PUBLIC SPACE IN THE NEW URBAN AGENDA

The character of a city is defined by its streets and public spaces. Having sufficient public space is a precondition for cities to function efficiently and equitably.¹ Public space is the setting for a panoply of activities, for people of different backgrounds and has many spatial forms, including in formal and informal part of the city. As rapid urbanization is proceeding in an uncontrolled manner, dangerously low proportions of public space are created and secured. Even planned areas of new cities have sizably reduced allocations of land for public space, with an average of 15% of land allocated to streets. In unplanned areas the situation is considerably worse.² Such areas are then unable to accommodate safe pedestrian rights of way; land for critical infrastructure such as water, sewerage, and waste collection; and green spaces that facilitate social cohesion and ecological functioning. The global movement for public spaces (outcomes of the Future of Places conferences) affirmed the role of public space as the connective matrix on which healthy and prosperous cities must grow and emphasized the essential requirements – inclusive, connected, safe, and accessible – without which they cannot function.

Access to public space is a first step toward civic empowerment and access to institutional and political space. Some groups, such as women, or the poor, may be excluded from public space by violence or control, can also be the setting for petty or organized crime that creates urban ghettos. Adequately planned and designed public spaces can play a critical role in mitigation and adaptation strategies to climate change; well-designed and maintained streets and public spaces can help lower rates of crime and violence³ and make space for formal and informal economic activities.

Local and national governments are developing policies that promote compact, liveable areas, with adequate public space that facilitates public transport, encourages walking and cycling. This in turn is stimulating economic activities and enhancing urban livelihoods and citizen wellbeing. A new paradigm is evolving, which recognizes the failure of market-led development to create or protect public and private open spaces. Enabling components of the new urban agenda which are mutually reinforcing and vital in ensuring prosperous cities are rules and legislation for protecting access to public spaces, urban planning and design for providing adequate quantity and good quality public space, and urban finance and economy for sharing values, promoting income, investment, wealth creation and providing employment. There is still a critical need for cities to continue strengthening public space as a common good and key enabler of the fulfillment of human rights by building socially and gender inclusive, integrated, productive, connected, accessible, environmentally sustainable and safe public spaces.

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¹ Public space is publicly owned land and available for public use. Public spaces encompass a range of environments including streets, sidewalks, squares, gardens, parks, conservation areas. Each public space has its own spatial, historic, environmental, social, and economic features.
² UN-Habitat 2013. Streets as Public Spaces and Drivers of Urban Prosperity. Nairobi.
³ Refer to Issue Paper n. 2 on Safer Cities.
Key drivers for action

- At city level, city-wide strategies need to focus not only places and spaces but on the form, function and connectivity of the city as a whole.
- At neighbourhood level, urban design should work with communities to foster social inclusion, celebrate multiculturalism, and enable urban livelihoods, to create rich, vibrant spaces in the urban commons.
- Laws and regulations need to be reviewed, to establish enabling systems to create, revitalise, manage, and maintain public space.
- Land value capture can be used as a tool for municipalities to capture private values generated by better public spaces to sustain investment in public space.
- Urban projects need to ensure adequate public space in planned city extensions and participatory slum upgrading projects. Instruments to enable the creation of public space from private owned land are of critical importance for urban development to succeed.

Proposed speakers:

Moderator: Elin Andersdotter Fabre, Ax:son Johnson Foundation
Introduction: Thomas Melin, UN-Habitat
Rapporteur: Delphine Crespin, UN-Habitat

Speakers:

Michael Mehaffy, Delft University (academic)
Celine D’Cruz, SDI (grassroots)
Planner (from Commonwealth Association of Planners, tbc)
Minister (from Africa, tbc)
Mayor (from UCLG, tbc)