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GeoJournal (2023) 88:3535–3548
https://doi.org/10.1007/s10708-022-10817-y

Public space and the cohesion-contestation spectrum

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Accepted: 12 December 2022 / Published online: 10 January 2023
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Abstract The urban policy assumption of public space's generative capacity for cohesion stands out as limited in the face of the reality of South African urban public space. Drawing on observations and experiences in a range of Johannesburg public spaces, we critique the assumption contained in international, national, and local South African urban policies about cohesive public space. We argue that assuming the agency of people as tending towards cohesion and that the agency of space is enough to ensure this because it is necessarily similarly cohesive, is incorrect. Likewise, assuming the primacy of the agency of space is misleading. This dichotomy of relationships focussing on space as cohesive, and people as influenced by space, requires a third element. That third element is understanding space as an amplifier of the norms people chose or appear forced to practice which exist beyond public space. This imparts the necessity of acknowledging the existence of contestation and conflict alongside cohesion and collaboration in public space, and allows for a more accurate and subsequently more effective understanding of public space, particularly in the post-segregation context. Along this vein we propose approaching public spaces through an appreciation for their complex multiple simultaneous realities, including cohesion, collaboration, tension, contestation, and even conflict as a few examples. Without seeking to imply a dichotomous categorisation, we call this approach the cohesion-contestation spectrum.

Keywords Public space · Contestation · Cohesion · Urban policy · Paradox

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Introduction

In analyzing public space policy, whether at the international, national, or local urban level in South Africa, we are struck by the normative assumption that public space is just, inclusive, and generatively cohesive. Goal 11.7 of the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development highlights the imperative for "universal access to safe, inclusive and accessible, green and public spaces" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, p. 22). South Africa's Integrated Urban Development Framework translates this vision to the local context in aspirational terms, stating that "good quality public spaces encourage the interaction of people from various social and cultural backgrounds" (2016, p. 94). At the urban level, the City of Johannesburg in its Spatial Development Framework seeks to implement this by focusing on "the creation of public spaces and amenities to create

opportunities for interaction" (2016, p. 75). These sentiments are likewise echoed in much of the literature on public space, which converges around the point that public space creates the potential for social mixing, which may potentially be cohesive by providing the opportunities for people to be exposed to others, albeit for a short time in an unfamiliar environment (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2019; Cattell et al., 2008; Dempsey, 2008; Gómez et al., 2018; Madanipour, 1999; Masiteng, 2018; Mowen & Rung, 2016; Peters et al., 2010; Pinto & Remesar, 2015; Sennett, 2003). However, when we study public spaces, in our case focusing on Johannesburg, we observe a range of interactions at times inclusive, collaborative, cooperative and cohesive, but often also tense, fragmented, conflictual, and contested. Additionally, many of these seemingly divergent or mutually exclusive qualities often occur simultaneously in a potentially mutually-reinforcing manner.

Given South Africa's history of state-sanctioned racial segregation and socioeconomic fragmentation, these observations are perhaps unsurprising, which links our findings to other South African cities and wider contexts. The same policies which we looked at for an understanding of public space framing in South Africa confirmed this, with former Johannesburg Mayor Parks Tau stating that "the legacy of apartheid planning still lingers strongly in our urban form, excluding many of the City's residents from the advantages of urban living" (2016, p. 8). However, these particular normative framings of public space as potentially generative of cohesion do not account for the variety of experiences ranging from cohesion to contestation which we observed and experienced. Here we argue that this range of realities in public space might better be understood as a non-linear spectrum: the cohesion-contestation spectrum. This contribution to a nuanced framing of urban transformation responds to a distinct gap in the existing literature (Hölscher & Frantzeskaki, 2021) which calls for case-based studies to be developed towards applicability in other contexts and requires space to be re-theorized in acknowledgement of greater complexity (Carmona, 2015).

The necessity of exploring our proposed spectrum arises from the limitations associated with the normative vision of public space as generatively cohesive. This is rooted in a general trend in literature that promotes public space as potentially cohesive simply because it is one of the primary locations for a majority of our interactions (Aelbrecht & Stevens, 2019; Mowen & Rung, 2016; Peters et al., 2010). Though the literature acknowledges cohesion comes down to city form, culture, and socioeconomic elements, there is often a focus on the role played by public space itself to address these (Pinto & Remesar, 2015). In this manner, public space is elevated to the level of a personified stakeholder with the agency to manifest integration and cohesion (Madanipour, 1999). Importantly, many of the assumptions on which generatively-cohesive public space is based are rooted in the vague idea that social mixing will take place if inclusion does, and that cohesion is a reasonable outcome to expect. However, while social mixing might be assumed to lead to equality and decreased social marginalization, this is rarely achieved through mixing as a means (Hildebrand, 2011). In fact, mixing policies often fail to even lead to inclusion, let alone cohesion. Such policies have the potential to bring diverse peoples in close proximity to one another, without actual mixing occurring, or in other cases, with exclusion occurring such that the marginalized groups targeted for social upliftment through mixing policies are worse off (Hildebrand, 2011). Thus, adopting the particular normative viewpoint that public space is generatively-cohesive is limiting in that it is rooted in inaccurate assumptions around socialization.

In approaching the limitations of prevalent approaches to framing public spaces as generatively-cohesive, we asked: How does the normative framing of public space as cohesive interrelate with public spaces in Johannesburg? This question, and the research tools used to study it, were loosely inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre's (1991/2004) proposition that space is socially produced and socially produces in turn. For Lefebvre, this socially-produced space can be characterized by three interrelated qualities: conceived, perceived, and lived. This understanding of space as simultaneously multiple, and the interrelated quality of these multiplicities, shaped our approach to understanding public space.

This paper seeks to explore the normative framing of public space as assumedly cohesive by proposing that its expression in South Africa is helpfully understood through the cohesion-contestation spectrum. In highly unequal and otherwise divided societies like South Africa, broader socio-spatial issues manifest in and shape shared, open space (Coggin,

2021; Landman, 2016; Middelmann, 2020; Simone, 2004). As such we argue that instead of the normative assumption of cohesion as a tool for analyzing and planning public space, more useful analytic inroads are generated through the application of our novel contribution, the cohesion-contestation spectrum, noting multiple and simultaneous experiences of public space characterized by cohesion, collaboration, conflict, tension and contestation. Through the lens of the spectrum we propose that public space, a nexus of urban relationships, *can* facilitate genuine collaboration that responds to societies' broader issues in a way that produces elements of social cohesion. However, such arguments require greater nuance which acknowledges the complex potential for contestation and its impact on desired cohesion, partly because urban public space remains a critical arena of participation and appropriation in response to spatial injustice on both broad and localized scales (Mitchell, 2003). We begin with an overview of the normative framing of public space and problematise the strengths and weaknesses of such approaches. Following this general framing, we discuss the methodology and our approach to data analysis as well as the codes that emerged from this. Next, we present the case study of Gandhi Square and a reflection on dynamics from Pieter Roos Park and Killarney Park which together resonated with the complexities and simultaneities we researched in several other Johannesburg public spaces, as well as what we put forward in the spectrum. Then, we move on to outline the conceptual components of the cohesion-contestation spectrum and how these relate to the grounded realities of public space we researched, with discussion of applicability, usefulness and opportunities for further research and workshopping.

Normative framings of public space

First, it is useful to clarify the key concepts we work with in this paper. Acknowledging the constantly evolving perspectives on how to approach public space (Carmona, 2019; Leclercq et al., 2020; Qian, 2020) we define public space as a "common good that can take different spatial forms'' ranging from physical to digital (Nikšič et al., 2018, p. 4). In South Africa this includes recreational public open space as well as public utility open space, i.e. places like parks, or botanical gardens as well as road reserves, pavements, pipeline or cable servitudes, and any other area managed by the government for the provision of a public service (City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, 2004). Focussing on urban, physical public places, we assume cohesion to relate to the practice and perception of interconnectedness and shared values within a group (Mowen & Rung, 2016). Framing cohesion and other values which we discuss here as norms, it is useful to explain that norms are simply "principled ideas" (Cortell & Davis Jr., 2000, p. 65). They provide sets of criteria on the basis of which decisions are made. In doing so norms help us to decide what is good or bad (related to subjective understandings of what is acceptable public behavior), to discern justice from injustice, or label something a problem instead of an unfortunate reality (Anderson, 1979; Towns, 2012). These prescriptions for action create a commonly-shared idea of what is acceptable by certain actors in certain settings, simultaneously delegitimizing alternate courses of action as unacceptable L. E. Mitchell, 1999; Towns, 2012). Thus, we propose a spectrum capable of capturing this full range. Here we understand a spectrum to refer to a non-linear continuum that is not bound by particular steps or value sets, and as such refrain from polarizing cohesion, contestation, and their interrelated varying iterations (conflict, tension, collaboration, etc.).

As noted, this spectrum (Fig. 2) is populated with various norms, and this normative framing requires further explanation. Normative planning and policymaking has characterised South African public policy since the end of apartheid in 1994, but at the level of urban public space it comes to focus especially on cohesion (Bremner, 2000; Gumede, 2008), without acknowledging the existence of, and potential need for, contestation in public space. When it comes to public space and the assumption of cohesion, the state's vision is rooted in inclusivity, justice, diversity, equality, transformation, ownership, accessibility, empowerment, and various other vaguely defined but related ideals captured in documents like the National Spatial Development Framework, National Development Plan 2030, and Integrated Urban Development Framework. Cohesion has been used in policy documents referring to developmental spatial goals for urban space, as well as other policy ideals like: efficiency, equity, equality, transformation, interaction,

justice, cohesion, connection, diversity (of purpose and users), ownership, humanity, accessibility, empowerment, and engagement (National Planning Commission, 2012). Recognizing apartheid's spatial legacy, Johannesburg's policies in particular suggest that "differentiated norms and standards need to be developed that go beyond engineering services, to include social facilities, public spaces and green infrastructure" (2016, p. 66). Taking up this challenge, key city-level policies seek to make contributions here, such as Johannesburg's 'Spatial Development Framework 2040' (2016), 'A Promising Future: Joburg 2040' (2011), 'Integrated Development Plans', 'Service Delivery and Budget Implementation Plans', 'Public Open Space By-Laws' (2004), and 'Public Art Policy' (2000), among others.

These policies vaguely imagine public spaces as "shared centers of community life and generators of social inclusion and cohesion" (Department of Cooperative Governance & Traditional Affairs, 2016, p. 66) that "make it easier for South Africans to interact with each other across racial and class divides" (National Planning Commission, 2012, p. 457), without providing clear mechanisms for the realization of this. When, policy argues, South Africans share daily interactions on an equal basis in common spaces, cohesion and mutual understanding should emerge (City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality, 2011; Department of Cooperative Governance & Traditional Affairs, 2016; National Planning Commission, 2012). This is a highly aspirational goal for the world's most unequal country (World Population Review, 2021), but beyond South Africa, these same goals are echoed. For example the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (United Nations General Assembly, 2015) calls for better cities to be characterized by inclusivity, requiring universal access to inclusive public spaces. The UN similarly suggests that "green spaces… can facilitate social cohesion" (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, n.d., para. 4).

This hopeful framing of potentially cohesive public space as a center of civic engagement, interaction with difference, and the formation of cosmopolitan identities, is echoed in prevalent literature (Amin, 2008; Barker et al., 2019; Fraser, 2008; Houssay-Holzschuch & Teppo, 2009). But, as Mabin (2001, p. 246) argues, "it would be foolish to exaggerate the integrative ability of public space to compete with powerful forces of division". Along this vein, several scholars carve out a critical framing of public space instead, which builds on the utopian dream for cohesion by acknowledging the existence and potential necessity of contestation and conflict (Landman, 2016; Milbourne, 2021; Mitchell, 2003; Mowen & Rung, 2016). A key manifestation of space as contentious and conflictual is the use of public space to voice dissent and dissatisfaction with the status quo. In this manner, public space makes visible society's deep-seated practices and beliefs so that they can be engaged in public debate (Low, 2000; Marcuse, 2014). Perhaps it is not only through cohesion but also through struggle, sometimes extra-legal, that physical public places are transformed by people into public space that contributes to the public sphere (Middelmann, 2020). This point is rooted in the work of Kevin Durrheim alongside colleagues John Dixon and Colin Tredoux (2005), who posit that the assumptions of the potential for contact to reduce prejudice (or begin to address it at least) are limited by their creation of utopian sterile imagined spaces within which contact could occur, forgetting the reality of the contexts in which groups engage. Similarly, the assumption that public space, by creating the potential for contact, automatically potentiates and generates cohesion, is limited. Thus we posit that to assume the cohesive potential of space is not wrong, but reductive because, as shown here, it fails to account for the multiple, open-ended experiences of public space which differ from cohesion but may ultimately still contribute to its realization.

Methods and data analysis

We adopted immersive observation participant research methods, spending the 2017–2019 period visiting public spaces in Johannesburg where we interviewed people, observed them, participated in using spaces alongside them, and listened intently to all of the interactions and conversations which took place around us. We used walking as a methodology to ensure that in the larger public spaces in particular, our immersive observation was informed by the true experience of using these spaces. In some cases we explored the digital dimension of some of these spaces, such as dedicated Facebook pages. Interviews with public space users and experts/officials

buttressed this observational research. To explore all of the cases which form the basis for our arguments here would go far beyond the scope of this paper, and has already been taken up in the course of two PhDs (Middelmann, 2020; Rawhani, 2021). While we have discussed some of our casework elsewhere (article under review), here we highlight the example of Gandhi Square as an unpublished example from our work which, as a privately-owned public space in the inner city, demonstrates the very complex dynamics of the cohesion-contestation spectrum. This is one of seven cases that we explored overall, the results of which were analyzed alongside hundreds of pages of fieldwork notes and more than 2000 coded incidents from documentary analysis. Here we summarize some of the results briefly and present them in the following the case.

Alongside Gandhi square, we studied Johannesburg's Constitution Hill, Pieter Roos Park (and the street-space connecting these), Killarney Park, Paterson Park, Joubert Park, George Hay Park (Middelmann, 2020; Rawhani, 2021). These cases were analyzed alongside South African policy documents and legal articles governing public space and cohesion as we understand public space to be a facet of urban policy, studying policy documents and the spaces they concern along with critical literature (*ibid*). We constantly asked: how does cohesion relate to the status quo here, and is it supported or opposed? Specifically, in each document that we read, or instance that we experienced and observed, we asked "what is happening here?" as a means for uncovering processes, and "to what end?" as a means for uncovering the associated meaning (Middelmann, 2020; Rawhani, 2021). This produced 39 key codes and concepts which founded the theoretical arguments we put forward here. Without delving into our data in great detail, which is the subject of other writing (manuscript article under review), we summarize the early coding results in the following Fig. 1 to help ground our arguments.

We present these results not as a demonstration of the spectrum, but as an indication of the complexity of qualities which we detected, witnessed, and experienced. While the details of this particular study have already been published (Middelmann, 2020; Rawhani, 2021), here we briefly explore the meanings which arose from our data. This serves the purpose of demonstrating the complexity at hand, and the implied inadequacy of limited conceptualisations of public space. In trying to discuss these qualities at a greater level of abstraction than the micro-level on which they were observed, we later found that we were met with a need for explaining this micro-level complexity beyond the simple binary of cohesion or not.

The data indicates that the state-set vision (rooted in assumptions about cohesive public space) largely problematizes South Africa's past which is acknowledged as segregationist and fragmentary while idealizing the cohesive potential of public space now, and focusing on transforming public spaces across the city. Comparatively, little attention is devoted to actively opposing these acknowledged problematic inherited spatial norms. This vision is increasingly institutionalized in the form of focusing on new ideal norms for South African public space, without demonstrating mechanisms for opposing problematic norms nor manifesting desired norms (Rawhani, 2021).

In the data we gathered and reviewed, we found that the process of translating this envisioned and institutionalized state-set understanding of cohesive public space takes the form of planning, conceptualizing, and legislating. The gaps in translation become evident when we understand it as preoccupied with the value/nature of (public) space, with the word public in parentheses to reflect its invisibility here. This is characterized by dichotomising space from the public such that efforts to realize cohesion focus on space first as if the power to effect normative change lies therein alone (Rawhani, 2021). This can obscure the reality that not all public spaces enjoy the same level of intervention and support from the state or private actors. Some contested uses of public space, especially protest and civic action, or participating in (or banning) informal work, can be seen as direct responses to broad spatio-economic injustice (Landman, 2019; Middelmann, 2020). Accordingly, struggles towards greater social, spatial and/or economic justice may be a pre-condition for this desired, normative change. Exclusion of informal workers, for example at Gandhi Square, denies them membership of 'the public' (Middelmann, 2020).

Finally, while the agency of the public is left out of the envisioned transformation of cohesive public space, it is the public that is engaged in creating so

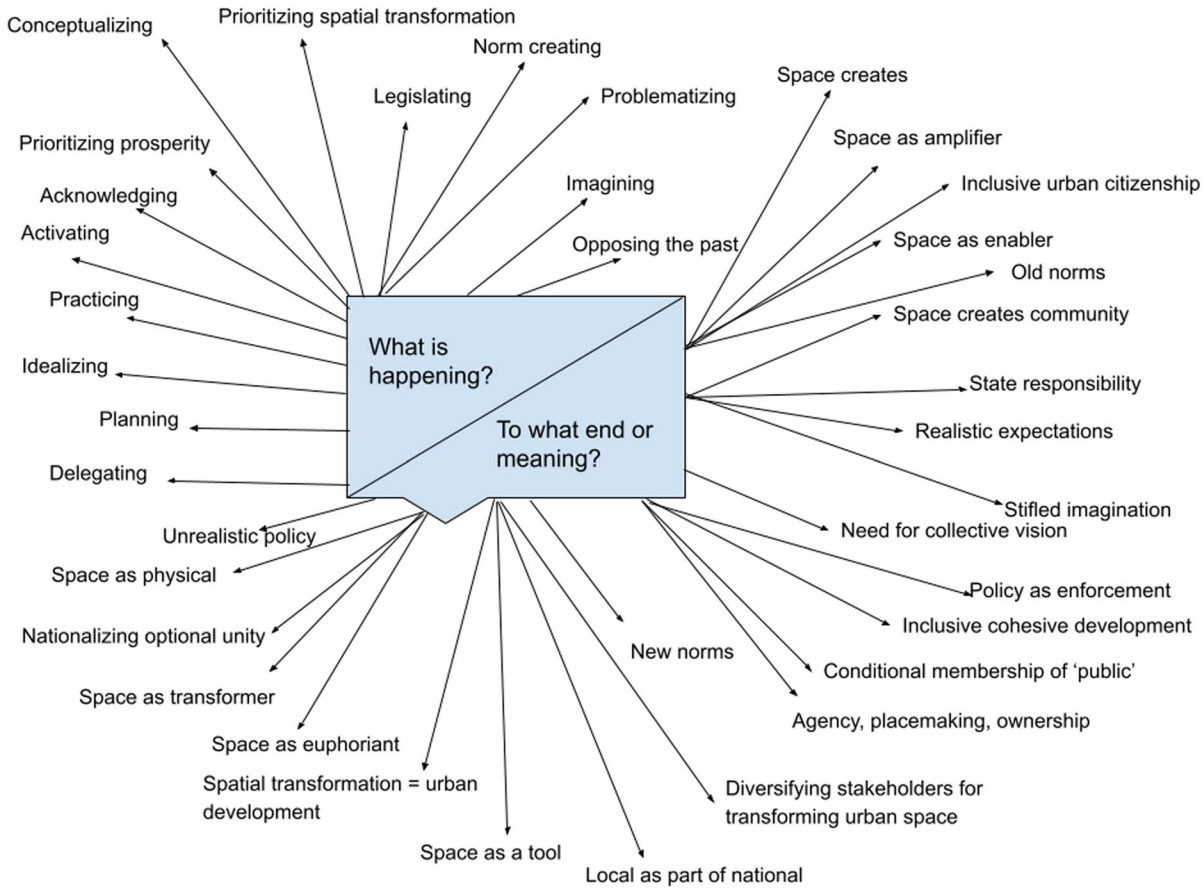


Fig. 1 Examples of the range of codes emerging from a study of public space and cohesion in Johannesburg

much of what the public space experience includes. While we found creating normative urban transformation dominated by the agency of the public (through individual and group practices), it remains an unregulated and unanticipated agency (from the perspective of the state-set vision). In other words, we found significant instances of spatial segregation and asymmetrical power relations produced in public behavior. Often, spatial segregation was reproduced in the public's behavior where individuals had the choice to behave cohesively instead (Rawhani, 2021). Simultaneously, instances of contestation often created cohesion, such as youth ignoring signs banning ball play to join in a game of soccer, or dog owners violating leash requirements to allow their pets to play while the owners socialize with one another. Another example is the highly contested appropriation of living space in parks by homeless people actually leading to cohesion through the sharing of goods and information, creating a cohesive network of individuals and public spaces (Middelmann, 2021a).

Gandhi square and reflections from other cases

Gandhi Square (0.45 km^2) is a paved, open square and bus interchange situated within the CBD neighborhood of Marshaltown. Importantly, Gandhi Square is one of the first public spaces in Johannesburg to be leased by the City to private developers, in this case Olitzki Property Holdings (OPH). In exchange for providing exclusive access to municipal buses on the roads that bisect the square, OPH has a great deal of control over the uses and meanings of the space. Additionally, OPH maintains the infrastructure in the square and sub-contracts cleaning and security

services. Despite the contributions of privately managed public spaces, and Gandhi Square in particular, OPH admits that City Improvement Districts do not do enough in moving towards spatial justice in Johannesburg (OPH official, int. 2019). This may undermine the potential of the space to facilitate genuine social cohesion. However, safety was by far the most commonly cited factor in conversations about what users like about Gandhi Square and need in public space more broadly, evidencing the strong perceptions and realities of crime in Johannesburg as much as the public culture of fear (e.g. Murray, 2020). Fear tends to promote closed, hardened public cultures. Thus, the safety experienced by many users at Gandhi Square has provided rare and important opportunities for interactions with others that are less bound up with fear, thus more likely to encourage social integration and reciprocal, inclusive public cultures and behaviors. One user connected several of these factors in their perception of the space: "cleanness also comes with the perception of safety; it also comes with the perception of more opportunities" (Public space User (hereafter PSU) 2, int. 2018).

While Zulu is a common lingua franca in much of Johannesburg's CBD, and 97% of Marshaltown's residents are Black, at Gandhi Square there is an apparently higher prevalence of other languages because hundreds of thousands more people from a range of backgrounds residing all over the city pass through the square everyday due to its use as a transport interchange and commercial center. As such, it is a public space that is relatively mixed racially compared to many spaces in the inner city, notable for attempts at social cohesion. Largely due to its role as a transport hub and being a relatively safe space in Johannesburg's CBD, it hosts a great deal of social mixing across age, gender, class and race lines. This often occurs while people wait in queues for the buses, where the common activity facilitates social connection that apparently resonates with desires in policy for social interaction and thus cohesion.

The diversity and mutual occupation by difference in Gandhi Square has been appreciated as rare and valuable by many users. This links to wider desires for integration in South Africa's public space (CoJ, 2016) and to public space theories that include interaction with difference as an important characteristic of publicness (Fraser, 2008). As put by one local resident: "it's a really dynamic space, cos there's people from all over the city, it's the central spot, … it just feels really cosmopolitan, it feels like a … a good cross-section of society and … you don't see that a lot in South Africa" (PSU3, int. 2019). However, as well as the facilitation of social contact, Gandhi Square also excludes some 'undesirable' users, especially informal traders and homeless people. This kind of private control over public space is problematic when it creates exclusion, even if it facilitates some form of social cohesion for other users. For example, the exclusion of informal traders is partly for the 'comfort' of people working in adjacent formal businesses (senior OPH official, interviewed 2019). Furthermore, while I observed many apparently positive interactions, there was also some thinly veiled racism when old white users of the space (PSU11-13) recalled how things were better there 'in the old days', referring to fond memories of the apartheid city. This publicly expressed racism is important given its power in meaning-making and sharing in contemporary public space. The complexities of interaction at Gandhi Square suggest a need for clearer understandings of what social cohesion means and how public space relates to it.

While Gandhi Square has hosted various forms of protest and civic action, this is generally limited by the securitisation of the space. Interestingly, Itzkin (2008: 11, 81) suggests that Gandhi Square's "heritage imagery [was] meant to promote spatial justice and social inclusion in a prominent central city public space." However, he also admits that signage "alludes only obliquely to other groups who stood trial at the same site. In particular, … countless Africans whose stories have never been recorded, let alone commemorated". This undermines some of the potential here for social inclusion given that Johannesburg's population is over 80% black African (Stats SA, 2016). Also, a senior employee of OPH relates the desire to name it Nelson Mandela Square, lamenting that Sandton had beaten them to it, alluding to the competitive edge the name Mandela might bring to a commercial space (OPH official, int. 2019). Since then, responses to the statue of Ghandi which inhabits the square have been wide-ranging, much like responses to any monument, and increasingly critical, as racist quotes from Gandhi's early years in Johannesburg become more significant in the public consciousness (Middelmann, 2021b). This speaks to the history of racism

embedded in the architecture of South African cities as critiqued by Manning (2004). His call on architects and public space practitioners to work more with indigenous black Africans and engage with the ways they use space reveals some of the irony in the continued suggestion that a statue which embodies to many South Africans forms of anti-black racism could be part of a deliberate project of social cohesion.

Issues of public space and expressions of public history link to how the idea of collective memory takes on a fractured nature in countries with many publics, and expresses paradoxical aspects of the cohesion-contestation spectrum: protests against the Gandhi statue are a form of contestation over a symbolic space that was conceived to improve social cohesion. While this may appear to suggest opposition between cohesion and contestation, we argue here instead that it shows their simultaneity. The mobilization in protest to an offensive figure is a contested use of public space, but it also suggests forms of social cohesion: first in the mobilization itself, and second in that it represents a struggle for symbolic justice in public space, which may be a precondition for broader projects of social cohesion. It is unlikely that in complex circumstances of spaces with brutal histories and serious inequality, that issues of cohesion are likely to be straightforward. The dynamics of response to the statue recall the dynamics of power, race and reimagining the city discussed by Minty (2006) in the context of the idea of symbolic reparations which can (attempt to) obscure (or reveal) the reality of continued and growing inequality.

Discussions of race and how it relates to public space raise a number of other pertinent issues that are revealed through other cases, collectively demonstrating the importance of open-endedness and multiplicity in analyses of social cohesion. Here we briefly consider some key dynamics from two similar incidents/processes in Pieter Roos Park and Killarney Park, two of our other case sites. In both parks, groups of local residents who regularly used their local park for picnicking and other leisure activities complained to the residents' association and the local government that ball sports in the park are limiting its usability by others. At Killarney Park, local by-laws governing ball play in public space were enforced and soccer was briefly informally banned in the park. Events such as these might be seen, reductively, as cohesive because it adheres to public space by-laws and protects various spaces to make them ostensibly inclusive. In this manner all can use the park without fear of stray balls and noise from boisterous play. However, viewed through the lens of a spectrum which allows for multiple contradictory simultaneous and often interrelated realities, encouraging us to acknowledge even those processes which appear to contest cohesion, we might understand things differently and ask some critical and important questions. Certainly, in some places cohesion might be promoted by encouraging a range of experiences beyond soccer. Possibly this is a result of strong collaboration among the group of picnic-goers. At the same time, what of the soccer players? If their activity has been expelled from the park in a way so have they. Thus, we might find there is some exclusion going on. Further, who are the soccer players and who are the picnic-goers? In the case of Pieter Roos Park, the answers to these questions demonstrate the public space as a forum for historical and spatial issues of access, transformation, race and power (Middelmann, 2022).

The contestation between relatively wealthy, white members of resident's associations and black youth from Hillbrow and Berea is important in a number of ways, showing how different types of conflict can have varying outcomes regarding cohesion. These relate to power, and to the historically embedded racism that Manning (2004) identifies as manifesting in and through architecture and public space. As written elsewhere on this particular example: "resulting conflicts between the Hillbrow-based soccer teams, mostly black, and the Parktown-based park users, mostly white, demonstrated how tension between inner-city residents and Parktown residents manifested in and through Pieter Roos Park. This recalls the largely class- and location-based tensions between residents of Parktown and Hillbrow during the apartheid period, although in the post-apartheid period these were much more driven by racial tension. As a proposed solution, the PA advocated for landscaping to create bumps that would reduce the possibility of soccer games. By 2005, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ) had acted in the favor of Parktown residents, despite the park being largely intended to serve Hillbrow and Berea (Middelmann, 2022: 19)."

In line with the above, in both cases, the picnickers and soccer players come from different socioeconomic classes, different generations, and different cultural backgrounds with divergent views on acceptable

and enjoyable public activities, and so it is important to take note of power asymmetries linked to class, race, or cultural tension and how these relate to history and the South African public realm. Finally, what do the picnic and soccer games respectively achieve? Perhaps the picnic allows respective groups to use the park for leisure, while the ball game brings together different people who happen to arrive at the park, regulars and strangers alike. Thus we might experience the subversion of cohesion in favor of a superficial and shallow form of inclusion that is actually exclusive. The examples discussed here are not intended to be exhaustive either for types of public space in Johannesburg (or beyond) or for the range of experiences within them, but rather to give some empirical detail that informed our arguments about the importance of thinking through public space using the idea of a spectrum.

Why a spectrum?

The imperative to think differently about the relationship between cohesion and public space emerges from a key finding in our data and analysis. If, per Lefebvre (1991), space is socially produced and socially produces in turn, and if relationships are triadic rather than dichotomous (allowing for simultaneous complexity rather than mutual-exclusivity), the implications for the assumption of cohesive public space are important. In our research, we observed that policy usually frames public space as agency-laden. This imagines public space as solely capable of, *and* responsible for effecting cohesion to the exclusion of other sources of power and change which often work very differently and with more impact. Instead, we propose a triadic understanding of normative spatial transformation which requires balancing (a) the agency of space against (b) the often more powerful agency of people, and (c) the quality of space as an amplifier where people's decisions and spatial practices have a significant impact on the norms which impact public space and are in turn reproduced through space (Middelmann, 2020; Rawhani, 2021).

When we approach the outcomes of our data analysis through this notion two key points are clarified. First, this reveals that when we assume public space is cohesive and frame policy around that assumption we fail to recognise what 'other' than cohesion is going on. Thus contestation, conflict, tension, and other important processes are rendered invisible and we may even entrench them through this invisibility. Second, we fail to understand the complexity of cohesion and the range of experiences necessary for its realization, particularly the potential for contestation and conflict to work against entrenched norms like fragmentation and inequality which counter cohesion, creating pathways towards cohesive space. While our work is rooted in Johannesburg, we present this argument because of its potential applicability in unequal and/or post-segregation spaces around the world (Jansen et al., 2006).

In summary, if we adopt a triadic framing of public space and cohesion we learn not only to account for the agency of space but the agency of the actors within space and the amplifying quality of public space whereby particular decisions by particular actors may set the tone for a complex set of coexisting normative qualities. Thus, at the center of the agency of space, the agency of people, and the idea of space as an amplifier, we locate the cohesion-contestation spectrum. This acknowledges multiple simultaneous, often mutually-reinforcing and not entirely separate, norms operating at various levels of power and influence.

The cohesion-contestation spectrum

The cohesion-contestation spectrum is both a concept for understanding as well as a tool for explaining public space and cohesion. Rather than a finalized product, it is a concept in development, and we present it here both for its current usefulness in understanding complexity in public space and for refining it through further scholarly exchange. We don't aim at an exhaustive explanation of cohesion or contestation in isolation, rather focussing on the interplay of factors that make up the spectrum. Cohesive public space, whether having actually achieved this normative status or only aspirationally so, cannot be planned or understood without comprehending the simultaneous coexistence of cohesion, conflict, contestation, collaboration, inclusion, fragmentation, and tension. Many more qualities may come to be added to this list of characteristics of public spaces, those who use them, and the interactions within and between these

groups. This is our core argument and the foundation of the spectrum.

These coexisting qualities are often mutually-reinforcing, at odds with one another, or coinciding in parallel, for example queues for buses at Gandhi Square simultaneously manifest new social contact and forms of integration as well as becoming forums for racist attitudes. Though it is not yet clear *why* this is so, their simultaneous coexistence in all their multiple iterations is definitively generative. This resonates strongly with more recent and progressive analyses of public space's multiplicities, which seem much more useful to us as researchers than exclusively focusing on cohesion (Qian, 2020). By this, we mean that a particular dynamic is generated through the interplay of simultaneous multiple publics, rather than simply one which is either cohesive or not yet cohesive. This in turn impacts the idealization (in terms of normative aspirations for cohesion) and experience of public space, as in the examples shared in the course of our case study. When we restrict ourselves to understanding public space and cohesion as points on a linear continuum ranging from completely fragmented to perfectly cohesive we are inevitably disappointed with any space which we analyze. Why? Because such approaches have little grounding in the real urban everyday. Thus, they fail to acknowledge it and account for it. Subsequently, our assessment of public spaces against the aspiration for cohesion is bound to be reductive, simplistic, and perhaps negative or disillusioned in its outlook because of this. Instead, we propose moving toward assessing public space and the potential for social cohesion through the lens of the cohesion-contestation spectrum. This name must not be taken to imply a polarized dichotomy. Rather, it points toward two examples of qualities often dichotomized which we seek to reframe within the notion of a spectrum, as indicated in the following figure:

As we alluded to in discussing our methods and data, coding our case work yielded insight into numerous incidents and manifestations which we might group under cohesion, but many which were somehow not yet cohesion and more akin to collaboration or inclusion. Further differentiated from cohesion, some of the experiences, codes, and concepts that we noted were better summarized under ideas like tension, fragmentation, contestation, tolerance, or even conflict. As such, the spectrum represents our

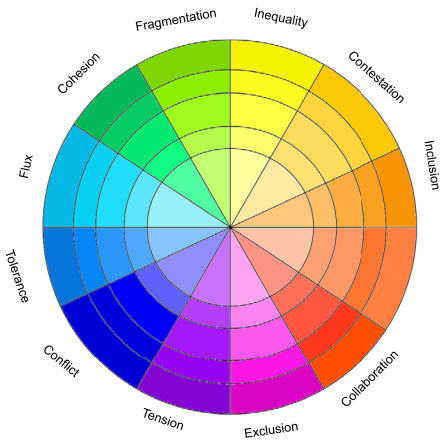


Fig. 2 The cohesion-contestation spectrum (authors's drawing)

attempts to raise our level of analysis from the micro-level specificities of our case, to the more general conceptual level at which ideas like cohesion sit.

For the purposes of demonstrating, a few qualities of space are listed alongside cohesion and contestation in Fig. 2, though in reality the number would far exceed what is representable here, and is likely to organically change and evolve depending on the space analyzed. In developing the metaphor of a spectrum of color, one would ordinarily not think of green and orange as more or less yellow, or as mutually exclusive. Instead, various colors might coexist in different ratios to produce a range of hues. Similarly, thinking of public spaces and those who use them as more or less cohesive is reductive as it blinds us to the richness of what is going on and what cohesion, or the aspirational journey toward achieving it may truly entail. Along this vein it is important to note that the concepts listed in different parts of the circular spectrum are not necessarily distinct ideas, but interrelated processes which we see as overlapping parts of one whole that all meet in the center of the circle, rather than separate components of a puzzle which can be analyzed independently of one another.

Additionally, we intend for this spectrum to be read as still open-ended. The qualities that populate the spectrum are not intended as an exhaustive list, rather an indication of key qualities that emerged from our grounded research and engagements with theory. As such, there is space on the spectrum for other qualities

to be included, and to reflect the possible overlaps between these qualities. This is part of our intention for this spectrum to be workshopped through use by other researchers and practitioners. Thus, we suggest that mapping out co-occurring qualities in the style of a spectrum gives us richer insights into what happens where we assume cohesion will unfold, what looks like cohesion but isn't, and what appears to threaten cohesion but contributes to its realization instead.

Conclusion

As South African researchers and users of South African public space, we found ourselves confronted by a paradox. While policies and literature portray public space as potentially or even automatically cohesive, nuances in the literature which indicate the contested nature of public space do not reflect in the policy norms surrounding cohesive public space. We argue that assuming the agency of people as tending towards cohesion and that the agency of space is enough to ensure this because it is necessarily similarly cohesive, is incorrect. Likewise, assuming the primacy of the agency of space is misleading. This dichotomy of relationships requires a third element, the understanding of space as an amplifier of the norms people chose or appear forced to practice which exist beyond public space, i.e. how broader societal factors impact on daily experiences of particular spaces. This imparts the necessity of acknowledging the existence of contestation and conflict alongside cohesion and collaboration in public space, and allows for a more accurate and subsequently more effective understanding of public space, particularly in the post-segregation context. Thus, we propose the cohesion-contestation spectrum as an original emerging tool, an analytic inroad for interrogating public space.

Contestation must be regarded not only at site-level, and managed in a way that reduces the conflict for a limited form of social cohesion, but must be examined in how it relates to broader historical, spatial, and cultural issues. Public spaces need to be spaces where people can reimagine space outside eurocentric archetypes and acceptable behaviors rooted in past injustice, and for deeper forms of cohesion to emerge. Perhaps, contestation needs to be facilitated in public spaces rather than quelled at the whims of largely white residents' associations.

Our case studies, in addition to the examples described above, demonstrate the embeddedness of contestation in public space, in some ways related to broader spatial and socio-economic inequalities and historical-cultural factors. They suggest a complex interplay between cohesion and contestation. Utilizing the spectrum allows an appreciation of the simultaneity of apparently opposing forces, which we argue allows a clearer, more realistic understanding of public space, necessitating examination of how history, inequality and other factors impact on experiences of public space. While dominant policy and theory may show elements of contestation to undermine goals of cohesion, the spectrum allows us to explore how various factors overlap and interrelate to produce complex processes and outcomes in and through public space. Lefebvre's (1991) understanding of spatial forces as separate but interacting and not distinct helps drive our application of the spectrum here. Part of the suggestion of the case of Gandhi Square, when read alongside our other cases and through the spectrum, is that individual public spaces are unlikely to ever facilitate or demonstrate only one of contestation and cohesion. The implication is that the different aspects of the spectrum are present in any public space in a constant interplay. By focussing on that interplay, it becomes more possible to develop analyses of public space that respond more directly to the complex, open-ended realities inherent in public space.

A few key questions aimed at sparking dialogue follow from this assertion. Are the public spaces which we hope to be inclusive and cohesive truly so, or are there examples of such spaces becoming amplifiers for old inherited norms which haven't been addressed, and why? Acknowledging the agency of those who use space, do members of the public(s) in countries like South Africa actually *want* cohesion, and in what ways? And how can we better understand the potentially generative quality of contestation in the pursuit of cohesion, especially in places with pervasive inequality and injustice? The task of further developing the spectrum and demonstrating its strength by applying it to cases interpretively remains an important one for future research. In line with this, we encourage researchers, policy-makers, planners and practitioners of public space to start with

an acknowledgment of this simultaneous multiplicity expressed in the spectrum as a starting point for researching and analyzing public space.

Acknowledgements We would like to thank Professor Mfaniseni Sihlongonyane of the Wits School of Architecture and Planning for his close read of previous drafts of this paper. The mentorship and guidance provided are much appreciated. We would also like to thank colleagues who attended our presentations at WiSER's seminar series, and the Faces of the City, for providing insightful feedback and useful provocations. The authors acknowledge the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD), as the funders of the Wits-TUB-UNILAG Urban Lab, the National Research Foundation of South Africa (NRF) as the funders of the Spatial Justice and Urban Resilience project, as well as the Life in the City scholarship program at the Wits School of Governance and the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies respectively. Finally, we acknowledge the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand (Johannesburg, South Africa) where Postdoctoral positions and visiting fellowships allowed for the completion of this research and its early stages of writeup, as well as the University of Western Cape for continued support through revisions and editing.

Author contributions CR: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Lead on writing; Review & editing. TM: Conceptualization; Data curation; Formal analysis; Investigation; Methodology; Project administration; Collaboration on writing; Review & editing.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The authors are not aware of any other competing interests to declare.

Ethical approval The research referred to in this paper is covered by Wits ethics protocol H19/04/22 (valid from 22 May 2019 to 21 May 2022) and H17/11/33 (valid from 17 November 2017 to 4 December 2020).

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