

Li, Juan; Dang, Anrong; Song, Yan

## Article

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## Research Article

## Defining the ideal public space: A perspective from the publicness

Juan Li<sup>a,b</sup>, Anrong Dang<sup>b,\*</sup>, Yan Song<sup>c,\*\*</sup><sup>a</sup> School of Urban Planning and Design, Peking University Shenzhen Graduate School, China<sup>b</sup> School of Architecture, Tsinghua University, China<sup>c</sup> Department of City and Regional Planning, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, United States

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of public space can be variously defined and understood from diversified perspectives. However, no matter which definition may be used, the most fundamental character of the public space is its publicness. This paper reviews the definitions and dimensions of publicness from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, and concludes four synthesized dimensions of publicness: ownership, accessibility, management, and inclusiveness. By clarifying the concept of publicness, we can unify the multiple values and functions pertaining to urban public space. The four dimensions are further related to the legal sense and lived sense to interpret public space, respectively. By discriminating their difference, the lived sense corresponding to the dimensions of accessibility, management and inclusiveness, is adopted to define the ideal public space from the perspective of publicness. The proposed definition shows both theoretical and practical significance for urban planning and management.

## 1. Introduction

The study of public space has always been a primary focus in the fields of urban study, urban planning, urban design, etc. Its aim is usually to answer two questions: what an ideal public space should be, and how such an ideal can be realized (Németh & Stephen, 2011). Explored perspectives are diverse and present a variety of preferred focuses. Some scholars pursue the best aesthetic layout (Alexander, 1977; Bacon, 1974), and some view public spaces as cognitive objects constructed by people (Lynch, 1960). Some scholars treat public space as the stage for public life and apply methods ranging from the conventional approach of behavioral psychology to the up-to-date approach based in emerging data and technology to explain the interactions between people and space (Carr et al., 1992; De Nadai et al., 2016; Dupont et al., 2014; Gehl, 2011; Whyte, 1980), while others involve public space in the broad concept of public realm, debating in the discourse of sociology and political philosophy (Arendt, 1958; Habermas, 1991; Lofland, 1989; Sorkin, 1992). These explorations have yielded ample insights, providing a long—but not exhaustive—list of characteristics that an ideal public space should possess, including being evolving, balanced, diverse, delineated, social, free, engaging, meaningful, comfortable, robust, inclusive, flexible, permeable, and authentic (Carmona, 2015; Ellin, 2006; Fernando, 2006; Kohn, 2004). This list points to positive directions practitioners can work towards, but no single public space should be asked to achieve each and every goal.

The concept of publicness, as the essential attribute that makes a public space public, is expected to unify these diverse research perspectives. Fundamentally, it is this publicness that causes people to have all manner of expectations for public space. No matter how an ideal public space is defined, guaranteeing its publicness is hence the most crucial prerequisite for approaching it. This in turn triggers

\* Corresponding author. School of Architecture, Tsinghua University, Haidian District, Beijing, 100084, China.

\*\* Corresponding author. 314 New East Building, CB 3140, Chapel Hill, NC, 27599-3140, United States.

E-mail addresses: [danganrong@126.com](mailto:danganrong@126.com), [danrong@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn](mailto:danrong@mail.tsinghua.edu.cn) (A. Dang), [ys@email.unc.edu](mailto:ys@email.unc.edu) (Y. Song).

a question that how to define the ideal public space from the perspective of publicness.

To answer the above question, this paper is organized as follows: after the introduction section, we first dissect the nature of the concept of publicness in Section 2, based on which Section 3 concludes four synthesized dimensions of publicness by reviewing its definitions and dimensions from both the theoretical and empirical perspectives. According to the synthesized dimensions, Section 4 puts forward the definition of the ideal public space. At last, Section 5 concludes the paper.

## 2. The multidimensional nature of publicness

Publicness is the essential quality that gives public space its “public” character (De Magalhães, 2010; Varna, 2014). The historical context is a key factor to understand how a public space is shaped (Carmona, 2014; Mehta & Palazzo, 2020). As a cultural concept, publicness refers to the people who are either conceptualized as *society* meaning the individuals gather together and form a collective through assembly, public discourses, and political expressions, or as a *state* referring to the authorities (Jackson, 1984; Madanipour, 2003). However, the meaning of the *society* or *state* is not always consistent, because the word “people” is less obvious and different groups continue to demand to be included in the public (Cruz et al., 2018; Fraser, 2021). For example, the Greek agora are used by most writings as an example of the ideal public space but it has long been out of date since it was denied to women, slaves and foreigners (Mitchell, 1995). Another example of the ideal of public space - the Palais-Royale in Paris, once preserved exclusively by the rich, had become “a truly public forum-a place of the people” by the late spring of 1789 (McMahon, 1996). Also, the suburbs once were regarded as the private sphere in Western cities of the early 20th century (Gholamhosseini et al., 2019). Until the street became the quintessential center of public life, public spaces were expected to be more inclusive and accessible, and to be a place of unplanned contact with others (Carmona et al., 2008; Jackson, 1984; Jacobs, 1961; Whyte, 1980). Therefore, publicness is also a historical concept, the meaning of which keeps changing and being enriched over time. In contemporary urban environment, local communities and individuals are still struggling to find public space by means of appropriating official public places, reclaiming underutilized urban space, transgressing boundaries between public and private domains, and pluralizing and reinterpreting latent publicness in urban space (Hou, 2010; Mehta & Palazzo, 2020; Mitchell, 2003; Watson, 2013). Space can gain its publicness through these spontaneous actions and “purposeful occupation” (Hou, 2010).

The ever-changing significance of the publicness has witnessed the increasing inclusion and openness of public space, but also made its definition less evident. Traditionally, the characteristic “public” exists because there is something deemed “private”. However, the “public”/“private” dichotomy has been challenged due to the difficulties of drawing a precise boundary between them in modern social, economic, and political contexts (Kohn, 2004; Madanipour, 2003) and to the outdated conceptualization of public character that is based on a lone attribute, mostly the ownership (De Magalhães, 2010). Moreover, attempts to locate publicness along a linear continuum from public to private may end up falling short (Kilian, 1997; Németh & Stephen, 2011) because the assumption that “public space is the place for public activities, private space for private activities” does not truly hold (Staehele & Mitchell, 2008). The public realm continues to be privatized and commercialized due to the prevalence of neoliberal capitalism (Wang, 2019). Some researchers even claim that both publicness and privateness “exist in every space” (Akkar, 2005a; Kilian, 1997). The publicness of space may be dynamically articulated from the complex “relationships established between property and the people who inhabit, use, and create property” (Staehele & Mitchell, 2008).

Elements of defining the publicness of public space are various. De Magalhães (2010) argued that these elements are generally fueled by the broader knowledge of public goods and services, which should consider, for example, the distinction between public and private, the composition of their recipients, the “magnitude and intensity of their socio-economic roles”, the realization of their public accountability, and public trust in them (Haque, 2001). Some scholars have endeavored to identify where publicness comes from by scrutinizing the concept of “public space” and found various additional elements to consider. Carmona (2010b) highlighted a list of factors, including historical trends and norms; the diverse modes of governance, regulation, legal dominion, and investment that create the space; cultural traditions; political priorities and the particular lifestyles they support; the balance between political and market forces; and the increasing complexity of public space and the limitations on professional skills and responsibilities to tackle it. Staeheli and Mitchell (2007) generalized 16 categories<sup>1</sup> of definitions of public space after analyzing more than 200 treatises. Meanwhile, Varna and Tiesdell (2010) observed that different disciplines have emphasized different aspects of publicness, with political scientists focusing on democratization and rights, geographers on sense-of-place and ‘placelessness’, and anthropologists and sociologists on the historical construction and subjective value of place. It is the diversity of features accounting for conceptualization that makes the distinction between publicness and privateness as complex as it is (Benn & Gaus, 1983).

Therefore, the concept of publicness should be interpreted from multiple dimensions. Criticizing that most “formulations of publicness have a strong normative character and point towards an absolute ideal of public space,” De Magalhães (2010) clarified that publicness is a relative quality rather than an absolute concept: “for any public space, there will be attributes that are more public than others.” This “relative” nature crucially indicates the multidimensional nature of publicness. The perspective of multidimensionality may help to reconcile the diverse discourses concerning the publicness, as well as to “avoid the tendency either to create a list of desirable features or to reduce the concept to a single continuum.” (Németh & Stephen, 2011).

<sup>1</sup> Including: physical definition; meeting places or places for interaction; sites of negotiation, contest, or protest; public sphere (no physical form); opposite of private space; sites of display; public ownership and public property; places of contact with strangers; sites of danger, threat, or violence; places of exchange relations (e.g., shopping); spaces of community; spaces of surveillance; places of open access-no or few limits; places lacking control by individuals; places governed by open-forum doctrine; idealized space-no physical form (Staeheli & Mitchell, 2007).

### 3. Definitions and dimensions of publicness

#### 3.1. Theoretical perspective

The idea of dissecting the concept of publicness according to a multidimensional nature was first discussed in treatises of sociology and political theory, just as the term “public space” was when it was first used in academic publications (Nadal, 2000).<sup>2</sup> From the standpoint of the sociologist and the political scientist, guaranteeing the publicness of public space is an approach to realizing their ideal for society. Young (1986) depicted her political ideal as an “unoppressive city”, defined as openness to unassimilated otherness. Through a constant endeavor to achieve this ideal, public space can thereby accommodate all kinds of users and their distinct situations, feelings, affiliations, and perspectives. Therefore, towards this ideal, Young (1990, 2000) highlighted three essential factors affecting publicness: accessibility, inclusion, and tolerance of difference.

Distinguishing primary types of distinctions between public and private from diverse features is still the fundamental approach to accessing a multidimensional definition of publicness, even though “the private and public realms are becoming increasingly intertwined” (Kohn, 2004). By acknowledging publicness as a complex-structured concept, sociologists Benn and Gaus (1983) discerned three broad types of distinctions, according to which three mutually interacting dimensions of publicness are elaborated: access, agency, and interest. They believed that these three dimensions were universal categories for social organization. The dimension of access consists of four subdimensions: physical access to spaces, access to activities and interaction, access to information, and access to resources. Yet, what's more important is “whether the control of access is public or private”, leading to the question of agency. The dimension of agency inspects the motivation of agents, who act either in their own interests or for the public benefit. The motivational status of agents therefore directly determines the beneficiaries of their decisions, which is the concern of the dimension of interest. Benn and Gaus's framework was useful for empirically analyzing public spaces by creating a methodical distinction between publicness and privateness, and was inspirational for urban studies by indicating a clear direction towards “an appreciation of the multiplicity of perspectives” on public space (Madanipour, 1999, 2003), despite being criticized for being “ambiguous and amorphous” (Franck & Lynn, 1989; Madanipour, 1999; Németh & Stephen, 2011), and for treating space with an instrumental approach (Madanipour, 2003). Similarly, Low and Smith (2013) asserted that the meaning of public space—its publicness—existed in contrast to private space. In their attempt to “wedge open a more multifaceted politics of public space,” public space was differentiated from private space in four dimensions: rules of access, the source and nature of control over entry, individual and collective behavior sanctioned in specific spaces, and rules of use. According to Low and Smith, rules over public spaces are the key factors affecting their publicness.

Quite apart from the unremitting efforts to distinguish between public and private, some scholars instead embrace the vague reality that contemporary public space reveals. To better interpret the ongoing process of blurring boundaries between public and private, Kohn (2004) proposed a flexible definition of public space by treating it as a “cluster concept”, which should have “multiple and sometimes contradictory” meanings or criteria. She outlined three component dimensions that derived a public quality: ownership, accessibility, and intersubjectivity (communication and interactions between people). Kohn's definition underlines the importance of public space as a facilitator of unplanned contact between strangers, friends, and acquaintances, and also as a place of unmediated and improvised uses which is asserted as the fundamental characteristics of ideal public space (Franck & Stevens, 2006; Schmidt, 2005). Carmona (2010b) also endorsed the idea of public space as a “cluster concept”. He further developed Kohn's three dimensions and proposed a new typology for understanding contemporary public space from perspectives of *design*, *socio-culture*, and *political-economy*, to which the corresponding dimensions of publicness are respectively function, perception, and ownership. The *design* perspective emphasizes the functional adaptability of public space, which can be demonstrated by Franck and Stevens's (2006) idea of “looseness” and “tightness.” A loose public space is “adaptable, unrestricted and used for a variety of functions,” while its tight counterpart will strictly constrain the types of activities that can occur there (Carmona, 2010b). The *socio-cultural* perspective values the users of public space and their perceptions within it. How public space is perceived and used will influence its management needs profoundly. The *political-economy* perspective is related to ownership and responsibility, which largely determine how public space will be managed. Carmona's definition of publicness is highly correlated with the management of public space, just as Low and Smith attached importance to rules over public space. Similarly, De Magalhães (2010) argued that it is the (re)distribution of roles, rights, and responsibilities in public space governance that actually affect the publicness, meaning “rules” and “mechanisms” are the primary principles considered when defining publicness. Therefore, according to De Magalhães (2010), the basic components of publicness are defined as: *rights of access*, being the rules and mechanisms that restrict individual access to a space, to facilities in a space and to the “confirmation of a symbolic function”; *rights of use*, being “rules and codes of behavior and enforcement mechanisms”; and *rights of control/ownership*, being rules and mechanisms through which a diffuse control over public space by different stakeholders can be realized.

Theories defining the dimensions of publicness are enriched and extended gradually, evolving from the generalized social ideal to the narrow sense of the public-private distinction, and from the values originated in sociology and political philosophy to the actual functions of physical space in urban studies. Public sphere “emphasizes the ideas, media, institutions, and practices that all contribute to the generation of something that we can call the public, publics or public opinions” (Low & Smith, 2013). Therefore, theoretical discussions on publicness usually use a political lens which can be manifested in multifaceted discourses as mentioned above, such as through political ideal; social organization; control and rules; communication and interactions between people; shared use, meeting and exchange; and (re)distribution of roles, rights, and responsibilities. In summary, the concept of publicness not only exists in theoretical

<sup>2</sup> According to Nadal (2000), the very first uses of the term “public space” were in Charles Madge's paper “Private and Public Spaces” (Madge, 1950) and Hannah Arendt's book *The Human Condition* (Arendt, 1958).

discussions but also bears the expectations of the public, just as De Magalhães (2010) has explained:

“Most people would expect of a public space that it should be provided and managed in a way that secures a relative openness of access to most members of society, allows them to use that space without other restrictions than those dictated by broadly accepted social norms of behavior, and guarantees them some say over key decisions regarding the running of the space.”

### 3.2. Empirical perspective

Extensive theoretical discussions have explored the component dimensions of publicness, preparing useful conceptual frameworks for pragmatic research. Some preliminary research has straightforwardly employed these theoretical dimensions to qualitatively analyze the publicness of public space. For example, Madanipour (1995) used Benn and Gaus's framework to examine the development and use-process of new public space. Akkar (2005a, 2005b) used the same framework to assess changes in the level of publicness after the redevelopment of existing public spaces but slightly altered the dimensions' terminology, replacing “agency” with “actor.” Following De Magalhães's (2010) interpretation, De Magalhães and Trigo (2017) developed and implemented an operable framework for analyzing the mechanisms that secured a certain level of publicness.

Yet gaps still exist between “the theoretical understandings of social and political space and the actual lived experiences of physical and material spaces” (Low & Smith, 2013; Németh & Stephen, 2011). When a framework developing its dimensions of publicness within the theoretical discussion are applied directly in empirical research, on the one hand, it shows advantages in presenting an in-depth case study, but on the other hand, it falls short in generalization because the analysis is restricted to qualitative results. Besides, the spatiality of the public sphere is not sufficiently explored in the political discourse, while understanding the physical public space is “an imperative for understanding the public sphere” (Low & Smith, 2013). Therefore, practical explanations for the publicness based in realistic urban scenes are needed to translate the theoretical framework into operationalized dimensions and to develop quantitative approaches for the comparative study of public space.

Németh and Stephen (2011) were the first to bridge the gap between theory and practice, interpreting publicness from dimensions of ownership, management, and use/users of space. Ownership refers to the legal status of public space, which may be owned by either the public sector or the private. Ownership is also directly related to operation. Differing from De Magalhães (2010), Németh and Schmidt denied a shared interest between a public space's owner and its operator, and instead identified four combinations of ownership and operation, each representing a certain level of publicness (Fig. 1). In the most public situation, a space is publicly owned and operated; in the least, it is privately owned and operated, and the other two scenarios are situated between these cases. The management dimension refers to the means by which a space is controlled and maintained, especially those that indicate appropriate uses, users, and behaviors. By examining extensive “legal, design and policy tools used to exert social and behavioral control” in actual public space, four categories of management methods are identified: “laws and rules,” “surveillance and policing,” “design and image-building techniques,” and “access restrictions and territorial separation.” Finally, the use/users dimension focuses on how a place is used and perceived by diverse users, resonating with Benn and Gaus's “interest,” Kohn's “intersubjectivity,” and Carmona's “perception” (Carmona, 2010b).

Varna (2014) identified more detailed dimensions of publicness from an empirical perspective, whereby the publicness consists of five dimensions: ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, and animation. Here, “ownership” considers both the legal status and the functions of space. Space that is more public is more owned by the public body and accountable to public or collective interests, while space that is less public is more owned by a private body and acted in private interest. In theoretical discussions, there is a prominent emphasis on space management, including its presence and motives (Carmona, 2010b; De Magalhães, 2010; Low & Smith, 2013). It is further demonstrated that what is most essential is not who manages the public space but rather the rules and mechanisms regulated by responsible groups or managers in order to manipulate various stakeholders (De Magalhães, 2010). Therefore, Varna (2014) used two dimensions—control and civility—to demonstrate the managerial aspects of publicness. “Control” refers to an “explicit

		Ownership	
		Public	Private
Operation	Public	Publicly owned and operated	Privately owned and publicly operated
	Private	Publicly owned and privately operated	Privately owned and operated

Fig. 1. Ownership and operation combinations (Németh & Stephen, 2011).

control presence” by means of management measures and physical designs embedded in a space. The more public situation reflected in the control dimension, is the absence of explicit controls that protect private property over public interests, which would limit individual freedoms and political manifestations of certain social groups, leading to a less public situation. “Civility” considers how public space is cared for, and seeks a balance between over-management and under-management. A higher level of publicness is granted to a clean and tidy public space that presents a welcoming ambience. A lower level of publicness reveals an imbalance, leaning to either over-management which deters certain people by being too strict and stiff, or under-management which results in decaying and “neglected space” (Carmona, 2010a). “Physical configuration” is the design-oriented dimension. It includes both a space’s relationship to its surroundings (macro level), and the specific design features of the space itself (micro level), resembling Németh and Schmidt’s ideas of “access restrictions” and “design and image.” A more public situation means a public space is well-connected to its surroundings, both physically and visually, and has no explicit barriers to entry, while a less public situation suggests the contrary. “Animation” refers to the actual use of public space, and considers how many and diverse the users and activities are. The more public situation can promote vibrant public life and clearly encourage a wide range of activities by a highly diverse set of users, while the less public situation will make public space more exclusive and monotonous.

Németh and Schmidt’s and Varna’s explorations have effectively transformed theoretical dimensions into pragmatic ones, establishing thus a more thorough and practicable framework for subsequent empirical studies which might adopt different terms but still express the same connotations (Table 1). Meanwhile, all dimensions of publicness are interwoven and interplayed, essentially indicating features of successful urban spaces, the most important functions of which are manifested in “urban life” and “human connection” (Lopes et al., 2019). In general, the empirical dimensions of the publicness improved the shortcomings of theoretical frameworks by presenting a prominent emphasis on the spatial attributes and human-centered concerns of public spaces and by being developed into practical measurement models.

### 3.3. Four synthesized dimensions

Through the literature review, it is explained how, in both theory and practice, the concept of publicness can be defined and comprehended according to its multidimensional nature. Various terms have been used to highlight different research focuses. The changing terminologies continue to represent a highly consistent essence, which, in conclusion, generally comprises four synthesized dimensions, as also expressed by Langstraat and Van Melik (2013): ownership, accessibility, management, and inclusiveness (Table 1).

**Ownership** refers to a public space’s legal status—usually either publicly or privately owned, although mixed ownership is becoming more and more common. In certain contexts, the major function or use of the public space will be considered alongside the division between the public and private sectors (Marcuse, 2005; Németh & Stephen, 2011).

**Accessibility** refers to both physical and psychological access to a public space, the latter of which is more critical for fostering a vibrant environment. Accessibility not only requires that people can easily enter the public space but also expects a friendly and

**Table 1**

Summary of the dimensions of publicness (Ekdi and Çıracı, 2015; Mantey, 2017; Wang and Chen, 2018).

	Authors	Dimensions						
		Ownership		Accessibility		Management		Inclusiveness
Theoretical perspective	Benn and Gaus (1983)	Agency	Access	-	-	-	-	Objective aspect
	Madanipour (1995, 1999, 2003)							Subjective aspect
	Young (2000)	-	Accessibility	-	-	-	-	Interest
	Kohn (2004)	Ownership	Accessibility	-	-	-	-	Inclusion
	Low and Smith (2006)	Source and nature of control	Rule of access	Rule of use	Behavior sanctioned in space	-	-	Tolerance of difference
	Carmona (2010b)	Ownership	-	Function	-	-	-	Inter-subjectivity
	De Magalhães (2010)	Right of control/ownership	Right of access	-	Right of uses	-	-	-
	Akkar (2005a, 2005b)	Actor	Access	-	Interest	-	-	-
Empirical perspective	Németh and Schmidt (2011)	Ownership	-	Management	Use/user	-	-	-
	Varna and Tiesdell (2010)	Ownership	Physical configuration	Civility	Control	Animation	-	-
	Varna (2014)							
	Langstraat and Van Melik (2013)	Ownership	Accessibility	Management	Inclusiveness	-	-	-
	Ekdi and Çıracı (2015)	-	Accessibility	Management	Use/user	-	-	-
	Mantey (2017)	-	Accessibility	Management	Diversity	-	-	-
	Wang (2019)	Ownership	Agency	Urban-scale design	Accessibility	Function	Management	Interest
	Wang and Chen (2018)					Control	Rules	Uses/users
	Lopes et al. (2019)					Architectural-scale design	-	Perception
		-	Physical design	Management	Urban life	Human connection	-	-



comfortable atmosphere that encourages people to enter.

**Management** refers to the management mechanisms and techniques applied to a public space, which essentially indicate the motives of management representatives. Positive motives attempt to maintain a better public environment for the public, while negative motives exert excessive control over the space and its users. Regarding material space, how the space is designed is an indispensable feature that reflects how the space is regulated.

**Inclusiveness** refers to a public space's ability to accommodate diverse users and behaviors, indicating who will actually benefit from a space's publicness. It generally includes two aspects: the density and diversity of users, activities, facilities and functions provided straightforwardly show the objective aspect of the inclusiveness dimension, whereas the perception of users will reflect its subjective aspect. This dimension supplements a bottom-up examination of the publicness embodied in actual users and uses, in contrast to the top-down view of the management dimension.

#### 4. Defining the ideal public space

By reviewing related definitions and arguments from both theoretical and empirical perspectives, we have concluded four dimensions to interpret the publicness of public space which indicate what an ideal public space should be. However, the four dimensions of publicness have varied significance when used to define the ideal public space.

##### 4.1. Difference between the legal sense and lived sense

Among the four dimensions, the first consideration is ownership which is the basis to categorizes whether a space is public or not in the legal sense. For example, the “privately owned public space (POPS)” generated through the incentive zoning programs in the US, is a type of public space defined based on the variation in ownership. Private developers and property owners provide these sorts of space for public use, such as plazas, arcades, atriums at their buildings, in exchange for “floor area bonuses and other valuable regulatory concessions” (Kayden, 2000). Zhang and Yu (2010) further generalized the distinct POPS as the sites that were constructed on non-public land by non-public investment but used by a wide range of public. It seems quite contradictory when binary oppositional meanings are juxtaposed in one and the same concept. We assert that this oxymoron composites two different perspectives of sense to understand the public and private essence. Specifically, the term “privately” in POPS is interpreted from the *legal sense*, meaning that legal rights of the land or buildings that provide public spaces belong to private body and the property owners may have “an unqualified prerogative to determine” the use/user of space (Gray & Gray, 1999); meanwhile, the term “public” is interpreted from the *lived sense*, meaning that the use of space is not limited to specific owners, but for the general public, and the space is in fact part of the public sphere.

There is no doubt that the legal status will affect the lived status. Even though the POPS can be accessed and used by the public, they are commitments made by the private sector for profit anyhow. The POPS are hence criticized by many scholars as “pseudo-public space” or “quasi-public space” (Banerjee, 2001; Button, 2003; Wang, 2019). As Banerjee (2001) claimed:

“There is a presumption of ‘publicness’ in these pseudo-public spaces. But in reality, they are in the private realm”.

Due to the private ownership, the lived experience of using the POPS shows four distinct characteristics: first, entering and using the space is a privilege rather than a right (Banerjee, 2001); second, these spaces are under strict surveillance; third, the managers of spaces may exclude certain activities and people; at last, the spaces may be isolated from the urban environment and ignore its connections with the surroundings. However, these negative characteristics could not deny the fact that the so-called pseudo-public space is used by the public in their lives. When entering the public sphere, these spaces acquire a certain degree of publicness and they are expected to be accountable for the public interest.

The example of POPS demonstrates the difference between the legal sense and lived sense to view the public space. The case of Chinese urban public space also reflects this difference from the other way around. In Chinese context, all urban land is owned by the state. There is no literally “privately owned public space”. Nevertheless, spaces that are open to the public but regulated and managed by private developers are very common in Chinese cities, such as shopping mall, commercial complex, corporate plaza, and their affiliated spaces (Wang, 2019). They are actually what Németh and Stephen (2011) called “publicly owned and privately operated” spaces. As the economist Steven Cheung (2010) claims that if the stakeholders enjoy three rights: right to use (or right to determine use), right to freely transfer, and right to profit without interference, then the ownership is not a necessity. In summary, to define the public space in the legal sense alone may not reflect the true relationship between space and people and not indicate whether the space serve the public interest. Instead, the lived sense enables “a broader conception of public space than a formal legal one that looks at ownership as the defining criteria for publicness” (Marcuse, 2005). Next, we will use the lived sense to define the ideal public space.

##### 4.2. Defining the ideal public space in the lived sense

According to Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith (1991), public space is the “physical nexus of a human and urban life” representing the lived space in which people’s “right to the city could be exercised” (Marcuse, 2005). In the lived or social sense, public space refers to the space that is “seen and felt and treated by most as public” (Marcuse, 2005), and more importantly, used by the public. To determine whether a space is public is to examine whether the public interest is recognized and realized in it. Worpole and Knox (2008) even asserted that whatever the state of its ownership, the value of public space is embedded in its nature of providing opportunities for shared use, meeting, and exchange. In this regard, as the legal sense of public space, the dimension of ownership is not always necessary. While the other three synthesized dimensions, namely accessibility, management, and inclusiveness, exactly reflect the lived sense of

public space. We could learn how the publicness of a public space is through the performance of these three dimensions, rather than via who owns the space.

Chua and Edwards (1992) have highlighted three criteria (also see Yeoh & Huang, 1998), which highly resonate with the essence of the dimensions of accessibility and management (see Section 3.3), to define the ideal public space: ① everyone has rights of access; ② encounters happened in the space between individual users are unplanned and unexceptional (Kohn (2004), Franck and Stevens (2006), and Schmidt (2005) also emphasized this criterion); ③ users' behavior in the space is subjected to rules none other than those of common norms of social civility. Besides, according to the interpretation for the dimension of inclusiveness, we assert that there should be a fourth criterion: ④ the public space is sociable and can promote social interactions. Private individuals can form a public by interacting and conversing (Habermas, 1991). Places that simply bring people together, such as cinemas, theaters, and sports stadiums, can establish a unidirectional relationship between people and a programmed activity, but they may not necessarily promote communication and interactions among various social groups (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2019).

From the perspective of the beneficiaries of the public interest, the four abovementioned criteria essentially point out the four fundamental goals that a public space should achieve in the most ideal state. Fig. 2 shows how the dimensions of the publicness are corresponding to the four goals of the ideal public space. Specifically, the dimension of accessibility pursues easy and convenient access to a space both physically and psychologically, and in the most ideal state, it will exactly realize the first goal that the public space is accessible to everyone. The dimension of management pursues a balance between under-management and over-management. The former results in a disorderly environment and lacks of appropriate regulations, and the latter imposes excessive restrictions other than common social norms on people's behaviors and activities which will obviate potential unplanned activities. Therefore, to achieve balanced management is to realize the second and third goals. At last, the dimension of inclusiveness is manifested in users and uses of a space. In the most ideal state, a public space is expected to accommodate as numerous and diverse users, behaviors, activities and events as possible to promote unmediated social interactions, which correspond to the fourth goal. Besides, the high accessibility of and unplanned encounters in the public space will also promote sociability. In summary, by deriving the four goals from the dimensions of accessibility, management, and inclusiveness, the ideal public space can be defined from the perspective of publicness.

## 5. Conclusion

This paper has explored the concept of publicness from both theoretical and empirical perspectives to illustrate the true nature of public space. Theoretical discussions delineate the sociological and political significance of publicness for the generalized public space, paying more attention to the ownership, rules, and management mechanisms that regulate spaces. Empirical discussions connect theories with physical and material spaces—the basic components of the generalized public space. They supplement spatial attributes to extend the understanding of publicness, hence putting greater emphasis on factors that show humanistic care such as how public spaces are designed, meet diverse users' needs, and support vibrant public life. By clarifying the concept of publicness, we can unify the multiple values and functions pertaining to urban public space, so as not to deviate the practice of public space from its fundamental purpose. We finally conclude four synthesized dimensions of publicness: ownership, accessibility, management, and inclusiveness.

We discriminate the difference between the legal sense and lived sense to interpret public space by demonstrating the contradiction between a definition of public space only in the legal sense and the actual usage of public space in the lived sense. Based on the essence of the four synthesized dimensions of publicness, we further relate them with the legal sense and lived sense, respectively. Specifically, the legal sense refers to the dimension of ownership, and the lived sense refers to the dimensions of accessibility, management, and inclusiveness.

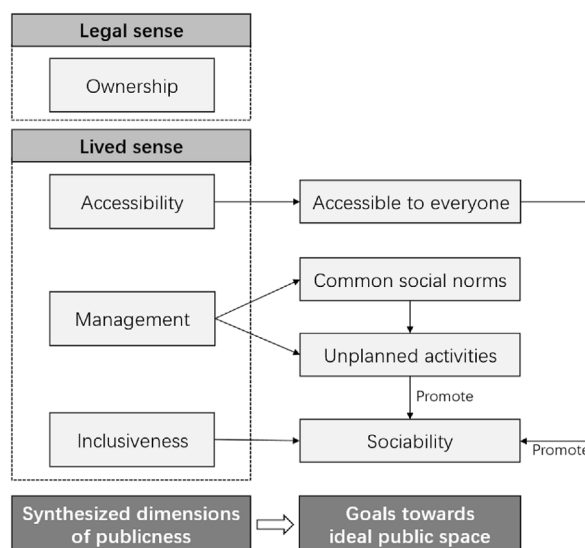


Fig. 2. Definition of ideal public space from the perspective of publicness.



inclusiveness. The difference between the legal sense and lived sense indicates that the former cannot reflect whether a space serves the public interest. Therefore, we use the lived sense of space to define the ideal public space.

The proposed definition includes four criteria indicating the four fundamental goals that any public space should strive to achieve in the most ideal state. In a word, an ideal public space should be accessible to everyone, only have basic social norms to constrain people's behavior, allow spontaneous activities, and be able to promote sociability. In theory, the definition of the ideal public space will function as a fundamental framework based on which the types, functions, values and meanings of public space can be largely enriched, not the other way around, that is, the various expectations for public space obscure its true nature. In practice, when constructing new public spaces or revitalizing existing spaces, practitioners/decision-makers (especially those in the public sector) can prioritize their various targets according to the guidance of the ideal definition to make optimal arrangements. More importantly, the four dimensions of publicness methodically constitute a theoretical framework which is only one step away from being developed into a quantitative tool for evaluating the public space. How to operationalize the four synthesized dimensions thoroughly into measurable indices and construct a practicable measurement model, how to quantify the criteria indicated by the ideal definition we propose, and how to empirically analyze public spaces from the perspective of publicness will need more future studies to elaborate.

## Declaration of competing interest

None.

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