

A Bibliometric Review of Global Research Trends on Designing Inclusive Public Spaces

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1 ABSTRACT

This bibliometric review examines global and international research trends on designing inclusive public spaces, with a focus on participatory approaches to improving accessibility and inclusivity in marginalized areas. Utilizing bibliometric analysis through VOSviewer, the study identifies key themes, methodologies, and conceptual frameworks shaping the discourse on inclusive urban design. It explores the influence of international guidelines, such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals and Universal Design Principles, in driving innovative approaches to urban accessibility and participatory planning. The review maps collaboration networks, keyword co-occurrences, and citation trends to provide a comprehensive understanding of the global research landscape. Case studies from diverse geographical contexts illustrate how participatory practices have been adapted to address unique social, cultural, and economic challenges. By situating South African townships within this global research framework, the paper highlights opportunities and challenges in applying international best practices to local contexts. This study contributes to the broader dialogue on inclusive urban development by synthesizing global research insights and offering recommendations for future applications in marginalized areas.

Keywords: Sustainable Development Goals, Participatory Urban Design, Inclusive Public Spaces, Bibliometric review, Planning

2 INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The design of inclusive public spaces has become a critical focus in contemporary urban development, reflecting global efforts to create environments that are accessible, equitable, and responsive to diverse user needs. International frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11, emphasize the importance of inclusive, safe, and sustainable cities. Additionally, the principles of Universal Design advocate for spaces that accommodate all individuals, ensuring social integration and spatial justice. However, despite growing international discourse on urban inclusivity, there remains a significant gap in understanding how participatory design approaches are shaping this field and how they can be effectively adapted to marginalized and historically underserved communities. A key challenge in advancing inclusive urban development lies in the fragmented understanding of global research trends on participatory urban design. While existing studies highlight the benefits of participatory planning in fostering inclusivity (Keeton, 2020), there has been no comprehensive bibliometric analysis of how research in this field has evolved over time. Furthermore, much of the scholarship on inclusive public spaces has been concentrated in high-income countries, with limited attention to low-income and informal urban settings, particularly in the Global South.

In South Africa, case studies such as Asiye eTafuleni in Durban (Lees & Dobson, 2021) and community-led placemaking initiatives in townships (Mafame & Horn, 2025) have demonstrated the transformative potential of participatory design. However, a systematic review of global research trends and how they inform local implementation remains underexplored. This study fills a critical gap by conducting a bibliometric review of global research trends on designing inclusive public spaces, focusing on participatory approaches. Unlike previous research that examines individual case studies or conceptual frameworks in isolation, this study will provide a data-driven synthesis of the dominant themes, methodologies, and collaborative networks shaping the discourse. By utilizing bibliometric tools such as VOSviewer, the study will map global research clusters, analyze key citation patterns, and explore the influence of international frameworks such as the SDGs and Universal Design Principles on scholarly output. The primary objective of this study is to conduct a bibliometric review to systematically map global research trends on participatory approaches to designing inclusive public spaces. In addition to mapping global research trends, this study intends to develop a conceptual framework based on the insights derived from the bibliometric analysis. By systematically

reviewing the dominant themes, methodologies, and theoretical underpinnings identified in the literature, the study will synthesize key principles that define participatory approaches to designing inclusive public spaces. This conceptual framework will serve as a structured lens for understanding how participatory urban design can be effectively implemented, particularly in marginalized areas such as South African townships. It will integrate global best practices with localized contextual factors, offering a model that can guide future research and policy interventions. Ultimately, the framework will provide a foundation for scholars, urban planners, and policymakers to critically engage with participatory design principles in ways that are adaptable, inclusive, and responsive to diverse urban challenges.

3 GLOBAL PERSPECTIVES ON INCLUSIVE PUBLIC SPACE DESIGN

The discourse on inclusive public spaces has gained momentum in global urban development, driven by frameworks such as the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 11, which calls for inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable cities (United Nations, 2015). The concept of universal design has also played a crucial role in shaping urban accessibility, emphasizing the need for environments that accommodate all individuals, regardless of their physical, cognitive, or social abilities (Imrie and Luck, 2021). Scholarly work highlights that participatory approaches to urban design are essential for fostering inclusivity, ensuring that public spaces reflect the needs and experiences of diverse users (Aelbrecht and Stevens, 2020). Participatory design methods, such as co-design workshops and citizen assemblies, have been increasingly integrated into urban planning processes to promote democratic engagement and social equity (Gehl, 2021). Research by Buser et al. (2021) emphasizes that participatory urbanism enhances spatial justice by allowing underrepresented groups to influence decision-making processes in public space development. Barcelona's Superblocks project is a leading global example of inclusive public space transformation. Initially implemented in response to urban congestion and pollution, this initiative reclaims street space for pedestrians, cyclists, and public activities (Rueda, 2020). The participatory planning approach involved consultations with local residents to ensure the redesigned spaces met the needs of different user groups, including people with disabilities, elderly residents, and children. The project demonstrates how inclusive urban design, combined with participatory governance, can enhance public space accessibility and social cohesion.

Despite the progress made, global studies acknowledge the challenges of sustaining participatory approaches in urban development, particularly in rapidly urbanizing regions where socio-economic disparities persist (Watson, 2020). These challenges necessitate context-specific strategies that align global best practices with local urban realities. In the African context, inclusive public space design is increasingly recognized as a key strategy for addressing spatial inequalities and historical legacies of segregation (Pieterse, 2021). Many cities across the continent face challenges related to informality, inadequate infrastructure, and exclusionary urban policies that limit access to well-designed public spaces for marginalized populations (Harrison, 2020). Participatory urban design in Africa is often linked to grassroots initiatives that empower local communities to take an active role in shaping their environments (Turok & Scheba, 2021). The concept of "placemaking" has been particularly influential in African cities, fostering collective ownership of public spaces through bottom-up interventions. The Nairobi Greenline Project, a collaborative initiative between civil society organizations and the Nairobi City Council, is an example of inclusive public space creation in Africa. The project aimed to restore and preserve green spaces in the city while providing recreational areas for diverse socio-economic groups (Mwau & Smit, 2020). By engaging local communities in tree-planting activities, design workshops, and decision-making processes, the initiative successfully integrated participatory methods into urban green space development. This case underscores the importance of community involvement in fostering inclusive and sustainable public spaces in African cities. Despite such efforts, urban development policies in many African cities remain top-down, limiting the extent to which participatory approaches can be institutionalized in formal planning processes (Parnell & Robinson, 2021). This calls for a rethinking of governance models to better incorporate local knowledge and grassroots activism in urban planning.

In the context of South Africa, urban landscape remains deeply shaped by apartheid-era spatial planning, which resulted in highly segregated and unequal cities (Todes et al., 2020). While post-apartheid policies have sought to promote spatial integration and inclusive urban development, many public spaces, particularly in townships and informal settlements, continue to suffer from neglect, poor infrastructure, and inadequate

safety measures (Landman, 2021). Participatory approaches to urban design have gained traction in South Africa as a means of addressing historical spatial injustices and fostering more inclusive city-making (Charlton & Meth, 2021). However, these efforts have often been challenged by bureaucratic inefficiencies, limited funding, and a lack of institutional support for grassroots initiatives (Bremner, 2020). A good case study of participatory urbanism that is community-centric is the example that was made reference to in earlier parts of this paper, namely Asiye eTafuleni which is a non-profit organisation in the City of eThekweni, also known as Durban in the Kwa-Zulu Natal province of South Africa. The name Asiye eTafuleni is an isiZulu phrase that translates to "bringing to the table" in English. The name reflects the organization's mission of inclusivity and participation, particularly in advocating for the rights and needs of marginalized communities. The organization has successfully implemented participatory planning initiatives to improve informal trading spaces and public areas for marginalized communities. Working closely with street traders, the initiative has developed co-designed infrastructure, such as shaded trading stalls, public seating, and improved pedestrian pathways (Dobson & Skinner, 2020). By centering the voices of informal workers in the design process, Asiye eTafuleni has demonstrated the potential of participatory urbanism in fostering inclusive and economically vibrant public spaces. Despite these successes, the integration of participatory approaches into mainstream urban planning in South Africa remains inconsistent. Many township and urban areas still lack well-maintained public spaces, exacerbating social exclusion and limiting opportunities for community engagement (Mabin, 2021). This highlights the need for a more systematic approach to inclusive urban design, informed by both global best practices and locally grounded participatory frameworks.

While significant research has been conducted on participatory urban design and inclusive public spaces, there remains a gap in systematically analyzing how these approaches have evolved globally and how they can be effectively adapted to marginalized contexts such as South African townships. This study aims to address this gap by conducting a bibliometric analysis of existing literature to identify dominant themes, knowledge networks, and methodological approaches. Based on the insights gained from the bibliometric review, the study will develop a conceptual framework that integrates global best practices with localized contextual factors. This framework will serve as a guide for policymakers, urban planners, and researchers, providing structured principles for implementing participatory design in public spaces across different socio-economic and cultural settings. By bridging the gap between theory and practice, the framework will contribute to a more inclusive, evidence-based approach to urban design in marginalized communities.

4 METHODOLOGY

This study employs a bibliometric analysis to examine global research trends on inclusive public spaces and participatory urban design. Bibliometric analysis is a quantitative research method used to evaluate the intellectual structure, research impact, and knowledge networks in a particular field (Donthu et al., 2021). This approach enables the identification of key themes, influential authors, prominent publications, and collaboration patterns shaping discourse on inclusive public space design. The Scopus database was selected as the primary source of bibliographic data due to its extensive coverage of peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and book chapters in urban studies, architecture, and social sciences (Elsevier, 2022). On 18 February 2025 a Scopus database search was conducted using the primary key search term: "Participatory AND public AND space AND design".

The inclusion criteria focused on English-language publications from any country and any year up to 2025. The exclusion criteria eliminated editorials, errata, letters, notes, short surveys, publications with unidentified authors and books, book chapters, reviews, and conference papers not published in English. The PRISMA guidelines were followed to screen titles and abstracts and ensure eligible studies were selected. The initial search yielded 950 publications. After applying the inclusion and exclusion criteria 98 publications were excluded, leaving a total of 852 eligible documents. VOSviewer was utilized to conduct the bibliometric analysis, as outlined in the figure below (Van Eck and Waltman, 2014). VOSviewer is a software tool that visually analyzes literature reviews, identifying trends, research foci, and key areas (Soegoto et al., 2022).

5 RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS OF THE BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS

The publication trend in participatory urban design, as depicted in the graph, highlights a significant rise in scholarly interest over the past two decades. From 1976 to the early 2000s, research output was minimal,

with fewer than 10 publications per year. However, from 2005 onwards, there is a noticeable upward trend, with research output accelerating around 2010 and experiencing exponential growth from 2015 to 2024. The highest number of publications occurs in 2024, with nearly 350 documents published. Interestingly, there is a sharp decline in 2025, which may be attributed to incomplete indexing, funding cycle shifts, or emerging research priorities.

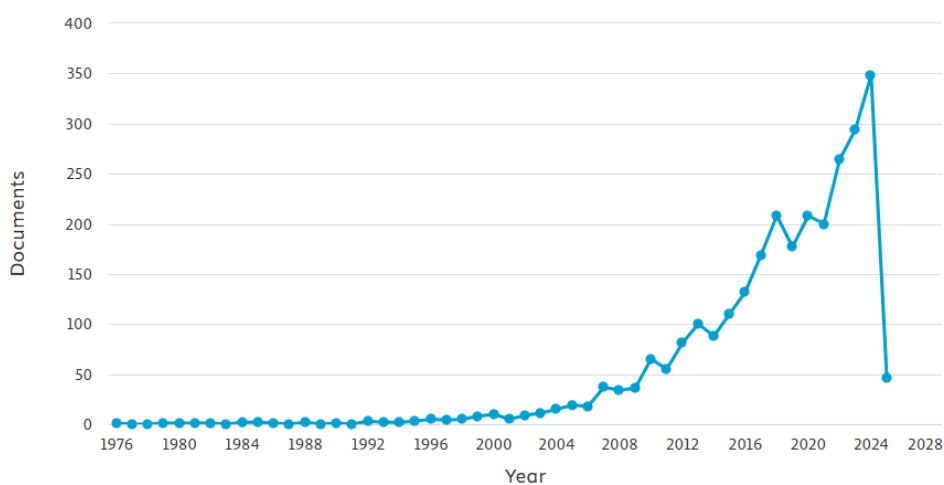


Fig. 1: Publication trend for research on participatory public space design.

This trend reflects a growing recognition of the importance of citizen engagement in urban planning and the increasing role of participatory approaches in urban governance (Frediani, 2016; Faga, 2006). The post-2010 surge aligns with global urban policies advocating for inclusive and participatory urban spaces, particularly influenced by the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11) and the New Urban Agenda (2016) (UN-Habitat, 2016). Several key factors have contributed to the growth of participatory urban design research over the years. One significant driver has been the role of global urban policies. The United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly SDG 11, emphasize making cities inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable (United Nations, 2015). Similarly, the New Urban Agenda (2016) promotes participatory governance and citizen-led urban design, encouraging greater scholarly interest in the field (UN-Habitat, 2016). These global frameworks have influenced both policy changes and academic research, positioning participatory urban design as a crucial component of urban planning and governance (Pieterse, 2019).

Another important factor is the rise of digital and smart city approaches, which have expanded the tools available for public participation in urban design. The increasing use of Geographic Information Systems (GIS), digital participatory mapping, and crowdsourcing has allowed for more effective citizen engagement in urban planning (McCall & Dunn, 2012). Additionally, the concept of smart cities and digital democracy has significantly shaped recent research trends, particularly in the last decade, as urban planning increasingly incorporates data-driven and technology-enabled participatory methods (Batty, 2018). The influence of social movements and the "Right to the City" discourse has also played a crucial role in shaping participatory urban design research. Inspired by Henri Lefebvre's (1996) theories, the "Right to the City" movement has gained momentum in urban discourse, advocating for citizen-centered urbanism (Harvey, 2012). Participatory urban design is increasingly viewed as a tool for spatial justice and urban equity, particularly in rapidly urbanizing cities of the Global South, where historically marginalized communities seek greater involvement in shaping their urban environments (Watson, 2014). Finally, the COVID-19 pandemic (2020–2022) had a profound impact on how cities approach public spaces, further driving research interest in participatory urban design. The pandemic underscored the need for inclusive urban design and walkability, prompting urban planners to explore innovative ways to involve citizens in shaping more resilient and adaptable urban environments (Honey-Rosés et al., 2020). The post-pandemic period (2020–2024) witnessed a surge in research on participatory urban design, as cities sought to reimagine public spaces, integrate health-conscious urban planning, and ensure equitable access to safe and inclusive spaces. This explains the sharp rise in publications in the last few years.

5.1 Keyword Analysis

The bibliometric visualization presented in the image provides an insightful mapping of key themes and conceptual linkages within the field of participatory design in urban spaces. The largest and most central node, labeled "participatory design," indicates that it is the dominant research focus, with strong connections to related concepts such as sustainability, public space, and urbanization. This suggests that participatory urban design research is deeply intertwined with broader urban sustainability and environmental planning discussions (Gehl, 2013). The color-coded clusters represent different thematic domains within participatory design research. The red cluster is strongly associated with gender and qualitative research, with prominent keywords such as "female" and "qualitative research." This signifies an increasing focus on gender-sensitive urban design and the role of women in participatory urban planning, aligning with feminist urbanism and feminist design theories (Kern, 2020). Additionally, keywords like "urban renewal" and "social aspects" suggest that researchers are exploring participatory approaches in urban regeneration projects, ensuring inclusivity and representation in urban transformation (Sandercock, 1998).

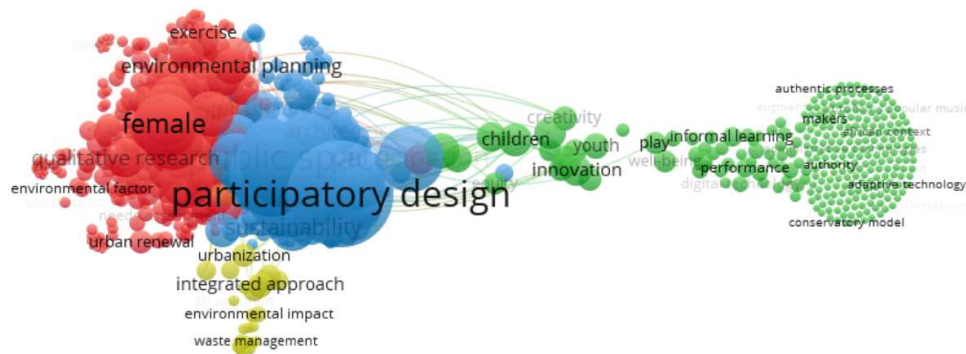


Fig. 2: Network map for keywords on research on participatory public space design.

The blue cluster is centered on sustainability, environmental planning, and integrated approaches. The strong association between "participatory design" and "sustainability" indicates that researchers are considering how inclusive design practices contribute to more resilient and adaptive urban spaces (Agyeman, 2013). Terms such as "waste management" and "environmental impact" highlight an emerging interest in ecological sustainability within participatory design frameworks, emphasizing circular economies and green urbanism (Newman et al., 2017). The green cluster focuses on youth, creativity, and innovation, highlighting participatory urban design's role in fostering child-friendly and youth-oriented urban environments. Keywords such as "children," "youth," "play," and "informal learning" suggest a growing recognition of the importance of designing public spaces that cater to younger populations, incorporating playfulness and creativity into urban design (Lester & Russell, 2010). This aligns with the shift towards child-friendly cities and participatory design methodologies that involve young people in co-creating urban spaces (Malone, 2013).

A particularly interesting aspect of the visualization is the smaller but highly connected cluster on the far right, which includes terms like "authentic processes," "makers," "digital technology," and "adaptive technology." This suggests an emerging research area where participatory design intersects with digital fabrication, maker movements, and adaptive urban technologies (Balestrini et al., 2017). The rise of digital participatory tools such as crowdsourced mapping, augmented reality, and computational design techniques is revolutionizing how urban spaces are co-created with communities (Batty, 2018).

The bibliometric network analysis reflects key contemporary debates in participatory urban design and demonstrates how the field has evolved to incorporate gender equity, sustainability, youth engagement, and digital innovation. The prominence of feminist and gender-sensitive approaches underscores the growing awareness of inclusive urbanism and the need to address historical gender biases in planning (Kern, 2020). Additionally, the strong connections between sustainability and participatory design indicate that researchers are prioritizing climate resilience, ecological planning, and community-led environmental governance (Agyeman, 2013). Moreover, the intersection of youth, play, and innovation within participatory design reveals an increasing emphasis on public spaces as sites of informal learning and creativity, which aligns with global trends in child-friendly and youth-inclusive urban planning (Malone, 2013). Lastly, the growing

presence of digital participatory tools and adaptive technologies points to the future of participatory urban design, where data-driven and technology-enhanced engagement methods will likely shape how cities involve residents in decision-making processes (Batty, 2018). Overall, the bibliometric trends indicate that participatory urban design is becoming increasingly interdisciplinary, integrating social, environmental, technological, and governance dimensions. Future research should continue exploring how these diverse elements interact, ensuring that participatory urban design remains a dynamic and inclusive framework for shaping equitable and sustainable cities.

5.2 Top countries publishing on participatory public space design

Participatory public space design is a growing area of research that intersects urban planning, architecture, environmental psychology, and social sustainability. The global distribution of research output in this field varies, with certain countries emerging as leaders in publication volume, citation impact, and collaboration networks. The table provides insight into the top ten countries contributing to this discourse, highlighting their research intensity, influence, and interconnectivity in the scholarly landscape.

Country	Documents	Citations	Total Link Strength
United Kingdom	140	1720	105
United States	164	2860	70
Spain	70	606	49
Sweden	36	1098	41
Netherlands	45	903	38
Australia	66	1050	35
Canada	54	630	35
Germany	39	766	33
Italy	83	641	33
Switzerland	12	395	33

Table 1: Top countries publishing on participatory public space design

The United States emerges as the most cited country, with 164 documents and 2860 citations, indicating its strong academic influence. The U.S. has a long history of community-based urban design initiatives, driven by movements such as New Urbanism and Tactical Urbanism (Lydon & Garcia, 2015). Scholars and institutions in the country have contributed extensively to placemaking strategies, community-led urban regeneration, and digital participation tools in urban planning (Mehta, 2019). Despite leading in citations, its total link strength of 70 suggests moderate international collaboration compared to the United Kingdom and Spain, reflecting a more nationally focused research agenda. The United Kingdom, with 140 publications and 1720 citations, stands out as a dominant contributor to participatory public space design research. Its total link strength of 105, the highest in the dataset, highlights extensive international collaboration. British research institutions focus on inclusive urban design, participatory governance, and sustainable urban spaces (Carmona, 2019). The UK's policy-driven approach, particularly through initiatives like the Town and Country Planning Association (TCPA), has contributed to a high degree of engagement with European and Global South scholars (Healey, 2010). Similarly, Spain, with 70 publications and 606 citations, has gained prominence in sustainable urbanism and citizen engagement in smart cities. Barcelona's pioneering Superblocks initiative is a globally recognized model of participatory urbanism that integrates community engagement into urban mobility and green space planning (Muñoz, 2018).

Sweden, despite having only 36 documents, has received 1098 citations, reflecting a high research impact. Swedish research is characterized by human-centered urbanism, child-friendly city planning, and social sustainability (Marcus & Colding, 2014). Scholars in Sweden contribute significantly to discussions on inclusive urban governance, green space co-creation, and participatory environmental planning (Stenberg, 2020). The Netherlands, with 45 documents and 903 citations, has also been at the forefront of living labs and experimental participatory urbanism. Cities like Amsterdam and Rotterdam are recognized for co-designing urban spaces with communities, integrating smart technologies, and testing participatory governance models (de Waal & Dignum, 2017). Australia, with 66 documents and 1050 citations, actively engages in participatory placemaking, indigenous-led urbanism, and resilient city planning (Steele & Legacy, 2017). Australian scholars emphasize bottom-up urbanism, participatory public art, and climate-adaptive design, often incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems into urban development frameworks (Porter,

2016). Similarly, Canada, with 54 documents and 630 citations, has made notable contributions to community-based public space design and participatory governance (Lehrer & Keil, 2019). Canadian research focuses on urban commons, participatory digital tools, and co-creation methods for equitable urban spaces, particularly in cities like Toronto and Vancouver.

Germany’s 39 documents and 766 citations highlight a focus on participatory sustainability planning and citizen involvement in smart cities (Schäfer & Keppler, 2021). German research often explores green urban planning, digital participatory governance, and ecological urbanism, with Berlin leading in experimental participatory urban projects. Italy, with 83 publications and 641 citations, has a strong tradition of historical urbanism and participatory public space design in heritage sites (Rizzo & Thiel, 2017). Italian scholars emphasize adaptive reuse of historical urban spaces and community engagement in architectural conservation projects. Switzerland, though having only 12 publications, has 395 citations and a total link strength of 33, suggesting that its research is highly collaborative and impactful. Swiss research institutions focus on resilient urban planning, participatory environmental design, and climate-responsive public spaces (Blöchliger, 2020). Overall, the data highlights key trends in participatory public space design research. The Anglo-American dominance is evident, with the United States and the United Kingdom leading in citations and research collaboration, while European nations excel in experimental sustainability models. Australia and Canada bring strong Indigenous and community-led perspectives, and Switzerland, though smaller in volume, contributes significantly to resilient and climate-adaptive urban design. Future research should emphasize cross-regional collaboration to ensure that participatory urban design remains an inclusive and globally relevant field.

5.3 Top authors publishing on participatory public space design

The research landscape in participatory public space design is shaped by a group of scholars who contribute to critical themes such as digital participation, sustainability, and urban co-design.

Author	Documents	Citations	Total Link Strength
Olivier, Patrick	5	87	13
Boulanger, Pierre	3	56	12
Schofield, Guy	3	56	12
Shearer, John	3	56	12
Taylor, Robyn	3	56	12
Amato, Federico	3	27	9
Graziadei, Antonio	3	27	9
Murgante, Beniamino	3	27	9
Sassano, Gerardo	3	27	9
Soares, Isabelle	4	52	8

Table 2: Top countries publishing on participatory public space design

Patrick Olivier is one of the leading scholars in participatory public space design, with five publications, 87 citations, and a total link strength of 13. His work primarily focuses on human-computer interaction (HCI) and digital participation in urban design. Olivier’s research investigates how digital technologies, such as smart city infrastructures, participatory mapping, and crowdsourced urban planning, can enhance community engagement in shaping public spaces (Olivier & Wright, 2015). His contributions align with smart urbanism and civic technology, emphasizing co-creation methodologies that empower local communities to influence urban planning decisions (Batty, 2018). Pierre Boulanger, Guy Schofield, John Shearer, and Robyn Taylor each have three publications, 56 citations, and a total link strength of 12. Their research collectively explores technological innovations in participatory public space design, integrating digital tools, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR) in community-driven urban planning. Their work contributes to discussions on immersive design techniques, where digital modeling and simulation are used to visualize community proposals for public space improvements (Boulanger et al., 2017). These authors are part of an emerging scholarly discourse on playable cities, a concept that integrates digital interaction and urban gamification to encourage public participation (Schofield et al., 2018).

Amato, Graziadei, Murgante, and Sassano each have three publications, 27 citations, and a total link strength of 9. Their contributions focus on sustainable urban planning, adaptive reuse of public spaces, and participatory resilience strategies. Their research examines how community engagement can shape climate-

adaptive urban spaces, particularly in European cities where historical preservation and modern sustainability principles intersect (Amato et al., 2019). Their work aligns with theories of ecological urbanism (Mostafavi & Doherty, 2016) and resilient urban governance (Ahern, 2011), emphasizing how participatory methods enhance environmental sustainability in urban design. Isabelle Soares, with four publications, 52 citations, and a total link strength of 8, focuses on gender-sensitive participatory planning, particularly in the Global South. Her research critically examines how urban spaces can be co-created to address the needs of women, children, and marginalized communities, drawing from feminist urbanism and intersectionality theory (Fainstein, 2010). Soares' work highlights how participatory approaches can challenge traditional, male-dominated urban planning paradigms, advocating for safe, inclusive, and accessible public spaces (Soares et al., 2020). Her contributions are particularly relevant to debates on feminist mobility and spatial justice, aligning with Lefebvre's (1996) concept of the Right to the City.

6 REFLECTION ON FINDINGS

While the bibliometric analysis provides a comprehensive overview of publication trends, keyword networks, and global research contributions in participatory urban design, it is essential to deepen the interpretative value by linking these findings to key theoretical and methodological developments in the field. This section critically reflects on the observed trends and their implications for participatory urban design research and practice. The observed rise in scholarly output post-2010 aligns with major global urban policy shifts, such as the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11) and the New Urban Agenda (UN-Habitat, 2016). However, beyond policy alignment, the exponential increase in publications between 2015 and 2024 suggests an epistemological shift in how participation is conceptualized in urban design. The early phases of participatory design research predominantly focused on community engagement as a normative good (Arnstein, 1969; Faga, 2006). However, post-2015, there is a discernible pivot towards digital participation, data-driven co-design, and resilience-focused urbanism (Batty, 2018; Balestrini et al., 2017). This transformation reflects a broader movement from abstract participatory ideals to technology-enhanced, evidence-based urban design methodologies.

Additionally, the sudden decline in 2025 publications suggests potential research fatigue or a shift in funding and policy priorities. Analyzing the nature of recent publications can provide insights into whether participatory urban design is plateauing as a field or evolving into new sub-domains, such as AI-driven participatory planning or post-pandemic spatial justice frameworks. The keyword co-occurrence analysis reveals a strong clustering around sustainability, gender, youth engagement, and digital urbanism. This suggests that participatory urban design is no longer a singular field but an intersectional domain engaging with social equity, environmental planning, and digital governance. However, gaps remain evident such as:

- The relatively smaller presence of keywords related to informal urbanism and the Global South indicates an underrepresentation of participatory methodologies tailored to non-Western urban contexts (Watson, 2014; Parnell and Pieterse, 2014).
- Despite the prominence of gender-sensitive urban design, feminist urbanism remains a niche sub-domain, often overshadowed by broader discussions on inclusivity and social sustainability (Kern, 2020).
- Emerging research on participatory smart cities and digital co-creation points to an increasing reliance on technology in urban planning, yet critical debates on digital divide and participatory exclusion remain limited (Balestrini et al., 2017).

The bibliometric findings highlight a growing emphasis on interdisciplinary and transdisciplinary approaches in participatory urban design research. The prominence of scholars integrating geographic information systems (GIS), digital ethnography, and computational modeling suggests that methodological advancements are shaping research impact and scholarly influence (McCall and Dunn, 2012; Batty, 2018). However, the variation in citation impact across different regions indicates that methodological sophistication alone does not drive research influence – policy relevance, institutional backing, and socio-political context play critical roles in determining the uptake of participatory research outputs. For instance, the high citation count of Swedish and Dutch research correlates with strong government-university partnerships in experimental urbanism (Marcus and Colding, 2014; de Waal and Dignum, 2017). Meanwhile, research outputs from the Global South, despite their practical relevance, often remain under-cited due to limited integration into

global knowledge networks (Pieterse, 2019). This underscores the need for stronger collaborative frameworks that enhance the visibility and impact of participatory urban design research from diverse geopolitical contexts

7 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS: CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK FOR PARTICIPATORY PUBLIC SPACE DESIGN

In conclusion, this study has demonstrated the growing significance of participatory approaches in designing inclusive public spaces, particularly in the context of urban environments that have historically been marginalized, such as townships in South Africa. The bibliometric analysis provides valuable insights into the evolution of research on participatory urban design, revealing trends that reflect a broader global shift toward inclusive, sustainable, and citizen-driven urban planning. The surge in publications, particularly after 2010, reflects increasing recognition of the role of participatory design in fostering more equitable and resilient urban environments. Despite this progress, challenges remain in adapting global research to local contexts, particularly in the Global South, where socio-economic disparities and historical legacies of exclusion continue to shape urban landscapes. This study contributes to bridging this gap by offering a conceptual framework that integrates global best practices with localized participatory approaches. The framework developed herein provides a structured lens through which urban planners, policymakers, and researchers can approach the design of inclusive public spaces, ensuring that they are accessible, equitable, and responsive to the needs of marginalized communities. Ultimately, the future of participatory urban design lies in its ability to adapt to the evolving needs of cities, particularly in addressing the intersections of social equity, environmental sustainability, and technological innovation. By fostering deeper collaboration across disciplines and geographies, and by prioritizing inclusivity in urban planning processes, cities worldwide can build public spaces that not only serve their current populations but also contribute to more just and sustainable urban futures.

Furthremore, considering the key themes that emerged from the network maps as well as the focus of the top authors in this research field and the gaps, a conceptual framework for participatory public space design is proposed. The proposed conceptual framework for participatory public space design emphasizes the integration of digital technologies, sustainability, inclusivity, and community-driven processes to create urban spaces that are adaptable, resilient, and equitable.



Fig 3: Conceptual framework for participatory public space design

The first key principle focuses on participatory digital technologies as tools for co-creation. The objective is to facilitate meaningful, real-time engagement through digital platforms that actively integrate local knowledge and community preferences into the design process. Techniques such as immersive design tools like virtual reality (VR), augmented reality (AR), and participatory mapping can allow communities to visualize potential changes and contribute to co-designing public spaces, ensuring that their voices are heard and incorporated (Zhao et al., 2021; Kitchin, 2014). The second principle, sustainability and resilience

through community-driven design, advocates for incorporating environmental sustainability and resilience strategies, particularly to adapt public spaces to the challenges posed by climate change. The objective is to foster adaptive urban spaces that are both environmentally sustainable and resilient, with the community playing a crucial role in proposing solutions. This approach draws from ecological urbanism and resilience governance, which emphasize the importance of community-led adaptations to ensure climate-resilient spaces (Pelling, 2011; Anguelovski et al., 2016). A third important aspect is the creation of gendered and inclusive urban spaces. This principle prioritizes gender-sensitive planning and intersectional approaches to urban design to ensure the inclusion of marginalized groups, particularly women and children. The objective is to create public spaces that cater to diverse needs, ensuring safety, accessibility, and inclusivity for all. By engaging marginalized communities in the design process, this approach challenges traditional urban planning structures and advocates for spatial justice, ensuring that public spaces reflect the lived experiences of those often excluded (Healey, 2004; McFarlane, 2012).

The fourth principle revolves around collaborative and playable cities, where urban spaces are designed to encourage play, interaction, and engagement through participatory methods blending both physical and digital elements. The objective here is to foster a sense of ownership and belonging among community members by enabling them to actively participate in co-creating their urban environments. The concept of "playable cities" integrates gamification and interactive digital models to promote ongoing community involvement, making the urban environment a dynamic, participatory space that evolves with its users (Bishop & Stocker, 2019). In conclusion, this framework advocates for a holistic, inclusive approach to participatory public space design that leverages digital technologies, sustainability, gender equity, and community empowerment. By ensuring that urban spaces are not only designed with community input but also remain adaptive, resilient, and equitable, the framework creates environments where all citizens – particularly marginalized groups – can thrive. This approach to urban planning supports the creation of spaces that are socially just, sustainable, and responsive to the needs of diverse communities.

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