USING PUBLIC SPACE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH
Using Public Space in the Global South

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1. GLOBAL SOUTH CITIES

INTRODUCTION

Public space only comes alive when it is used. This seems obvious, but using public space in South African cities is to come up against a long history. Spatial planning during Apartheid was not just about determining who lived where, but also about controlling the urban space through which people and politics moved.

In democratic South Africa, the legal and policy culture and framework have directly and indirectly persisted, producing a context which often snuffs out the use of public space rather than facilitating it.

From citizen initiatives and art, to informal businesses, this legacy of control permeates almost every aspect of public space.

This is highly visible across many areas of urban life. And looking at comparable contexts points to alternative approaches to create dynamic and resilient cities.
COLOMBIA AND SOUTH AFRICA

The populations and economies of South Africa and Colombia are similar in size, as are their cities.

Both countries have Human Development Index levels classified as ‘high’ at over 0.7 (Herre & Arriagada, 2023).

But they are in the top ten countries with the highest income inequality in the world (World Bank, 2023). The richest 10% of their populations own more than half of wealth (UNDP, n.d.). They fall within the bottom third of the World Economic Forum’s Social Mobility Index (World Economic Forum, 2020), indicating the challenges in overcoming inequalities.

Cities in the Global North are often used as examples to learn from or emulate. However our cities are in fact dwarfed economically by cities such as New York, which has a GDP that is several times the size of the entire country of South Africa.

Gross Domestic Product 2022-3 (US$ Billions)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Country</th>
<th>Value (US$ Billions)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>South Africa</td>
<td>380.91</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colombia</td>
<td>363.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cape Town</td>
<td>38.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Johannesburg</td>
<td>60.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medellin</td>
<td>26.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bogotá</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New York City</td>
<td>1500</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Top 5 exports

- Platinum
- Gold
- Iron Ore
- Diamonds
- Coal

- Crude Petroleum
- Coal
- Coffee
- Gold
- Refined Petroleum

Sources: (OEC, 2021a) (OEC, 2021b)
OUR CITIES

The largest city is Bogotá with 7.7 million people, followed by Johannesburg and Cape Town with roughly 4.8 million people each according to the 2022 census, and Medellín with 2.6 million (Stats SA, 2023) (C40 Cities, n.d.).

As with GDP, city budgets provide an interesting view on the resources available to cities and how they use them.

Clearly again, New York City has a level of resources that is incomparable with the other cities.

City budget (US$ Billions)

Sources: (Herrera, 2022), (City of Cape Town, 2023), (Bolivar, 2022), (Vulekamali, 2023), (City of Johannesburg, 2023), (New York City Council, n.d.).
2. PUBLIC SPACE & INFORMALITY

UNEMPLOYMENT

Unemployment remains one of South Africa’s deepest challenges. It is extremely high compared to most economies of similar size.

However, looking at the split between formal and informal employment is critical to understanding the South African context.

Informal employment is the percentage of total employment that is informal.

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**Unemployment rate**

![Diagram of Unemployment rate for Colombia and South Africa]

Sources: (Stats SA, 2023) (DANE, 2023a).

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**Percentage of employment that is informal**

![Diagram of Percentage of employment that is informal for Colombia and South Africa]

Sources: (Masuku & Nzewi, 2021, #), (DANE, 2023b).
While exact comparisons are challenged by how to measure informal employment, Colombia’s level of informal employment is high at 58%, while South Africa’s is estimated as closer to 20%.

Colombia’s level is much closer to the norm in similar economies.

South Africa is the outlier and research shows that the large number of unemployed people in South Africa would, in many other countries, be employed in the informal sector (Shah, 2022).

That is not to romanticise the informal sector, but to acknowledge that it is an important source of income in many countries and its absence - amongst other factors - helps to explain the extremely high levels of unemployment in South Africa.

Informality as a key component of city life and urban development is increasingly recognised and valued. In some contexts such as food and trading, this may be common and often accepted, while in other arenas, such as housing, practices might raise additional challenges.

But in these sectors, there is increasingly an acknowledgement of the need to facilitate informality rather than stop it.
Using public space in South Africa is constrained by a compliance and control-driven regulatory framework.

For instance, a temporary road closure in most municipalities requires an event permit. And an event permit entails a host of expensive and onerous regulations.

Informal trading is another example. The regressive regulation in South African cities constrains informal economic activity in public space, a contradiction given the levels of unemployment, which helps to explain why in comparable economies, the informal economy makes up more than half of total employment.

Bylaws (which build on various pieces of national legislation) across our cities make it difficult to partake in the informal economy and give law enforcement agencies significant power to control, confiscate, and even criminally sanction informal vendors (Modiba, 2022) (Xolo, 2023) (Mohlala, 2023).

This is not to say that there should be no regulation. Public space is just that - public. There needs to be a rational policy and legal framework to govern its use so that there is a broad public benefit.

Regulations are essential to activate space and enable its use. Although imperfect, there are governmental efforts to achieve better policy. The City of Cape Town hosts an annual Informal Economy Summit & Expo where these issues are explored. In Bogotá there is an entire city department that focuses on managing public space.

These efforts could result in regulations that promote, rather than prevent, the use of public space.

In fact, there are examples in Bogotá and Cape Town that illustrate the importance of appropriate legal frameworks and the multiple-benefits and value that can be leveraged from enabling the use of public space for public good.
Public Food Markets

19 markets on public land
Run by City of Bogota’s IPES Program offers management, training, and infrastructure
Markets include fresh produce, gastronomy, herbal medicine, crafts, and more

Ciclovia

Founded in 1976
127 km are car-free streets on Sundays and holidays
Recognised as the world’s largest linear park
2 million people use it
300 staff members
500 student volunteers
Over 200 informal vendors

Public Space Department

Founded in 1999
Maintains and manages public space
Oversees the City’s real estate asset inventory
Celebrates an annual ‘public space day’
Hosts the Bogotá Public Space Observatory, a data platform
Publishes a “green public space index”
**City Improvement Districts**

21 CID:s in Cape Town

**Facilitate** collaboration between public and private to improve public spaces

**Fund** public amenities like temporary public toilets

**Collaborate** to provide support to homeless populations

**Work** with the City to develop more pedestrian-friendly spaces

**Co-create** neighbourhood-level interventions

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**Langa Bicycle Hub**

**Founded** in 2020

**Collaborates** with the City for young cyclists to access public land

**Provides** training, mechanical services and a safe space for children and cycling

**15 people** work at the hub, including volunteers

**Offers** weekly learn to cycle lessons

**Sells** 17 bicycles per month

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**Community Initiatives**

**Active** communities work around the city

**Fundraise** for public amenities (e.g. Mowbray Community Action Network)

**Work** with NGOs to support local food markets (e.g. TCOE market)

**Collaborations** with informal reclaimers for waste collection and recycling

**Organise** bicycle buses for children
FINDING INSPIRATION

Despite the perception of informal activity in public space leading to disorder and crime, there is evidence to suggest that using public space for multiple purposes can help improve safety (Safer Spaces, n.d.).

For example, Bogotá’s weekly Ciclovia programme which turns 127km of streets into car-free public spaces attracts a large number of informal vendors. The increased number of people on foot, bicycle and on the street more generally creates a sense of safety across a city which similarly struggles with crime.

Similarly, by facilitating rather than constraining places like markets, they continue to be important places in their neighbourhoods (Casas & Kramer, 2022).

On our Global South Public Space Platform, we have begun collecting interesting examples of such practices. This is just the beginning of unpacking, exploring, and testing new ways of using public space in the Global South.


