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Research Article

The perception of public spaces in Mexico city, a governance approach

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ABSTRACT

Public spaces are considered a vital ingredient of prosperous cities as they support their sense of community, identity and culture. Understanding their relevance, the Mexican government has developed new regulatory frameworks. In 2016, the first federal legislation in Mexico was created and combined the concepts of urban development, public space, and social participation. This change affected national and local regulations. Acknowledging that public spaces are anchored to the institutional and governance context, we based our explorative research from a theoretical perspective on the Contextual Interaction Theory (CIT) and its five governance elements. Considering the regulatory and institutional framework for public spaces in Mexico, this research aims to understand how the different actors perceive the current conditions of public spaces in Mexico City. This research adopted a case study approach, and we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with stakeholders that participate in the planning process of public spaces in Mexico City. Through these interviews and revision of secondary sources, we found that all interviewed actors agree that the regulatory framework of public spaces differs with the application in practice, with legal gaps and lack of clarity in responsibilities which brings confusion among practitioners and developers of public space projects. The implementation of the public spaces policy is affected by the lack of continuity of public space projects and the discrepancies between the efforts to promote inclusive and safe public spaces, and a negative perception of society on the current conditions of public spaces.

1. Introduction

Public spaces are considered a vital ingredient of prosperous cities as they support their sense of community, identity and culture. A well-maintained public space also leads to a healthy and safe city that is attractive to live and work (Andersson, 2016). Scholars have defined public space as a physical space with a shared-use between the inhabitants of a city, where social, cultural, artistic, recreational and political functions unfold, and where social expressions and manifestations can be shared with others to create a sense of a pluralistic democracy (Borja & Muxi, 2003; Campos & Brenna, 2015, pp. 157–177; Gehl & Svarre, 2013; Lucio, 2000; Madanipour, 1999; Narciso, 2018). Along with this type of definition, it is understood that political and economic shifts in the last part of the twentieth century have changed the way cities provide and manage their public spaces (Schmidt & Németh, 2010).

Currently, public spaces are included as part of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) through the target 11.7. It focuses on

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providing more safe, inclusive, and accessible public spaces and enhancing social participation in planning human settlements (United Nations, 2015). According to UN-Habitat, well designed public spaces with proper management can be a vital element and a fundamental asset for a thriving city. They can generate a positive impact on the economy, meaning that investing in public spaces can improve public health and the quality of life of people (Vaggione, 2014). Furthermore, the New Urban Agenda considers promoting safe, inclusive, accessible, green open spaces a priority to be achieved (United Nations, 2017).

While an important number of studies have been conducted in the global north in topics related to real estate speculation, unequal distribution and access of green spaces, among others, there is less research focusing on the Latin America governance context about the quality of public spaces (Ribeiro-Palacios, Yañez, & Morales Gómez, 2021), and on how public spaces are being developed (Low, 2005). In order to address this gap, this research focuses on understanding how the different actors perceive the current conditions of public spaces in Mexico City by employing a governance context approach.

Understanding that public spaces are anchored to the institutional and governance context, we based our explorative research from a theoretical perspective on the Contextual Interaction Theory (CIT) and its five governance elements (Bressers, 2009; Bressers & Kuks, 2013; De Boer & Bressers, 2011). Based on the CIT, this research adopted a case study approach, and we conducted eight semi-structured interviews with stakeholders that have participated in the planning process of public spaces in Mexico City.

The research employs the Contextual Interaction Theory and analyses how the different actors perceive the current policy of public spaces in Mexico City. As the research focuses on a Latin American country, our results can interest other scholars working in countries with similar configuration and challenges in the region, such as Costa Rica or Venezuela (Guillezeau, 2002; Low, 2005).

The case study was selected due to its historical importance in the appropriation of public spaces since prehispanic times, social value and identity that represent a large part of the population in the country (Licona, 2010). In 2016, the federal government presented the first national law that evokes the importance of public spaces in the country and intends to bring the participatory process in different planning stages (Diario Oficial de la Federacion, 2016a). The case study provides new insights on how public spaces are being developed based on the input of actors participating in the development of public space.

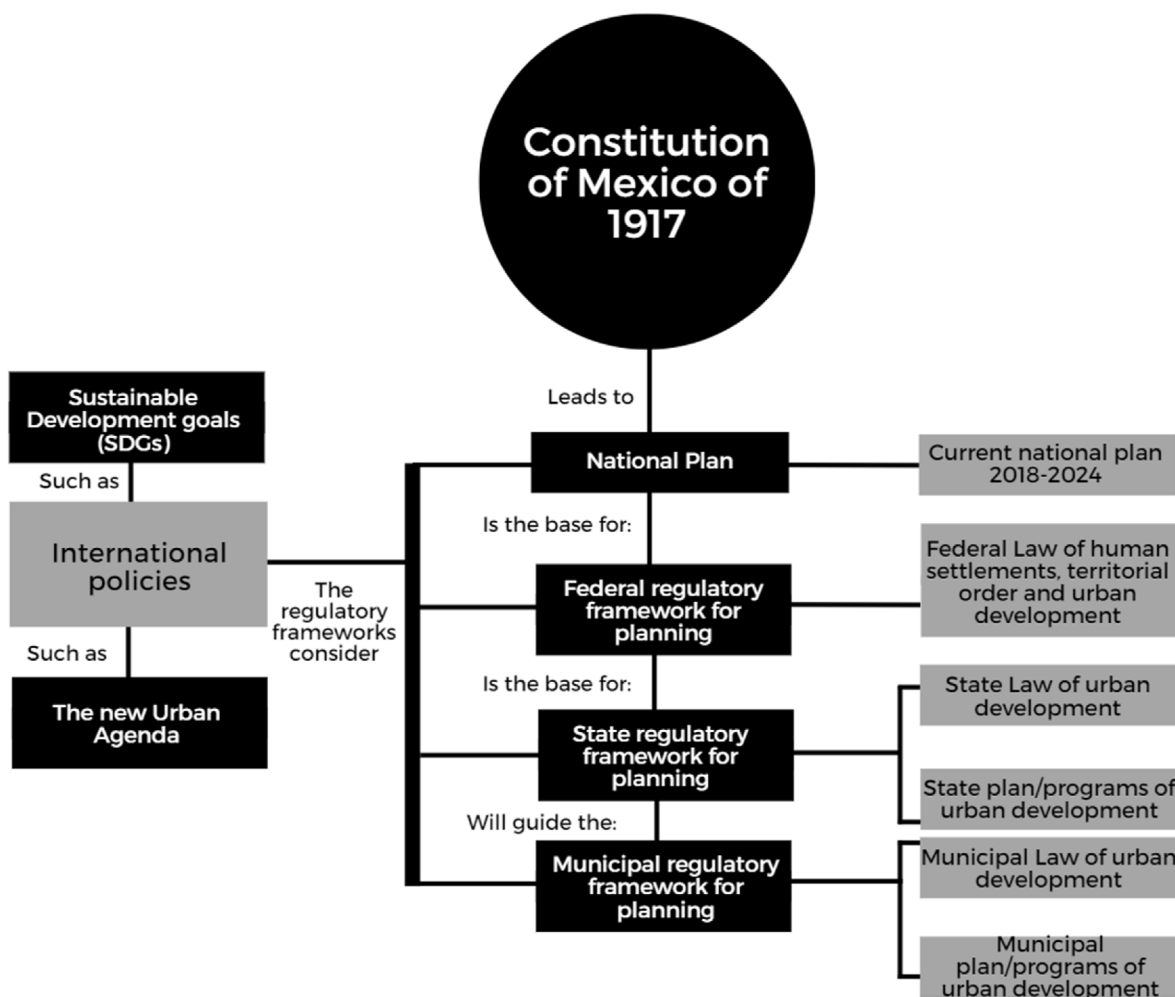


Fig. 1. Regulatory planning framework of Mexico, own design.

This paper is divided into six sections. After the introduction, we continue with the research background explaining more detailed the regulatory framework of Mexico; the next section is the Theoretical framework which presents in more detail the CIT as the theoretical framework employed in this study; the fourth section is the methodology, where we also describe the case study and the methodologies used in fieldwork. The fifth section presents our findings obtained on fieldwork in Mexico City, and the last section presents the discussion and conclusion of this research.

2. Research background, Mexico and the regulatory framework of public space

Previous studies have identified that Latin American countries such as Bolivia, Guatemala or Colombia have decentralised planning institutions in their territories, allowing municipalities to work independently, but without any management or development model to follow and without any homologation on what they do (Guillezeau, 2002). This was the case in Mexico until 2016, when the first federal legislation focused on urban planning and territorial order was officially published. This legislation is essential to developing public spaces in the Mexican cities (Legislativo, 2016), and together with the legislation, a new federal planning institution was created too. However, the regulatory planning framework in Mexico has been characterised as hierarchical (Casiano Flores et al., 2019), and Fig. 1 below presents the hierarchical composition. The constitution of Mexico is the main regulatory document, and each law, plan or regulation is based on the principles of the constitution. Each federal administration presents a National Plan by the president in office, mentioning the programs that will be implemented in their six year mandate. Furthermore, every federal, regional, and municipal program is legally obliged to follow the National Plan. The development of the Mexican cities is mentioned in the National Plan, with objectives and actions focused on improving the cities' conditions.

Although important efforts have taken place in the last years to align the municipal and state government regulatory planning framework with the federal regulations, there are still exceptions in small cities or towns that do not have the resources to align equally (Filipe, C, Ramírez, & B, 2016). Such exceptions increase complexity when trying to align and to set mid and long-term policies.

In order to conduct our research from a multi-governance perspective, we have considered the different governmental levels involved. At the highest level is the federal ministry created by the former president Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018). During his mandate, he created a new federal ministry named “Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development” (Subsecretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Vivienda, 2014), the acronym in Spanish is SEDATU. The same year that the Federal Law of Human Settlements, Territorial Order, and Urban Development (LHSTOUD) (Diario Oficial de la Federacion, 2016b) was published, SEDATU was created. The LHSTOUD is the first federal legislation in Mexico that considered the concepts of human settlements, urban development, public space and social participation as essential elements of the Mexican cities. Within this legislation, for the first time, the concept of public spaces was defined as “... open spaces or land that belong to human settlements intended for use, enjoyment or collective use, with generalised access and free transit”¹ (Poder Legislativo, 2016). This was the first time that the definition of public space is specifically present in a federal regulatory document.

In Mexico, the federal, state, and municipal government levels have promoted the development of public spaces. However, their efforts have been fragmented, and the changes in the government administrations, private interest and the lack of continuity have been stopping the development of public spaces (Narciso, 2018). A very well-known and similar example is the wastewater treatment plant policy. The previous federal administrations between 2000 and 2012 did not achieve the goals set in the National Plans, and the lack of continuity in the policy has been affected negatively due to the constant changes at the bureaucratic level (Casiano Flores et al., 2019). In order to provide a governance analysis, we have employed the CIT as a theoretical governance framework for our research, which will be explained in the next section.

3. The Contextual Interaction Theory in public spaces

The concept of governance has been criticized for not having a common definition, and it is sometimes compared with vague concepts such as sustainability (Mandeli, 2019; Zamanifard, Alizadeh, & Bosman, 2018). Yet, governance can imply articulating individuals and institutions expressing communal needs and interests to be achieved. A combination of different stakeholders, mechanisms, and technologies can take a central role in urban governance to achieve liveable cities and urban futures (Gupta, Pfeffer, Verrest, & Ros-Tonen, 2015), similar to the aim of public space management in the achievement of collective goals for the development of public spaces.

Understanding that public space management is anchored to the institutional and governance context (De Magalhães & Carmona, 2006), we based our explorative research from a theoretical perspective on the Contextual Interaction Theory (CIT) (Bressers, 2009; Bressers, Bressers, Kuks, & Larrue, 2016; Bressers & Kuks, 2003, 2013; De Boer & Bressers, 2011). CIT is a third-generation implementation theory, and it has evolved since then (De Boer & Bressers, 2011). Third-generation theories attempted to combine or get the best of the “top-down” and “bottom-up” approaches. This generation started to be developed at the end of the ‘80s and early ‘90s. Third-generation scholars have concentrated efforts to understand better the policy implementation process (Lester & Goggin, 1998). In CIT, implementation is not seen as a top-down process but as a multi-actor interaction process influenced by the involved actors. Therefore, implementation is defined here as “the whole of all activities that are connected to the employment of a preconceived set of policy measures” (Dinica & Bressers, 2003, p. 2). This understanding of implementation allows capturing the interaction among the

¹ Spanish original definition of Public space: áreas, espacios abiertos o predios de los asentamientos humanos destinados al uso, disfrute o aprovechamiento colectivo, de acceso generalizado y libre tránsito.

different actors from a governance perspective. Hence, the governance model in the CIT consists of questions that attempt to determine: Where? Who? What? How and With what? These questions respond to characteristics that feature modern governance systems. They are multi-level, multi-actor, multi-faceted, multi-instrumental and multi-source-based (Kuks, 2004).

According to the CIT, the governance context is composed of five elements:

1. Levels of Governance: Governance assumes the general multi-level character of policy implementation.
2. Actors and their networks: Governance assumes the multi-actor character of policy implementation.
3. Perception of the problem and objectives: Governance assumes the multi-faceted character of the problems and objectives of policy implementation.
4. Strategies and instruments: Governance assumes the multi-instrumental character of policy strategies for policy implementation.
5. Responsibilities and resources for implementation: Governance assumes the complex multi-source basis for the implementation of policy (Bressers & Kuks, 2003).

The five elements of the governance context can be used to describe a particular policy field in a specified place and time (Bressers & Kuks, 2003). Governance is employed as a neutral concept, and it is an enlarged understanding of the concept of “policy” (Boer de, 2012, p. 30). The CIT has been employed to analyse the governance context in developed countries, such as The Netherlands, Belgium, France, Spain, Italy, Switzerland, The United States and Finland, and developing countries. Such as Indonesia, China, Vietnam, South Africa and Mexico (Casiano Flores, 2017). For Mexico, the CIT has explicitly been used to understand the governance context of environmental policies in the State of Mexico (Casiano Flores, Bressers, Gutierrez, & de Boer, 2018; Franco-García et al., 2013).

For our explorative research, which aims to understand how the different actors perceive the current conditions of public spaces in Mexico City, we took into consideration the five elements of modern governance systems (multi-level, multi-actor, multi-faceted, multi-instrumental and multi-source-based) (Bressers & Kuks, 2003; Casiano Flores, 2017), and conducted our explorative research to answer the following questions:

1. Multi-level: How do the different governmental actors perceive the conditions of public spaces in Mexico City?
2. Multi-Actor: How do the different non-governmental actors perceive the conditions of public spaces in Mexico City?
3. Multi-faceted: What are the problems public spaces are facing in Mexico City according to the different actors?
4. Multi-instrumental: How do the different actors perceive the instruments that affect public spaces in Mexico City?
5. Multi-source-based: How do the different actors perceive the resources employed for public spaces in Mexico City?

In order to answer these questions, governmental and non-governmental actors were interviewed about their perceptions of public spaces. We complemented their answers by analysing the regulatory framework and official documents explaining public spaces' instruments and resources.

We conducted these questions with the three main groups with some level of participation in developing public spaces in the country, which are key actors commonly selected in other research (Bojórquez & Romo, 2018; Hernández-Bonilla, 2012; Misetic, Krnic, & Kozina, 2013). The selection of the actors will be described more deeply in the methodology section.

4. Methodology

This research adopted a case study approach. Case studies investigate the current phenomenon in-depth to understand contextual conditions relevant to the phenomenon being studied (Kaarbo & Beasley, 1999; Yin, 2010) and contribute to the cumulative development of knowledge (Flyvbjerg, 2006). For our case of study, we selected Mexico City. According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, Mexico City belongs to Mexico's most populated metropolitan area, with more than twenty million inhabitants (OCDE, 2015). Mexico City is considered one of the most challenging cities to be managed as it is the most populated in the country with more than 9 million inhabitants where public spaces are a priority for daily coexistence and where urban life is developed through cultural, sports, recreational and commercial activities (Harnik, Claudia, & Ayala, 2018; Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía). The relevance of the case study lies in the contribution of analysing public spaces from a governance approach, which will lead to an understanding by different stakeholders on how public spaces are being perceived.

For the selection of the interviewed actors that participate in the planning process of public spaces, we selected three primary groups that are part of public infrastructure development. They are government agencies, non-governmental organisations and the private sector (Bojórquez & Romo, 2018; Hernández-Bonilla, 2012; Misetic et al., 2013). In order to select the interviewees, we used the chain method. This method “... is efficient and cost-effective to access people who would otherwise be very difficult to find. In this method, the researcher asks the first few samples, who are usually selected via convenience sampling, if they know anyone with similar views or situations to take part in the research” (Naderifar, Goli, & Ghaljaie, 2017, p. 2). Below, we describe the three selected groups.

- Government agencies: Each city in Mexico has different institutions at the state and municipal level; there is a lack of coherence within the different cities and governmental institutions. In a town, one department can be in charge of the planning of public space, wherein in other, it can be a task that involves two or three institutions working collaboratively in the planning, design and maintenance of public spaces.
- Non-governmental organisations: Organisations working at the local context on urban issues, aiming to acknowledge the social needs of an urban problem and to promote the “right to the city”, a concept that has been promoted by several scholars and adopted

by these organisations in order to give the power of the city to the citizens (Borja, 2011). In Mexico, this type of organisation can receive funds from the federal government, private companies, or international institutions, but they require a federal registration (Natal & Muñoz, 2013). Otherwise, they will be only social organisations without a legal figure. Usually, neighbourhood associations need a legal registration in the local government administration to be recognised and to have a stronger voice within government institutions. Social organisations in Mexico need improvements and validation among decision-makers of the city. Currently, only 0.40% of their population participating in non-governmental organisations, while the Netherlands who has the first place, accounts for 14% (Ablanedo, 2009). In Mexico, it is common to see that informal organised community groups take responsibility for their neighbourhoods due to the government's lack of interest to attend their needs.

- Private sector (Architecture firms): Government institutions in Mexico do not have the proper equipment and team to both develop public space projects, so it is expected that private architecture firms design or develop complete projects to develop and implement urban plans for the government. The government usually hire private companies to design and develop public spaces (Cuenya, 2009). Also, real estate developers tend to hire architecture firms, to invest in central or peripheral areas that previously served as public spaces. In this regard, we decided to choose the architecture firms as they need to follow or interpret the regulatory framework of Mexico in order to design public space projects.

The interviews allow retrieving experiences and points of view of the previously selected groups while obtaining relevant information to answer the questions based on the CIT. Within each group, we also looked for a maximum variation sample (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) to have different perspectives on the issue at stake and avoid elite bias (Hutjes & Van Buuren, 1992).

Table 1 below presents the groups of interviewed actors, why they were selected, and how we planned to approach them.

Part of our objective was to include in the interviews the person from the federal government that was in charge of the 2019 programs of urban development. Nevertheless, it was not possible to obtain such interview. We believe that one of the reasons is the scandals related to corruption by the last SEDATU administration. On August 13th 2019, the former director of SEDATU was sent to prison for mismanagement of public funds (Nájar, 2019). Those funds were sent to universities and private companies through public service contracts without complying with the legal requirements (Fierro, 2019).

In the end, the interviews took place at the federal level only with actors from the current administration of SEDATU. The fieldwork took place in Mexico City. A total of 8 semi-structured interviews were conducted. As mentioned in Table 1, we try to have a more balanced sample on the interviews; nevertheless, one NGO and two private sector companies did not reply to our request for an interview. The actors that were interviewed can be found in Table 2. During the data analysis, we obtained more than 12 h of audio recordings in Spanish that had to be transcribed and translated to English in order to respond to the questions.

After presenting the methodology employed during our research, the following section presents the results framed into the CIT framework.

Table 1

Description group of actors to be interviewed in fieldwork in Mexico. Source: Own design.

Who?	Which actors	Why?	How do we approach them?
Government agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Secretaría de Movilidad de la ciudad de Mexico. • Secretaría de Obras y Servicios • Secretaría de Desarrollo Agrario, Territorial Y Urbano 	These government institutions are in charge of urban planning in the city, including all public services and public infrastructure at the different government levels (Diario Oficial de la Federacion, 2016a). The selected institutions are in charge of the development of Public Spaces in Mexico City.	During the desk research, we identified the government actors that are working on public space issues. It was necessary to schedule appointments in advance and visit directly the governmental offices to interview them.
Non-Governmental Organisations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Barriopolis • Taller de Inovación Urbana 	These organisations take part in social initiatives that aim a participatory development as a democratic right of local communities. Some of them focus on the improvement of public spaces (Tosun, 2000), and they are considered an essential group of actors that has an interest in city development and are formed by active citizens (Gehl & Svarre, 2013). These organisations have been working in the promotion of public spaces in Mexico City.	There is a limited number of non-profit organisations working on public spaces or social participation in Mexico. Most of the organisations are collective groups without any legal representation. We focused on NGOs working on public space projects in Mexico City for the research. We contacted three organisations, from which one never responded to the invitation for the interview.
Private sector	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thorsten Arquitectos 	The perception of the actors hired by the government as consultancy companies for the development of public spaces was another source of information. This group of actors are part of the debate about how planning should be implemented and how it is in real life when following official orders or private interest (Gehl & Svarre, 2013; Ziccardi, 2012). The selected actor participate in the planning and design of public spaces projects in Mexico City.	It is usually a problem to access information from private companies. However, from three companies that we planned to interview, only one of the architecture firms that focus on public space design in Mexico City accepted our request for the interview.

Table 2
Interviewed actors in Mexico City during November of 2019 and 2020.

Number	Type of Actor	Institution	Date of Interview
1	NGO	Barriopolis	November 2019
2	Private	Thorsten Arquitectos	November 2019
3	NGO	Taller de Innovación Urbana	November 2019
4	Mexico City Government	Ministry of Mobility of Mexico City	November 2019
5	Mexico City Government	Secretaria de Obras y Servicios	November 2019
6	Federal Government	Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development	November 2019
7	Federal Government	Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development	January 2020
8	Federal Government	Ministry of Agrarian, Territorial and Urban Development	January 2020

5. Results

5.1. Multi-level: how do the different governmental actors perceive the conditions of public spaces in Mexico city?

For the federal government and city level, the public spaces are perceived as neglected spaces in inadequate conditions. In general, governmental actors agree that public spaces lack maintenance. However, the conditions of central, touristic or public spaces that attend a higher number of people, like urban parks, present better conditions, design and maintenance. They are seen as the priority since they attract tourists, and they usually represent the city's image. Yet, in general, public spaces are vandalised or abandoned. In low-income areas, public spaces are perceived in a process of deterioration and abandonment, but with the possibilities of being recovered or renewed. Also, they are perceived as insufficient to serve the needs of civil society. The existing public spaces only have an ornamental or recreational function, without being designed to offer multifunctions that can satisfy the different needs of the cities. What it is important to mention is that at the federal level, there is a positive vision on the work developed for the improvement of public spaces, which contrast with the perception of the local government. They mentioned that public spaces in the centre and south of Mexico City, where there are urban settlements of the upper-middle class, present a more significant quantity of public spaces, with more presence, quality in their design and maintenance than in the north of Mexico City in middle-lower class settlements.

5.2. Multi-actor: how do non-governmental organisations perceive the conditions of public spaces in Mexico city?

For NGOs, public spaces are perceived as forgotten places, and they do not coexist with the urban context. Only historic public spaces are well preserved. Traditionally, they had been used by the wealthy class in the city centre of the Mexican cities. Public spaces are divided into economic zones where marginalised neighbourhoods have neglected public spaces. They can be commonly found on the periphery of the cities. The private sector working on the development of public spaces perceive them as areas in adverse conditions. The public spaces with green areas present neglected physical conditions. The non-governmental actors agree that Mexico City has a significant urban vegetation ecosystem but is currently facing maintenance and management issues. Some public spaces have been adequately designed, although the lack of recurrent maintenance transforms them into unsafe and neglected areas. Also, a general coincidence is the perception of poor physical conditions. Only public spaces at the urban or regional scale are adequately maintained, while marginal or peripheral public spaces present problems related to pollution, insecurity and lack of social appropriation. In general, both actors, NGOs and the private sector interviewed, perceive public spaces in the same way; their perception over the condition of public spaces is less optimistic than the one from governmental actors.

5.3. Multi-faceted: what are the problems public spaces are facing in Mexico city according to the different actors?

It was stated by the government agencies at the federal and local level that there is a need for a more robust normativity that can reinforce the development of public spaces in the city, as there are ambiguities on what the new federal law LHSTOUD mentions and what is done in practice. Primarily the objectives set out in the law cannot be achieved due to a lack of instruments and programs at the city level. At the city level, the main setback mentioned was the abolition of an institution called Authority of Public Space, which was in charge of planning, designing, and maintaining several public space projects in the city. Due to several political changes, the institution was dissolved by the Ministry of Urban Development and Housing of Mexico city in 2018 (*Gaceta Oficial de la Ciudad de Mexico, 2018*), and leaving as a legacy the abolition of a government institute that was a pioneer in its area and could have become an example to other states in the country. Nevertheless, due to budget problems and political rivalries had to be dissolved. According to the NGOs, one of the challenges faced is the informal sector appropriating streets, parks and alleys without any regulation, together with the lack of maintenance of public spaces and the need for major investment in peripheral or marginalised areas of the city. As population growth is unstoppable, new settlements are developed with a focus on private interest. NGOs also mention the personal interest among government and private sector seeking to profit from existing or undeveloped areas into real estate development with private investment, leaving aside social infrastructure, such as the development or improvement of safe public spaces. According to the private sector, the main challenge is the lack of continuity in public space projects, the lack of budget to finalise such projects in the way they were planned or designed, and they lack opportunities to develop projects for government institutions, as was mentioned favouritism among certain private companies to develop them, and the lack of clear regulations for their planning and design. According to them, many regulations are open to misinterpretation due to legal or technical gaps.

5.4. Multi-instrumental: how do the different actors perceive the instruments that affect public spaces in Mexico city?

The governmental actors interviewed at the federal and city level mentioned the intention of starting initiatives to make public spaces a priority in the federal and local agendas. In Mexico City, government practitioners at the city level mentioned the intention to reevaluate public spaces considering a social perspective, a design that takes into account the urban context, and the reduction of gentrification processes in new urban developments. Governmental actors at the federal and city levels mentioned how they adapt their planning or program instruments according to the international agendas like the SDGs or the Habitat III agenda. Nevertheless, as was previously stated, the ambiguity of the laws, norms and regulations leave gaps for a broad interpretation of the regulatory framework in Mexico. Yet, the government actors are optimistic about the future of public spaces, and they promote new laws and norms that can favour and strengthen their implementation. Government actors want to change the negative image that public spaces currently have.

Regarding the NGOs, the instruments for the development of public spaces vary from the project's geographic location, as these organisations work on a local scale, usually follow the basic administrative regulations to work within a specific community in the development of a public space project or initiative. Some of these organisations work together with government institutions depending on the project, as sometimes they are sponsored by local government institutions. Nevertheless, in practice, NGOs mention the lack of follow-up of norms and rules by the government when an administrative offence is committed, mentioning the irregularity of construction permits from private companies that have tried to disguise projects of public spaces in the city but with a commercial objective. An example is the Chapultepec corridor (Hernandez, 2020).

The private sector mentioned a general perception of indifference by government actors concerning the responsibilities to maintain and manage the public spaces in Mexico and keep them in functional conditions. Also, they mentioned that despite the efforts made by government institutions to include international agendas as part of the goals to achieve better public spaces, the instruments of planning allows ambiguous interpretation on their use. This is used by real estate projects to misunderstand for their own benefit aspects such as the amount of green space that must be left for public use, legal gaps for changes in land use that evoke real estate speculation or illegal appropriation of public spaces caused by corruption.

5.5. Multi-source-based: how do the different actors perceive the resources employed for the public spaces in Mexico city?

The governmental actors at the federal and city level agree that one of the main issues is the limited budget for developing new public spaces and maintaining the existing ones. The current assigned budget is not enough to keep them in optimal conditions. The main budgetary resources focused on the improvement of public spaces mentioned by the federal and city level. There are programs such as the Public Space Improvement Program or the Urban Improvement Program that seek to improve the habitability of public spaces in the country. At the local level, the program Planting Parks (2019–2025) aims to improve public spaces in the city and focuses on 16 projects (Gobierno de la ciudad de Mexico, 2020). A technical operationalisation of public spaces is needed in both levels of government, and it was mentioned the lack of human and technical resources that allow efficient management of public spaces. Also, the credibility of their actions is a needed resource mentioned by government actors at both levels. Their actions need to include social participation with a direct consideration in the aspirations of society at the different stages of the development of public spaces in the city. The local government mentions social participation as a resource that has been wasted and it is merely used to approve public space projects and to avoid conflicts with different stakeholders. Current participation is perceived as a simulation without any real impact on public space projects. Presently, federal and local governments are trying to bring acceptance for the plans, programs, and projects developed by the government institutions with the inclusion of social participation, but it is still not achieved in practice.

For the NGOs, the resources employed by government institutions leave the future of the public spaces in an uncertain future; there is a perception of institutional unawareness about public spaces in Mexico. Still, they consider that it is possible to improve this situation. In this regard, the general vision is optimistic despite the problems and economic interests that take part in the development of public spaces. NGOs mention that a vision of social participation is necessary for developing public spaces as it is aimed in paper by the federal and city level government institutions. The involvement of society could be included in the different stages of the planning, design, and maintenance of public spaces. However, commercial interests and political factors are still perceived as a substantial obstacles.

For the private sector, an important resource for the development of public spaces is the investment in new urban developments, as this can increase the land value. The multifunctionality capacity of the public spaces is part of the new models of architecture. Therefore, new proposals from the private sector, are including the mix-use and the diversity of spaces. Currently, the perception of these actors is that cities need to be designed and based on multifunctionality. There is also a trend for the privatisation of public space to favour specific economic groups. Real state developers are legally obliged to create public spaces in the private areas they construct, but their characteristics respond to political factors in many cases and many times are gated communities. Contrary to what it mentions the NGOs and the government institutions, the private sector considers a lack of social actors participation in marginalised neighbourhoods. According to them, inhabitants of neighbourhoods in wealthy areas tend to participate and organise more than those in marginal conditions, for which their necessities go beyond having pleasant public spaces.

6. Discussion and conclusions

Based on the previous interviews and following the theoretical perspective on the Contextual Interaction Theory (CIT) (Bressers, 2009; Bressers & Kuks, 2013; De Boer & Bressers, 2011) we discussed the differences found among the interviewed actors, following the five government elements of the CIT.

At a multi-level, different actors highlight uncoordinated efforts to maintain, develop and manage public spaces. There are currently

issues for assigning responsibilities between the different government institutions at the federal and the city level. This situation creates complex scenarios for external actors to understand who is in charge of developing and maintaining public spaces in Mexico. We can state that in terms of governance levels, the current policy implementation presents differences in the conditions to improve public spaces from the federal to the city levels and confirming the lack of clarity in the regulatory instruments to comply with federal policies, bringing confusion among practitioners and developers of public space projects (Garza, Scheingart, & A, 2010; Kuri, 2015).

In multi-actor terms, the NGOs and the private sector highlight that social actors have no genuine involvement in planning, designing, and maintaining public spaces. Since current government institutions face budgetary issues, NGOs and the private sector perceive a challenging future for public spaces in marginalised urban areas. This situation is leading to unsafe and insecure areas in Mexico City, which is mentioned as one of the challenges of the 21st century in Mexican cities (Bonilla, 2012). We confirm through our conducted interviews that the deterioration and abuse of public spaces are caused due to poor maintenance by local authorities and corruption processes for the approval of irregular permits that allow the appropriations of informal economy in streets of Mexico City without any management plan (Garza et al., 2010; Kuri, 2015).

From a multi-faceted perspective, the perception of problems developing public spaces in Mexico City portrays a general lack of interest by government actors and decision-makers. Although new public spaces are being developed with more contemporary architectural designs, there is a lack of policies that genuinely consider the maintenance and management of public spaces. We confirm the proliferation of gated communities is still segregating the use of public spaces; real estate developers are offering well maintained public spaces, green areas and communal services such as playgrounds, swimming pools or sports fields, segregating the access to others that do not live on them (Borja & Muxi, 2003; Garza et al., 2010). Promoting social class differences among those who can afford to live in these gated communities and those who cannot (Bonilla, 2012).

From a multi-instrumental perspective, the strategies and instruments that currently exist for the development of public spaces are new or nonexistent. Even with the creation of the first federal legislation that defines what public spaces are and their functions, all interviewees manifest the need for regulatory instruments such as norms, plans, and programs at the subnational and local level to facilitate the development of public spaces. The former administration presented strategies for improving public spaces. However, the lack of continuity due to political and administrative changes generates problems of monitoring and measuring the implemented strategies. An important example is the disappearance of the Minister of Public Space in 2018 (*Gaceta Oficial de la Ciudad de Mexico*, 2018), the only one in Mexico City and all the country. Consecutively bringing issues such as waste problems in public spaces or illegal appropriation. Our interviews confirm that the lack of updated planning instruments has allowed the informal appropriation of public spaces, especially in marginalised neighbourhoods, unplanned human settlements and peripheral areas, where urbanisation processes have left current planning instruments behind (Garza et al., 2010).

From a multi source-base perspective, the responsibilities and resources for implementing public spaces in Mexico are fragmented and face significant limitations (Fernandez del Campo, 2017, p. 1). There is a lack of coordination, clarity and organisation between government institutions to assign responsibilities regarding the development, planning, maintaining and design of public spaces. This situation is present at a horizontal level and from a multi-level governance perspective as there is no clarity on responsibilities inside government institutions. This also affects the acquisition of necessary resources to implement strategies that promote safe, clean, inclusive and green public spaces along with the inclusion of new technologies to develop them. New models or planning already mention the importance of social actors inclusion in the responsibilities and allocations of resources to implement policies for the administration of public spaces. However, in Mexico, efforts are still required to include society in the decision-making process and the implementation of new technologies to improve participatory processes (Brynskov et al., 2014).

In conclusion, each group of actors perceives the conditions of public spaces differently, and it depends on their interests. The perception of each actor depends on the type of work that they are conducting. Government actors at the federal and city level agree that public spaces in Mexico city lack maintenance and are not equitably developed. Nevertheless, they are trying to promote and solve the lack of public spaces with new proposals when starting their administration but leaving aside previous efforts made by former administrations. This is a major complaint from the NGOs and the private sector. Every six years, the change of office at the federal and city level comes with new proposals that diminish the previous administrations' efforts. Specifically, the interviewed NGOs try to maintain continuity with projects elaborated in conjunction with social actors despite the administration change. This includes pushing the acceptance of previously approved projects by the new administration. However, it is not always possible due to political rivalries. The private sector can continue projects by being competitive in the construction market through real estate companies. This sector invests in the development of public spaces, but only for the higher economic sectors of the population that look for secure gated communities due to the city's insecurity. The conditions of public spaces still present a discrepancy between the actors who promote their development inside the government and those trying to protect them and improve them considering a social perspective.

Finally, as the CIT framework has been already used in Mexico, the relevance of this research is its application in the governance of public spaces, expanding its use in the field of urban planning. Some of the limitations during the research were related to the availability of government actors due to the change of the presidential term in 2019, where the majority of public officials were replaced by the new political party in turn, being challenging to find those previously responsible of working on public space issues. Also, the private sector was the most reluctant to be interviewed. Nevertheless, as this is a first approach of the use of the CIT, further research is needed at a broader scale, with the inclusion of other cities and a wider selection of actors to provide a more general understanding of how the public space policies are being implemented and how are they being understood.

Declaration of competing InterestCOI

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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