

Rethinking Public Space in the Global South: A Secondary Analysis of Spatial Justice in South African Cities

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1 ABSTRACT

Public spaces are critical sites through which spatial justice is enacted and experienced in everyday urban life. In South African cities, however, public space provision and governance continue to reflect deep socio-spatial inequalities shaped by colonial and apartheid planning legacies, despite progressive post-apartheid reforms. This paper examines how spatial justice principles embedded in the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) are realised in practice through a comparative case study of two public parks in Johannesburg: Joubert Park in the inner city and Zoo Lake in an affluent suburban area. Using a qualitative research design that combines secondary policy analysis with non-participant field observation, the study evaluates each case against SPLUMA's spatial justice mandate and established principles of good public space. The findings reveal pronounced class-based differences in access, safety, diversity of use, maintenance, investment and governance. While Joubert Park performs well in terms of proximity and intensity of use, it underperforms in experiential access maintenance, and participatory governance. In contrast, Zoo Lake delivers high-quality public space outcomes for its primary users, largely due to sustained investment and aligned civic influence. The paper argues that spatial justice in public space planning cannot be assessed through proximity or formal access alone, but must be understood as a lived condition shaped by care, safety, recognition and power. It concludes by calling for differentiated, redistributive and participatory public space strategies to realise SPLUMA's transformative intent.

Keywords: Spatial justice; Public space; SPLUMA; Johannesburg; Urban inequality

2 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Public spaces play a central role in shaping the social and democratic life of cities, functioning as everyday sites of mobility, interaction, and belonging (Low, 2000; Madanipour, 2010). In cities marked by deep socio-economic inequality, public spaces are particularly significant as they often represent the most accessible urban resources available to marginalised communities (UN-Habitat, 2016). In the Global South, however, access to safe, well-maintained, and inclusive public spaces remains uneven, reflecting colonial and postcolonial planning legacies that have entrenched spatial segregation and unequal investment along lines of race, class, and location (Watson, 2009; Robinson, 2016). South African cities exemplify these dynamics. Under apartheid, public space was racialised, controlled, and unevenly distributed, with Black communities systematically excluded from quality civic environments (Christopher, 2001; Harrison et al., 2008). Despite the transition to democracy and the introduction of progressive spatial planning reforms, these inequalities persist in contemporary urban landscapes. While post-apartheid policy has emphasised integration and redress, public spaces in many South African cities continue to reflect stark disparities in quality, safety, and investment, particularly between inner-city and township areas and affluent suburbs (Mabin & Smit, 1997; Todes, 2012; Bénit-Gbaffou, 2018). The Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) of 2013 represents a key legislative attempt to address these inequalities by embedding spatial justice as a core planning principle (Republic of South Africa, 2013). Although SPLUMA does not regulate public space directly, it shapes public space outcomes through municipal planning instruments. Yet the extent to which its spatial justice mandate translates into equitable everyday public space experiences remains under-examined, as existing scholarship has focused largely on land use management and housing rather than lived public space outcomes (Todes et al., 2020; Van Wyk, 2021). Against this backdrop, this paper examines how public spaces in different socio-economic contexts within Johannesburg respond to SPLUMA's spatial justice principles and the extent to which they align with established criteria for good public space. Through a comparative analysis of two contrasting public parks, one in an affluent suburban area and the other in the inner city, the study explores how class, governance, and institutional priorities mediate the implementation of spatial justice in practice.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 Public Space, Inequality and the South African Urban Context

Public spaces are widely understood as central to urban life, functioning as sites of social interaction, mobility, leisure, and democratic engagement (Jacobs, 1961; Madanipour, 2010). Critical urban scholarship has shown, however, that public spaces are not inherently inclusive. Instead, they are shaped by planning decisions, design norms, and governance practices that reflect and reproduce broader social and spatial inequalities (Mitchell, 2003; Low & Smith, 2006). In cities characterised by high levels of socio-economic inequality, public space quality and accessibility are unevenly distributed. Affluent areas tend to benefit from sustained investment, active management, and strong civic advocacy, while public spaces in low-income neighbourhoods are more likely to experience neglect, securitisation, and under-resourcing (Watson, 2009; Low, 2017). These dynamics are particularly pronounced in cities of the Global South, where colonial and postcolonial planning legacies have produced fragmented urban forms and deeply unequal access to urban amenities (Robinson, 2016; Myers, 2011). South African cities exemplify these patterns. Under apartheid, public spaces were deliberately racialised, controlled, and unevenly distributed, with Black communities systematically excluded from quality civic environments (Christopher, 2001; Beavon, 2004). Despite post-1994 policy commitments to spatial transformation, contemporary public spaces continue to reflect stark class- and location-based inequalities (Mabin & Smit, 1997; Todes, 2012). Inner-city and township public spaces frequently face challenges related to safety, maintenance, and governance, while parks and recreational spaces in affluent suburbs tend to be better resourced and managed (Bénit-Gbaffou, 2018). These enduring disparities raise important questions about how spatial justice is operationalised in practice.

3.2 SPLUMA and Spatial Justice in Planning

The Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) constitutes a central pillar of South Africa's post-apartheid planning framework. By positioning spatial justice as a core development principle, SPLUMA seeks to address historical spatial inequalities through redress, equitable access, and the prioritisation of disadvantaged communities in planning decision-making processes (Republic of South Africa, 2013). Scholars have highlighted SPLUMA's potential to reorient planning towards a more normative and justice-driven agenda (Todes, 2014; Van Wyk, 2015). At the same time, critical assessments caution that the Act's effectiveness depends heavily on interpretation and implementation at the municipal level (Todes et al., 2020). Much of the existing literature has focused on SPLUMA's implications for land use management and housing delivery, with comparatively limited attention given to public space as a key site through which spatial justice is experienced in everyday urban life. This gap is significant given the central role of public spaces in shaping mobility, safety, and social interaction, particularly for low-income and marginalised residents.

3.3 Theoretical and Analytical Framework

This study adopts an integrated framework that combines spatial justice theory, SPLUMA's normative planning principles, and established criteria for evaluating public space quality. This approach enables a comparative analysis that considers both policy intent and lived spatial outcomes. Spatial justice theory provides the normative foundation for the analysis by foregrounding the unequal distribution of spatial resources and the power relations embedded in planning processes (Soja, 2010). Drawing on Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city, spatial justice emphasises the right of all urban residents to access, use, and shape urban space, including public spaces that support everyday life and democratic participation (Lefebvre, 1996). Within the South African context, SPLUMA operationalises these ideas by embedding spatial justice as a statutory planning principle. In this study, SPLUMA is treated as a normative benchmark against which public space outcomes can be assessed. Although the Act does not regulate public space directly, it shapes public space provision through municipal planning instruments, spatial priorities, and development controls. To evaluate how public spaces perform in practice, the study draws on principles of good public space articulated by Carmona et al. (2010). These principles include accessibility and connectivity, safety and comfort, diversity of use and users, quality of design and maintenance, and governance and management. When read alongside SPLUMA's spatial justice mandate, Carmona's framework provides a practical evaluative tool for assessing whether public spaces are functional, well-designed, equitable, and inclusive. By integrating spatial justice theory, SPLUMA's normative commitments, and public space evaluation

principles, the framework allows for a structured comparison of public spaces across different socio-economic contexts. It enables the study to examine how class, location, and governance mediate the translation of planning legislation into lived urban experience, and to assess the extent to which public spaces contribute to or undermine spatial justice in Johannesburg..

4 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative comparative case study design to examine how public spaces in different socio-economic contexts respond to spatial justice principles within South Africa's planning framework. Two public parks in Johannesburg were purposively selected for a class-based comparison: Joubert Park in the inner city, serving predominantly low-income and transit-dependent users, and Zoo Lake in an affluent suburban area, functioning primarily as a leisure and recreational space. Both cases fall under the same municipal and legislative framework, enabling meaningful comparison of how socio-economic context mediates public space outcomes. The study draws on secondary data and non-participant field observation. Documentary sources include national planning legislation, particularly SPLUMA, municipal planning instruments, public space audits, and peer-reviewed literature. Field observations documented patterns of use, accessibility, maintenance, safety, and everyday activities through structured field notes. Data were analysed thematically using spatial justice principles derived from SPLUMA and evaluative criteria for good public space articulated by Carmona et al. (2010). A comparative analysis was then undertaken to identify key contrasts and patterns across the two cases. As the study relied on publicly available documents and observational data only, formal ethical clearance was not required.

5 FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1 Access and Connectivity: Proximity Versus Effective Access

Both Joubert Park and Zoo Lake are formally accessible public spaces, yet the nature and quality of access differ markedly when examined beyond locational criteria. Joubert Park is highly accessible in spatial terms, situated within walking distance of dense residential neighbourhoods and major public transport routes. Field observations confirmed continuous and diverse use throughout the day, particularly by commuters, informal traders, caregivers, and children. From a SPLUMA perspective, the park appears to perform well against principles of access, integration, and proximity, aligning with the Act's emphasis on locating urban amenities close to disadvantaged communities. However, a closer examination reveals that spatial proximity does not translate into equitable or sustained access. Effective access to Joubert Park is constrained by safety concerns, uneven maintenance, and limited amenities that shape who can use the space, when, and for what purposes. Women and caregivers were observed to use the park predominantly during peak daylight hours, with noticeably reduced presence in the early morning and late afternoon. This temporal pattern reflects what feminist urban scholars describe as the conditional and negotiated nature of women's access to public space, where safety perceptions, care responsibilities, and fear of harassment restrict spatial and temporal mobility (Koskela, 1999; Fenster, 2005; Phadke et al., 2011). From a spatial justice perspective, this raises critical questions about how access is conceptualised in planning policy. SPLUMA's emphasis on physical access and integration risks privileging measurable, locational indicators while overlooking experiential dimensions of access rooted in gender, age, and vulnerability. As Soja (2010) argues, spatial justice requires attention not only to the distribution of resources, but also to the conditions under which space can be meaningfully used. In this sense, Joubert Park's accessibility is partial and uneven, offering access in principle but not consistently in practice.

Zoo Lake presents a contrasting case. The park is less accessible in conventional spatial planning terms, relying more heavily on private vehicle access and serving lower-density, affluent neighbourhoods. Yet, for its primary users, Zoo Lake offers high levels of effective access. Well-maintained pathways, consistent lighting, clear sightlines, and the presence of other users support extended use across different times of day. These conditions align with Carmona's argument that access is not solely a function of location, but is produced through design quality, management practices, and ongoing investment (Carmona et al., 2010). Critically, the comparison exposes a classed dimension of access that is often obscured in policy discourse. While inner-city public spaces such as Joubert Park may satisfy access objectives through proximity and density, affluent-area public spaces often outperform them in experiential and functional access. This reflects broader critiques of urban planning in unequal cities, where formal equality in policy masks substantive

inequality in lived outcomes (Mitchell, 2003; Low, 2017). In this context, access becomes less about who can reach a space and more about whose presence is anticipated, supported, and normalised. The findings therefore point to a fundamental tension within SPLUMA's spatial justice mandate. If access is assessed primarily through spatial indicators such as location and connectivity, planning outcomes may appear equitable while reproducing everyday exclusions. A more transformative interpretation of SPLUMA would require planners to incorporate experiential, gendered, and temporal dimensions of access into public space planning and evaluation. Without such a shift, public spaces in marginalised areas risk remaining accessible in theory but exclusionary in practice.

5.2 Diversity of Use and the Politics of Inclusion

Joubert Park supports a wide diversity of uses and users, including informal trade, social gathering, play, waiting, resting, and transit-related activities. Field observations indicate that the park functions as an essential everyday space for inner-city residents whose livelihoods, mobility, and social lives are closely tied to public space. From the perspective of Carmona's public space framework, such diversity would ordinarily be interpreted as a marker of success, as it reflects adaptability, intensity of use, and responsiveness to varied urban needs (Carmona et al., 2010). However, this diversity is not unambiguously valued in planning and management practice. Field observations and secondary sources suggest that the multiplicity of activities in Joubert Park is frequently framed within municipal and public discourse as disorderly, unsafe, or indicative of decline. These representations often trigger episodic securitisation, increased surveillance, and attempts to regulate or remove informal activities. This dynamic reflects what Mitchell (2003) describes as the paradox of public space, whereby spaces that are genuinely public in use become sites of conflict precisely because they accommodate groups and practices that challenge dominant norms of order and civility. This tension is well documented in South African urban scholarship. Bénit-Gbaffou and Oldfield (2011) argue that informality in public space is routinely treated as a governance problem rather than as a legitimate mode of urban life. In inner-city contexts, informal trade, social congregation, and non-consumptive uses of space are often perceived as incompatible with urban regeneration agendas oriented towards safety, cleanliness, and economic competitiveness. While SPLUMA formally promotes inclusion, redress, and equitable access, its implementation at the level of public space is frequently mediated by managerial logics that prioritise control, risk mitigation, and aesthetic order over social justice.

From a spatial justice perspective, this raises fundamental questions about whose presence is recognised as legitimate in public space. Lefebvre's concept of the right to the city emphasises not only access to urban space, but also the right to inhabit, use, and produce space according to everyday needs (Lefebvre, 1996). In Joubert Park, the everyday practices of informal traders, migrants, and low-income residents represent active claims to urban space. Yet these claims are often marginalised through regulatory practices that privilege abstract notions of order over lived realities. Zoo Lake presents a contrasting configuration of diversity and inclusion. The park supports a narrower range of uses focused primarily on leisure, recreation, and exercise. While less diverse in functional terms, these activities are socially sanctioned, institutionally supported, and aligned with middle-class norms of public space use. Governance practices at Zoo Lake work to protect and enhance these uses through maintenance, event programming, and informal civic oversight. As Low and Smith (2006) note, such spaces often appear inclusive precisely because exclusion operates subtly through social norms rather than overt regulation. The juxtaposition of the two parks illustrates how diversity in public space is unevenly valued. In affluent contexts, limited diversity is interpreted as order and quality, while in inner-city contexts, functional diversity is often reframed as disorder requiring intervention. This asymmetry reflects broader classed and racialised hierarchies embedded in urban governance, where certain ways of occupying space are normalised and others are problematised. The findings therefore suggest that spatial justice in public space planning cannot be achieved through tolerance alone. Accommodating diversity without legitimising it leaves marginalised users vulnerable to ongoing regulation and displacement. A more transformative interpretation of SPLUMA would require municipalities to explicitly recognise informal and non-normative uses of public space as integral to urban life, and to shift public space governance away from control towards care, recognition, and inclusion.

5.3 Maintenance, Investment, and Governance: Uneven Priorities and Spatial Justice

Differences in maintenance, infrastructure quality, and governance arrangements emerged as some of the most visible and consequential contrasts between Joubert Park and Zoo Lake. Zoo Lake consistently

exhibited high levels of upkeep, including clean pathways, functional amenities, regular landscaping, and clearly maintained recreational infrastructure. These material conditions were supported by active governance arrangements and sustained municipal attention. By contrast, Joubert Park, despite experiencing heavy daily use and serving a population with limited access to alternative recreational spaces, displayed uneven maintenance, deteriorating amenities, and limited infrastructural investment. This unevenness reflects long-standing critiques of post-apartheid urban investment patterns, in which historically marginalised areas continue to experience infrastructural neglect despite formal policy commitments to redress and equity (Todes, 2012). From a SPLUMA perspective, this pattern signals a dilution of the spatial justice mandate. Although the Act calls for the prioritisation of disadvantaged communities, resource allocation in practice often continues to favour spaces already embedded within affluent and politically influential urban areas. The result is a planning landscape in which equality of policy coexists with inequality of outcome.

The distribution of maintenance and investment is closely linked to governance and participation structures. Zoo Lake benefits from strong civic engagement and informal partnerships involving resident groups, recreational users, and event organisers whose interests align closely with municipal priorities. While these forms of participation are not always formally institutionalised, they exert significant influence over management decisions and resource allocation. This form of governance reflects what Healey (1997) describes as collaborative planning operating within relatively equal power relations, where participants possess the social capital, organisational capacity, and institutional access required to shape outcomes. In contrast, governance at Joubert Park remains largely top-down and managerial. Although the park is intensively used, everyday users, including informal traders, migrants, caregivers, and low-income residents, have limited influence over planning and management decisions. Participation, where it occurs, tends to be procedural rather than substantive, fulfilling statutory requirements without meaningfully redistributing decision-making power. This gap between formal participation and lived influence reflects critiques of participatory planning that emphasise how participatory processes often privilege actors with greater social, economic, and institutional capital (Cooke & Kothari, 2001).

From a spatial justice perspective, these dynamics highlight that redistribution and participation are deeply intertwined. As Soja (2010) argues, spatial justice is ultimately realised through the redistribution of both material resources and political power. In the absence of sustained investment and inclusive governance mechanisms, public spaces in marginalised areas remain subject to cycles of neglect, securitisation, and reactive intervention. Legislative intent, including SPLUMA's emphasis on redress and equity, therefore risks remaining symbolic rather than transformative. The comparison between Joubert Park and Zoo Lake demonstrates that maintenance and governance are not merely technical issues, but deeply political ones. Decisions about where to invest, whose voices are heard, and which spaces are valued reveal underlying priorities that shape urban inequality. Achieving spatial justice in public space planning requires more than uniform policy application. It demands differentiated investment strategies, proactive redistribution of resources, and governance models that amplify marginalised voices and recognise everyday users as legitimate stakeholders in the production and care of urban public space.

6 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has demonstrated that while SPLUMA provides a robust normative framework for advancing spatial justice, its transformative potential in public space planning is unevenly realised in practice. Through a comparative analysis of Joubert Park and Zoo Lake, the paper has shown that public space outcomes in Johannesburg are shaped not only by legislative intent, but by how planning principles are mediated through class, location, governance, and investment priorities. Inner-city public spaces may meet access objectives in spatial terms, yet continue to underperform in experiential, functional, and governance dimensions. In contrast, public spaces in affluent areas often deliver high-quality experiences, not because of deliberate redress, but due to sustained investment, institutional attention, and aligned civic influence. These findings suggest that spatial justice cannot be assessed through proximity, formal access, or uniform policy application alone. Instead, it must be understood as a lived condition shaped by safety, care, maintenance, and the legitimacy of everyday uses. The persistence of uneven maintenance, selective governance, and the problematisation of informality highlights a gap between SPLUMA's redistributive mandate and municipal practice. Without targeted investment and inclusive governance mechanisms, spatial justice risks remaining symbolic rather than materially transformative.

For urban planning practice, the implications are significant. Public space planning must move beyond technocratic compliance towards differentiated, redistributive strategies that prioritise historically marginalised areas. Inner-city and low-income public spaces should be treated as essential urban infrastructure, requiring sustained maintenance, improved amenities, and care-centred design approaches that respond to gendered and everyday mobility needs. Informal and non-commercial uses of public space should be explicitly recognised and supported, rather than managed through episodic securitisation and control. Equally important is the need to strengthen substantive participation in public space governance. Procedural consultation alone is insufficient to address entrenched inequalities. Planning practice must support co-governance models that enable everyday users, particularly marginalised groups, to shape decisions about design, maintenance, and programming. This requires not only institutional reform, but also investment in facilitation, capacity-building, and long-term place-based engagement. Finally, the study underscores the value of public spaces as tangible indicators of spatial justice. Embedding equity-focused public space audits and monitoring mechanisms within SPLUMA-aligned planning instruments would enable municipalities to assess whether policy commitments translate into lived urban equity. In this sense, public spaces function as both outcomes and measures of planning effectiveness. Advancing spatial justice in South African cities therefore requires repositioning public space at the centre of urban planning, not as a residual design concern, but as a critical site where redistribution, recognition, and participation are made visible in everyday urban life.

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