Inclusive Public Space, Accessibility, and Social Cohesion. A Multi-criteria Monitoring Model for Schuster Park in Rome

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Abstract. This paper presents the ongoing design research process within the Department of Architecture at the University of Roma Tre. The research focuses on evaluating the impact of excessive tourist influx on certain qualities of inclusive public spaces. It is well established that the accessibility of public places influences tourist destinations and, consequently, economic flow. However, the definition of "public space" is evolving, incorporating elements such as inclusiveness, accessibility, and well-being critical factors for fostering social cohesion, which may be at risk due to excessive tourist flows. The article explores the complexity of managing public spaces in urban environments characterized by high tourist traffic, with particular attention to accessibility and inclusiveness. Using the Schuster Universal Inclusive Park in Rome as a case study, the article examines the park's unique features and outlines the initial steps toward developing a multicriteria monitoring model. This model aims to assess the social impact of the park in the context of Jubilee 2025, considering the interaction between regular use and excessive visitor numbers. The outcome is a preliminary framework for an integrated approach to the evaluation of public spaces. This approach aims to balance sustainable tourism with the strengthening of community cohesion and a sense of belonging.

Keywords: Environmental accessibility · Public spaces · Evaluation and monitoring · Social cohesion

1 Introduction: Public Space, Social Cohesion and Conflict

Defining the rationale for categorizing a space as public is a matter subject to considerable variability. Numerous factors influence whether a space is regarded as public, and several studies have identified this issue as central to the topic on public space [1]. Many contemporary approaches have recognized certain characteristics as essential for the classification of public spaces, such as inclusiveness, accessibility, public ownership, and unrestricted access [2]. However, none of these criteria, whether examined individually or collectively, fully encapsulates the concept of public space. In contemporary debate, additional factors are recognized, including physical spaces that emerge from participatory processes involving collective planning, design, and management [3]. A

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space can be considered public when it acts as a platform for diversity and local identities, allowing for artistic and cultural expression and facilitating collaboration to shape those identities [4]. Furthermore, it is well-established in the literature that high-quality public spaces are instrumental in promoting social cohesion [5, 6]. Definitions of social cohesion often include intangible aspects such as social ties, trust, and solidarity, which are essential for fostering relationships among community members [7, 8]. Numerous studies highlight how well-designed public spaces can enhance social interactions and community ties, which are crucial for cultivating a sense of belonging and collective identity among residents [9, 10]. Public spaces act as vital arenas for cultural expression, significantly contributing to social sustainability. From this perspective, inclusivity and accessibility are key features of public spaces, as they foster inclusive communities, particularly for vulnerable groups. This nurturing of public culture is enriched by cultural diversity while facilitating mobility and economic activity for all [11]. However, major cities increasingly feature areas where high volumes of tourist flows intersect with public and community values. In such cases, many aspects of social cohesion mentioned above may be compromised, undermining the capacity of public spaces to deliver their intended benefits and meet the needs of diverse communities. Overtourism, as a phenomenon, can exacerbate these challenges by exceeding an area's capacity to accommodate tourists, leading to congestion, environmental degradation, and social conflicts. According to Koens et al. [12], overtourism generates uniform impacts on tourism, complicating efforts for local communities to maintain their sense of identity and cohesion. Bertocchi and Visentin [13] note that excessive tourist load, as observed in cities like Venice, has led to tensions between residents and tourists, threatening social cohesion. Rawhani and Middelmann [14] emphasize the importance of managing public spaces in a way that considers the needs of all users residents and tourists alike so as to avoid conflict and foster enduring social cohesion. Without an integrated approach to managing public spaces, especially in areas where tourist flows intersect, a sense of exclusion may arise among residents, resulting in their abandonment of these spaces and a further decline in social cohesion.

This paper aims to propose an evaluation approach that underscores how excessive tourist load can affect the social capacities of public spaces, using the Schuster Park project in Rome as an experimental framework. This project, as research design, comes from a collaboration involving the Department of Architecture at Roma Tre University (under the scientific direction of Prof. Adolfo F.L. Baratta), Fondazione Tetrabondi Onlus, the Department of Human Neuroscience at the Sapienza University of Rome, AITO (Italian Association of Occupational Therapists), and the cultural association AES (Architettura Emergenza Sviluppo). The project envisions the creation of a Universal Inclusive Park within the green area adjacent to the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls, aiming to enhance community engagement and social interaction.

2 The Accessibility of Public Space with High Flows

The complex definition of public space as a social good is inextricably linked to its environmental accessibility for society. This protection is guaranteed by the Fundamental Principles of the Italian Constitution, encompassing both the usage and enjoyment of

this good. In this context, Article 3 of the Constitution acknowledges the Republic's responsibility to "remove obstacles of an economic and social order which, by effectively limiting the freedom and equality of citizens, prevent the full development of the human person and the effective participation of all workers in the political, economic, and social organization of the country" [15].

The term "accessibility" denotes "the ability to be easily accessed" [16], safeguarding inviolable human rights such as freedom of movement, self-determination, and personal development following the principles of equality affirmed by the United Nations in the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities [17]. The conflict generated by anthropogenic actions within space must be mitigated through multidisciplinary and multiscale processes designed to make the space accessible to all. Environmental accessibility, within this context, aims to mitigate conflicts between individuals and their environment. It ensures that spaces, goods, and services are accessible, identifiable, and understandable to all people, enabling full autonomy and safety for individuals with any physical, sensory, or cognitive condition, thus accommodating human variability [18].

Through these processes, public space transcends its material aspects and gains significant value, contributing to individual development while fostering interpersonal, social, and cultural exchanges. This intangible value arises from a process that involves diverse actions and intervention scales, upholding the fixed goal of environmental accessibility in response to evolving needs over time. This diversity of actions is directly linked to the heterogeneity of public spaces, which reflects the unique historical, cultural, and social significance of various contexts, necessitating diverse approaches to interventions.

Simultaneously, distinctions arise between citizens, residents, daily users of public goods, and tourists. These groups differ in behavior and characteristics, particularly in terms of temporality and origin, necessitating interventions designed to ensure accessibility of spaces in scenarios with multiple, simultaneous users. Public spaces characterized by these elements can be understood as complex systems of flows, both tourist and non-tourist [19]. Activities, context, and flows modify the fundamental inputs for designing and implementing strategies to expand the accessibility of public assets, thus promoting universal and social inclusion.

Regarding the Italian national territory, only 0.6% of municipalities have been awarded the "lilac flag," a symbol of accessibility [20]. This statistic, when compared to the number of people with disabilities in Italy and the potential attraction of international visitors, underscores the critical need for accessibility in all its facets. It also highlights the moral and economic losses faced by the Italian state. The actual accessibility of the diverse morphologies of public spaces is closely connected to and influenced by specific tourist flows. This issue has become increasingly relevant, generating significant challenges, especially in areas where tourism continuously creates high user flow, with global interest spurring greater possibilities for inclusion.

In light of the Jubilee 2025, which is expected to attract approximately 35 million pilgrims to Rome over the course of the year, attendance is projected to rise from 54 million to 104 million [21]. This surge will create new needs, requiring routes and supports that must be addressed through appropriate actions, interventions, and performances to ensure the environmental accessibility of public spaces. In this context, Schuster Park an

open public space situated near one of the four Jubilee basilicas emerges as a vital subject for interdisciplinary study on accessibility and inclusion. Its flow, coupled with its natural connectivity, make it an important case for examining the intersection of tourism and accessibility.

3 The Design of a Schuster Universal Inclusive Park in Rome

The interaction between people and the built environment evolves through design developments that integrate multiple approaches, enhancing functions with inclusive solutions. Consequently, processes aimed at enhancing environmental accessibility emerge, particularly in public spaces. These processes not only define the bidirectional relationship between the social fabric and the environment but also highlight economic factors linked to tourist flows, which are influenced by place accessibility. These factors establish the necessary conditions to ensure the usability of assets and help define the asset's nature as a public heritage [22].

Within the Italian context, such places, when situated in established urban environments, carry narratives that must be 'listened to and interpreted' before designing any intervention strategy. This approach generates active user participation aimed at formulating integrated solutions to address functional, formal, and social needs. In this context, the quality of public works spanning design to construction reflects performance levels across various areas, particularly in tourism, which often emphasizes consumerism. This highlights an approach focused on fostering awareness and a sense of belonging to the space.

Schuster Park is a large triangular area of over 5 hectares, situated between the Basilica of St. Paul Outside the Walls along Ostiense street and a bend in the Tiber River. Over half of the park consists of permeable surfaces. The current geometric configuration is the result of a project by architect Francesco Cellini and Studio Insula for the Jubilee of 2000. This project transformed the park such that the northern avenue became the main parvis, and the square bordered by the *quadriporticus* incorporated green areas. Additionally, the remains of the Necropolis of St. Paul, located along Ostiense street, were made accessible to the public through a curved, lightweight cover.

The park serves as a public open space used daily and during major events. It is frequented by citizens and tourists, reflecting its strategic location near an important site in Christianity, with nearby amenities such as a metro station, the Roma Tre University, and the Bambino Gesù Children's Hospital. The participatory process involved in developing the design guidelines, which has been renewed in both methodology and activities, addressed the park's environmental accessibility needs. This approach views accessibility not merely as infrastructure but as a fundamental right. An inclusive park should provide a space where children can develop their abilities, accommodating their specific capacities.

The park's play area features two spaces designated for children of different age groups, offering sensory and socialization activities that stimulate multisensory experiences. The rubberized anti-trauma flooring guarantees safety and usability for all. The play equipment features elements with varying levels of challenge, encouraging creativity through the creation of various compositions and shapes. Urban seating in the

adjacent area features tub-shaped backrests that accommodate vegetation at varying heights, providing children and all visitors with opportunities for exploration and learning. The design strategically encourages intergenerational social interaction, creating a sensory garden that is accessible to all users.

The park serves as a connector for various functional uses, both within its internal dynamics and those of the surrounding areas. It also facilitates spontaneous activities, encouraging self-organization among users to strengthen social cohesion among regular visitors while integrating occasional users. The play area, located near a senior center (also a subject of intervention), reinforces the park's intergenerational character. The pathway system, designed as a single element with varying service options, is organized as follows: the southern section is designated for inclusive sports activities, the central part is adjacent to existing seating and water points for resting, and the northern section opens into a tranquil, free area enhanced with light and trees [23].

The park is connected to nearby infrastructure through three main axes: to the north, southeast, and southwest. The study of often-overlooked micro-topographies enabled the optimization of the park's layout to maximize accessible walkability in all directions. The park features various facilities, including a skatepark, a bar, spaces for associations, restrooms, and a stage. In compliance with the latest design intervention, the drainage channel running from north to south includes a modular component designed to overcome barriers and connect these facilities (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Schuster Universal Inclusive Park project.

The research proposes a series of interventions framed across integrated fields, capable of transforming environments into accessible and inclusive public spaces for all individuals, including those facing various forms of vulnerability. These interventions incorporate ideas and suggestions from users and involve stakeholders with diverse backgrounds. Furthermore, the research facilitators acted as intermediaries, aiming to extend the principles and outcomes of the participatory design process to further levels of design managed by the Jubilee 2025 Society [24].

In this context, in collaboration with non-profit organizations, solutions for orientation and wayfinding were developed, including interactive multilingual totems designed to engage all user categories. During the current Jubilee year, these initiatives positioned Schuster Park as a catalyst for slow and sustainable tourism, which should be protected and promoted in pursuit of universal inclusivity. At the same time, these initiatives can highlight aspects that may compromise the park's capacity to effectively foster social cohesion and deliver its intended benefits.

4 A Multi-criteria Monitoring Process for the Jubilee year

Since construction work on the Park is underway, the paper aims to define the first steps for a monitoring and evaluation system that explores the relationship between the social benefits gained from the Park's presence and the potential effects generated by the flows during the Jubilee year. The coexistence of ordinary, day-to-day functions aimed primarily at the local community and activities related to the event could lead to a reduction in the Park's capacity to provide social benefits. For this reason, Schuster Park serves as a suitable test area for this type of multi-criteria evaluation.

In this context, multi-criteria models are ideal tools for monitoring the effects and impacts of urban dynamics, offering a structured evaluation approach that incorporates various elements of complexity [25] and the multitude of interacting factors in the use of public spaces. These evaluation models facilitate decision-making by integrating various criteria into a cohesive framework that aids in interpreting urban aspects. Multidimensional evaluation allows for the combined examination of the physical and social characteristics of public spaces and an understanding of how this influences user well-being. Several studies demonstrate that the perceived quality of public spaces significantly impacts their ability to generate benefits, indicating that evaluation should also account for subjective factors such as users' perceptions [26]. In some applications related to public space, the Weighted Linear Combination (WLC) approach has been used to integrate several variables into a single assessment, facilitating informed decisions on public space management [27]. Having defined the objective of the evaluation, the proposed method consists of the following operational steps:

1. Division of the park into areas to be assessed, including areal ambits (different park areas or functions), linear ambits (such as paths), and punctual ambits (individual elements like street furniture).
2. Identification of evaluation criteria that incorporate both tangible and intangible aspects into the evaluation.
3. Attribution of specific indicators to each criterion that can synthesize the phenomenon being evaluated; both qualitative and quantitative indicators may be utilized.
4. Data collection will involve direct measurements for quantitative indicators and direct social survey methods for qualitative indicators.
5. Construction of the evaluation matrix, which will consist of the different areas of the Park as rows and the set of criteria/indicators as columns.
6. Assignment of relative weights among the criteria.
7. Development of the matrix with calculation of scores, definition of rankings, and identification of critical elements.

8. Analysis and interpretation of the evaluation results.

A sample scheme of the evaluation matrix is presented in Table 1 below.

To more clearly outline the initial framework of the evaluation system, a preliminary set of indicators can be defined. Concerning quantitative criteria, direct measurements can be utilized. For example, the Saturation Index can be measured as the relative density (number of people) in a specific area (e.g., the play area) within a unit of time (at specific times). Calculated in this manner for each area, this index can be useful as a reliable indicator of potential overcrowding.

For each area, a maximum user threshold can be defined beyond which accessible and enjoyable use is restricted; a second quantitative indicator could be the Load Capacity, which refers to the number of instances within a unit of time when this user limit is exceeded. Repeated use beyond the Load Capacity of certain systems can also lead to deterioration or damage to specific elements. A Deterioration Index expressed as the proportion of degraded areas (for areal or linear zones) and the number of deteriorated elements (for point elements), can help monitor the effects on public spaces and plan recovery and restoration interventions [28]. Similarly, a Noise Index can be established by measuring the sound pressure generated by increased pedestrian traffic.

Finally, with regard to quantitative criteria, various econometric and extra-economic indicators [29] can be employed to quantify the combined effects of the Park and tourist flows, establishing methodologies for measurement before and after the Jubilee events to capture any potential variation. For instance, hedonic price methods can be used to investigate the variability and related market price impacts of the dynamics under study on properties in the vicinity of the Park [30]. Proximity to the inclusive park may positively affect the real estate market, but this potential benefit could be countered by the effects of any excessive tourist influx. According to the qualitative criteria, a set of perceptual elements can be established based on direct surveys, such as questionnaires, interviews, and focus groups composed by the users, who would give perceived scores based on specific characteristics. By capturing the direct expressions of various user categories over time, aspects such as perceived accessibility, space quality, feelings of safety, well-being, emotional qualities, visual attributes, senses of enjoyment, potential dissatisfaction, and perceptions of the Park's symbolic values can be qualitatively investigated and measured for each area. For these measurements, various scales of measurement may be employed. For instance, the Likert scale, with either 5 or 7 points, allows for the expression of the intensity of perception for each criterion. Additionally, perceptual collective maps can be utilized to indicate the intensities of perceptions related to specific criteria [31]. Finally, emotion scales can quantify users' feelings of well-being or discomfort.

The scope of the investigation can encompass all elements that serve as guarantors of the social impacts of an area designed for universal accessibility, also utilizing inclusive crowd-mapping processes to implement additional systems of analysis and evaluation [31]. Once the evaluation matrix is implemented, opportunities arise for further developing the proposed method. The first scenario involves formulating criticality rankings, which can be either partial or aggregated.

To develop these rankings, it is necessary to normalize the input data to ensure comparability and interpretability. Rankings may be partial, referring to individual elements within similar domains, or complete, encompassing all elements regardless of

Table 1. Sample diagram of the evaluation matrix.

Areal Ambits	Quantitative Criteria				Qualitative Criteria			
	C1	C2	…	Cn	C1	C2	…	Cn
Churchyard								
Senior Citizens Center								
Green area of the senior center								
Inclusive playground								
Inclusive skatepark								
Restrooms								
Free green areas								
Basilica Entrance								
Archaeological area								
Stage in the park								
Sensory Garden								
Space for associations								
Bar								
Linear Ambits	Quantitative Criteria				Qualitative Criteria			
	C1	C2	…	Cn	C1	C2	…	Cn
Access routes to visiting areas								
Pedestrian paths								
Sensory path								
Sports routes								
Punctual Ambits	Quantitative Criteria				Qualitative Criteria			
	C1	C2	…	Cn	C1	C2	…	Cn
Benches								
Water points								
Wayfinding Totem								
Other sittings								
Lighting								
Trees								
Cable duct crossings								
Hedges								

their domain. This dual interpretation provides various ways of understanding the phenomena that may arise in the park, particularly regarding its ability to correlate specific criticalities with the relevant elements of the park.

The formulation of rankings may also precede the establishment of a priority preference for the criteria. This process, aimed at defining the evaluation perspective, can be conducted through consultations with park users, employing various inclusive methods to determine the weights assigned to each criterion [32]. At the same time, the system can remain an open, unresolved, and non-generative ranking matrix, designed to maintain an active monitoring framework that can be addressed on time through compensatory activities or solutions in response to perceived or identified inconveniences.

5 Conclusion

Accessibility, inclusiveness, and quality of public space are elements that can be compromised for the local community when the space must be shared or managed alongside large flows of tourist use. In this context, this paper aims to highlight the inherent trade-off by proposing an evaluation system for a specific area that, according to the authors, could serve as an ideal case for identifying this dynamic. Indeed, Schuster Park in Rome, where daily use coincides with the Jubilee Year, could illuminate these critical issues and their impact on the local communities. To achieve this, the paper proposes preliminary guidelines for a multi-criteria evaluation of these effects.

The division into distinct categories (reclassified into areal, linear, and punctual) enables a comparison of areas most likely to be affected by overcrowding, and the matrix system will highlight areas experiencing the greatest distortions, both in terms of measuring effects and user perception regarding certain quality profiles. The proposed matrix allows the identification of various elements useful for space management, including:

a) Identifying a hierarchy of the most critical areas where the potential distorting effects of overcrowding are concentrated, as well as determining whether this is more likely to occur in flat, linear, or punctual areas. These indications can help redefine flows, even temporarily, to promote sustainability in terms of environmental accessibility and social quality of the space.
b) The heterogeneity of the criteria enables the correlation of specific issues (overcrowding, noise, etc.) with the areas requiring intervention.
c) The perceived inconveniences reported by the park's local community can guide interventions aimed at reducing critical issues.
d) Continuous monitoring of the state of degradation of the park and specific elements of street furniture can facilitate interventions to mitigate problems.
e) The perceived inconveniences by the park's reference community, relating to the overload experienced in the context, can be enumerated for specific criticalities such as accessibility, livability, access to services, perception of well-being, and various productive opportunities denied due to overlapping flows. This allows for planning potential compensatory measures, even on a temporary basis.
f) A comparison between perceived discomfort and quantified measurements (using quantitative indicators) is useful for understanding possible synergistic and complementary aspects of disturbing elements, or whether the community has an asymmetrical perception of critical elements that does not align with actual surveys.

In conclusion, this provisional system will need to be reviewed and calibrated based on actual implementation, ensuring effectiveness for its intended purposes.

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