

## Public Space as Dynamic Heritage. Urban Regeneration, Urban Safety and Spatial Justice

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### Abstract.

*The paper proposes a reinterpretation of public space as dynamic heritage and a strategic infrastructure of the contemporary city. In response to environmental crises, socio-spatial inequalities and the growing demand for safety, a theoretical-operational model is developed that integrates vulnerability analysis, design strategies and multidimensional evaluation tools. The model is based on four key principles: ecological integration, universal accessibility, integrated urban safety and community activation. The analysis of recent European experiences in Barcelona, Rotterdam and Paris shows how public space regeneration can contribute to urban resilience, social cohesion and the promotion of spatial justice.*

**Keywords:** Public space; Urban heritage; Urban regeneration; Urban safety; Spatial justice.

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## Introduction

The contemporary city is affected by a plurality of interconnected crises, including the climate emergency, socio-spatial polarization, economic fragilities, demographic transformations and a growing perception of insecurity. These phenomena do not manifest themselves in abstract terms, but find concrete expression in the configuration and use of urban spaces. In particular, public space emerges as the place where such tensions become visible and, at the same time, as a privileged field through which structural interventions can be implemented.

Numerous studies have highlighted the role of space in the production of inequalities, interpreting the contemporary city as a territory marked by deep fractures, where the quality of public space becomes a tangible indicator of the distance between the “city of the rich” and the “city of the poor” (Secchi, 2013). Similarly, urban territories are increasingly characterized by new forms of vulnerability that require design approaches capable of integrating social, environmental and infrastructural dimensions (Viganò, 2010).

At the same time, the international debate has progressively recognized the central role of public space as a primary infrastructure of urban quality, emphasizing how the vitality of open spaces represents an essential condition for safety, social cohesion and collective well-being (Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 2017). Moreover, the World Cities Report 2020 highlights that urban sustainability requires systemic investments in collective spaces, considered fundamental drivers for climate resilience and social inclusion (UN-Habitat, 2020).

In this context, the need emerges to overcome a residual or merely aesthetic conception of public space, still common in many urban renewal practices. Public space should not be understood as a simple urban void or a decorative element, but rather as a structural device that organizes relationships, produces identity and distributes opportunities. Space can therefore be interpreted as a social product and a field of conflict, where the right to the city implies the possibility of actively participating in its transformation (Lefebvre, 2009).

This paper proposes interpreting public space as dynamic heritage, that is, as a collective material and immaterial asset in continuous evolution, whose enhancement cannot be limited to formal conservation but must be oriented towards integrated regeneration processes. In this perspective, design becomes a tool of territorial welfare<sup>1</sup> and an operational lever for the promotion of spatial justice<sup>2</sup> (Soja, 2010), in line with the most recent orientations of Italian urban regeneration policies (IFEL–Fondazione ANCI, 2023).

The aim of the article is to define a theoretical and design-oriented model capable of integrating sustainable urban regeneration, perceived safety and collaborative management, proposing operational criteria transferable to contemporary urban policies. The underlying hypothesis is that the quality and accessibility of public space represent structural conditions for overcoming socio-spatial inequalities and activating processes of environmental and social resilience.

## Public Space between the Commons and Urban Infrastructure

Interpreting public space as dynamic heritage implies a dual conceptual shift: from a physical object to a common good, and from a functional domain to an infrastructure of the ecological and social transition.

The notion of the commons allows us to overcome the rigid opposition between public and private, interpreting urban space as a relational and processual reality whose quality depends on collective care and on the capacity of communities to participate in its production and management. From this perspective, public space is not defined exclusively by legal ownership, but by the social function it performs and by its ability to generate shared practices, cohesion and inclusion (Mattei, 2012). In Italy, experiences of shared administration and urban co-governance show that collaborative management can improve the care of public spaces and promote their active use by citizens, strengthening the sense of responsibility and community belonging (Arena and Bombardelli, 2022; Iaione, 2016).

This perspective is closely connected to the concept of spatial justice, understood as the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities within urban space. The organization of the city is not neutral: the location of services, the presence of green spaces, and the quality of pedestrian infrastructures and meeting places directly affect people's living conditions (Soja, 2010). When these elements are unevenly distributed, forms of territorial injustice emerge, reinforcing social and economic disparities. The quality of public space thus becomes a tangible indicator of urban inequalities and of the capacity of policies to ensure equity and inclusion (Secchi, 2005; 2013).

The climate crisis introduces further layers of complexity. Squares, parks, ecological corridors and networks for active mobility assume a strategic environmental function for mitigating urban heat islands, managing stormwater and enhancing urban biodiversity. In this perspective, public space can be understood as a diffuse ecological infrastructure and a key component of climate adaptation strategies. Designing open space therefore requires an integrated approach capable of combining morphological quality, environmental sustainability and social inclusion, overcoming fragmented and sector-based planning logics (Carmona, 2019).

Considering public space as an infrastructure of transition means recognizing its capacity to activate systemic processes. This does not simply involve the upgrading of surfaces or street furniture, but rather the rethinking of the urban structure through integrated strategies. The most advanced European experiences<sup>3</sup> show that interventions in open spaces can generate multiplier effects, including the reduction of pollution, the increase of perceived safety, the strengthening of local networks and the activation of local economies.

In this sense, the heritage value of public space acquires a dynamic dimension. Urban heritage does not coincide exclusively with historical legacy, but also includes practices of use, collective memories and social relationships that sediment within space. Regenerating public space therefore means intervening in a complex system of material and immaterial values, adopting adaptive approaches capable of responding to emerging vulnerabilities.

Overcoming traditional conservation-based models requires the integration of environmental policies, inclusion strategies and urban safety measures, avoiding exclusively securitarian<sup>4</sup> or technocratic approaches. Public space thus becomes a privileged field for experimenting with new forms of multilevel governance and collaborative design, configuring itself as an operational lever for sustainable and inclusive urban regeneration.

### **Urban Safety and Spatial Justice**

Urban safety has become one of the main areas of tension in the design of public space. The growing perception of insecurity, fueled by social transformations, economic crises and media representations, has often oriented urban policies towards approaches centred on control and surveillance. However, such strategies risk producing counterproductive effects, intensifying processes of exclusion and spatial fragmentation.

One of the classic references in the debate on environmental safety<sup>5</sup> is the theory of *Defensible Space* (Newman, 1972), which attributes a decisive role to the physical configuration of space in crime prevention. While introducing an important reflection on the relationship between urban form and safety, this approach has sometimes been interpreted in a reductive way, favouring solutions oriented towards separation and enclosure of spaces. Similarly, the *Broken Windows* theory (Wilson and Kelling, 1982) argued that visible signs of disorder generate deviant behaviour, legitimising zero-tolerance policies and extensive control strategies.

When applied rigidly, these models may lead to a progressive privatization of public space and to the diffusion of surveillance devices that limit accessibility and diversity of use. In some contexts, such strategies can generate dynamics of exclusion that particularly affect more vulnerable social groups. In this perspective, safety risks being interpreted primarily as a tool for controlling space rather than as a factor capable of strengthening urban cohesion (Low and Smith, 2005).

An alternative perspective considers urban safety as the result of the vitality and continuous presence of people in public space, rather than the closure or separation of spaces (Jacobs, 1961). The widespread use of space, functional diversity and continuity of activities foster spontaneous forms of social control and contribute to making spaces safer and more inclusive. This approach is currently reflected in European strategies for integrated urban safety, which combine physical interventions in space with social policies and participatory governance processes.

In the European context, safety is increasingly interpreted as a component of urban quality rather than as a separate domain. The experiences of Rotterdam<sup>6</sup>, for example, show how socio-spatial regeneration programmes can simultaneously address physical degradation, social vulnerability and perceptions of insecurity through integrated interventions in public space, neighbourhood services and community activation. Safety is thus understood as the outcome of inclusive processes rather than merely the result of repressive measures.

In this perspective, the concept of spatial justice becomes central. The organization of urban space is not neutral. The distribution of resources, services and safety conditions directly affects people's life opportunities (Soja, 2010). Neighbourhoods characterised by a lack of quality public spaces, absence of services and inadequate maintenance tend to register higher levels of perceived insecurity, generating a vicious circle of marginalisation.

Overcoming the traditional securitarian paradigm<sup>7</sup> therefore requires an integrated approach capable of combining design quality and spatial care, social inclusion and functional mix, the presence of local services and activities, and the active participation of local communities.

Within this framework, urban safety is reinterpreted as a transversal dimension of sustainable regeneration. The design of public space becomes a tool of territorial prevention capable of reducing environmental and social vulnerabilities through structural rather than episodic interventions.

The challenge is to transform public space from an object of control into a platform for inclusion. This implies both a cultural and an operational shift: from emergency-based responses to adaptive planning, from functional separation to spatial permeability, and from centralized management to collaborative governance. Only in this way can safety be reconnected to a broader horizon of spatial justice, avoiding exclusionary outcomes and reinforcing the role of public space as a primary infrastructure of urban welfare.

### **Operational Model for Public Space Regeneration**

In light of the theoretical framework outlined above and of the critical issues emerging from the relationship between safety, spatial justice and ecological transition, this paper proposes an integrated operational model for public space regeneration. The model is grounded in a dynamic understanding of urban heritage and is oriented towards measurable outcomes in terms of inclusion, resilience and perceived quality.

The model is structured around three complementary methodological levels and four cross-cutting strategic principles, with the aim of providing a framework applicable to urban policies and design processes.

#### *Three Methodological Levels*

The first level concerns the critical analysis of the urban context, understood as a complex system of environmental, social and spatial vulnerabilities. Public space regeneration cannot be reduced to a purely morphological intervention; rather, it must begin with a multi-level diagnosis capable of identifying climatic vulnerabilities (such as urban heat islands, soil sealing and flood risks), social vulnerabilities (including poverty, exclusion and conflicts of use) and spatial vulnerabilities (such as lack of accessibility, fragmentation, poor lighting and inadequate maintenance).

At this stage, the integrated use of both quantitative and qualitative indicators becomes particularly relevant. These may include environmental data, socio-demographic analyses, participatory mapping and surveys on perceived safety. The perceptual dimension, often overlooked, represents

a key element in assessing the quality of public space, as it directly influences behaviours and the collective appropriation of space. Identifying these vulnerabilities makes it possible to establish priorities for intervention and to avoid standardized solutions. Each public space reflects specific territorial conditions and therefore requires adaptive strategies consistent with its context.

The second level concerns the definition of integrated design strategies capable of combining environmental, social and safety dimensions. From an environmental perspective, regeneration should prioritise nature-based solutions, such as increasing urban greenery, using permeable surfaces, providing natural shading and adopting sustainable drainage systems, all of which improve the environmental performance of public space and strengthen the resilience of urban contexts (Mussinelli et al., 2023).

From a social perspective, design should promote functional mix, flexibility of use and inclusiveness. The coexistence of different activities (cultural, commercial and recreational) enhances the vitality of public space and contributes to strengthening informal forms of safety, in line with the principle of “eyes on the street” (Jacobs, 2009). Flexibility also allows the adaptation of spaces to temporary uses and seasonal dynamics, reducing the risk of abandonment.

From the perspective of urban safety, design interventions should avoid defensive or segregating solutions. Adequate lighting, visibility, continuity of pedestrian routes and the absence of opaque visual barriers are design elements that can improve the perception of safety without compromising accessibility. In this way, safety becomes embedded within the spatial design rather than being superimposed as an external control device.

The third level concerns the multidimensional evaluation of impacts, aimed at measuring the effectiveness of interventions from a systemic perspective. In this regard, an evaluation framework is proposed, structured around three main dimensions (Tab. 1): environmental sustainability, social and inclusive quality, and perceived urban safety.

Environmental sustainability includes indicators such as the reduction of impervious surfaces, the increase of vegetation cover and improvements in microclimatic comfort. Social and inclusive quality refers to universal accessibility, diversity of space uses and the activation of community practices. Perceived urban safety includes increased use of public space, reduction of residual areas and improvements in lighting and visibility.

Evaluation should not rely solely on quantitative indicators, but should also incorporate qualitative tools such as interviews, field observations and participatory processes. The aim is to assess the capacity of regenerated public spaces to activate long-term processes of inclusion and resilience.

#### *Four Strategic Principles*

In addition to the three methodological levels, the proposed model is based on four strategic principles that guide both the design and governance of public space.

The first principle, ecological and climate integration, suggests that every intervention should contribute to the environmental transition by reducing climate impacts and strengthening urban resilience.

The second principle, universal accessibility, emphasises that public space should be designed according to criteria of equity and inclusion, ensuring usability for all categories of users regardless of age, gender or physical condition.

The third principle, integrated urban safety, highlights that safety should not be conceived merely as a repressive response or as the simple implementation of technological control devices, but rather as the outcome of careful and conscious spatial design.

The fourth principle, community activation and collaborative management, stresses how shared care and collective management strengthen the sense of belonging and contribute to long-term sustainability. Participation is therefore not an accessory element but a structural component of the regeneration process.

The proposed model should not be interpreted as a rigid scheme but rather as an adaptive framework capable of guiding regeneration processes in different contexts. Its implementation requires coordination among institutional levels, technical expertise and local actors, promoting a form of multilevel governance consistent with the complexity of contemporary urban systems.

### European Experiences of Urban Regeneration

In light of the operational model outlined above, the analysis of several recent European experiences highlights how public space regeneration interventions can integrate environmental, social and urban safety dimensions. In different urban contexts, such policies have demonstrated that open spaces can function as urban infrastructures capable of generating multiple benefits, contributing to quality of life and territorial resilience.

Among the most significant experiences are the *Superilles* programme in Barcelona, the Water Squares developed in Rotterdam, and the *Oasis Schoolyards* project promoted in Paris. Although implemented in different urban contexts, these experiences share an integrated approach that combines spatial interventions, environmental strategies and forms of participatory governance.

#### *The Superilles Programme in Barcelona*

This programme, launched by the city of Barcelona in 2016, represents one of the most advanced examples of public space transformation in Europe. The intervention consists of reorganising urban mobility by reducing vehicular traffic within groups of city blocks, thereby returning space to pedestrian mobility, social activities and urban greenery (Rueda, 2019) (Fig. 1).

The transformation of street space significantly improves environmental quality and urban comfort by reducing emissions and noise while increasing the availability of collective spaces. Recent studies show that this model produces important benefits in terms of public health and quality of life, thanks to the expansion of pedestrian areas and the reduction of exposure to air pollution (Mueller et al., 2020).

At the same time, the reconfiguration of urban spaces encourages the continuous presence of social and commercial activities, increasing use and strengthening informal forms of social control. In this way, the transformation of public space contributes not only to environmental sustainability but also to perceived safety and urban vitality (Fig. 2).

#### *Water Squares in Rotterdam*

A second significant example is represented by the Water Squares developed in Rotterdam within the framework of the city's climate adaptation strategies. The Benthemplein Water Square, designed by the De Urbanisten studio, integrates hydraulic functions with the public use of urban space (Fig. 3).

The project includes the construction of temporary basins capable of collecting and storing rainwater during intense rainfall events, thus contributing to flood risk management. Under normal conditions, however, the space is used as a sports area and a meeting place for the local community (Bologna and Hasanaj, 2020) (Fig. 4).

This solution demonstrates how urban infrastructures can assume a multifunctional role, combining climate resilience, the quality of public space and social activation. The Rotterdam experience is often cited as an example of the integration between urban planning and climate adaptation strategies, in which public space becomes an integral part of the city's environmental infrastructure (Frantzeskaki et al., 2016).

#### *The Paris Oasis Schoolyards Programme*

A third relevant example is represented by the *Paris Oasis Schoolyards* programme, promoted by the City of Paris as part of its urban climate adaptation policies. The project involves the

transformation of schoolyards into permeable and shaded green spaces capable of mitigating urban heat island effects and improving the environmental quality of neighbourhoods (Fig. 5).

The interventions include the introduction of vegetation, permeable surfaces and natural shading systems with the aim of creating more comfortable and inclusive spaces. Outside school hours, many of these spaces are opened to the local community, increasing the availability of public spaces in densely urbanised neighbourhoods (Climate-ADAPT, 2022) (Fig. 6).

This approach highlights how public space can be reinterpreted as a climatic and social infrastructure capable of contributing both to environmental resilience and to the strengthening of local community networks.

The analysis of these three cases reveals several significant convergences. First, the interventions aim to restore centrality to public space as a structural component of urban quality. Second, design strategies integrate environmental, social and functional dimensions, overcoming sector-based approaches to urban regeneration. Finally, all these experiences consider public space as a platform for social interaction and community activation.

These elements confirm the relevance of a multidimensional approach to public space regeneration, in which design interventions and governance strategies jointly contribute to the creation of more sustainable, inclusive and resilient urban environments.

## Conclusions

The reflections developed in this study highlight how public space can no longer be interpreted as a residual domain of urban planning, nor as a simple object of formal redevelopment. Environmental crises, socio-spatial inequalities and the growing demand for safety require a reconfiguration of its role within contemporary urban policies.

Considering public space as dynamic heritage means recognising its evolving, relational and infrastructural nature. At the same time, it functions as a common good, an ecological platform and a device for social inclusion. Its quality directly affects the distribution of urban opportunities, thus becoming a determining factor in the pursuit of spatial justice.

Overcoming the traditional securitarian paradigm represents a fundamental condition for this transformation. Urban safety cannot be ensured solely through control or surveillance measures, but must emerge from the quality of design, the vitality of uses and the active presence of communities. From this perspective, public space regeneration becomes a tool for territorial prevention and for strengthening social cohesion.

The proposed operational model integrates three methodological levels (vulnerability analysis, integrated design strategies and multidimensional evaluation) and four strategic principles: ecological integration, universal accessibility, integrated safety and community activation. This structure aims to provide a transferable operational framework capable of guiding interventions consistent with the complexity of contemporary urban contexts.

The European case studies analysed demonstrate that an integrated approach can generate systemic effects, including improved microclimatic conditions, increased use of public spaces, a stronger sense of belonging and a reduction in perceived insecurity. At the same time, they highlight the need for multilevel governance capable of preventing processes of exclusion or selective valorisation.

In conclusion, public space regeneration should be understood as a structural policy of territorial welfare. Investing in the quality, accessibility and collaborative management of collective spaces means addressing the spatial roots of inequalities and contributing to the creation of more resilient, inclusive and sustainable cities. Public space, far from being merely an urban setting, thus emerges as a primary infrastructure of the ecological and social transition and as a strategic lever for the construction of a renewed urban citizenship.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Policies, services and interventions aimed at improving the living conditions of local communities through the organisation of urban space, access to services and the quality of living environments. In this perspective, public space can be interpreted as a social infrastructure capable of supporting inclusion, cohesion and collective well-being.

<sup>2</sup> Policies, services and interventions aimed at improving the living conditions of local communities through the organisation of urban space, access to services and the quality of living environments. In this perspective, public space can be interpreted as a social infrastructure capable of supporting inclusion, cohesion and collective well-being.

<sup>3</sup> The literature on urban regeneration highlights numerous European experiences in which public space interventions have generated environmental, social and economic benefits. The cases discussed in the text represent some of the most significant examples of this approach.

<sup>4</sup> This refers to urban policies that address safety primarily through control and surveillance devices in public space, without integrating urban design interventions, social inclusion strategies or community activation processes.

<sup>5</sup> This refers to urban policies that address safety primarily through control and surveillance devices in public space, without integrating urban design interventions, social inclusion strategies or community activation processes.

<sup>6</sup> Among the main experiences developed by the city of Rotterdam are the introduction of the *Rotterdam Safety Index* in the early 2000s (a tool used to monitor crime, urban decay, perceived safety and environmental quality), the *Rotterdam Zuid* programme (one of the most important urban regeneration initiatives in the Netherlands, aimed at reducing social marginalisation, urban degradation and perceived insecurity), and urban climate adaptation policies (aimed at improving the quality of public space, environmental safety and the social use of urban spaces).

<sup>7</sup> A set of approaches to urban safety primarily based on strategies of control, surveillance and crime prevention through technical devices or repressive measures. In this model, safety is often treated as a matter of public order, with interventions centred on policing, video surveillance and the regulation of access to urban spaces, rather than on integrated policies of urban quality, social inclusion and public space design.

<sup>8</sup> De Urbanisten is a renowned urban design and landscape architecture practice composed of an international team of urban planners and landscape architects. The studio was founded in 2009 by Florian Boer and Dirk van Peijpe and is based in Rotterdam, Netherlands.

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## Images



Fig. 01 – Diagram of a typical superblock in the final phase of implementation with all constituent parts, BCNecologia.

Just accepted



Fig. 02 - Playground within the Poblenou Superblock, © Curro Palacios/barcelona.cat.

Just accepted

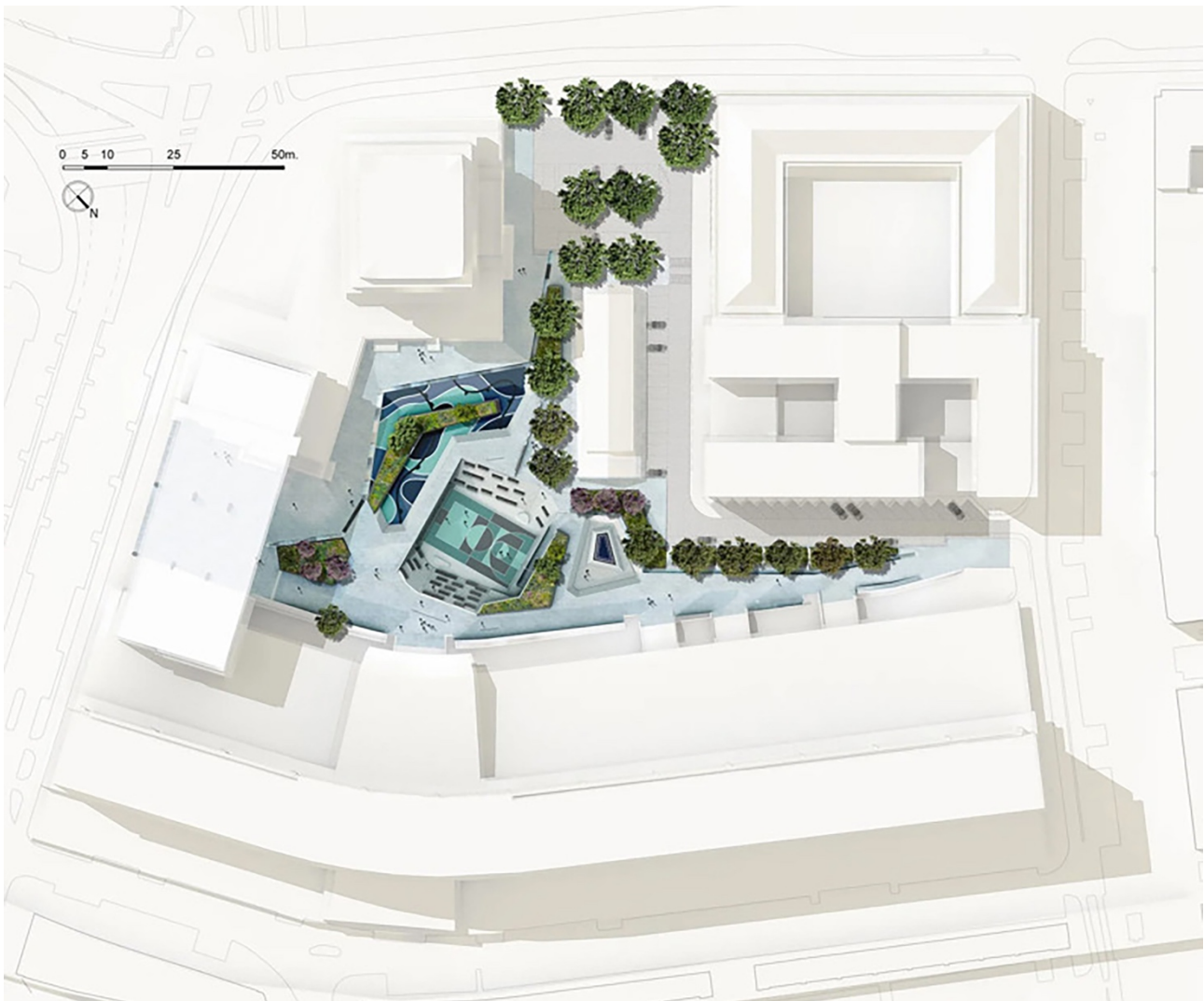


Fig. 03 - Water Square Bentheimplein, Rotterdam. Plan view of the multifunctional public space integrating stormwater management and recreational uses, Wikimedia Commons.



Fig. 04 - Water Square Bentheimplein, Rotterdam. Multifunctional public space used as a recreational and sports area, integrated with a temporary stormwater storage system, Wikimedia Commons.

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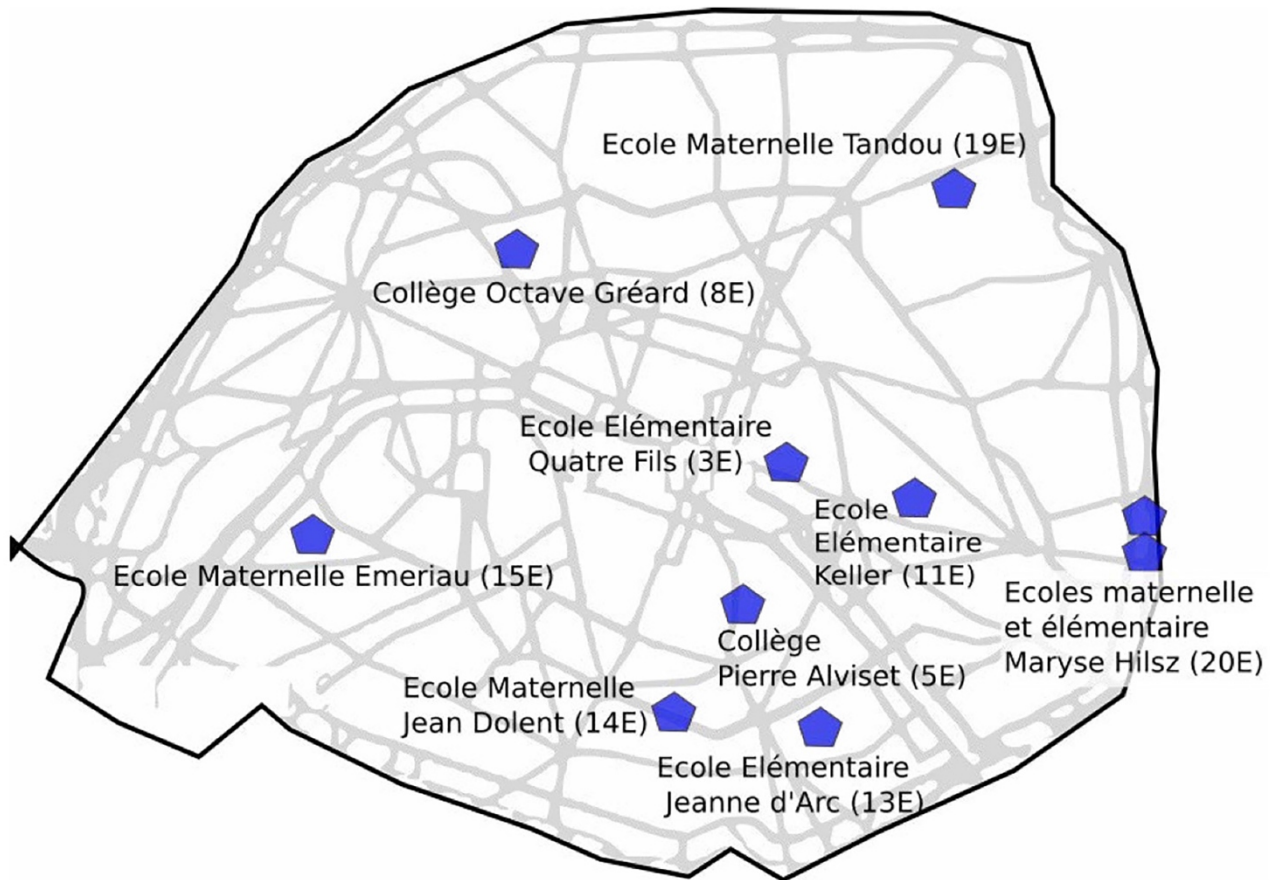


Fig. 05 - Location of the ten Oasis Schoolyards selected within the Urban Innovative Actions (UIA) programme, City of Paris.

Just accepted



Fig. 06 - Oasis Schoolyards in Paris provide accessible, gender-neutral and polyvalent areas for children, UIA.

## Tables

DIMENSION	KEY INDICATORS	ASSESSMENT TOOLS	OBJECTIVES
<b>Environmental sustainability</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reduction of impervious surfaces</li> <li>- increase in vegetation cover</li> <li>- improvement of microclimatic comfort</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- GIS analysis</li> <li>- microclimatic surveys</li> <li>- environmental indicators</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- mitigation of urban heat islands</li> <li>- improved stormwater management</li> <li>- enhancement of environmental quality</li> </ul>
<b>Social and inclusive quality</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- universal accessibility</li> <li>- diversity of space uses</li> <li>- presence of community activities</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- field observations</li> <li>- user interviews</li> <li>- participatory mapping</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increased social inclusion</li> <li>- strengthening of sense of belonging</li> <li>- greater vitality of public space</li> </ul>
<b>Perceived urban safety</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- increase in space use and attendance</li> <li>- reduction of residual spaces</li> <li>- improvement of lighting and visibility</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- safety perception surveys</li> <li>- pedestrian flow analysis</li> <li>- urban safety audits</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- reduction of perceived insecurity</li> <li>- increased use of public space</li> <li>- improvement of urban quality</li> </ul>

Tab. 01 – Multidimensional evaluation framework for public space regeneration, author's elaboration