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Advancing Spatial Justice: A Framework Integrating Spatial Justice and Spatial Capital

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A MANIFESTO JUST for the CITY

Volume 4

Edited by Roberto Rocco, Caroline Newton & Juliana Gonçalves

Colophon

A Manifesto for the Just City Vol.4

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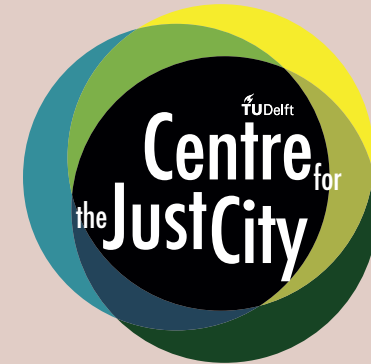
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DEDICATED TO PURSUING SOCIAL JUSTICE THROUGH THE LENS OF URBAN DEVELOPMENT, THE CENTRE FOR THE JUST CITY VALUES ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE, DIVERSE THOUGHT, AND COMMITTED ACTION.

[HTTPS://JUST-CITY.ORG](https://just-city.org)

The Centre for the Just City was set up at the Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment at the Delft University of Technology in response to the pressing challenges of rampant social inequalities affecting the cohesion and the sustainability of cities and communities. Recognising the vital need to address these issues, the Centre emerged as a platform for research, education, and outreach activities for the creation of just cities. Since its inception, the Centre has been at the forefront of bridging theory and practice, fostering collaborations, and influencing policies and actions that contribute to making cities equitable, sustainable, and inclusive.

This book is based on an online workshop and lecture series that took place over five days in October 2023. 273 students from 86 different academic institutions submitted 73 manifestos for publication.

This is the fourth Call for a Manifesto for the Just City organised by TU Delft and partners.

Advancing Spatial Justice: A Framework Integrating Spatial Justice and Spatial Capital*?

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Keywords: Spatial Justice, Spatial Capital, Informal Settlements, Urban Inequality, Participatory Planning

*Further development of the framework will be published in greater detail in an upcoming article by the authors.

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Introduction

Urban inequality, epitomized by the systemic marginalization and precarious conditions of informal settlements and areas characterized by spatial disparities, continues to be a significant barrier to achieving equitable urban environments across the globe. Such spaces are frequently neglected by formal planning systems, manifesting pronounced spatial injustices that not only mirror existing socio-economic and political disparities but also exacerbate them. Yet, they also function as sites of resilience and agency, where residents engage in ongoing negotiations to claim their right to the city (Lefebvre, 1968), even amid instability and fragmented governance (Roy, 2011).

Building on the foundational contributions of Harvey (1973) and Soja (2010), the concept of spatial justice extends conventional social justice frameworks by emphasizing the spatial dimensions of power, governance, and inequality. This perspective encompasses not just the equitable distribution of resources, but also the dynamic processes through which urban spaces are produced, contested, and regulated. In doing so, it foregrounds the varied experiences and identities shaped by spatial inequalities, demanding a critical examination of the mechanisms that perpetuate exclusion. Achieving spatial justice, therefore, requires inclusive urban planning approaches that place marginalized communities' needs, rights, and agency at the forefront.

Translating spatial justice from theory into practice, however, is rendered difficult by its conceptual breadth and the challenges of operationalising it in diverse contexts. Overcoming these hurdles necessitates a dual strategy: first, identifying the physical and systemic factors that reinforce or mitigate spatial injustices; and second, developing suitable evaluative frameworks to probe these dynamics. Spatial capital offers a potent lens in this regard, illuminating the interrelations among spatial configurations, resources, and human agency—factors crucial to a nuanced understanding of urban inequities.

Accordingly, this article introduces a foundational framework for analysing spatial justice in informal settlements by integrating the concept of spatial capital. Through this integrative approach, the article bridges the theoretical underpinnings of spatial justice with pragmatic applications that can inform policy making, planning, and grassroots interventions.

Theoretical Foundations: Spatial Justice and Spatial Capital

Spatial justice captures the spatial dimensions of social relations, explicating how urban environments both reflect and reinforce systemic inequalities. This analytical perspective thereby elucidates the processes that sustain or contest spatial exclusion, particularly in settings where marginalized communities bear the brunt of such injustices.

Sen's (1979, 2009) capabilities approach offers an incisive conceptual framework for understanding justice in terms of the substantive freedoms' individuals require to lead lives they value. Nussbaum's (2000) focus on the socio-cultural barriers to achieving core capabilities deepens this perspective, highlighting how embedded systemic injustices, especially pronounced in informal settlements, curtail individuals' essential freedoms. Aligned with these views, MirafTab's (2004) notion of insurgent planning accentuates the proactive agency of marginalized communities, demonstrating their capacity to resist exclusionary policies and envision transformative urban futures.

Complementing these perspectives, Simone's (2004) concept of "people as infrastructure" reframes human interactions and social networks as adaptive, informal systems that compensate for the shortfalls of formal infrastructure—particularly in the Global South. This re-conceptualization spotlights the creativity and resilience emerging from community-driven responses to systemic constraints, underscoring the interplay between resource limitations and collective agency. Taken together, these theoretical insights form a robust basis for recognizing, critiquing, and addressing the spatial structures that perpetuate urban inequalities.

While spatial justice remains an aspirational ideal, in this article, spatial capital is unpacked using the A.U.R.A (Access, Utilisation, Resistance, and Adaptation) framework, where the complex interplay of the different characterisations allows the concept to be operationalised.

Spatial capital extends Bourdieu's (1986) conception of social capital, which he conceptualises as "the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition" (Bourdieu 1986, p. 248). Spatial capital then draws attention to how the spatial configurations and spatial distributions of resources shape socio-economic opportunities and constraints. It re-conceptualizes spatial

environments as active determinants of agency, thereby influencing how individuals and communities navigate structurally unequal urban landscapes.

Levy's (2014) expansion of social capital integrates a spatial lens, illustrating the ways in which built environments can both enable and constrain access to vital resources, opportunities, and networks. This perspective is especially relevant in informal settlements, where spatial inequalities are most acute. In turn, spatial capital emerges as a critical determinant of community resilience and adaptive capacity, forming the basis of the AURA framework that operationalizes spatial capital through its four interrelated dimensions: access, utilization, resistance, and adaptation.

A.U.R.A (Access, Utilisation, Resistance, and Adaptation): A Framework for Operationalising Spatial Justice

Access

Access, as framed by Amartya Sen's (2009) capabilities approach, highlights the importance of creating meaningful opportunities rather than merely providing resources. Within a spatial context, access addresses how both physical configurations and institutional frameworks can either foster or hinder equitable engagement with essential services—such as housing, infrastructure, and public amenities. Sen's emphasis on genuine opportunities resonates with David Harvey's (1973) critique of how entrenched political and economic power structures shape urban space, often marginalising vulnerable populations.

Evidence from Mumbai's M-East Ward, where only 31% of households have access to individual toilets compared to the citywide average of 85% (Subbaraman et al., 2014), reveals the severity of systemic neglect. This disparity directly affects public health, economic stability, and social mobility. More broadly, limited access to infrastructure (e.g., potable water and reliable transportation) exacerbates barriers to education and employment, compounding cycles of marginalisation. In this sense, access serves as the foundational dimension of the AURA framework, defining the baseline conditions under which communities interact with—and potentially transform—their urban environments.

Nevertheless, access on its own does not guarantee meaningful engagement

with resources, leading to the next dimension: utilisation.

Utilisation

Henri Lefebvre's (1968) concept of the right to the city offers a lens through which to view utilisation as an active, participatory process. Rather than simply focusing on the availability of resources, utilisation foregrounds the agency of marginalised communities as they navigate systemic constraints and repurpose spatial resources to meet socio-economic and cultural needs. This perspective aligns with Edward Soja's (2010) framing of spatial justice as a process in which urban spaces are continually shaped and reshaped by lived practices—not merely top-down governance.

In Dharavi, Mumbai, for instance, like many other such neighbourhoods, shared spaces become sites of vibrant economic activity, where residents establish recycling workshops, pottery studios, and small-scale manufacturing units that collectively yield an estimated one billion dollars annually (Sharma, 2000). These practices are not limited to economic pursuits; they also strengthen social cohesion and cultural expression. During the annual Hindu Ganesh Chaturthi festival, shared spaces are temporarily transformed into communal areas for celebration. These environments likewise serve as venues for personal milestones, such as weddings, underscoring their adaptability as cultural infrastructure. Utilisation, then, bridges the gap between formal resource provision and the lived realities of agency, highlighting how communities creatively leverage spaces in ways that do not necessarily alter the structural conditions but do enable immediate survival and collective identity.

Yet, these strategies often encounter external pressures or policies that undermine local ingenuity, ultimately prompting resistance.

Resistance

Resistance refers to the collective mobilisation of marginalised groups against spatial arrangements or policies threatening their livelihoods and well-being. Informed by Faranak Miraftab's (2004) theory of insurgent planning, resistance emerges as a grassroots endeavour to confront inequitable urban governance. Concurrently, Harvey's (2008) articulation of the right to the city underscores resistance as integral to reclaiming agency within oppressive spatial systems.

An illustrative case is Dharavi's long-standing opposition to top-down rede-

velopment proposals favouring elites and private developers. Large-scale demolition and forced relocation often undermine social networks, dismantle thriving local economies, and exacerbate inequalities. Through sustained advocacy and collective action, Dharavi's residents have pressured authorities to revise their plans, ensuring greater recognition of community voices and preserving the settlement's spatial and social fabric (Patel et al., 2002). Resistance is thus an iterative process: it not only defends existing socio-spatial arrangements but also reclaims power in shaping urban futures.

Even so, resistance alone cannot resolve chronic socio-spatial neglect. Consequently, communities must also engage in proactive strategies of adaptation.

Adaptation

Drawing on AbdouMalik Simone's (2004) notion of people as infrastructure, adaptation reframes infrastructure to include the collective practices that underpin urban resilience in contexts where formal systems fall short. As the culminating dimension of the AURA framework, adaptation underscores how communities creatively reorganise their built environments to meet immediate needs while cultivating long-term aspirations. Sen's (2009) emphasis on agency complements this perspective by highlighting the transformative potential embedded in localised solutions.

In Mumbai's informal settlements, adaptation takes diverse forms: constructing makeshift housing, devising improvised transportation routes, and developing community-led water distribution and waste management systems (Nijman, 2010). These initiatives not only fill infrastructural gaps but also repurpose communal spaces into sites of economic, social, and cultural innovation. In the initial stages, people themselves function as the core infrastructure, leveraging collective skills to address systemic voids. Over time, these adaptive practices reshape the physical environment, creating more durable and community-centred infrastructure.

Adaptation thus transcends mere survival tactics; it is a purposeful transformation of both space and socio-spatial relations, manifesting the community's capacity to engender resilient and equitable urban landscapes.

When viewed collectively, the four dimensions—access, utilisation, resistance, and adaptation—form a cohesive framework for understanding and intervening in spatial injustices. By emphasising both structural analysis and community agency, the AURA framework provides a nuanced tool for examining the multifaceted challenges

of urban inequality. In doing so, it demonstrates how communities not only cope with injustice but actively reshape their urban environments in ways that enhance resilience and equity.

Conceptual Integration Of The AURA With Spatial Justice

This section extends the AURA framework—comprising access, utilisation, resistance, and adaptation—by situating it within broader debates on spatial justice. The analysis draws on Rocco’s (2024) “spatial justice triangle,” which posits recognitional, procedural, and distributive justice as interlocking dimensions essential for achieving equitable urban outcomes (Rocco, 2023).

1. Recognitional Justice

Recognitional justice entails valuing the identities, experiences, and socio-cultural practices of historically marginalised groups. Within the AURA framework, utilisation highlights how communities actively configure and repurpose urban space, thereby affirming their cultural, social, and economic identities. Resistance further solidifies recognitional justice by contesting oppressive governance structures and demanding recognition of marginalised communities’ rights.

2. Procedural Justice

Procedural justice emphasises inclusiveness, transparency, and equity in governance. Access aligns with this dimension by advocating fair and inclusive mechanisms to allocate resources such as housing, infrastructure, and public services. Likewise, utilisation underscores the importance of participatory processes, enabling community-driven claims of urban space, in manners best useful for them. Adaptation also contributes to procedural justice through community-led innovations that inform formal planning frameworks.

3. Distributive Justice

Distributive justice prioritises the equitable distribution of spatial resources. Access directly addresses this principle by focusing on how essential services are made available to marginalised groups. Resistance speaks to distributive justice when communities challenge exclusionary policies that reinforce spatial inequi-

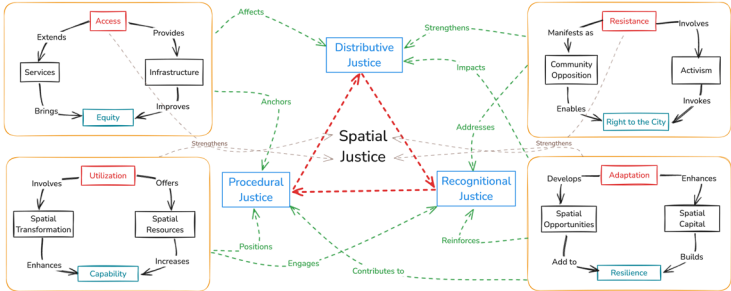


Fig. 1 Diagrammatic conceptualisation of the framework and its relationship with Spatial justice. The Spatial Justice triangle used, was developed by Roberto Rocco (2024). Diagram by author.

ties. Finally, adaptation solidifies the outcomes of distributive justice by transforming shared spaces to meet collective needs sustainably.

The diagrammatic representation (based on Rocco, 2024) illustrates how the AURA framework operationalises these three facets of spatial justice. Collectively, access, utilisation, resistance, and adaptation map onto recognitional, procedural, and distributive dimensions, thereby offering a holistic methodology for examining and addressing urban inequalities. In so doing, the framework highlights the inventive and interdependent strategies—mobilisation of collective knowledge, creative appropriation of spatial resources, and strategic reshaping of urban space—through which communities disrupt poverty cycles and enhance socio-economic mobility.

By integrating the theoretical constructs of spatial justice with on-the-ground practices in informal settlements, the AURA framework reveals how grassroots agency can be harnessed to foster more inclusive urban development. The following section will further demonstrate how this integrated perspective advances both scholarly debates on spatial justice and applied strategies for equitable city-building.

Towards Advancing Spatial Justice

The A.U.R.A. framework builds on two interrelated yet distinct conceptual underpinnings. First, it draws on Lefebvre’s (1991) spatial triad, which elaborates how space is conceived (representations of space), perceived (spatial practice), and lived (representational space). This triad foregrounds the production and experience of space as a socio-political process. Second, it integrates the spatial

justice triangle, an operationalisation of justice-oriented scholarship (Soja, 2010; Fraser, 2007; Fainstein, 2010), which emphasises recognitional, procedural, and distributive dimensions of justice in urban contexts.

Whereas Lefebvre's spatial triad addresses how space is produced and experienced, the spatial justice triangle focuses on the normative imperatives guiding the fair allocation of resources, inclusive governance processes, and recognition of differences. By aligning with both frameworks, the A.U.R.A. model captures how systemic constraints, symbolic representations, and material practices intersect with struggles for recognition, participation, and equitable resource distribution. Its four dimensions—access, utilisation, resistance, and adaptation—reveal the barriers marginalised communities encounter and unpack their strategies to reclaim and reconfigure spatial rights. Through this dual lens, the A.U.R.A. framework underscores the reciprocal relationship between the socio-political production of space and the ethical obligations to contest and transform spatial inequities.

Crucially, adaptation emerges as a central element of the framework, highlighting the collaborative, often innovative, ways in which communities respond to chronic neglect and structural imbalances. Resistance remains vital to ensuring that marginalized groups actively contest exclusionary policies and reclaim ownership of their urban futures, while access and utilisation describe the foundational conditions and dynamic engagement required to advance this transformative process. Together, these dimensions showcase how localized agency can reconfigure oppressive spatial arrangements into more empowering urban structures. By operationalizing these concepts, the A.U.R.A. framework transitions from a theoretical construct into a practical instrument for diagnosing and addressing spatial injustices.

The A.U.R.A. framework acquires enhanced analytical strength when integrated with the concept of spatial capital. Analysing how individuals utilise and modify spatial resources reveals several fundamental findings:

1. Multidimensional Character of Spatial Resources

Extending beyond conventional discussions of urban inequality, the framework highlights the multifaceted ways in which spatial resources shape community capabilities (Soja, 2010).

2. Empirical and Comparative Utility

By offering measurable components—access, utilisation, resistance, and adaptation—the framework enables rigorous empirical evaluations of spatial justice across diverse contexts, facilitating systematic comparisons (Robinson, 2006).

3. Community Agency in Urban Development

Aligned with participatory paradigms (Miraftab, 2004), the framework underscores the resourcefulness of marginalized groups in mobilizing and transforming spatial capital for socio-economic and cultural needs.

4. Strategic Entry Points for Policy

By pinpointing how systemic barriers intertwine with local innovations, the framework reveals strategic entry points for equitable policy interventions (Fainstein, 2010).

5. Scalability and Holistic Understanding

Spanning from individual households to large-scale urban systems, the framework exposes interconnections between micro-level practices and macro-level structures (Massey, 2005).

These insights collectively position the A.U.R.A. framework as a valuable resource for scholars, policymakers, and practitioners alike. Not only does it advance debates on spatial justice by dissecting the structural bases of inequity, but it also guides interventions aimed at cultivating resilience and equity within urban spaces.

Operationalizing the A.U.R.A. Framework

Implementing the A.U.R.A. framework calls for a rigorous, multilayered assessment of how each dimension is actualized within a given neighbourhood or spatial milieu. By systematically pinpointing the presence or absence of these elements - and how they manifest themselves -, researchers and practitioners can uncover critical deficits in spatial capital that undermine collective resilience. For instance, insufficient access to essential services can trigger cascading socio-economic challenges, while a weakened capacity for resistance—manifested in limited grassroots mobilization or constrained civic participation—may leave communities vulnerable to exclusionary redevelopment schemes. Having diagnosed these lacunae, strategic interventions can be introduced to reinforce each dimension: cultivating infrastructure and governance mechanisms to expand access; championing co-creation processes to enhance utilisation; galvanizing community-based advocacy to fortify resistance; and adopting design adaptations that bolster adaptive capacities.

Beyond corrective measures, proactively embedding these dimensions in new planning and policy initiatives creates opportunities to mitigate potential injustices and unlock opportunities for iterative, community-driven transformations. This

approach incorporates ‘undesigned’ spaces, allowing for organic appropriation and fostering spatial capital development at individual and collective levels. A.U.R.A. framework thus becomes a powerful tool for advancing spatial justice, equity, and resilience in diverse urban contexts by integrating theoretical precision with empirically grounded strategies. It advocates for a balanced approach, combining structured planning with flexibility, to empower communities to shape their environments and enhance urban responsiveness to diverse needs.

The pursuit of spatial justice, especially amid deepening urban inequalities, demands a fundamental revision of dominant planning paradigms. Such a reorientation calls for shifting away from top-down, technocratic models that often exacerbate spatial injustice, and moving toward participatory and inclusive frameworks that incorporate local knowledge and priorities. Central to this transformation is empowering communities to harness their spatial capital—the collective knowledge, skills, and resilience required to co-create urban environments that are equitable, sustainable, and culturally responsive.

While access to essential resources constitutes a starting point for spatial justice, it must evolve into a form of active engagement that aligns with local economic and socio-cultural realities. In this way, resources become catalysts for empowerment, elevating access from mere availability to a platform for community-driven development. Such elevation allows marginalized groups to wield resources in ways that enhance their spatial capital, ultimately fostering more resilient and equitable urban futures.

At the same time, the capacity for resistance underscores procedural justice by ensuring that vulnerable populations refuse to remain passive recipients of imposed urban policies. Instead, they actively shape their own futures by contesting harmful spatial arrangements and reasserting their agency in local governance. Adaptation complements this process, illustrating the creative responses communities formulate to navigate structural inadequacies. Far from being purely reactive measures, these adaptations reveal the dynamism and ingenuity of local actors and highlight the transformative potential of community-led urban evolution.

Through its interrelated dimensions of access, utilisation, resistance, and adaptation, the A.U.R.A. framework brings conceptual rigour to the study of spatial injustice and offers practical strategies for meaningful, community-centric change. It shifts attention to the ingenuity inherent in informal settlements and other marginalized environments, spotlighting how these spaces are reimagined and renewed

through local initiative. By centring community agency and resilience as the core drivers of urban transformation, the framework reaffirms that genuine spatial justice arises when the contributions and capabilities of marginalized populations are not just recognized but fully integrated into city-building processes.

In line with Harvey’s (2008) observation that just cities must serve as arenas for collective agency and inclusion, the A.U.R.A. framework conceptualizes spatial capital as a tool through which tangible equity can be realized. Spatial justice exposes systemic inequities, while spatial capital reveals the latent resilience and creativity within local environments. Neglecting spatial capital only deepens injustice; cultivating it, however, fosters new possibilities for collaboration, innovation, and ultimately, the co-creation of more inclusive urban landscapes.

This reorientation—shifting from deficit-based approaches to opportunity-driven frameworks—positions spatial capital as a catalyst for transformation. In doing so, the A.U.R.A. framework offers a pathway for shaping urban futures in which marginalized communities serve as principal architects of inclusive, just, and sustainable cities. By harnessing spatial capital to strengthen collective agency, urban systems can evolve into dynamic spaces that both reflect and nurture the aspirations, capacities, and imagination of all their inhabitants.

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The workshop **Manifesto for the Just City** is a digital lecture and debate series composed of four online sessions with leading academics and practitioners in the fields of urban theory, urban planning and spatial justice. Upon participation in the online lecture series, teams of students are invited to draft a **Manifesto for the Just City**, expressing their visions for cities that are sustainable, fair and inclusive for all.

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