuova Darsena in preparation for Expo 2015, which became a central node within the Navigli system. Owing to their accessibility and strong iconic character, these spaces rapidly attracted both residents and tourists, initiating new forms of urban conviviality in Milan’s main squares. During the same period, the 2012 Piano di Governo del Territorio (Territorial Government Plan) introduced

the concept of *Nuclei di Identità Locale* (Local Identity Nuclei), with the aim of recognising Milan's polycentric structure by enhancing neighbourhood public spaces. Since then, public space—both in central representative areas and in more “domestic” settings—has become a stable component of municipal policy.

Within this context, the *Piazze Aperte* programme was launched in 2018, promoted by the Municipality of Milan and developed by *Agenzia Mobilità Ambiente Territorio* (AMAT) with the support of Bloomberg Associates and the *Global Designing Cities Initiative*. Its stated objective is to “redesign the streets and squares of neighbourhoods as places of social interaction, vitality and encounter, returning urban spaces to public life” (Comune di Milano, 2022). While many European programmes—such as the already mentioned *Superilles* in Barcelona—have used street-space reclamation primarily as a mobility strategy, *Piazze Aperte* explicitly framed tactical interventions as instruments of proximity welfare and neighbourhood social infrastructure. The programme addressed multiple needs: the creation of inclusive social spaces for groups underserved by existing ones (such as adolescents, migrant communities, and the elderly); the growing demand for proximity-based public spaces (later amplified by the pandemic); and the political intention to involve residents in urban transformation processes. The adopted approach follows the principles of tactical urbanism (Andres, 2025; Lydon et al., 2012; Lydon & Garcia, 2015), based on temporary, low-cost, and reversible interventions that allow empirical testing of solutions prior to potential permanent transformation. This strategy positioned Milan alongside other European cities engaged in tactical experimentation while simultaneously strengthening its international profile through networks such as C40. From both political and operational perspectives, it offered a pragmatic path: interventions that could be implemented swiftly, at low cost, and, where necessary, easily reversed.

#### **4.2. Programme Evolution and Implementation**

The *Piazze Aperte* programme evolved through three main phases: an initial stage of top-down experimentation; a subsequent opening to civic participation through a public call; and, finally, a focus on interventions in school areas. Originating from a predominantly administrative and centralised logic—with pilot projects selected internally by the Municipality—it gradually transformed into a more participatory instrument capable of mobilising local networks of collaboration.

The first tactical experiments were conducted in 2018 in the neighbourhoods of Dergano and Corvetto. Their stated objectives were to expand pedestrian areas, foster social interaction, and test new forms of cooperation between institutions and residents. In both cases, on-street parking areas were converted into spaces for rest and social encounter, using colourful ground markings and movable furniture supplied by AMAT. Although widely used and appreciated, these transformations also generated immediate opposition, mainly due to the loss of parking spaces and the perception of an excessively provisional aesthetic. Rather than representing mere resistance, these reactions acted as early stress tests, helping to refine the programme's subsequent evolution towards a more inclusive format. Figure 1 shows the transformations of *Piazza Dergano*, one of the first interventions realized.



**Figure 1.** Piazza Dergano, (a) before and (b) after tactical intervention. Source: Comune di Milano (2022).

In 2019, the programme was opened to bottom-up proposals through a public call, which received 65 applications from more than 200 associations and around 800 citizens (Comune di Milano, 2022). The selection criteria—technical feasibility, local embeddedness, and territorial balance—introduced an initial form of shared governance among AMAT, municipal technical offices, and the Districts.

A second call, launched in 2022, reoriented the programme towards school squares, in response to the large number of proposals submitted by parents and educational institutions during the first edition. *Piazze Aperte per ogni scuola* (“Open squares for every school”) received 87 applications, involving approximately 600 local groups and 250 schools (Comune di Milano, 2022), confirming educational communities as the main catalysts of transformation.

In addition to the interventions realised through the two calls, further proposals were collected over the years through other channels—both via the Districts and through alternative funding programmes. According to AMAT’s director of the urban planning and public space sector, who initiated *Officina Urbana*, an office specifically devoted to the implementation of the *Piazze Aperte* program (interviewed in October 2025), a total of 60 interventions had been completed by 2025, reclaiming more than 55,000 m<sup>2</sup> of public space. The installed features include 700 benches, 175 bicycle racks, 85 picnic tables, 70 table tennis tables, and about 600 green elements, including potted plants and trees. Table 3 summarises the main features of the programme’s evolution and its key figures from the first to the second call (2018–2022).

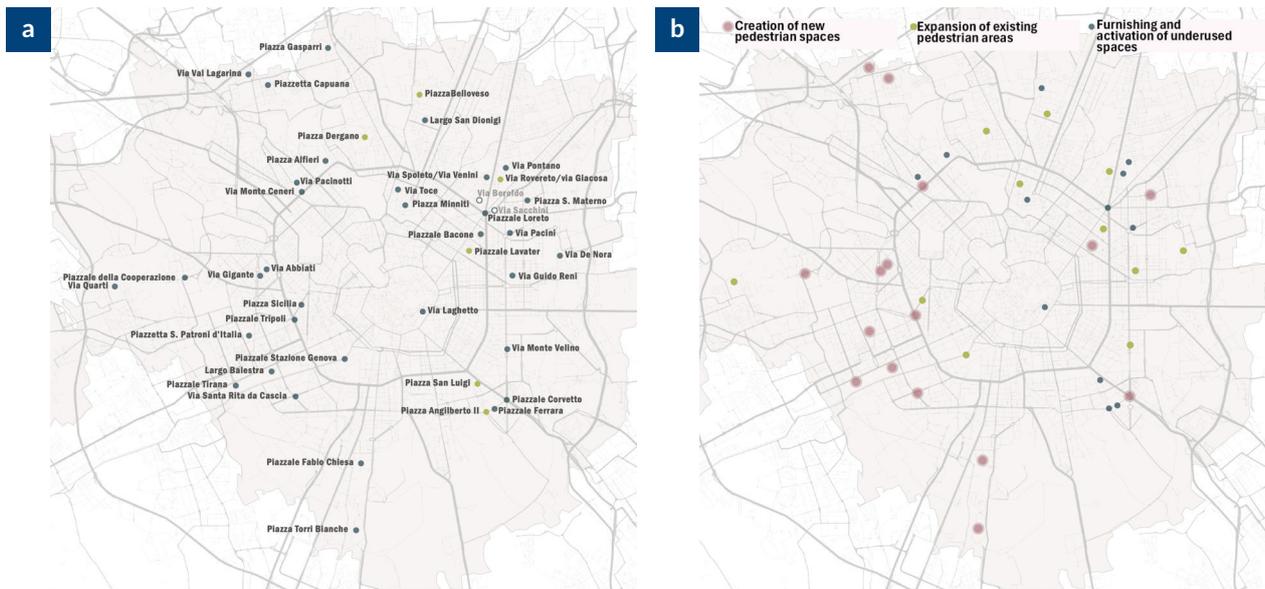
**Table 3.** Evolution of the Piazze Aperte programme.

Phase	Start year	Implementation mode	No. of projects/proposals	Proponents	No. of realisations
Pilot experiments (Piazza Dergano, Piazzale Corvetto, Porta Genova)	2018	Top-down	3 interventions	Municipality of Milan, AMAT	3 (all completed)
First open call (Piazze Aperte in ogni quartiere)	2019	Public call	65 proposals	Over 200 associations, around 800 citizens	35 (13 in 2019 + 22 in 2020–2021)
School open call (Piazze Aperte per ogni scuola)	2022	Thematic call	87 proposals	Around 600 groups, 250 schools	4 (2 in 2022 + 2 in 2023)
Other implementations	2019–2025	Other channels	18 proposals	N/A	18 (2018–2025)

Three main types of intervention were adopted in the programme for street reclamation, as indicated in Table 4. The creation of new pedestrian spaces represents the most substantial type of intervention, involving street closures, changes in traffic direction, or the removal of parking spaces to create parklets with lightweight furnishings in 30 km/h zones. The expansion of existing pedestrian areas required only a rationalisation of the carriageway, sometimes achieved through lane narrowing, the removal of some parking spaces, and traffic-calming measures. Finally, the equipment and activation of underused spaces constitute the lightest form of intervention, involving temporary setups with new furniture (benches, tables) and the organisation of social activities. The map (Figure 2) shows the distribution of tactical interventions and the different typologies in Milan.

**Table 4.** Types of interventions within the Piazze Aperte programme.

Type of intervention	Main mechanism	Typical actions/tools
Creation of new pedestrian spaces	Changes to traffic circulation or conversion of parking bays into parklets (in 30 km/h zones)	Street closures/direction changes, removal of parking spaces, installation of parklets, use of lightweight street furniture
Expansion of existing pedestrian areas	Rationalisation of roadway layout	Lane narrowing, removal of low-turnover parking spaces, traffic-calming measures
Equipment and activation of underused spaces	Temporary installations and new functions	Ground paintings/surface decorations, installation of benches and tables, small-scale uses and social activities



**Figure 2.** Piazza Aperte (a) locations and (b) types of intervention. Sources: Comune di Milano (2022); Municipality of Milano website; elaboration by G. Corbetta and E. De Rosa, Politecnico di Milano.

Only slightly more than 10% of these projects—six in total—have been so far consolidated into permanent configurations through redevelopment works that formalised pedestrianisation and introduced new paving, vegetation, and urban furniture. Among these are the first pilot sites of Angilberto and Dergano, as well as four other spaces located in peripheral areas: Piazza Belloveso, Piazza San Luigi, Piazza Lavater, and Via Giacosa. The remaining cases continue in a tactical or semi-permanent condition, raising significant questions regarding transition times and long-term durability. Table 5 summarises the timelines of transition from the tactical phase to the permanent configuration for the six cases mentioned.

**Table 5.** Conversion of tactical interventions into permanent public spaces in Milan (2018–2023).

Square/Area	Tactical phase	Start of permanent works	Final completion
Piazza Angilberto II	2018	Early 2021	Autumn 2021 (finalised by 2023)
Piazza Dergano	2018	Late 2020	Mid-2021
Piazza San Luigi	2018	Late 2019	End of 2020
Piazza Belloveso	2019	Early 2021	Mid-2022
Piazzale Lavater	2019	Late 2020	Late 2022
Via Rovereto – Giacosa (Parco Trotter)	2019	Early 2021	Late 2022

### 4.3. Phases, Actors, and Governance Structure

The implementation of the interventions selected through the calls followed a multi-phase process, within which different forms of collaboration between citizens and the public administration became visible, as summarised in Table 6.

**Table 6.** Implementation phases of the Piazze Aperte calls.

Phase	Main actors	Output
Submission of proposals	Associations, schools, local groups	Application dossier
Evaluation of proposals	AMAT, Municipality of Milan, Districts	Selection of approved projects
Technical review and co-design	Proponents, AMAT, Municipality of Milan, Districts	Shared tactical project/project kit
Institutional approval	Municipality of Milan, Districts	Authorising resolution
Implementation of the intervention	AMAT, associations, volunteers, citizens	Installation and activation of the space
Collaboration Pact	Municipality of Milan, proponents	Agreement for shared care and maintenance
Monitoring and/or development of final project	Municipality of Milan, AMAT, proponents	Definitive project (in cases where implemented)

The process began with the submission of proposals, in which applicants were required to justify the intervention, outline an initial idea for the transformation, and establish partnerships with other local actors. The proposals were then jointly evaluated by AMAT, the municipal technical offices, and representatives of the Districts, based on criteria of technical feasibility, territorial balance, and degree of local embeddedness. Approved proposals subsequently proceeded to a phase of technical review and co-design, during which proposers met with AMAT staff, municipal technicians, and District representatives to define shared objectives, equipment, and management methods. During this stage, a modular design kit was prepared—typically including benches, planters, game tables, and bicycle racks—that could be tailored to the specific needs of each context. Once the project design was finalised, the process entered the institutional approval phase, which involved a public presentation and an authorisation by the competent District, followed by a resolution of the City Council, particularly in cases involving modifications to traffic circulation. The physical implementation often took the form of a collective installation day, involving residents and volunteers coordinated by experienced associations, and usually concluded with a public inauguration. In many cases, the opening was accompanied by the signing of a Collaboration Pact, which assigned citizens an active role in the care of the space while maintaining its status as public property. These pacts regulated shared responsibilities and forms of light maintenance, framing the interventions as urban commons (Labsus, 2017). Only in a minority of cases did the process lead to the formulation of a permanent project, based on evidence gathered during the experimental phase.

Overall, the two calls—which collected a total of 152 proposals—attracted three main types of actors (Fung, 2006): structured civic organisations, such as non-profit associations, social cooperatives, trade associations, and religious organisations; institutional actors, particularly schools (17 in the first call and 250 in the second), together with museums, foundations, and universities; and self-organised groups, including neighbourhood committees, tenants' associations in public housing, and design professionals collaborating on a voluntary basis.

The programme was financed primarily through public funds and the essential contribution of voluntary work, but it also benefited from technical sponsorships (for instance, the provision of materials or services), financial support from businesses located in the transformed areas (such as the Ascom Niguarda traders' association in

the case of Piazza Belloveso), and, in some cases, European funding (for example, the CLEAR – City LiveAbility by Redesign urban mobility programme, supported by the European Institute for Innovation and Technology).

## 5. Piazzale Bacone: Field-Based Insights From a Tactical Intervention

Piazzale Bacone is located in District 3, and its transformation took place while the author was serving as district councillor. As previously noted, this position enabled her to follow the process from an internal and grounded perspective, observing it directly and continuously between 2017 and 2021, maintaining constant dialogue with the actors involved and monitoring the evolution of space use over time. Situated in a semi-central area of the city, the site—although formally designated as a *piazzale*—functioned primarily as a traffic junction, with narrow pavements and traversed by cars, buses, and trams. The area hosts a large school complex and a nursery attended by approximately 750 children aged between 0 and 13, supported by particularly active parents' associations. Prior to the intervention, the street space was clearly dysfunctional: Oversized carriageway segments were improperly used for parking, while pedestrian crossings were long and unsafe. District 3 had long called for an intervention for road safety reasons, initially regarded as the main concern.

The Piazze Aperte programme made it possible to *reframe the issue* not only as a question of safety but also as a lack of spaces for social interaction. The project selected through the first call in 2019, titled *Liberi Passi* ("Free Steps"), was promoted by a broad coalition including school associations, architectural and design studios, and a cultural organisation. Following the process described in Section 4.3, the intervention reshaped vehicular circulation by introducing new traffic directions, shortening pedestrian crossings, and reducing the width of the carriageway. Across a total surface area of approximately 5,000 m<sup>2</sup>, about 1,200 m<sup>2</sup> were reclaimed for pedestrian use and equipped with 14 benches, 3 picnic tables, 1 table tennis table, 24 potted plants, and 8 bicycle racks, as shown in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Aerial views, spaces, and pedestrian areas of Piazzale Bacone (a) before and (b) after the tactical intervention (2018–2020). Sources: Comune di Milano (2022); Google Maps; elaboration by G. Corbetta and E. De Rosa, Politecnico di Milano.

The road junction was rapidly transformed into a recognisable and inhabitable space from the earliest stages of tactical implementation, as shown by images collected over time (a selection of which is included in Figure 4). Continuous observation of how the space was used—although not conducted systematically—revealed a wide variety of users: elderly people resting on benches; children and teenagers playing table tennis; young adults gathering at the picnic tables during the day and in the evening; adolescents studying together; and families or groups (including those of different ethnic backgrounds) organising small celebrations. Late in the evening, small groups were often observed drinking on the benches. The diversity of facilities, combined with the proximity of schools and local businesses (including a wine bar, an ice-cream parlour, and neighbourhood shops), significantly contributed to the vitality of the space. As noted in the literature, the co-presence of different social groups is itself an indicator of well-functioning public space (Gehl, 2010; Lloyd & Auld, 2010).

Piazzale Bacone thus presents itself as a space of implicit conviviality, where different users coexist through parallel practices.

At the same time, alongside the positive outcomes, several controversies also emerged. During the implementation phase, complaints were submitted to District 3. Some residents who had not been involved in the project criticised the loss of parking spaces in an already congested area. Certain parents expressed concern that children were playing in the street under conditions they perceived as unsafe. Numerous comments focused on the low aesthetic quality of the tactical intervention, considered by some to be inappropriate for the context—particularly in the early years, when *Piazze Aperte* was still relatively unknown in the city. The maintenance of the potted plants was, at times, deemed insufficient. The activities envisaged in the Collaboration Pact were indeed carried out, but not always with the frequency required to ensure continuous activation of the space. Finally, the failure to execute the permanent project—already prepared by the technical offices and approved by District 3—was frequently mentioned. Its absence weakened the experimental narrative of the process, making it necessary to repaint the surface only two years after the inauguration.

Within the broader context of the *Piazze Aperte* programme and its evolution, Piazzale Bacone is widely regarded by public opinion in Milan as a successful example of tactical urbanism and citizen participation in transforming a street space into a public one. However, analysis of this case in light of the three theoretical domains introduced earlier, and of the research questions outlined at the beginning, highlights several key issues related to the quality of urban spaces, different temporalities, and governance which will be further discussed in Section 6.



**Figure 4.** Piazzale Bacone uses. The top-left image shows the situation before implementation. The other images illustrate different moments after the intervention carried out in September 2020. The photographs were taken by the author between 2022 and 2025 on both weekdays and weekend, and during both daytime and nighttime.

## 6. Discussion

The analysis of the *Piazze Aperte* programme and the case of *Piazzale Bacone* allows for broader reflections on the conversion of street space to social uses and points towards several directions for future development. The three theoretical frameworks adopted—temporary uses, tactical urbanism, and collaborative practices—provide a lens through which to reinterpret the Milanese experience and to address the questions posed at the outset: What role do the temporary uses typical of tactical urbanism play in the transformation of street space into public space, what do they enable, and what limitations do they reveal? What form and role does collaboration with citizens take in the implementation of such interventions? What effects do these experiments have on governance and institutional learning? In the background lie questions concerning the effectiveness of these tools and the conditions required for their long-term consolidation.

### *6.1. Temporary Urbanism, Tactical Experimentation, and Long-Term Urban Quality*

The temporary uses activated through the tactical interventions of *Piazze Aperte* enabled the rapid execution of numerous street-space reclamation projects that would not have been feasible through standard municipal procedures. The combination of low costs, operational simplicity, and immediacy fostered a shared perception—among both administrators and residents—that change was possible, generating further demand, as demonstrated by the success of subsequent calls for proposals.

However, several critical issues remain in the medium and long term. As noted above, the literature often distinguishes between two different typologies of temporary uses: ephemeral uses, characterized by reversible interventions that restore the status quo (Mehrotra & Vera, 2023), and transitional uses, which accompany permanent transformations (Darchen & Simon, 2022). The experience of *Piazze Aperte*, and specifically that of *Piazzale Bacone*, demonstrates the effectiveness of this approach but occupies an intermediate position: It is neither ephemeral (as it lasts for years) nor entirely transitional (as permanent projects are not yet on the agenda). Tactical installations have proven highly effective in the short term but, as is well known, present a high degree of material perishability: Painted surfaces and lightweight furnishings are not designed to endure and must be restored or removed after a few years. At the same time, permanent pedestrianisation or redevelopment projects have progressed slowly and still account for only a small proportion of cases (around 10%). This issue cannot, however, be resolved simply by demanding faster delivery of “permanent” designs. In light of what Milan has achieved citywide over seven years of street-recovery interventions, the case suggests that tactical experiments should be embraced as ordinary tools of public action, conceived not merely as provisional stages awaiting permanence but as transformative devices with their own temporal logic. From the very beginning, they should include medium-term maintenance plans and long-term adaptation and transition strategies. This confirms the importance—in both planning and design—of considering the temporary and tactical uses differently, addressing not only their spatial and functional aspects but also their inner temporalities of transformation.

The relationship between tactical interventions and permanent transformation brings into focus the question of urban quality throughout all stages of the process. Rapid and low-cost interventions have effectively addressed long-standing spatial problems—as in the case of *Piazzale Bacone*—but they also raise at least three methodological considerations.

First, urban quality must be redefined beyond purely aesthetic criteria. From Jacobs (1961) and Gehl (2010), who grounded it in everyday uses and social presence, through Lynch (1981), Carmona (2010, 2019), and Madanipour (1996, 2003), to the critical readings of Lefebvre (1968) and Amin (2008), the quality of public space is defined by its capacity to meet real needs, accommodate diverse practices, and sustain coexistence. In *Piazze Aperte*, some residents criticised the tactical interventions as “poor” or lacking decorum, assessing them on aesthetic rather than functional grounds. This highlights the need to bridge the perceptual gap by reaffirming that, in such cases, quality lies in use and in the social relations that space enables.

Second, transferring the “situational energy” generated during the tactical phase (Tardiveau & Mallo, 2014) into permanent projects remains a challenge. Once formalised, many spaces tend to lose their symbolic recognisability and participatory intensity. Although permanent conversions in Milan are still relatively few, this suggests that physical redesign alone is insufficient: Maintenance and activation strategies are essential to ensuring long-term vitality.

Third, attention should be paid to the relationship between punctual interventions and broader urban policies. Although the calls for proposals mobilised wide participation, they inevitably favoured areas with higher levels of social capital. The challenge remains to ensure an equitable distribution of interventions, including in less organised yet more disadvantaged neighbourhoods. Moreover, it is necessary to connect the logic of urban acupuncture (Lerner, 2014) with a broader strategic vision of public space. Municipal tools such as the Public Space Guidelines (Comune di Milano, 2021) and the forthcoming Atlas of Neighbourhoods represent initial steps in this direction, but the issue remains open.

## 6.2. Collaboration and the Publicness of Public Space

*Piazze Aperte* has experimented with an innovative mode of public space production, combining the reclamation of street space with citizen involvement through calls and Collaboration Pacts. This approach aligns with a broader orientation of Milan’s urban policies towards models of hybrid governance, in which public authorities enable civic participation in the management of collective assets—such as the adoption of green areas, private sponsorships for park management, and the entrusting of abandoned sites to associations for conversion into shared gardens. However, unlike other collaborative schemes that focus on semi-private or enclosed spaces, *Piazze Aperte* operates within fully public and freely accessible spaces, where the principle of *publicness*—understood as accessibility, inclusivity, and non-exclusivity (Marcuse, 2004)—must remain a central reference point. Within this framework, collaboration with residents has taken shape in three distinct forms.

*Co-design* emerged following the selection of proposals, through meetings between proponents and municipal staff. While essential for aligning objectives and verifying feasibility, its effectiveness varied according to the composition of the groups involved and the technical complexity of individual cases, highlighting the need for more systematic evaluation. In any case, the conceptual contribution gathered from citizens who submitted proposals proved significant, as it required the technical offices to engage in dialogue regarding demands arising directly from the local context.

*Co-creation* took shape during collective implementation days involving volunteers. This form of collaboration most clearly defined the identity of the programme, contributing both to its public

recognisability and to the embedding of the new spaces within the social fabric. Beyond their symbolic value—representing the interventions as “made by citizens”—these events also played a pragmatic role, helping to overcome bureaucratic constraints and visibly reducing execution costs.

*Co-management* is the least prominent form of collaboration, developing mainly through light-maintenance activities and social events, particularly in school contexts. The shared management of public space, however, raises a delicate question: Can collaboration strengthen collective responsibility without undermining the *publicness* of space? While part of the literature warns that community care may lead to subtle forms of exclusion (Bianchetti, 2016), the case of Piazzale Bacone—characterised by the coexistence of users heterogeneous in age, class, and ethnic background—suggests that this risk has, so far, not materialised. Rather than acting as a mechanism of exclusion, citizen collaboration in the street-transformation project has, in this instance, functioned as an effective means of reinforcing the openness and inclusivity of public space.

### 6.3. Institutionalisation and Organisational Learning

One of the most significant issues highlighted by the *Piazze Aperte* case concerns its effects on governance and institutional learning. *Piazze Aperte* introduced a new working method within the Municipality of Milan. Through the adoption of tactical urbanism, the municipal administration appropriated practices that were originally bottom-up in nature (Lydon & Garcia, 2015) and often emerged as conflictual responses to the absence of adequate public policies (Brenner, 2017). The institutionalisation of such practices—as has occurred in many other European cities and has been codified in several globally circulated manuals and guidelines (Arup, 2020; C40 Cities & Arup, 2021; NACTO & Global Designing Cities Initiative, 2020; “*Piazze Aperte: How Milan gave its piazze back,*” 2022)—has had implications not only for the types of spaces created and their intentionally “poor” and low-cost aesthetics, but also for the governance mechanisms through which they were produced.

*Piazze Aperte* was initially conceived in 2018 in Milan as a flagship, top-down, experimental pilot project, with strong political support. Its initial institutionalisation did not entail stable collaboration with citizens, except in a very limited form—the participation of volunteers in collective implementation days—and it was criticised by some local media commentators as mere “window dressing.” Over time, however, the programme evolved towards more collaborative and inclusive forms, moving towards a hybrid model of cooperation between citizens and the administration, as discussed above. This evolution required substantial organisational and cultural adjustments to become embedded within the ordinary practices of the municipal administration:

- Programme structure: The transition from top-down projects to open calls marked an initial turning point, signalling a shift towards a more participatory and collaborative approach.
- Dedicated office: A further key step was the establishment of a dedicated technical unit within AMAT, called *Officina Urbana*, which grew from a handful of staff members in 2019 to around 30 today.
- Administrative reorganisation: The municipal technical departments responsible for public space interventions were reorganised into a new department (*Direzione Infrastrutture e Spazio Pubblico*), explicitly including “public space” in its title to emphasise the strategic importance of the issue. During the co-design phases of *Piazze Aperte*, moreover, technical staff were required to interact directly with citizen groups—an unprecedented occurrence in administrative practice.

- Regulatory adaptation: Certain regulatory frameworks were also revised, allowing, for instance, the conversion of parking spaces into parklets within 30 km/h zones.
- Formalisation of co-management: Finally, the introduction of Collaboration Pacts formalised shared management and care arrangements, further integrating these practices into ordinary procedures.

Collectively, these developments represent adaptive responses by the public administration to the growing diffusion of tactical urbanism interventions. Notably, in 2020—during the Covid-19 pandemic—the Municipality of Milan drafted a document titled *Milano 2020. Adaptation Strategies* (available at <https://partecipazione.comune.milano.it/processes/milano2020>), outlining how temporary and reversible interventions could serve as tools to address unprecedented and dramatic circumstances (Bruzzese, 2022). Years later, although the emergency has passed and tactical interventions are no longer emergency measures, they have nonetheless catalysed a reorganisation of public space governance, fostering adaptation. Viewed from within the public administration, the adoption of tactical approaches in Milan can thus be interpreted as a form of urban experimentation (Evans et al., 2021)—albeit not formally labelled as such—which has reshaped established procedures and, seemingly, activated processes of institutional learning (Argyris & Schön, 1978; March & Olsen, 1989). Whether these innovations will achieve lasting consolidation, however, remains to be seen.

## 7. Conclusions

Piazze Aperte demonstrates that tactical urbanism can operate not only as a design approach but also as a governance device capable of mobilising civic initiatives, reshaping administrative routines and redefining the publicness of street space. By reclaiming streets as infrastructures of proximity and encounter, the programme shows that urban quality does not necessarily depend on material permanence but on the capacity of space to support everyday and multiple uses, and the coexistence of different people. At the same time, the case exposes the structural fragility of temporary interventions. Tactical approaches are effective in generating rapid change but require clear transition mechanisms to avoid remaining indefinitely suspended between experimentation and permanence. Likewise, the use of bottom-up calls raises fundamental questions of territorial justice, as participation tends to concentrate where social capital is already present. Two conditions therefore appear crucial for the long-term consolidation of such practices: (a) ensuring the lasting quality of interventions, preventing the tactical phase from turning into a state of perpetual suspension; and (b) guaranteeing equitable territorial distribution, moving from a model that responds to the demands of those who already have a voice to one capable of reaching less organised and more disadvantaged contexts. In this sense, the Piazze Aperte case provides valuable evidence for the broader debate on the institutionalisation of tactical practices and the possibility of conceiving public space as a negotiated common good—provided that the experiment does not remain an exception but becomes a stable form of governance, capable of combining urgency with long-term vision.

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## Conflict of Interests

The author was involved in the implementation of the Piazze Aperte programme as an elected municipal councillor. As outlined in the Methodology section, this role entailed elements of participant observation and may therefore represent a potential conflict of interest. The author affirms that all reasonable efforts were made to ensure objectivity and transparency throughout the analysis. In this article, editorial decisions were undertaken by Jenni Cauvain (Nottingham Trent University) and Andrew Karvonen (Lund University).

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## Experimental Logics of Street Transformations

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### Abstract

Street experiments are proliferating in cities worldwide and have emerged as an approach to transform urban mobility and public space. Previous research attests to the broad spectrum of street experimentation and its variety of stakeholders, aims, methods, and impacts. In this article, we probe this multi-faceted nature through a study of the landscape of street experimentation as it evolved in one city—Stockholm, Sweden—over a 10-year period (2014–2023). Through document analysis and 19 semi-structured interviews, we analysed stakeholder involvement, motives, and interactions related to four different platforms of street experimentation. Our temporal, evolutionary perspective moves beyond isolated case studies to show how experimental logics emerged over time in Stockholm via shifting ambitions, foci, and stakeholder constellations. The city-specific perspective allowed us to analyse how experimentation develops and transforms as actors change, thus revealing dynamics of complementarity and competition, the addition or subtraction of layers, and successful as well as missed opportunities for between-experiment learning. The article highlights the crucial role of municipal actors for implementation and scaling, but also their limited capacity to effect transformative change.

### Keywords

governance; institutionalisation; participation; street experiment; tactical urbanism; urban mobility; urban transformation

## 1. Introduction

Street experiments are proliferating in cities worldwide. They have emerged as a quick, affordable approach to reimagine and change mobility and urban space. They can range from smaller tactical interventions to large-scale municipal transformations, and they often bring together various stakeholders with potentially diverging goals (Bertolini, 2020, 2025; Garau et al., 2024; Glaser & Krizek, 2021; VanHoose et al., 2022; Verhulst et al., 2023). Existing scholarship stresses both promises and pitfalls: while street experiments *can* change mobility patterns, democratise public space, generate new governance practices, and initiate greater socio-technical change processes, they may equally have exclusionary, commercialising, and depoliticising effects (Littke, 2016; Sierhuis et al., 2024; Verlinghieri et al., 2024; von Schönfeld, 2024).

A growing body of literature on street experiments has sought to classify and evaluate these interventions. Bertolini (2020) proposed a framework to assess their transformative potential—to what extent they are radical, challenge-driven, feasible, strategic, and communicative/mobilising—which has been further developed and applied in subsequent research (Glaser & Krizek, 2021; VanHoose et al., 2022). VanHoose (2023) synthesised barriers and enablers, highlighting the crucial role of long-term institutional support as well as the tensions between early municipal enthusiasm and later confinement by established institutional processes. Other scholars have drawn attention to governance conflicts (Vitale Brovarone et al., 2023), democracy and justice (Eneqvist & Karvonen, 2021; Smeds et al., 2023), as well as public acceptance around street experiments (Marcheschi et al., 2022; Smeds & Papa, 2023). These studies attest to the wide spectrum of experimentation in terms of actors, aims, means to achieve those aims, and kinds of impacts. However, most studies examine isolated cases or compare multiple cities while paying less attention to how street experiments evolve diachronically within one context.

Recent scholarship has started to address this gap by tracing the trajectories of street experimentation within single cities. Studying Ghent's Living Streets programme, VanHoose and Bertolini (2023) conceptualise three municipal roles—promoter, enabler, and partner—to capture how the local authority's position evolved as the programme developed over a decade. They find that, in the early phases, the municipality's role as promoter and enabler benefitted the transitional capacity of street experiments. As the programme matured, the municipality's later promoter–partner role provided stability but reduced radicality. Villani and Talamini (2023) analyse Hong Kong's pedestrianisation experiments over time, showing how different trajectories reflected changing governance responses, from commercially initiated, contested uses of public space, to more regulated and tightly managed forms of pedestrianisation, with some experiments ultimately discontinued.

Meanwhile, Verlinghieri et al.'s (2024) study of a collaborative pedestrianisation experiment in Turin traces how the locally driven initiative became, due to municipal and institutional pressures, more constrained and with less transformative ambition. In contrast, Smeds et al. (2023) explore the evolution of participation and access regarding street experimentation in connection to New York's public plaza scheme, and show how citizen coalitions transformed a top-down, inequitable scheme into a more inclusive approach that enhanced equity in public space. Together, these studies illustrate that street experiments should not be understood as static interventions but rather as evolving practices embedded in shifting political and institutional configurations, often—but not always—marked by an increasing consolidation of municipal control.

This article contributes to this literature through a diachronic analysis of Stockholm's decade of street experimentation (2014–2023) to identify different experimental logics. We draw on the concept of institutional logics, which captures the drivers and ambitions that shape actors' identities, practices, and understandings of legitimate behaviour (Hellquist et al., 2025; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008; Thornton et al., 2012). Berglund-Snodgrass and Mukhtar-Landgren (2020) distinguish between a bureaucratic logic of conventional planning—with hierarchy, stability, and accountability as defining features—and an experimental logic oriented toward innovation, exploration, and testing. In this article, we move beyond this dichotomy to differentiate between *multiple* experimental logics in street transformations. These logics embody different approaches to reworking the form and function of streets with a range of outcomes, allowing for a fine-grained analysis of how their ambitions, actor constellations and participation, governing practices and tools, and forms of learning and institutionalisation shape the evolving streetscape.

We identify four experimental logics, demonstrating a loose chronology with partially overlapping phases: a tactical grassroots logic, a pragmatic municipal logic, a challenge-led innovative logic, and an embedded administrative logic. Each was championed by different actor constellations and carried distinct ambitions for transformation, participation, and learning. By tracing these logics, the article makes two contributions. Firstly, it shows how the meanings and functions of street experiments change as they are appropriated by different actors. Secondly, it highlights the trade-offs between experiments as drivers of radical transformation and as instruments of more incremental adaptation. In this way, the Stockholm case adds to debates on urban experimentation and governance by illustrating not only how municipalities act as promoters, enablers, and partners (VanHoose & Bertolini, 2023), but also how other stakeholders—civil society groups, designers, commercial actors, and national agencies—reshape the experimental landscape. In doing so, the article brings a broader, multi-actor perspective to the evolutionary study of street experimentation.

## 2. Methodology

To explore the logics of street experimentation, we conducted a case study of Stockholm activities between 2014 and 2023. Our diachronic approach allowed us to trace the outcomes of individual experiments as well as the interplay between them, the shifts in stakeholder constellations, and the changing logics of experimentation.

We reviewed municipal policy documents and project reports relating to key interventions. These documents provided background information on the rationale, implementation, and reception of the experiments. We also conducted interviews with individuals involved in the design, implementation, and evaluation of street experiments in Stockholm, seeking to capture a broad range of perspectives, from grassroots organisers to senior municipal officials. Some participants were not directly involved in our key projects but were interviewed for their strategic perspectives on how these initiatives were viewed and managed within the Traffic Administration. In total, 19 interviews were conducted between 2022 and 2023, including with project leaders from the City of Stockholm (P1–P4), consultants from the private sector (C1–C6), representatives from the Traffic Administration (T1–T6), a civil society member (G1), and project leaders from the national government agencies Vinnova and ArkDes (N1–N2). The interviews lasted 40–95 minutes, most of them conducted remotely (online). The interviews explored the interviewees' motivations, experiences, and reflections on the experiments. All interviews were transcribed and coded

thematically, alongside project documents, to identify the street experiment logic in terms of intervention design, stakeholder roles, sources of inspiration, ambitions, success factors, obstacles, long-term strategies, and learning processes. Quotations are cited verbatim (with minor adjustments for readability) to preserve the voices of stakeholders.

We identified four key platforms of urban experimentation: Pallis (2015), Levande Stockholm (2015–present), Framtidsgator (2020–2021), and Street Moves (2020–2021). Additional potential cases surfaced through our research but were excluded for different reasons: some lacked available interviewees, while others differed substantially in character or were too embryonic to analyse systematically (e.g., the city’s play street trials and the recent work on low-emission zones). We do not seek to provide an exhaustive account of every experiment but instead to trace how experimental logics emerged over time. The emphasis is on interpretation and synthesis rather than evaluation of outcomes.

### 3. Tactical Grassroots Logic—Pallis (2015)

The first experimental logic is *tactical grassroots*: community-driven, small-scale experimentation that challenges conventional assumptions about who can initiate urban change. This logic is exemplified by Pallis, a temporary “pop-up” park established in the Södermalm district in the summer of 2015. Pallis was modest in scale—it occupied a short cul-de-sac for one month—but it has since acquired a symbolic status as the starting point for street experimentation in the city. It followed a tactical urbanism approach that is citizen-driven, experimental, and deliberately temporary, with the municipality playing the role of enabler (Schreiber, 2025; Webb, 2018).

Pallis emerged from the initiative of two well-connected individuals: a well-known Swedish actor and the CEO of the Stockholm chapter of the Swedish Property Federation. Motivated by a desire to question the limits of shared urban space, they sought to create “temporary arenas for meetings and activities, at no cost and open to all” (Fastighetsägarna Stockholm & White Arkitekter, 2016, p. 2). They identified a section of Åsögatan—a “rather desolate place” (G1) along which one of them lived, but close to a lively street—as the site for a temporary community-driven transformation (see Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Åsögatan before (left) and during (right) the establishment of the Pallis pop-up park. Photo: Thomas Zaar, White Architects.

The intervention involved closing the street to traffic and furnishing it with temporary structures made largely from pallets (the name “Pallis” plays on *lastpall*, Swedish for pallet). The space hosted a wide range of community-led practices: DIY jewellery-making, skateboard deck design, horticultural tutorials, food trucks, DJs, and live performances. At the end of the project, residents were invited to take elements of the park home to ensure that the material legacy of the initiative lived on in the neighbourhood (Fastighetsägarna Stockholm & White Arkitekter, 2016). This combination of community initiators and simple, temporary interventions reflects the actor–practice configuration of the tactical grassroots logic.

The initiators drew inspiration from international and local precedents: the pedestrianisation of Times Square in New York, the spread of parklets in San Francisco, the Superkilen project in Copenhagen, and the culture of temporary architecture in Berlin (Littke, 2016; Prytherch, 2022; St Hill, 2019). One organiser, who split his time between Stockholm and Berlin, noted the contrast between Berlin’s citizen-driven transformations and Stockholm’s “rule-based” planning culture, where “nothing ever happened without the city administration’s initiative” (G1). Pallis was thus a deliberate attempt to test “whether a more Berlin-inspired approach was possible in Stockholm.” The ambition was not only to activate a forgotten space but also to democratise urban design and challenge assumptions about who has the right to shape the city. As one landscape architect recalled: “The driving force was to test what is possible to do in Stockholm, quite simply, in the form of fun initiatives in the streetscape....To test the limits for our common spaces” (C6). Thus, the experiment explicitly tried to challenge the presumed understanding of legitimate behaviour on city streets.

Although initiated by a small core group, Pallis, with its open-ended organisational structure, quickly expanded into a collaborative endeavour. An architecture firm, whose employees lived nearby, contributed *pro bono* design expertise. As one of the landscape architects explained, “temporary architecture” had become *en vogue*, and the firm connected Pallis to their “chain of place-making [activities] in the city” (C6). The members of a housing society and local businesses—including a bicycle repair shop, a tattoo studio, and café owners—participated in workshops to co-design the site. Sponsors provided plants, sand, and materials. Importantly, local residents were not only consulted but directly involved. The organisers “went around the neighbourhood and talked to people and put up notes,” inviting them to participate in the design and construction. “And surprisingly many people thought it was a great idea and wanted to be involved,” one initiator explained, continuing: “Of course, it was us who were the project managers at the beginning, but towards the end it had become much more of a kind of spontaneous, anarchic order, which was also very lovely” (G1). Civic initiative rather than formal planning was the driver and ambition behind the logic.

This participatory ethos sets Pallis apart from other street experiments and aligns with contemporary notions of co-production and co-design of public space (Huybrechts et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2024). It fostered a sense of ownership: “We wanted everyone to also feel that they themselves had invested a little in it to increase the feeling of ownership” (G1). The lack of budget, which could have been a limitation, was instead recast as a catalyst for community commitment. According to one organiser, the goal was “democratic somehow,” to test what interventions could “do to the cohesion in a neighbourhood” (C6).

The biggest obstacle came from municipal regulations. Stockholm lacked a permit category for temporary, non-commercial use of street space. The only available option—an outdoor dining permit—involved a cost far beyond the organisers’ means. After initial resistance, one organiser used personal contacts to lobby senior politicians and administrators. Eventually, the head of the traffic administration found a workaround

by categorising Pallis as a “religious gathering.” As one organiser recalled, “[the head of department] was very creative, I thought, because in the end he managed to find a category [that we were allowed to use]” (G1). This workaround allowed the initiative to go ahead legally without prohibitive costs. The episode highlighted both the rigidity and flexibility of municipal bureaucracy. On the one hand, existing regulations posed a major barrier. On the other hand, sympathetic officials could find ways to bend the rules, enabling experimentation through informal means.

Once implemented, Pallis benefited from strong media coverage. The involvement of a well-known actor, combined with the communications expertise of the other initiator, ensured publicity. The presence of Janette Sadik-Khan, New York’s former traffic commissioner, on the opening day further boosted visibility. National television covered the launch in real time, and newspapers reported on the project throughout its one-month existence. Interviewees consistently described Pallis as a “success” that created a good “vibe” and attracted enthusiastic participation.

Despite its success, Pallis had limitations. It lasted only one month, and the organisers did not conduct a systematic evaluation. As one landscape architect put it, “What were we going to do with it [an evaluation]? Why? No, I think we’re more doers” (G1). The ambition was never to create a permanent transformation but rather to inspire others: “We had hopes that it would also lead to more people taking things into their own hands” (G1). This lack of formal learning mechanisms is a common symptom of many urban experiments (Evans et al., 2021; Metzger et al., 2025; Zhao & Sun, 2025). As a result, the impacts of Pallis depended largely on diffusion through inspiration and storytelling, rather than structured evaluation.

Still, Pallis left tangible legacies. The organisers published a *Handbook of Citizen-Driven Urban Development* (Fastighetsägarna Stockholm & White Arkitekter, 2016), with practical advice on how to identify sites, mobilise communities, and navigate bureaucratic processes. The handbook explicitly aimed to inspire others to replicate the model. Perhaps more significantly, Pallis triggered changes in municipal regulations. City officials recognised that the absence of a “temporary park” category had posed unnecessary barriers. Drawing inspiration from San Francisco’s *Parklet Manual*, they created a new permit type for non-commercial, temporary street uses. By 2017–18, fee-free permits for non-commercial uses were introduced, lowering barriers for cultural events and installations (T4). As one interviewee argued, this was “Pallis’ greatest gift to the afterworld” (C6). These outcomes illustrate the logic’s learning and institutionalisation patterns: primarily informal and inspirational, although with some influence on municipal routines.

Pallis exemplifies a grassroots tactical experimental logic with activities that are small-scale, temporary, low-cost, and community-driven. It explicitly challenges the perception that urban change must always come from municipal authorities. At the same time, its very existence depends on informal alliances with sympathetic officials, who circumvent bureaucratic rules to make the project possible. The municipality’s role was ambiguous: while existing rules formally obstructed the experiment, officials informally enabled it. The participatory ethos of Pallis—its emphasis on co-creation and community ownership—distinguished it from later street experiments in Stockholm, where grassroots involvement would be less pronounced.

#### 4. Pragmatic Municipal Logic—Levande Stockholm (2015–ca. 2019)

A contrasting experimental logic of street transformation in Stockholm is defined by the municipality's assumption of leadership. We refer to this logic as *pragmatic municipalism*. From 2015, Levande Stockholm ("Living Stockholm") emerged as a programme for temporary street interventions that then grew into a citywide municipal platform. This programme brought experimentation from the margins into the centre of governance, reshaping its purposes, actors, and outcomes. Municipal leadership enabled scaling, visibility, and continuity at the expense of community participation, highlighting municipal control and administrative feasibility as the ambitions driving the logic.

Levande Stockholm originated in the political climate of the mid-2010s, when the Green Party controlled the transportation agenda in Stockholm's municipal government. Inspired by international precedents, the mayoral office introduced temporary pedestrian streets in the city's 2015 budget. As one policymaker recalled, "my idea was to distribute a lot of seating, greenery, larger outdoor cafés and get like this cozy urban life...a pretty quiet, pleasant street you can kind of stroll on" (T4).

The first year saw two summer pedestrian streets, closed to cars for several months and activated with temporary furniture, greenery, and opportunities for pop-up parks and cafés (see Figure 2). The approach was explicitly experimental. Officials stressed that the temporary framing reduced risk and allowed both the administration and the public to "test" changes without permanent commitment—attesting to the logic's focus on governing through reversible pilot interventions (Karvonen, 2018). As one policymaker put it: "I think that testing...it's a good way to move forward a little bit, especially with 'scary' measures such as closing out cars somewhere. It might be a lot more appetising to say, 'we're just testing'" (T1). The trials also worked internally to "create acceptance for these kinds of measures within the city [administration]" (T1) and provoke established professional norms such as prioritising car traffic flow and the separation of modes.



**Figure 2.** Swedenborgsgatan—one of the first two summer streets in the Levande Stockholm project. Photo: Ernst Henry, Sweco Architects.

Thus, the early pedestrian streets acted not only as interventions in public space. They were also bureaucratic provocations that challenged existing understandings and practices within the administration.

After this tentative beginning, the programme expanded rapidly. By 2016, four streets were included; in 2017, 10; and in 2018, around 20 sites, including “winter streets” and experiments in suburban districts (Trafikkontoret, 2018). Replication was propelled by both political and societal demand. Politicians saw in Levande Stockholm a visible and popular way to promote sustainability and liveability, while local businesses, property owners, and residents increasingly requested to host pedestrian streets. As one consultant noted, “the city districts have become increasingly eager to host summer pedestrian streets, while the city itself has begun to use the initiative as a branding tool to promote Stockholm to visitors” (C3). The pedestrian streets thus acquired a dual identity as neighbourhood amenities and as a marketing device to attract tourists.

The success of the programme depended on strong political support. Initial reactions were mixed, but as the initiative gained popularity even parties on the right, sceptical at first, endorsed it for its benefits to commerce and tourism (T4). This political backing, paired with internal support within the administration, empowered civil servants to take risks and defend the programme in the face of criticism. As one official observed:

We were probably also a little tougher [than in some other cities] actually...removing parking spaces and [being] tougher at regulating, which also meant that we maybe got a little further. But I think it has to do with the fact that we actually have political decisions on what we do, and that we have the traffic department’s leadership behind us. (P3)

The political backing both empowered the programme but also made it explicitly dependent on political leadership.

Another important factor was the creation of a cross-departmental project team. Levande Stockholm brought together traffic planners, communicators, regulatory experts, landscape architects, and land use specialists who otherwise worked in silos. This novel collaboration allowed for more agile handling of permits, design, and activation. Over time, the Cultural and Sports Departments joined, contributing art installations and physical activity initiatives, while district administrators used pedestrian streets as “security-creating measures” (C3). One policymaker remarked that “the trials offered a chance to unite the city’s administrations around a new way of working” (T4). In this sense, the programme not only produced new public spaces but also new institutional arrangements (Bulkeley, 2019; Karvonen, 2018).

Despite its popularity, Levande Stockholm differed sharply from Pallis in its engagement with residents. A few early projects involved businesses, property owners, and housing associations as initiators and custodians, but as the programme scaled, grassroots involvement waned. Cafés and restaurants became the dominant actors besides the municipality. A policymaker lamented that “outdoor cafés and dining areas have taken over a lot in some places....I wish that there had been more stakeholders who wanted to do things...and that there had been greater creativity from below....It is hard to get this [non-commercial] rolling” (T4). Thus, even though administrators were sympathetic to grassroots initiatives, they lacked the time and means to facilitate and support such endeavors. The municipality’s framing of Levande Stockholm as a programme to “activate” streets encouraged commercial uses that were easy to organise and sustain, which entailed a more structured and institutionally driven mode of participation. In contrast, the participatory ethos of Pallis, with its emphasis

on co-creation and neighbourhood ownership, was largely absent in Levande Stockholm, marking a distinctive configuration of key actors and participation within this logic.

Not all responses were favourable. According to municipal evaluations, though most feedback was positive, recurring complaints involved lost parking spaces and noise from cafés and restaurants (Trafikkontoret, 2018). Motorists expressed frustration at reduced access and a project leader also noted that the city lost revenue from parking fees (T4). Early signs of geographic variation and imbalance also emerged. Central, affluent districts proved easier to activate, while suburban areas, with less commercial activity, were more difficult to animate and experienced less impact. As one planner remarked, while central, affluent districts “activate themselves’ thanks to external parties’...resources and capital,” suburban areas often lacked the “local anchoring” that gave experiments social vitality, therefore requiring more effort from the municipality (P4).

The programme also marked a shift in learning practices. Compared to Pallis, Levande Stockholm engaged in more systematic evaluations of its temporary interventions. Nevertheless, these assessments remained site-specific and focused mainly on technical issues and user satisfaction. Hence, the logic focused on what is referred to as single-loop or first-order learning rather than broader institutional reflection (Beukers & Bertolini, 2021; Zhao & Sun, 2025). From around 2018, the programme also began to serve as a platform for testing designs before permanent reconstruction—“to see if it works or not,” as one project leader explained (T3). For project leaders with limited pilot budgets, Levande Stockholm offered infrastructure—furniture, signage, competence—that made experimentation cheaper and easier (P3). While this testbed role was not its original purpose, by the late 2010s it had become a recognised though still informal function.

The pragmatic municipal experimental logic involves low-risk testing and promotion of temporary interventions to trial car-free streets, activate public space, and build acceptance for permanent changes. While the approach supported scaling and visibility, it had limited grassroots participation, minimal learning beyond the site, and revealed challenges such as commercial dominance and uneven geographic outcomes. In short, Levande Stockholm marked the shift from a marginal grassroots initiative to a centralised municipal platform, demonstrating both the power and limitations of municipal leadership. It transformed experimentation into a tool of governance. While it paved the way for permanent redesigns and citywide scaling, it foreshadowed debates about participation, equity, and purpose that would be more prominent in later programmes.

## 5. Challenge-Led Innovative Logic—Framtidsgator and Street Moves (ca. 2020–2021)

By the late 2010s, Levande Stockholm had become the city’s platform for street experiments, with a focus on low-risk, temporary, and politically acceptable interventions to activate public space. Around the same time, a different strand of experimentation emerged. Carried forward by national innovation agencies, design firms and institutions, and research organisations, this third phase reframed experimentation around a logic of *challenge-led innovation* (Buylova et al., 2025; Janssen et al., 2021, 2023). The goal was not just to test incremental improvements but to challenge car-dominated policies and entrenched planning norms, and to produce systematic knowledge that could be scaled up. This new logic is illustrated by Framtidsgator (“Future Streets,” 2020–2021) and Street Moves (2020–2021).

The reorientation was reflected in the constellation of actors involved. While Levande Stockholm was firmly anchored in the municipal administration, the new projects were funded and driven by national bodies such as Vinnova, Sweden's innovation authority, and ArkDes, the national centre for architecture and design. They worked in collaboration with universities and private design firms and consultancies who participate in expert-led urban innovation programmes and actions involving digitalisation, greening, economic development, and social cohesion. The City of Stockholm remained a necessary partner, but not the lead actor. Instead, the municipality became one stakeholder among many—characteristic of this logic's actor constellation. The redistribution of authority created opportunities for more radical experimentation, while also generating tensions between overlapping platforms.

Framtidsgator was the Stockholm-based pilot within the broader Smarta Gator (Smart Streets) research and innovation programme, coordinated by KTH in collaboration with Chalmers, VTI (The Swedish National Road and Transport Research Institute), Spacescape, and other architectural firms. The initiative drew inspiration from international models—particularly the National Association of City Transportation Officials' Urban Street Design Guide (2025) and the Global Designing Cities Initiative (2025)—building on New York's high-profile public space transformations. The project leader recalled that Sweden's national street guidelines were “car-centric and outdated” (C1), and the core ambition was to challenge these entrenched standards by promoting multifunctional and multimodal street use. This work ultimately resulted in the publication of the *Design Guide for Smart Streets* (KTH et al., 2022), offering municipalities a more flexible framework. Locally, Framtidsgator was described as “practice-based research”—a way of doing applied research through direct engagement in planning processes (C1).

Three streets in the inner city were chosen for temporary redesigns. Selection criteria included low traffic volumes, absence of bus routes, city-owned parking, and adjacency to schools. The political calculus was clear: “By strategically selecting that surface [streets adjacent to schools], we simply eliminated many types of conflicts” (N2). School sites offered an advantage because, as one project leader put it, “it is politically impossible not to side with ambitions to create better environments outside schools” (C1). The interventions included playful installations that foregrounded the needs of children, disrupting long-standing traffic priorities (Figure 3). Design elements were co-created with children, parents, and teachers through workshops, with Spacescape (2025) facilitating participation via its digital tool *Place to Plan*.

While Framtidsgator was unfolding, Vinnova launched a new “mission pilot” under its mission-oriented innovation strategy, which focused on street transformation and spawned Street Moves. Coordinated by ArkDes, the project had an explicit national ambition. As a Vinnova official put it, the task was to “make all Sweden's streets become healthy, sustainable and full of life by 2030” (N1). Building on workshops with municipalities and private sector actors, Vinnova identified municipal capacity gaps around parking and micromobility (N1). ArkDes was tasked with leading a collaborative design process, supported by Lundberg Architects, and convened a consortium including Voi, Volvo Car Mobility, and the Swedish Transport Agency.

Stockholm was already engaged in the Smarta Gator programme and agreed to pilot Street Moves on the same three streets as Framtidsgator. Here, modular prototypes were installed as mobility-oriented “hot-spots,” combining e-scooter parking with “plug-in” modules that could host greenery, seating and various other activities, and charging infrastructure. The prototypes, installed in September 2020, were evaluated, and the insights compiled into a manual to guide other municipalities (ArkDes Think Tank, 2021a,



**Figure 3.** Hälsingegatan—one of the three streets that were temporarily transformed as part of the Framtidsgator and Street Moves projects—before (left) and during (right) the experiment. Photo: Lennart Johansson. Source: Spacescape (2021).

2021b). For a design consultant involved, tangibility was the key contribution: “It’s one thing to show it in pictures—but it’s something completely different to show it in real life. Only then do people really understand the project’s potential” (C5). Thus, the rationale was to show and tell through the experiments while also opposing the car-centric planning ethos.

While the two projects differed—Framtidsgator emphasised child-centred school streets and guideline reform, while Street Moves pursued modular design and national rollout—they shared several defining features. Both championed rapid, low-cost, collaborative experimentation, highlighting the logic’s characteristic practices and forms of participatory engagement. Both critiqued municipal norms and sought to accelerate change. One Smarta Gator leader argued that municipalities lacked the “habit...to go outside the box and try new things” and described the project as being about exploring “how to make quick conversions...how to make cheap and fast” (C1). Meanwhile, a Street Moves project leader emphasised that its design-led approach accelerated planning, reducing timelines from “3–5 years to 8–14 months compared to traditional planning,” and how, by operating “a little outside the usual norms,” it provided opportunities to bypass bureaucracy (N2).

Evaluation and learning were formal elements of both projects. Whereas Levande Stockholm engaged in first-order or single-loop learning through site-specific, ad hoc assessments, these projects integrated evaluation into their design to develop second-order or double-loop learning (Beukers & Bertolini, 2021; Zhao & Sun, 2025), highlighting systematic evaluation and reflection. Framtidsgator produced a 45-page report (Spacescape, 2021) that a municipal official described as “a very proper evaluation if you compare it to our other evaluations” (P1). These evaluations documented generally positive attitudes as well as clear

impacts: reduced vehicle speeds, considerably more lingering, and improved resident perceptions of safety (Trafikkontoret, 2021). Yet conflict was unavoidable. Complaints centred on noise from children playing and the loss of parking (Spacescape, 2021). Even removing ten of fifty parking spaces provoked strong reactions among a “vocal minority,” making parking loss “politically very sensitive” (C1). Street Moves representatives also made special mention of parking. Anticipating resistance, and recognising that “this is a sensitive area,” they emphasised the need for an “open and transparent dialogue” and for deeper co-creation: “truly doing this together with the citizens [to ensure] added value” for them (N1). Both projects also made efforts to reflect on the outcomes and translate them into design or process guidelines.

The relationship with Levande Stockholm was ambivalent. Project leaders stressed complementarities and potential synergies and the opportunities to share equipment and expertise (P2). Yet other city officials viewed national projects as a “political imposition,” that is, that collaboration with Vinnova was forced upon them, and they questioned the need for parallel experimental platforms: “If we have our own way of working, why invent something new together with Vinnova?” (T3). Scepticism was also voiced toward the Smarta Gator guidelines, viewed by some as visionary but lacking technical grounding in practical concerns such as underground infrastructure (T1). These diverging views reflected differing positions within the municipality: project leaders emphasised complementarities while officials with less connection to the projects were more sceptical, perceiving them as disruptive or imposed.

The challenge-led innovative experimental logic framed experiments as vehicles for knowledge production, design demonstration, and national policy influence. Alongside tangible interventions, it generated manuals, guidelines, and systematic evaluation frameworks, with the ambition to accelerate change, reframe norms, and equip municipalities with evidence and design tools. Successes lay in visibility, learning, and cross-sector collaboration, while hindrances included political sensitivities, rushed execution, and occasional friction with municipal approaches.

## 6. Embedded Administrative Logic—Levande Stockholm 2.0 (ca. 2019–Present)

The fourth experimental logic of street transformations in Stockholm is defined by the consolidation and embedding of Levande Stockholm into the municipality. We refer to it as an *embedded administrative* logic. What began in 2015 as a politically championed programme for seasonal pedestrianisation matured, since approximately 2019, into a permanent municipal platform encompassing more than 40 sites—pedestrian streets (several now designated as permanent, recurring summer pedestrian streets), squares, pop-up parks, and quays—citywide and embedded in governance routines. The designation of 2019 as a turning point is not linked to a specific event, but rather to what a project leader called Levande Stockholm’s transition to a “management phase” (P3), characterised by a budgetary reallocation in which a significantly larger share of funds was directed towards management and operations rather than investments when compared to previous years. Experimentation shifted from ad hoc interventions and programmatic trials toward a professionalised and routinised practice of street activation with an increased emphasis on design quality and communication with other stakeholders. As one policymaker summarised, “we moved from a project to a programme, and from a programme to a platform” (T4). This shift signals the logic’s core drive and ambition: experimentation embedded as routine administrative practice rather than one-off moments of innovation.

Levande Stockholm became both a vehicle of visible urban change and a framework to adaptively manage public space. Its consolidation entailed dedicated staffing, sustained political support, and formalised arrangements: budgets were formalised, routines codified, and responsibilities distributed across departments. One official described how the administration now worked “much more systematically and professionally and long-term...than in the early years” (T4), while another argued that “it is no longer a fad, no longer a test” (P3). This indicates that experimentation has gone from an alternative practice to a standardised tool of governance (Andres, 2025; Bulkeley, 2019; Karvonen, 2018).

Institutionalisation also revealed tensions between political and administrative timescales. Administrators sought to embed Levande Stockholm in long-term governance, while politicians valued its visibility for photo opportunities and campaigns. As one official explained, “our mandate is more long-term than politics, which runs on a four-year cycle. We don’t want this to just be ‘a spectacle,’ but something anchored in our main mission” (T6). The same official noted growing pressure from politicians to “do more” to produce quick, visible results. Another reflected: “While there has been strong political will, there has been little long-term perspective. The project has expanded year by year, but with short time horizons, resulting in many quick decisions and solutions” (P4). The programme’s growing scale also began to strain capacity. Team members acknowledged that expectations often outpaced resources: “We are running the whole time. We don’t really have time to reflect” (T5). This results in limited opportunities for second-order or double-loop learning.

By now, Levande Stockholm had consolidated its role as the city’s testbed for permanent investment projects. Although still dependent on personal relationships among officials, several large-scale projects routinely used the programme to trial temporary regulation and design before committing to costly reconstruction; Levande Stockholm’s temporary infrastructure offered a low-risk evaluation method and political legitimacy. One planner explained how this made it “easier to argue [for the change]” (T3). In effect, Levande Stockholm became the city’s default interface for public-space experimentation. As one project leader put it, “It’s almost as if you can’t test something without Levande Stockholm being involved” (P3). This testified to the platform’s success but also raised concerns of over-centralisation, potentially narrowing the range of approaches and crowding out other forms of radical or decentralised experimentation (T1).

The stakeholder landscape also shifted. Though the Traffic Administration remained the institutional anchor, commercial actors became increasingly prominent. Property owners and restaurateurs saw opportunities to enhance the attractiveness and value of their areas. A planner noted that “property owners have really woken up in the last few years and discovered that this is a good way to work with public space” (P3). Their motivations were explicitly economic: “More attractive environments in connection with their businesses...creates better profitability for the businesses that their tenants run” (C3). Restaurants also benefitted from expanded outdoor seating, reinforcing the programme’s commercial orientation. In their own evaluation, the administration highlighted how Levande Stockholm supported restaurant revenues and had become a feature in real estate marketing (Trafikkontoret, 2022). By contrast, grassroots and civic groups had difficulty gaining traction (T4). The stakeholder mix had thus changed: municipal leadership paired with strong commercial actors and even less community presence.

Geography also continued to shape outcomes, with outer districts proving harder to activate. One official highlighted a suburb where activities only took off after extended collaboration and the presence of local staff: “That’s when you really see a change...but those kinds of collaborations also take a very long time...It is

rarely in year one that it is full activity” (T6). This highlights the geographical unevenness of urban experiments (Karvonen, 2018).

Officials claimed that the programme conducted “more evaluations than most” city initiatives (P3), using citizen panels and site-specific surveys, and had built an “enormously much larger” knowledge bank than other projects (P4). Yet learning limitations persisted. Evaluations often only served instrumental purposes (justifying political decisions), rather than attempting to change existing policies or develop new ones. “We do not stop and reflect on what we do well. So, we don’t document that learning to the extent [we should]” (P3), one official admitted. Another explained: “We weren’t that good at reflecting after launch...everyone was happy it happened...and then next year you try to remember what to do differently” (T2). This reflects how, within this logic, learning remained primarily operational rather than transformational; the lack of second-order or double-loop learning continues from the first phase of Levande Stockholm.

Nonetheless, Levande Stockholm encouraged new mindsets and bolder forms of experimentation. A planner emphasised how temporary measures and accompanying evaluations had helped build “organisational courage,” imbuing staff with tacit knowledge about what works and greater confidence to push boundaries (P4). Yet this way of working has not spread evenly across the administration. As one interviewee noted, “it’s a fairly limited group of people who still work with it actively” (P4). From this perspective, Levande Stockholm risks remaining a niche practice rather than transforming the department’s standard operating procedures.

Others suggested that the programme’s influence was felt less in formal procedures than in everyday mindsets. A project leader reflected that Levande Stockholm had shown planners “that we can actually work with temporary measures in public space.” This short-term experimental mindset did not always align with 5–20 year planning horizons, but did reframe what counted as legitimate practice and contributed to a “process of change in how one understands the city” (P3). In this sense, Levande Stockholm’s significance in this later period lay not only in its interventions but in its contribution to cultural shifts within planning. Experimentation became institutionalised not merely as a means to realise permanent changes but as a governance tool in its own right—an approach that valued flexibility, iteration, and adaptation. As one strategist put it, while people often see pilots as trials before permanence, the real aim here was “to test [and] achieve this flexibility” (P1).

After 2019, Levande Stockholm professionalised and stabilised, embedding adaptive street management into Stockholm’s policy landscape. Within the embedded administrative logic, street experimentation evolved into a durable governance practice, suggesting that municipalities can institutionalise flexibility, making streets adaptive and dynamic. Yet institutionalisation came with trade-offs, as the programme experienced challenges in balancing political visibility and long-term change, and commercial interests and democratic participation. This reveals both the potential of embedding experimentation in municipal governance and the risks of institutionalisation: routinisation, commercial capture, and diminished creativity. Together, these dynamics highlight the tensions inherent in turning experimentation into the everyday work of governing cities.

## 7. Discussion: Competing Logics and the Evolution of Street Experimentation in Stockholm

Stockholm's decade of street experimentation follows a move from improvised grassroots action to institutionalised municipal governance. This trajectory shows how different experimental logics—tactical grassroots, pragmatic municipal, challenge-led innovative, and embedded administrative—have overlapped and partially replaced one another (see Table 1). The coexistence of logics demonstrates that urban experimentation is not singular but continuously redefined through complementary and sometimes contrasting visions, including the nature and speed of change and who should drive it. Rather than a linear progression, it reflects an evolutionary sequence of initiatives, each building on but also diverging from what came before. As one participant summarised it: “I want to believe that Framtidsgator is a spinoff of it, not

**Table 1.** A comparison across dimensions of four experimental logics in Stockholm.

	Tactical Grassroots (Pallis, 2015)	Pragmatic Municipal (Levande Stockholm, 2015–2019)	Challenge-Led Innovative (Framtidsgator & Street Moves, 2020–2021)	Embedded Administrative (Levande Stockholm 2.0, 2019–present)
Drivers & Ambitions	Challenge municipal regulation; democratise street space; test limits through temporary, low-budget, citizen-driven creativity.	Create attractive public space; reduce political risk by testing temporary changes; emphasise activation, visibility, and pragmatic problem-solving.	Accelerate systemic change; challenge car-centric policies; design-led innovation; evidence-based experimentation.	Stabilise experimentation as part of routine governance; prioritise continuity, coordination, and predictable delivery over disruption.
Key Actors & Participation	Initiated by citizens and local civic actors; municipality as informal enabler; emphasis on community/ neighbourhood co-creation.	Municipality leads; cafés, restaurants, property owners as key stakeholders; limited citizen involvement.	National agencies, designers, researchers lead; municipality as partner; structured co-creation with selected stakeholder groups (e.g., children, schools).	Municipality leads; large property owners increasingly dominant; limited role for citizens.
Practices & Governing Tools	Pop-up park; DIY construction; permit workaround; intensive local engagement; temporary activation.	Seasonal pedestrian streets; cross-department coordination; standardised temporary furniture; branding and communication tools.	School street transformations; modular street prototypes; guidelines and manuals; participatory tools.	Recurrent street activations; standardised management routines; institutionalised testbed function; embedded operational procedures.
Learning & Outcomes	Informal, inspirational learning; diffusion through storytelling; creation of permit category; no systematic evaluation.	Site-specific evaluations (single-loop); strengthened internal acceptance; used informally as testbed for permanent redesigns.	Systematic evaluations (double-loop); evidence-based insights aimed at wider dissemination; limited municipal uptake.	Operational learning; routinisation and institutionalisation; limited reflective learning; risk of commercial capture and reduced creativity.

just Pallis, but I mean that everything [is] like a string of projects in some way, it is connected...informally, all projects rub off on everything" (C6).

Despite continuity and projects "rubbing off" on one another, each logic is distinct. Pallis pioneered bottom-up, temporary transformations and demonstrated the persuasive power of tactical interventions. Levande Stockholm inherited regulatory tools such as the "temporary park" permit, but reframed experimentation as municipally coordinated and politically sanctioned activation. Framtidsgator and Street Moves reintroduced more radical ambitions, tying temporary designs to research, national guidelines, and systematic evaluation, yet also revealed tensions with municipal routines and authority. The subsequent institutionalisation of Levande Stockholm helped professionalise experimentation and embed it in administrative routines while reducing participation and co-creation. In hindsight, Pallis is remembered as both an inspiration and a missed opportunity. It seeded new regulatory frameworks and encouraged municipal actors but did not lead to a broader wave of citizen-driven experiments. Instead, subsequent phases would see experimentation taken up and reshaped by municipal and national institutions. While Pallis remains emblematic of what bottom-up experimentation can achieve, its legacy also highlights how radical and participatory ambitions can be diluted as experimentation becomes institutionalised (Ehnert, 2023; Evans et al., 2021; Raven et al., 2019).

Different actor constellations underpinned these trajectories. Building on VanHoose and Bertolini's (2023) ideal types, municipal roles shifted over time: from enabler (Pallis) to promoter (Levande Stockholm), partner (Framtidsgator, Street Moves), and, finally, institutional owner (Levande Stockholm's consolidation). Compared to the Ghent case discussed by VanHoose and Bertolini (2023), the Stockholm case reveals more tensions, such as those between spontaneity and bureaucracy, inclusion and commercialisation (as also highlighted in Villani & Talamini's [2023] study of Hong Kong), and short-term visibility and long-term learning.

Pallis, Smarta Gator/Framtidsgator, and Street Moves were led by architects, designers, and researchers who foregrounded citizen dialogue and reflection, and challenged planning norms. These coalitions were eclectic, involving universities, design firms, and national agencies. Levande Stockholm, by contrast, was anchored by civil servants in the Traffic Administration, privileging pragmatic activation and visible results aligned with political priorities. This grounding provided stability and visibility but, as Sierhuis et al. (2024) note in other contexts, results in less scope for disruptive ambitions. Over time, commercial actors gained prominence. Property owners recognised pedestrianisation as an opportunity to raise rents and enhance neighbourhood appeal, while restaurateurs benefitted from expanded terraces. As in Hong Kong (see Villani & Talamini, 2023), this commercial orientation shaped the programme's trajectory, favouring uses that were easier to regulate and sustain. Grassroots and civic groups, by contrast, were largely marginalised. In this sense, the balance of actors shifted from civic and design-led coalitions to municipal-commercial alliances, in direct contrast to the findings of Smeds et al. (2023), which saw citizen groups in New York mobilise *in response* to an initially municipality-led scheme.

The label "experiment" often mistakenly suggests systematic learning (Beukers & Bertolini, 2021), with the reality proving more uneven. In Stockholm's early street experiments, learning was tacit. Pallis proved the power of full-scale demonstration but produced little structured knowledge. Levande Stockholm produced reports and citizen surveys, but evaluation was often instrumental, used to justify political choices rather than to develop policy. Reflections were acknowledged as ad hoc and partial. By contrast, the

Vinnova-backed projects treated learning as central. Framtidsgator was conceived as practice-based research, with rigorous evaluation and a design guide aimed at national dissemination. Street Moves codified lessons into manuals and toolkits to support other municipalities. These were attempts to translate local experimentation into systemic knowledge. Yet their influence on Stockholm's municipal routines was limited. Some city officials viewed externally produced evaluations as peripheral, and the lessons were only partly absorbed into Levande Stockholm. Still, Levande Stockholm fostered what interviewees called "organisational courage": the confidence to test, evaluate, and make decisions based on visible examples. This shift in mindset was perhaps its most important legacy. Even if policy learning was thin, experimentation began to be seen as a legitimate way to govern streets. Temporary interventions were no longer novelties but part of the municipal repertoire. Interestingly, while other projects *challenged* norms, it was Levande Stockholm that actually seemed to *change* norms, thanks to the more tacit learning among officials working with Levande Stockholm over an extended period.

The tangible achievements of Stockholm's experiments are evident. Levande Stockholm grew into a permanent platform with professional staff, curated furniture, and political legitimacy. Framtidsgator informed alternative street design guidelines. Street Moves generated modular prototypes and gained global media coverage. On the ground, these interventions slowed cars, encouraged lingering, and showed that even modest temporary changes could alter everyday life of residents and visitors.

Yet important opportunities were missed. The non-commercial ethos of Pallis—a meeting place without consumption requirements—was never institutionalised. Structured learning from Vinnova projects was not fully transferred into municipal routines. Instead, Levande Stockholm remained focused on visible activation. Political cycles reinforced this orientation: administrators worked with four-year time horizons, striving to deliver quick results rather than slow, reflective learning. Across the projects and programmes, geographic imbalances persisted. Inner-city districts with high-income residents were easier to activate, while outer districts with lower-income residents required sustained local collaboration and often lagged behind. The fact that Pallis took place in a desirable neighbourhood and was driven by empowered local actors is, if we take note of Verlinghieri et al. (2024), no surprise and it is perhaps little wonder that typically underrepresented groups remained on the fringes until more recently. Despite targeted efforts, however, remaining disparities raise enduring questions of equity and inclusivity in Stockholm's street experimentation.

Mobility transformation also remains limited. Street experiments often balance two ambitions: to alter mobility patterns and to nourish public space (Bertolini, 2023). In Stockholm, as in many other places, the latter dominated. Interventions prioritised placemaking in central locations—lingering, socialising, café life—rather than the fundamental reworking of mobility systems, reflecting broader trends (Bertolini, 2023; Smeds & Papa, 2023). Although car restrictions were often a precondition, the focus was rarely on shifting travel behaviour or overall mobility patterns. Instead, experiments sought to create attractive public space or safeguard children. A traffic planner described Levande Stockholm as "probably more about rerouting the traffic rather than limiting the traffic...a tool to be able to develop a place in the long term" (C2). Avoiding politically sensitive parking conflicts reinforced this orientation toward placemaking rather than systemic mobility change. This reflected a deliberate strategy to sidestep the contentious politics of automobility and preserve the "positive vibes" of Levande Stockholm.

## 8. Conclusion

This article highlights that street experiments are not static interventions, but rather dynamic processes that evolve, institutionalise, and compete with one another. Stockholm's decade of experimentation demonstrates this interplay across four distinct experimental logics: tactical grassroots (Pallis), pragmatic municipal (Levande Stockholm), challenge-led innovative (Framtidsgator and Street Moves), and embedded administrative (Levande Stockholm 2.0). Across these logics, actor constellations, ambitions, practices, and engagement with learning, evolved and coalesced into distinct configurations of experimentation over time. These developments brought tangible gains—the activation of lively pedestrian corridors, safer school streets, and innovative new ways of governing the city—yet came at a cost. Grassroots initiative, central in Pallis, faded over time. Commercial actors—cafés, restaurants, property owners—became dominant partners, raising concerns of privatisation. Learning remained fragmented: Framtidsgator and Street Moves showed how structured evaluation could inform policy, yet the municipality only partly adopted these lessons. Geographic imbalances persisted, with central districts favoured over suburban areas. Radical ambitions—to democratise space or confront car dominance—were diluted as experimentation became a routine mode of administration and placemaking took precedence over mobility transformation. Similar dynamics observed in cities globally suggest that, without inclusive participation, spatial equity, and structured learning, street experimentation can have limited transformative potential.

Taken together, Stockholm illustrates both the potential and the risk of embedding experimentation into governance. On the positive side, temporary interventions are now seen as legitimate planning tools. Officials have adopted more agile ways of working and gained the confidence to push boundaries. On the negative side, learning remains partial, participation weak, and mobility transformation has been consistently deferred. A more structured approach to learning could have generated richer insights and embedded more radical transformation ambitions into municipal practices.

Three broader lessons follow from the case presented here. First, experimentation is not inherently transformative: its meaning depends on who drives it, with what ambitions, and under which institutional conditions. Second, systematic learning cannot be assumed. Without deliberate structures for evaluation and synthesis across projects, experiments risk being reduced to political spectacle. Third, equity and participation require active cultivation. Without deliberate attention, experimentation risk reproducing existing inequalities and privileging the well-resourced.

For scholars, the Stockholm example highlights the benefits of studying cities diachronically. Their significance lies not only in isolated interventions but in how they evolve, connect, and are institutionalised. The case also demonstrates that multiple experimental logics, rather than one single “experimental logic,” operate in parallel. This reflects VanHoose and Bertolini's (2023) finding that street experiment roles are “not absolute” (p. 8), suggesting the potential generalisability of the Stockholm case. We do not, however, claim that these four logics are exhaustive; street experimentation in other cities—and experimentation in other policy domains—may reveal additional experimental logics. For policymakers, the lesson is to embrace experimentation as a tool for flexibility and adaptation, while guarding against the erosion of participation and inclusivity.

The previous decade of street experimentation in Stockholm leaves a mixed legacy. It has embedded flexibility into governance and mainstreamed the idea of streets as adaptable commons. Yet it has also shown how

professionalisation can blunt street experimentation's radical edge. The challenge for the coming years is to preserve creativity and civic voice while consolidating institutional stability—ensuring that experimentation remains not just a means of street activation, but a vehicle for deeper urban transformation (Bertolini, 2025).

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# The Social Zipper: Redefining the Role of Streets in Disadvantaged Housing Estates

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## Abstract

Danish postwar non-profit housing estates reflect the rise of the welfare state by providing quality housing for all, regardless of income. Typically built on the outskirts of cities, these estates were shaped by modernist ideals of traffic separation and functional zoning. Today, several states face criticism for their physical and social fragmentation. In response, the Danish government introduced the Parallel Society Act in 2018, mandating mixed forms of ownership in selected estates to promote greater social and functional diversity. The Parallel Society Act has led to extensive physical changes, including the creation of new internal streets designed to reduce isolation, increase “eyes on the street,” invite visitors, and foster social interaction. These interventions represent a new planning paradigm, in which streets are reframed as “social zippers.” This article explores how such transformations are envisioned and experienced in two Danish estates: Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken. Drawing on methodological approaches inspired by architectural anthropology and based on an ongoing long-term study conducted by an interdisciplinary team since 2019, we examine how the role of streets as “social zippers” shapes perceptions of connectivity, safety, child-friendliness, and livability among residents and visitors. Findings reveal ambiguous outcomes: While streets are intended to connect people and spaces, residents often perceive them as intrusions into established social structures and spatial routines. This raises critical questions about whom such interventions are designed to serve and whose everyday lives they aim to reshape. The study underscores the need for participatory, context-sensitive approaches to avoid reproducing the fragmentation these policies seek to address.

## Keywords

disadvantaged housing estates; new streets; social zipper; suburban transformation



The architects behind the forthcoming transformation describe their design intention as follows:

Our primary strategy is to establish a vibrant, unifying street running along the center of Gadehavegaard. The “zipper” ensures a connection between the existing and the new and creates a shared, equitable, and engaging space for current and future residents, as well as for students and visitors. (Arkitema Architects, 2020)

According to Arkitema Architects, the street is intended to function as a new type of public space, accommodating multiple modes of transport, bicycles, cars, and pedestrians, while also facilitating daily interactions between existing and new residents. Ideally, it will be attractive and safe enough to draw visitors into the heart of the estate.

The term “social zipper,” inspired by Arkitema’s concept, is used in this article as a metaphor for the reinterpretation of streets as social meeting spaces, a feature shared by many of the estates examined in the evaluation. This represents a pivotal shift from the original traffic-separated planning models, which were rooted in modernist ideals emphasizing functional zoning, the segregation of traffic modes, and physical separation from surrounding street infrastructure to reduce noise and pollution from cars (Bech-Danielsen, 2022; Turkington et al., 2004).

In recent decades, the urban renewal of disadvantaged post-war estates has extended beyond Denmark, with similar processes taking place across Europe and fundamentally transforming these housing areas (Bech-Danielsen & Stender, 2017). The PSA has attracted particular attention from neighboring Nordic countries, and because the full consequences of the legislation are not yet visible, sharing insights during the transformation can help deepen understanding of these processes as they unfold (Stender et al., 2025). While the PSA provides a framework for these transformations, this article focuses specifically on the relationship between physical changes and social life. Drawing on architectural-anthropological field studies, the article examines how new internal streets, envisioned as “social zippers,” reshape the social and spatial dynamics of post-war housing estates and how residents experience these changes in terms of everyday life, social interaction, and perceptions of safety and livability.

The article proceeds as follows. First, it provides an overview of the PSA to contextualize how the legislation changes the rules governing the non-profit housing sector, particularly in relation to Denmark’s tradition of resident participation. Next, it outlines the rationale for selecting two cases, Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken, from a total of 15 housing estates, highlighting both their similarities and differences. The methods and data underpinning the findings are then described, focusing primarily on qualitative interviews with residents and stakeholders, along with spatial analysis of the two estates. The findings from Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken are presented in two sections, emphasizing both planned and established internal streets and drawing on insights from the qualitative interviews. Finally, the concluding discussion compares the two cases and situates them within a broader analytical framework informed by existing scholarly literature.

## 2. The PSA

Danish non-profit housing estates have undergone ongoing maintenance and transformation over the years. However, in estates subject to the mandatory requirements of the PSA, the scale of planned interventions is unprecedented within the Danish context (Bech-Danielsen, 2022). This makes it particularly important to examine the impact of the legislation on both the targeted estates and their residents. Introduced in 2018, the PSA aims to physically restructure disadvantaged non-profit housing estates by promoting socio-economic diversification. Through extensive physical transformations, the policy seeks to attract more resourceful residents and reposition these estates within the broader urban hierarchy (Nielsen et al., 2023).

Since 2010, the Danish government has monitored approximately 200 non-profit housing estates with over 1,000 inhabitants for elevated levels of unemployment, crime, low educational attainment, and a high proportion of residents with non-Western backgrounds (Nielsen et al., 2023). The PSA applies uniform criteria, requiring non-profit housing estates that fail to meet specific standards to reduce the proportion of non-profit family housing from 100% to as low as 40% by 2030, a requirement currently affecting 17 estates. Consequently, municipalities and housing associations must implement this reduction through demolition, sale of units, rebranding, or new construction of private or owner-occupied housing. Beyond the compulsory introduction of mixed forms of ownership, most non-profit housing estates are undertaking more extensive transformations, including the incorporation of non-residential functions, the enhancement of recreational spaces, and the creation of new internal streets to open up the estates and strengthen their connections to the surrounding urban fabric.

Each year on December 1, a public list identifies non-profit housing estates that fail to meet the designated PSA criteria. This practice reinforces public labeling and contributes to further stigmatization, perpetuating these estates' position at the lowest level of the urban hierarchy (Stender & Mechlenborg, 2022). The PSA reflects a narrative that constructs these non-profit housing estates as "parallel societies" deviating from mainstream Danish norms, thereby legitimizing targeted social and physical interventions (Bech-Danielsen & Stender, 2017; Larsen & Delica, 2024). Initiatives implemented under the PSA framework also reflect a broader European trend toward reimagining and restructuring disadvantaged post-war housing estates. Compared to other nations, Denmark's approach is distinctive in its explicit emphasis on ethnicity, as the proportion of residents with non-Western ethnic backgrounds is one of five criteria used to classify areas as disadvantaged. Within the PSA framework, this criterion carries the greatest weight (Bech-Danielsen, 2022; Mechlenborg et al., 2025; Stender & Mechlenborg, 2022).

A case is currently under review by the European Union's highest court to determine whether Denmark's PSA constitutes discrimination, potentially violating human rights and the rights of minority groups. The outcome may influence the future implementation and legitimacy of the PSA (Stender et al., 2025). Nevertheless, although these large-scale transformations in Denmark are still ongoing, they are widely regarded as exemplary models and testbeds for urban renewal, attracting considerable attention from international scholars, policymakers, and urban development practitioners.

Traditionally, Denmark's non-profit housing sector has maintained a strong tradition of resident democracy, with formal influence exercised through elected boards and established processes (Nielsen et al., 2023). Residents are generally required to vote on major changes to their housing estates that may affect rent, a

procedure that also applies under the PSA. However, if residents reject a PSA development plan, their decision carries no weight, as the plan constitutes a binding obligation enforceable by a higher authority. In this way, the PSA effectively undermines the Danish tradition of resident democracy, allowing top-down state interventions to override established mechanisms of resident participation.

### 3. State of the Art: Streets as Social and Safe Spaces

In response to the widespread housing shortages following World War II, large-scale housing developments were constructed across Europe, shaped by a modernist planning legacy that emphasized functional zoning, traffic segregation, and the construction of industrialized, homogeneous apartment blocks (Turkington et al., 2004; Zupan, 2021). This approach was driven by ideals of efficiency, health, and order, aiming to provide residents with access to light, air, and green spaces while separating residential areas from industrial, commercial, and traffic-related activities (Bech-Danielsen, 2022).

Infrastructurally, these residential housing estates were commonly designed according to traffic separation principles, with major arterial roads encircling the estates, while internal streets were limited and often terminated in large or decentralized parking areas, emphasizing car-free communal spaces (Bech-Danielsen, 2022; Mehta, 2013). This approach was developed in response to the rapid rise in traffic-related injuries following the post-war increase in car ownership. Urban planners sought to minimize vehicular traffic through spatially efficient layouts, enhance street safety, and create pedestrian-friendly environments, particularly for children and other vulnerable groups (Marshall, 2005). According to Southworth and Ben-Joseph (2003), residents of car-free residential areas generally express satisfaction with what they perceive as a safe environment, a perception supported by findings from long-term evaluation studies (Nordberg & Sundstrup, 2021).

However, the traffic separation model, along with the zoning practices that produced large monofunctional housing estates, was soon criticized by prominent urban theorists such as Jacobs (1965), who highlighted the lack of permeability and diminished social interaction. Critics also argued that prioritizing traffic segregation often resulted in underutilized and poorly activated pedestrian zones, contributing to a reduced sense of safety due to the absence of passive surveillance, which Jacobs (1965) famously termed “eyes on the street.” According to Jacobs, this undermined both the perceived and actual safety of these environments, challenging the very rationale behind their original design principles.

In recent decades, urban renewal strategies have increasingly emphasized the (re)introduction of street networks to promote spatial connectivity, social inclusion, and urban vitality (Helleman & Wassenberg, 2004; Nordberg & Sundstrup, 2021). Several scholars note that streets as public spaces have the potential to foster community-oriented, inclusive, and socially engaged neighborhoods and cities (Filion, 2001; Mehta & Bosson, 2021). However, the addition of new street networks does not automatically encourage social interaction or community engagement (Stender et al., 2025). Without accompanying strategies, such as activating ground-floor spaces, promoting mixed land uses, and ensuring safety through “eyes on the street,” new streets can remain underutilized and may inadvertently reinforce patterns of neglect (Jacobs, 1965; Mehta, 2013).

Additionally, the introduction of new streets often requires the demolition or restructuring of existing buildings and communal green spaces, raising concerns among residents about the potential loss of community identity (Stender et al., 2025). The environmental implications of demolition, such as material waste and carbon emissions, have also attracted increasing criticism from professionals and the public, highlighting the need for more sustainable approaches to urban redevelopment. In Denmark, debate over both the transformations and associated demolitions has been particularly prominent in housing estates targeted by the PSA, where demolition was initially justified on socio-political grounds rather than environmental considerations (Bech-Danielsen, 2022).

Several scholars emphasize the importance of recognizing and understanding urban and suburban settings, which often respond differently to infrastructural interventions (Dovey & Pafka, 2014; Filion, 2001; Mehta & Bosson, 2021). Most research on streets as social and public spaces focuses on urban areas, whereas in suburban areas, the car remains the dominant mode of transportation (Mehta, 2013; Mehta & Bosson, 2021). Jacobs's (1965) conclusions are primarily based on urban areas with higher building densities than those typical of suburban contexts, raising the question of whether her principles can be directly applied to suburban landscapes (Dovey & Pafka, 2014). Furthermore, infrastructural strategies differ markedly in cities that reduce car traffic and parking to create more pedestrian-friendly environments. Carmona (2010, p. 127) uses the concept of "invaded space" to describe situations in which remaining urban public space is dominated by vehicular traffic, thereby diminishing its social function.

In both Danish and international contexts, most non-profit post-war housing estates were initially constructed on greenfield sites. Over time, these estates gradually became integrated into suburban and, in a few cases, urban contexts. The effects of new street networks can vary depending on the specific setting, underscoring the need for tailored urban renewal approaches that consider local conditions and community needs (Filion, 2001). Transforming streets from movement corridors into social spaces requires integrated planning across mobility, housing, landscape, and social infrastructure (Carmona, 2010; Dovey & Pafka, 2014). Low population density and the prevailing reliance on cars in surrounding suburban areas help explain the generous allocation of space for vehicles in these suburban centers (Filion, 2001). Paradoxically, this can create environments that are less conducive to pedestrian traffic and social interaction. The potential for social interaction also increases when speed limits are lowered, highlighting the importance of speed-reduction measures and the effective management of traffic volume and speed (Sauter & Huettenmoser, 2008). In addition, the physical characteristics of streets, including shade, façade articulation, sidewalk width, and street furniture, play a central role in supporting social behavior (Mehta & Bosson, 2021).

Finally, the question of urban integration remains politically charged. New streets designed to connect previously isolated housing estates with more affluent surrounding areas can encounter resistance both internally, due to fears of invasion or loss of identity, and externally, because of territorial stigma or concerns about property values (Bridge et al., 2011; Stender et al., 2025). Moreover, such interventions can leave existing residents, particularly low-income and racialized tenants, more exposed and vulnerable, as efforts to enhance safety and connectivity through design may unintentionally generate new forms of surveillance, spatial exclusion, and social tension (August, 2014). As such, reconfiguring spatial connectivity is as much a socio-political negotiation as it is a matter of physical design. This view is further supported by research emphasizing that the legitimacy and long-term success of urban regeneration, including the implementation of improved street designs, depend heavily on participatory planning processes that actively

involve residents (Bech-Danielsen, 2022; Southworth & Ben-Joseph, 2003). Other scholars note that urban integration efforts must also consider residents' emotional experiences and everyday practices, as these fundamentally shape how public space is perceived and used (Stapper & Duyvendak, 2020).

This article examines how newly introduced and planned streets in disadvantaged housing estates, conceptualized as “social zippers,” are redefining the role of streets and reshaping social and spatial dynamics within these estates. Drawing on qualitative interviews, the article explores residents' everyday experiences, social interactions, and perceptions of safety, situating these insights within the broader academic debates outlined in this section.

#### 4. Case Selection: Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken

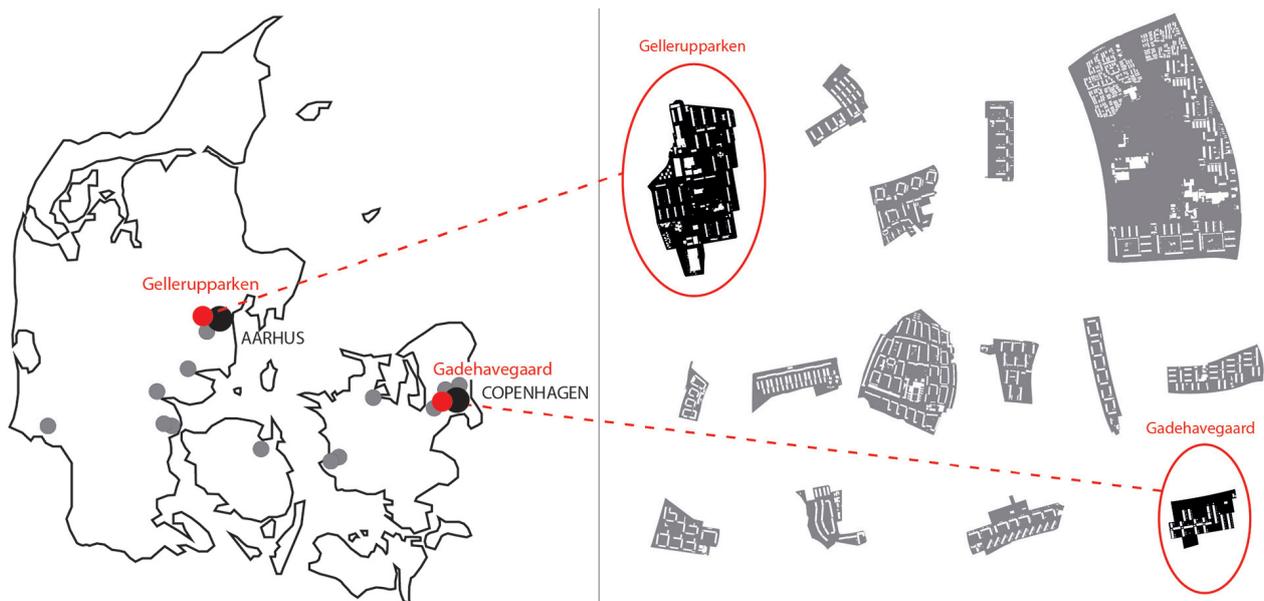
This article draws on data from an ongoing long-term evaluation, initiated in 2019, examining the 15 non-profit housing estates that appeared on the PSA list that same year. Even if some of these estates are no longer included on the list, they are still required to complete the mandated restructuring by 2030. All 15 housing estates were originally developed during Denmark's most significant post-war building boom, spanning from the early 1960s to the early 1980s (Bech-Danielsen, 2022).

As products of modernist planning ideals, all the designated estates, except one, are characterized by functional zoning, traffic separation, and uniform apartment blocks. In nine of the 15 designated estates, proposed strategies include creating new internal streets and significantly modifying existing street networks, primarily to enhance car mobility, increase accessibility, and attract visitors. Although traffic interventions are only one of several planning tools, they are often the most substantial and frequently serve as the initial step in a broader transformation process. Such interventions typically involve considerable alterations to the building fabric through demolition and reshape the relationship between private and public boundaries around apartment blocks.

Under the PSA, municipalities and housing associations are required to prepare a development plan outlining strategies to meet legislative requirements. In several cases, this has been followed by an architectural competition presenting visions for the transformation. While the long-term valuation draws on extensive empirical material from all 15 housing estates, this article focuses on two cases, Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken, to provide a detailed account of the context and to illustrate patterns observed across the broader dataset. In both cases, the transformation visions stem from architectural competitions. They are characterized by a high level of ambition, with explicit strategic objectives for the estates, their wider urban contexts, and particularly the design and function of the new internal streets, making them especially valuable for the analysis presented here.

The transformation of Gellerupparken began before the implementation of the PSA and has significantly shaped the estate's design, emphasizing mixed forms of ownership through processes such as demolition, rebranding, unit sales, and the construction of private or owner-occupied dwellings (Regeringen, 2018). Gellerupparken also exemplifies a comprehensive physical transformation, featuring new infrastructure, functional diversification, and redeveloped green areas that substantially alter the estate. The effects of these infrastructural changes are already tangible, both visually and experientially, for residents and visitors alike (Bech-Danielsen et al., 2020; Stender et al., 2023).

Gellerupparken serves as a test case for the other targeted estates and thus represents an illustrative example, particularly as several of the other estates remain in the initial stages of transformation. Measured by area, number of housing units, and residents, Gellerupparken ranks as the second-largest non-profit housing estate in Denmark, with approximately 5,600 residents and 2,400 dwellings (see Figures 2 and 5). Its size is comparable to several major European post-war social housing estates, underscoring its relevance as a case in an international context (Bech-Danielsen & Stender, 2017).



**Figure 2.** Left: Map of Denmark showing the 15 non-profit housing estates (grey dots), Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken (red dots), and the nearby cities Aarhus and Copenhagen (black dots). Right: The 15 non-profit housing estates shown on a comparable scale.

Gadehavegaard is comparable in scale to 11 of the 15 housing estates subject to the PSA but is significantly smaller than Gellerupparken (see Figure 2). It houses approximately 2,150 residents in about 1,000 dwellings (see Figure 3). The estate was selected because, like Gellerupparken, it has been designated for extensive and ambitious transformations defined through an architectural competition. Within this framework, the planned internal streets constitute a primary strategic element, envisioned as a “zipper” or central backbone for the future development of Gadehavegaard.

## 5. Methods: Architectural-Anthropological Field Studies

An interdisciplinary research team at BUILD, Aalborg University, is conducting a 10-year long-term evaluation, following the regeneration process as it unfolds, with a particular focus on the physical transformations and their impact on residents’ everyday lives. The evaluation runs from 2019 to 2029, with field studies in each housing estate conducted in four rounds at two- to three-year intervals, enabling the transformation process to be followed over time.

The field studies employ a set of methods: desk research; architectural studies; on-site observations; systematic photographic documentation; media analysis covering a 12-month period in local, regional, and national newspapers; participant observation and field reporting; and qualitative interviews with residents,

representatives from housing organizations, municipalities, advisors, and local civil society. Methodologically, the 15 estates are divided into two groups, reflecting certain variations in data collection, with the two selected housing estates belonging to separate groups. Qualitative insights were gained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with residents and visitors in Gellerupparken, and through walk-alongs in Gadehavegaard. The methods are described below, and an overview of participants is provided in Table 1.

In both Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken, a baseline and a second round of data collection were conducted as part of the field studies, enabling a preliminary analysis of developments over the period. In Gadehavegaard, the field studies were conducted in 2021 and 2023, while the transformation and associated infrastructural interventions remain in the planning phase (Bech-Danielsen et al., 2021, 2023). In Gellerupparken, data collection took place in 2019 and 2022. Although transformations in Gellerupparken began in 2011, the process is still ongoing (Bech-Danielsen et al., 2020; Stender et al., 2023).

Methodological approaches in this article are inspired by architectural anthropology, focusing on the interaction between physical changes and social life (Stender et al., 2022). As a result, the data supporting the findings in this article are drawn primarily from the architectural studies combined with the qualitative interviews with stakeholders and interviews or walk-alongs with both residents and visitors in the two cases (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Overview of participants in the field study of Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken ( $N = 161$ ).

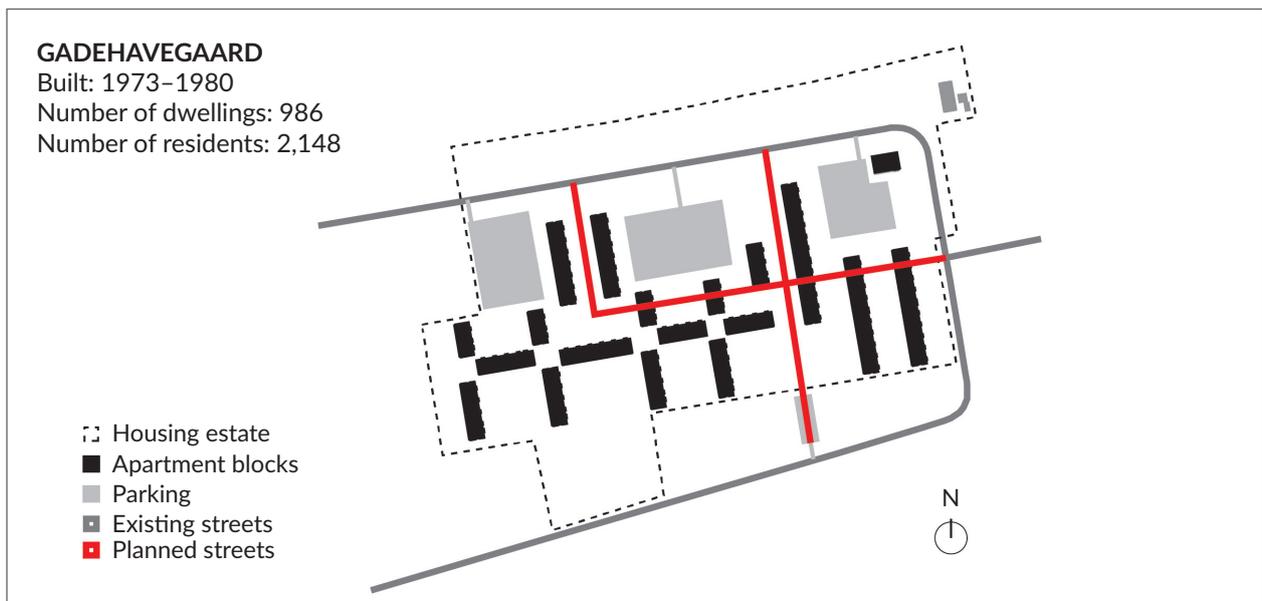
Participants	Housing estate Year of field study			
	Gadehavegaard 2021	Gadehavegaard 2023	Gellerupparken 2019	Gellerupparken 2022
Municipality	1	1	1	1
Housing association	1	1	1	1
External advisors (architects, planners, etc.)	—	1	1	—
Housing community worker	1	1	—	—
Leader of the local school	1	1	1	1
Leader of a local day care institution	1	—	—	—
Leader of local activities	—	—	1	1
Local real estate agents	1	1	1	1
Resident representative	1	1	—	1
Walk-alongs: residents and visitors	63	30	—	—
Qualitative interviews: residents and visitors	10	—	18	14
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>80</b>	<b>37</b>	<b>24</b>	<b>20</b>

The housing estates targeted by the PSA are characterized by high levels of unemployment, crime, low educational attainment, and a large proportion of residents with non-Western backgrounds, alongside socially disadvantaged residents. To include marginalized voices, including non-Danish speakers, we prioritized physical presence in the field and conducted face-to-face interviews with residents and visitors in outdoor settings rather than relying on digital or telephone contact. In Gellerupparken, simple, open-ended

questions were used to facilitate participation across different language proficiencies. Participants determined the location and duration of the qualitative interviews, whether in their homes or in public spaces. All in-depth interviews were recorded and transcribed. In Gadehavegaard, walk-alongs were conducted outdoors, linking questions directly to the physical surroundings and enabling the recruitment of residents who might otherwise not engage. All walk-alongs were documented through field notes and observations. Across both methods, participants were selected to ensure diversity in age, gender, and ethnic background, reflecting the composition of the estates.

## 6. Findings From Gadehavegaard

Gadehavegaard is situated approximately 25 kilometers west of central Copenhagen. Currently, before the planned transformations, it is a non-profit housing estate characterized by an extended street structure that encircles the estate, with car access limited to three large parking areas along the northern periphery (see Figure 3).



**Figure 3.** Map of Gadehavegaard showing existing and planned streets.

In the vision for the future Gadehavegaard, the architectural firm Arkitema Architects places strong emphasis on the new internal street, conceived as the estate’s future backbone and referred to by the architects as the “zipper” in their winning proposal from the architectural competition: “We are introducing a vibrant city street through the middle of Gadehavegaard. The street stitches the estate together from east to west and brings life and energy into the center of the settlement” (Arkitema Architects, 2020). Although the project is still in the planning phase, this vision represents a decisive shift from the original traffic-separated layout, inspired by modernist planning ideals that prioritized traffic segregation and physical isolation to reduce noise and pollution from cars (Bech-Danielsen, 2022; Turkington et al., 2004). Figure 4a shows the original traffic-separated layout in Gadehavegaard before the transformation, with car-free courtyards and a network of paths between the apartment blocks and Figure 4b is a visualization of the future zipper.



**Figure 4.** Gadehavegaard (a) before the transformation, and (b) in 2030 after the transformation (visualization). Source: Arkitema Architects (2020).

The new street aims to integrate the housing estate into the broader urban context by enhancing permeability and inviting visitors. This goal aligns with urban design literature, which views streets not only as conduits of movement but also as arenas for everyday life and social interaction (Carmona, 2010; Jacobs, 1965; Mehta, 2013). The transformation of Gadehavegaard is intended to break down the so-called “parallel society” and improve safety through increased flow and visibility, consistent with Jacobs’s (1965) “eyes on the street” principle. Beyond the mathematical exercise of reducing the proportion of non-profit family housing to 40%, the winning proposal also entails the integration of new public facilities, such as a university campus, and the redesign of recreational areas. However, as evidenced in both international and Danish contexts, such large-scale physical interventions often encounter considerable resistance, particularly when implemented in a top-down manner without meaningful local engagement (Fainstein, 2010; Madgin et al., 2016).

A resident in Gadevang, a housing estate with owner-occupied apartments adjacent to Gadehavegaard, explains: “The municipality is trying to merge us into one integrated neighborhood, but the mood in Gadevang is that we do not want one neighborhood. We are owners, they are tenants. We want our own neighborhood.” This statement reflects a widespread perception observed in the field studies across several neighboring housing estates, which distance themselves from Gadehavegaard’s negative reputation and its designation as a “parallel society” (Bech-Danielsen et al., 2021, 2023). Often, neighbors struggle to perceive the benefits of merging into an integrated neighborhood, partly due to an excessive emphasis on property values. Physical demarcations, such as barbed wire, have been installed along the boundary between the two estates, accompanied by signs posted by Gadevang residents explicitly restricting access to their area, thereby excluding residents of Gadehavegaard. This is a very physical manifestation of findings from other studies, which also highlights fears of invasion by strangers and loss of identity among residents (Bridge et al., 2011).

Among several of Gadehavegaard’s residents, the plan for an integrated neighborhood is similarly perceived as challenging, as one resident explains: “You have your own little neighborhood, and that’s where you stick, that’s where you know people, and that’s where you meet people you hang out with. I think it will always be like that.”

Among the informants living outside Gadehavegaard who were interviewed, only a few mentioned the planned new street layouts. Some consider the integration of a new internal street in Gadehavegaard a

reasonable idea but believe it is unlikely to affect them personally, as they currently have no reason to visit the housing estate. Whether the proposed campus will change this for those without specific errands in the area remains uncertain. However, the campus is expected to increase the flow of people in and out of Gadehavegaard. The more compelling question is whether the future street will function as a social meeting place. Gadehavegaard is situated in a suburban context, which may influence this outcome, as scholars such as Fillion (2001) note. The comprehensive planned changes are partly a binding task because of the PSA, but the residents of Gadehavegaard are, perhaps unsurprisingly, generally skeptical:

Our home is to be demolished, and we will be relocated or at least moved to another flat. We are very dissatisfied with the upcoming plans and are particularly critical of the street that is to be constructed through the area....Why? Unfortunately, we believe that the new plans will destroy the area.

The statement exemplifies how many residents perceive the planned transformations as shifting from place-making to place-taking, resulting in a change in the place's identity, an observation that reflects a general trend identified in our field studies across the 15 targeted housing estates (Stender et al., 2025). Although many residents are accustomed to participating in resident democracy and contributing to decision-making processes regarding local changes, their input is formally disregarded under the PSA. If residents vote against the plan, the decision is escalated to a higher authority, as its implementation is considered a binding obligation (Nielsen et al., 2023).

In this way, this transformation process contradicts not only typical Danish practice but also the widely acknowledged understanding that the long-term success of urban renewal efforts largely depends on participatory planning processes. Most residents place a high value on the existing traffic-separated environment and express concern that problems with speeding cars and scooters on surrounding streets will be brought directly to their doorsteps. The intention to create streets as new social meeting places is not reflected in interviewees' accounts, perhaps indicating that such a vision currently lies beyond their imagination and feels distant from how they perceive the functionality of existing streets. Several residents are also skeptical about the effectiveness of the proposed traffic-calming measures, questioning whether they will have a meaningful impact (Nordberg & Sundstrup, 2021). Concerns extend to the recreational qualities of Gadehavegaard, as the construction of internal streets may increase noise and air pollution from vehicular traffic. Parents are particularly worried about their children's safety, noting that after the implementation of the new street system, it may no longer be safe for children to play unsupervised in the green areas due to passing cars. One parent living in Gadehavegaard concludes:

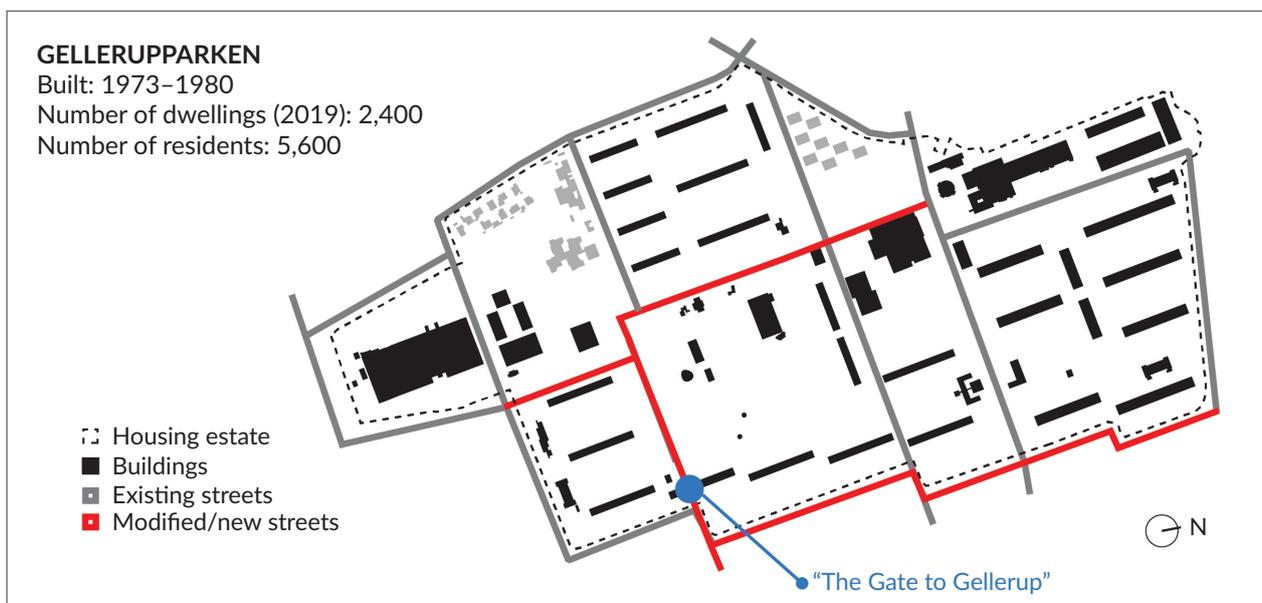
With the upcoming changes, the new street will pass right in front of my garden, which is quite depressing. I don't think it's particularly good for my children and their safety. Today, it's a good place for children to grow up. It's closed to traffic; there are playgrounds, and there are lots of other children.

In Gadehavegaard, the planned infrastructural changes are part of a broader strategy and remain in the planning phase. The visions of Arkitema Architects is illustrated in Figure 4b: a street with a social purpose, emphasizing a more human-scale approach with diverse building types of varying heights. The design integrates trees and seating areas, fostering a welcoming atmosphere and encouraging social interaction within the neighborhood, consistent with existing knowledge in the field (Gehl, 2021; Mehta, 2013).

Nevertheless, Gadehavegaard serves as a clear example of the extensive transformations envisioned across most of the 15 housing estates in our evaluation. Even prior to implementation, these planned infrastructural changes already have significant implications for residents, affecting their everyday routines and the social networks embedded in the local community. The residents are aware that the major transformations lie ahead, and several residents have already been or will soon be relocated to make room for the demolition of apartment blocks. In one end of the estate, the demolition of apartment blocks has already begun to make room for the new internal streets. The more resourceful residents who could have moved out of the estate, leaving empty apartments scattered throughout the estate.

## 7. Findings From Gellerupparken

Gellerupparken is situated approximately five kilometers west of Aarhus's city center and is further illustrated in Figure 5. The estate has been undergoing extensive transformation since 2011, a process that remains ongoing.



**Figure 5.** Map of Gellerupparken showing existing and modified or new streets.

Apartment blocks have been demolished to make room for new private homes, office spaces, sports and cultural facilities, as well as newly constructed and reconfigured streets within the housing estate. The scale of the estate contributed to stakeholders' perception of Gellerupparken as a closed enclave, particularly prior to the transformations. Despite a history of crime and gang-related activity, many residents report a high level of satisfaction with everyday life in the housing estate. Feelings of insecurity are more commonly expressed by visitors than by the residents. The establishment of a new street system has already improved accessibility to the estate and provides access to amenities and functions.

As described in the master plan, the introduction of new street systems was an early initiative, with the purpose described as follows:

The new street network has introduced traffic through the area while simultaneously dividing it into smaller neighborhoods. This has improved accessibility for car drivers and public transportation in and out of the estate, and with the addition of shops, squares, and public spaces, the main street has become the central artery of the area. (Helhedsplan for Gellerup og Toveshøj, 2024)

Even though Gellerupparken is still undergoing transformation, many residents noted that the housing estate feels more open. This perception is primarily influenced by the new city park, the removal of large trees, the demolition of apartment blocks, and the establishment of the new gateway (see Figure 6), along with new internal streets. Several residents appreciate the openness and regard it as a positive aspect of the transformation. However, many also expressed concerns, particularly regarding cut-through traffic and frequent instances of reckless driving. Field observations indicate a clear shift in movement patterns, with a marked increase in motorized drive-through traffic. This change stems directly from the new gateways, which channel traffic through rather than around the housing estate. Residents' accounts corroborated these observations, and many highlighted the negative consequences of the increased traffic. One resident, who had lived in Gellerupparken for just over two years, explained:

People are talking more about traffic now that vehicles pass through Gellerupparken. Many feel that drivers are not behaving responsibly, and the problem has become more visible and audible. Some believe that a speed enforcement vehicle should be stationed permanently, but the police have other priorities.

This testimony illustrates how infrastructural changes not only affect mobility flows but also heighten residents' concerns about safety, noise, and the quality of everyday life. What was previously a relatively enclosed and pedestrian-friendly environment has, in the eyes of several residents, been transformed into a less predictable and less secure space. At the same time, observations and interviews reveal that the new streets are increasingly used by outsiders who traverse the estate on their way to work or leisure activities. Several non-residents described using the internal streets and green areas for walking or jogging, or as shortcuts between destinations. This suggests that the estate no longer functions solely as a residential



**Figure 6.** “The Gate to Gellerup” is a symbolic and illuminated landmark, visible from the center of Aarhus at night, and enables a new street connection into Gellerupparken.

enclave but is gradually being integrated into the broader urban context. While such integration aligns with the political ambition of reducing isolation and “opening up” these areas, it also produces ambivalent outcomes: Residents experience greater exposure and disruption, while outsiders primarily perceive the estate as a transit zone rather than as a destination.

Although one goal of the transformation is to enhance safety by encouraging greater movement throughout the district, following Jacobs’ (1965) concept of “eyes on the street,” perceptions of safety vary considerably among both residents and visitors. Field studies conducted in 2022 indicate that the sense of security in Gellerupparken has not necessarily increased; rather, it has remained stable or slightly decreased. While some residents expressed concern about renewed gang activity, others attributed the unrest to the ongoing transformation itself, including demolitions and relocations. Many residents also find the recently introduced drive-through unsettling. This concern is particularly pronounced among parents in Gellerupparken, who worry that the drive-through compromises children’s ability to move independently and safely. A mother living in Gellerupparken reflected:

For me, this new plan in Gellerupparken—the traffic has been terrible....It is not child-friendly anymore. If I think that I want to move from the local area, it is not because of the people, but because I want a child-friendly area. The traffic is not for residents but for visitors.

Figure 7 illustrates one of the newly established internal streets in Gellerupparken, featuring reduced speed limits, narrow traffic lanes, designated bus lanes, and the inclusion of trees and benches to enhance comfort and rest. Despite these measures to calm traffic, many residents still express concerns about speeding along the new internal streets. As one resident stated: “Often someone drives like crazy, runs through a red light, fast. These are big streets; there are bumps, [but] it doesn’t deter people....You must be a little extra careful.”



**Figure 7.** A new internal street and recently constructed buildings in Gellerupparken, illustrating how the new streetscape introduces variation to the previously uniform apartment blocks.

Though most residents interviewed view the redevelopment positively, appreciating the improved aesthetics and openness, concerns remain about increased traffic through the housing estate as well as the ongoing

demolitions and evictions. Moreover, some residents worry that an influx of new residents and heightened activity from visitors and passersby might undermine the existing sense of community. Historically, residents recall that people used to greet everyone, but some now fear that this tradition may diminish as it becomes harder to distinguish neighbors from visitors. Several residents expressed a sense of alienation, exemplified by one individual who decided to leave the neighborhood, stating: “People in the neighborhood think it looks beautiful now...but it no longer feels like it belongs to us.” This observation also relates to the earlier point that the transformations are perceived more as acts of place-taking rather than place-making for the residents (Stender et al., 2025).

Our field studies indicate that the introduction of new functions in Gellerupparken has stimulated urban activity and drawn visitors from outside the neighborhood; however, these visitors do not necessarily interact with residents. One resident even remarked that the locals themselves have, in a way, become an attraction: “You may find that people come out and look at the animals at the zoo and then go home again.” At present, the new internal streets primarily function as physical connectors, or “zippers,” linking the housing estate to the surrounding area and improving accessibility. However, they have yet to serve as catalysts for fostering social interaction and community engagement, or as so-called “social zippers.”

## 8. Concluding Discussion

Overall, the findings from both Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken provide valuable insights into how large-scale infrastructural interventions are conceptualized and experienced in practice. The case studies reveal the challenges of transforming residential car-free and semi-private zones into public street spaces intended to function as new types of public and social environments. The physical characteristics of both international and Danish non-profit housing estates, once celebrated as examples of modern, child-friendly planning due to features such as traffic-free zones and expansive communal areas, have become both contributing factors to and symbolic representations of the difficulties these estates now face. The shift from traffic-separated layouts to integrated street systems is often presented as a necessary correction of the modernist planning paradigm, as seen in the extensive traffic interventions planned in nine of the 15 housing estates included in the evaluation. In practice, however, these new streets can yield ambiguous results: While they may enhance accessibility and circulation, they can also introduce new vulnerabilities, particularly related to safety, the loss of child-friendly spaces, and a diminished sense of local identity, as emphasized by informants from both study areas.

The original planning of housing estates such as Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken followed a top-down approach rooted in a standardized modernist tradition, designed and implemented before residents moved in. Today, a new wave of standardized interventions is once again being introduced from above, this time mandated by the PSA and again shaped by a generic, one-size-fits-all planning rationale. While residents generally express satisfaction with their social networks and the spatial qualities of their estates, external stakeholders often perceive them differently. Those involved in the transformation processes emphasize the need to reconfigure movement patterns, dismantle physical and social barriers, and promote social and functional mixing to create more inclusive, safe, and resilient areas. Although the transformation across nine of the 15 housing estates differs in aspects such as the specific nature of traffic interventions, notable similarities reveal a shared underlying rationale, one that also resonates with themes in contemporary urban planning literature. Paradoxically, the planned and ongoing interventions increasingly reflect a generic

response and a narrowly framed understanding of the challenges and solutions facing these estates, often with limited sensitivity to local conditions. If not carefully adapted, overly rigid and time-bound solutions risk undermining the spatial and social qualities that define these non-profit housing estates.

Without careful attention to local socio-spatial dynamics, including resistance from neighboring communities to integration efforts, renewal and infrastructural initiatives are unlikely to achieve their intended goals of inclusion and cohesion. In Gadehavegaard, residents of adjacent estates actively resist integration with the stigmatized housing estate, preferring to maintain or reinforce spatial and social separation. At the same time, large-scale physical interventions generate significant frustration among residents, who experience daily disruptions, uncertainty, and erosion of local social networks, even before infrastructural implementation begins. Before new streets can be constructed, apartment blocks must be vacated and residents relocated, a process that takes time. Moreover, plans for extensive transformations create uncertainty among residents, prompting several resourceful individuals with the means to seek alternative housing before transformations begin, leaving empty apartments behind. This pattern recurs across the 15 targeted housing estates and is evident in Gadehavegaard.

In Gellerupparken, the introduction of new streets has altered movement patterns and improved physical connectivity, but these changes have not translated into a greater sense of security for residents or strengthened social ties with visitors passing through. While residents acknowledge the visual improvements, many describe the housing estate as less child-friendly due to traffic moving closer to their homes and the loss of car-free recreational space. Although the majority of residents report feeling secure moving around the area after dark, an increasing share indicates that they do not. Similarly, the proportion of respondents who feel Gellerupparken is a good place for children to grow up has declined. These findings suggest that spatial permeability, though often promoted as a driver of safety and cohesion, does not, by itself, generate meaningful social interaction or a stronger sense of security.

In Gadehavegaard, the architectural visualization (Figure 4b) illustrates increased building density, downscaling, and greater variation in the built environment, complemented by greenery, trees, and street furniture intended to establish the street as a social zipper. While these visualizations are compelling in many respects, they arguably reflect an urban, high-density context rather than the primarily suburban setting of Gadehavegaard. Even if a campus and other functions are successfully implemented, it will likely take considerable time before the housing estate can be regarded as a truly mixed-use environment with the density required for the street to function effectively as a social meeting space. Additionally, transforming semi-private recreational areas between apartment blocks into accessible public space remains a central but highly complex challenge.

In Gellerupparken, where a 30 km/h speed limit has been introduced and trees and benches have been installed along the streets (Figure 7), residents continue to report speeding. If cars remain dominant on these newly built internal streets, due to both travel distances and the suburban logic embedded in the street design, the potential for streets to serve as social spaces is undermined. Research on streets as social meeting places typically focuses on urban contexts, where walkability and street life are already more established. In suburban zones, vehicles remain the primary means of getting from point A to point B. Consequently, the question remains: How should a street be designed in a suburban context if it is truly to function as a social zipper?

The implementation of PSA policy has significantly eroded Denmark's longstanding tradition of participatory planning, replacing local democratic decision-making with centrally administered spatial restructuring initiatives. Extensive physical transformations, such as constructing new streets without participatory processes, risk undermining local identity and reinforcing the stigmatization of housing estates. From the residents' perspective, such top-down interventions can result in place-taking rather than place-making, as everyday experiences and emotional attachments to place are often overlooked. The cases of Gadehavegaard and Gellerupparken further demonstrate that spatial interventions are far from neutral; they are deeply entangled in political agendas and dominant narratives of "parallel societies." This reveals a spatial double standard in Danish urban policy: Whereas urban areas such as Copenhagen and Aarhus focus on reducing car traffic, eliminating parking, and transforming streets into pedestrian-friendly environments, marginalized neighborhoods are subject to policies that introduce car traffic as a tool for social control and integration. This contradiction highlights a deeper asymmetry regarding whom urban design is intended to serve and whose everyday life it seeks to shape.

In conclusion, the street as a "social zipper" remains a powerful metaphor but a fragile practice. The outcomes and impacts of the Danish transformations in the 15 targeted housing estates will be important to monitor as part of the ongoing evaluation. Over time, these cases may contribute to a more nuanced understanding of how newly constructed streets can function as social meeting spaces within suburban contexts. If streets are to serve as true "social zippers," they must be more than physical connectors; they must emerge from an inclusive, context-sensitive design process that recognizes residents' everyday practices, concerns, and sense of belonging. Otherwise, there is a considerable risk that these interventions will replicate the very exclusion and fragmentation they are meant to counteract. Our findings highlight the need for context-sensitive, participatory, and multi-scale approaches. Streets should not only be seen as infrastructure but as social and political arenas where conflicting interests, past experiences, and imagined futures intersect.

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### **Conflict of Interests**

The authors declare no conflict of interests.

### **Data Availability**

Due to the nature of the research, data sharing is not applicable to this article.

### **LLMs Disclosure**

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