

Exploring Community Participation in Shaping Inclusive Urban Public Spaces

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords: Exploring, Community Participation, Inclusive, Urban, Public Spaces.

Received: 6, October

Revised: 26, October

Accepted: 28, November

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role and extent of community participation in shaping inclusive public spaces in Tomohon City, North Sulawesi. Using a mixed-methods case study of the Tomohon City Square, data were collected through surveys of 100 users, field observations, and interviews with 10 key informants. The findings show that the community holds significant influence in creating inclusive public spaces, primarily through informal participation such as community activities and grassroots initiatives, while formal involvement in planning remains limited. The study concludes that strengthening participatory mechanisms in urban design can enhance users' sense of belonging, accessibility, and the social quality of public spaces. Overall, the research highlights the importance of citizen collaboration in developing locally grounded, inclusive urban design practices.

INTRODUCTION

Public spaces are an important part of urban architecture because they are a place for people to interact, do activities, and express their social identity. In the context of the development of modern cities, public spaces not only function as physical elements, but also have a social role that supports inclusivity and citizen well-being, as explained by Lee et al., (2023) who found that the design of public spaces that take into account different age groups improves social cohesion. In many cities, lifestyle changes, population growth, and the need for safe and welcoming social spaces for all groups are increasingly urgent. The increase in the number of urban populations in Indonesia, including in Tomohon City, has led to pressure on limited public spaces and less participatory planning. According to Rahman and Santoso (2022), the lack of a citizen consultation mechanism in the planning stage causes public spaces to often not be in accordance with local needs. Therefore, there is a need to examine the extent to which the community can be involved in the process of designing public spaces to suit their needs.

Globally, cities around the world are starting to implement the concept of urban planning based on community participation to create inclusive and sustainable spaces. Citizen participation is an important element in realizing spatial justice and increasing a sense of belonging to common space. According to Cheung et al. (2022), public spaces designed with citizen involvement tend to have a higher level of comfort and social sustainability. However, there are still many cities in developing countries that face a gap between top-down planning and community aspirations at the grassroots level. This shows that there are still problems in integrating citizens' views into the design process of public spaces.

In Indonesia, public participation in public space planning is still often a formality and has not touched the substance of citizens' needs. A study by Hastuti et al. (2023) found that most people are only involved in the final stages, not from the design stage. This condition causes a low sense of belonging to public space and a lack of attention to the aspect of inclusivity for vulnerable groups such as women, children, the elderly, and people with disabilities. In Tomohon City, a similar phenomenon can be seen in the management of the City Square which is the main space for residents to carry out social activities, but it does not fully reflect the principle of inclusivity.

Meanwhile, at the level of urban architecture theory, the concept of inclusivity means that public spaces must be accessible, usable, and enjoyed by everyone without discrimination. Research by Selanon et al. (2025) shows that the design of public spaces that pay attention to the social and cultural aspects of users is able to increase social interaction across groups. Thus, participatory urban architectural design is an important strategy to bridge the needs of citizens and government policies. However, there is still a knowledge gap related to how the form of community participation concretely affects the perception of inclusivity of public spaces, especially in the context of medium-sized cities such as Tomohon.

Based on a literature review, previous research has largely discussed community participation in the context of urban development in general, but not

much has focused on the relationship between participation levels and perceptions of inclusivity in public spaces. For example, Nurhamdani et al. (2024) highlight the importance of participatory spaces in urban development, but have not explained how participatory mechanisms affect the experience of space users. Thus, there is a research gap that needs to be bridged through more in-depth and contextual studies. Tomohon City is a relevant location because it has a strong socio-cultural character and the potential for public space that continues to grow along with the growth of tourism and community activities.

The purpose of this study is to explore the form and level of community participation in forming an inclusive public space in Tomohon City, as well as to analyze the relationship between citizen participation and perception of the quality of public space. This research also aims to identify obstacles and opportunities in the application of the principle of inclusivity in urban architectural design. By understanding community involvement as a whole, it is hoped that the results of the research can provide a real picture of how participatory public spaces can improve the quality of urban life.

The research approach used is mixed methods with a case study on Tomohon City Square. The selection of this location is based on its characteristics as the main public space that represents the social life of residents and becomes a point of interaction for various community groups. The study involved a survey of 100 respondents using public spaces and in-depth interviews with 10 key informants from the community, local communities, and urban planners. Data were analyzed descriptively and thematically to understand the relationship between citizen participation and the perception of inclusivity. This approach is considered relevant because it is able to combine quantitative and qualitative understanding of socio-architectural phenomena.

Theoretically, this research is expected to contribute to the development of urban architecture studies by strengthening the understanding of the role of community participation in creating inclusive public spaces. Practically, the results of the research can be the basis for local governments and urban designers to formulate more effective and socially equitable participatory planning strategies. Through an approach that combines architectural perspectives, urban sociology, and citizen participation, this research is expected to be a reference for the development of a public space design model that is more adaptive, sustainable, and reflects the values of inclusivity in today's urban society.

THEORETICAL REVIEW

The Concept of Inclusive Public Space in Urban Architecture

Inclusive public spaces are considered a crucial element in urban architecture because they are an arena where social diversity meets and interacts. A study by Gupta (2025) states that many public spaces still fail to incorporate universal design principles that take into account the different physical, sensory, and social needs of users. In addition, Celik (2024) suggested that ergonomic design that pays attention to user comfort can expand the inclusivity of public spaces, especially for children and the elderly, through a mixed methods approach that reflects the user's point of view. Thus, the concept of inclusive

public space is not only about physical access, but also a real integration of comfort aspects and the representation of social identity in urban spaces.

Community Participation as a Catalyst for Space Design

Community participation in the design of public spaces has been discussed in contemporary literature as an important factor for ensuring public spaces are responsive to the needs of citizens. Vazquez et al. (2025) show how digital participatory platforms are used to evaluate the quality of public spaces with citizens, increasing opportunities for dialogue between citizens and policy makers. Meanwhile, Niwa (2025) describes an innovative method of managing urban spaces in Toyota City, Japan, that involves the community in the maintenance and design of public spaces. These findings reinforce the idea that citizen participation, both formal and through digital media, can transform the design nature of public spaces from policy monologues to collaborative processes.

Spatial Justice, Inclusion, and Exclusion in Urban Space

Spatial justice is concerned with equitable access to public space for all groups of people. Haselbacher et al. (2024) examined the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion in public spaces in European cities and found that urban policies often trigger tensions between universal needs and the specific needs of local groups. This suggests that public spaces can be a social battleground where certain groups may be excluded. In Indonesia or other developing countries, these kinds of challenges need to be explored in local constellations so that spatial design does not add to inequalities.

Environment-Building Interaction and Participation in Space Perception

The relationship between the physical elements of the environment and community participation in spatial perception has been researched by Hou et al. (2025). In their study, variables such as the quality of facilities, the relevance of the housing environment, and the needs of residents had a significant influence on the intensity of community participation and the perception of public space ownership. This study reinforces the relevance of the theory of person-environment fit in the context of urban architecture, namely that the fit between the physical environment and the needs of residents correlates with participation and attachment to public space.

Gender-Specific Design and Social Inclusion in Public Spaces

Social inclusion also requires attention to differentiation of needs based on gender. Moonen (2024) proposes eight design principles to make public spaces more responsive to women's needs, such as visual safety, symbolic representation, and informal surveillance. Such a design has the potential to bridge the gap in spatial experience between the sexes. This approach is relevant for the design of public spaces that want to be inclusive not only in terms of physical, but also the psychological and social experience of users.

METHODOLOGY

Types and Approaches to Research

This study uses a mixed methods approach with an exploratory case study design in the context of urban architecture in Tomohon City, North Sulawesi. This approach was chosen because it allows researchers to gain a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between community participation and the perception of public space inclusivity through the integration of quantitative and qualitative data. This dual approach is considered effective for studying complex social-spatial phenomena in public spaces (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2022). The case study is centered on Tomohon City Square, which serves as the main interaction space for residents and becomes a real representation of the inclusivity of urban spaces. This approach is in line with the recommendation of Yin (2021) that case studies are ideally used when researchers want to understand social dynamics in real contexts that are difficult to reduce by one type of data alone.

Population and Sampling Techniques

The research population includes all users of the Tomohon City Square, both local residents, traders, communities, and visitors from outside the city. The researcher used a non-probability sampling technique with a purposive sampling approach because the focus of the research was on groups that had direct experience in utilizing public spaces. A total of 100 respondents were selected for the quantitative survey, consisting of local residents (60%), traders and creative economy actors (25%), as well as tourists and general visitors (15%). For qualitative data, this study involved 10 key informants, namely: local government officials in the field of spatial planning, urban planners, local architects, community representatives, community leaders, small business actors around the square, members of the youth organization, people with disabilities who use public spaces, academics in the field of architecture, and representatives of women's organizations. The selection of informants was carried out strategically to represent the diverse social, cultural, and functional perspectives involved in the use and management of public spaces. This approach is aligned with the recommendations of Braun and Clarke (2023) who emphasize the importance of cross-group representation in participatory research.

Data Collection Techniques and Research Instruments

Quantitative data were collected through a structured questionnaire consisting of 25 items using a Likert scale of 1–5. The questionnaire items were adapted from instruments developed by Tadi et al. (2023) regarding the perception of inclusivity and satisfaction in public spaces. The validity test of the content was carried out through expert judgment by two architectural academics and one urban sociologist, while reliability was tested using Cronbach's Alpha coefficient with a value of ≥ 0.70 as an indicator of internal consistency. For qualitative data, collection techniques include semi-structured in-depth interviews, participatory field observations, and visual documentation. The interview lasted between 45–60 minutes per informant and was recorded with

the consent of the participants. Observations were carried out for three weeks to map patterns of space use, social activities, and interactions between users. The triangulation approach of the method is used to ensure the credibility and validity of the findings (Nowell et al., 2021).

Research Implementation Procedure

The research was carried out in four main stages. First, the preparation stage, including the formulation of instruments, the management of research permits, and coordination with local governments. Second, the data collection stage, which was carried out during July-August 2025, included the distribution of questionnaires and the implementation of interviews and field observations. Third, the data processing stage, including data filtering, transcription of interview results, and initial thematic coding. Fourth, the data analysis and interpretation stage, which is integrating quantitative and qualitative results to obtain a holistic understanding of community participation in the formation of inclusive public spaces.

Data Analysis Techniques

Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics through SPSS software version 26 to identify demographic distribution, participation rates, and perceptions of inclusivity. Meanwhile, qualitative data were analyzed using thematic analysis with the help of the NVivo 14 device. The analysis process follows six stages proposed by Braun and Clarke (2023): data familiarization, code generation, theme identification, theme review, theme definition, and result writing. The integration of the two types of data is carried out with a joint display analysis approach so that quantitative results can strengthen qualitative findings (Onwuegbuzie & Frels, 2023).

RESEARCH RESULTS

Level of Community Participation in the Use of Public Space

The results of a survey of 100 respondents who use Tomohon City Square show that the level of community participation in the use of public space is relatively high. As **72% respond** admitted to using the square at least twice a week for social activities, sports, and family recreation. Others are around **18%**, only visit on weekends, while **10%** It is classified as rarely visited. Nevertheless, only **28%** respondents who have been involved in formal activities such as deliberative forums, spatial planning, or public consultation activities with the government.

Table 1. Frequency and Form of Participation of Tomohon City Square Users (N = 100)

Form of Participation	Percentage (%)
Regular use for social activities	72
Weekend visits	18

Form of Participation	Percentage (%)
Formal involvement (forum/ deliberation)	28
Informal involvement (community, service)	67

These findings show that community participation in Tomohon City occurs more in a **informal** rather than formal. Residents feel freer to contribute through community activities, community service, or social activities than to follow formal mechanisms that are considered less flexible. A representative of the community said, *"We often hold cleaning and gymnastics activities together in the square without having to wait for official permission, because this is part of the sense of belonging to our own space"* (D, interview August 03, 2025). The statement was reinforced by local government officials in the field of spatial planning who explained that *"Community participation has begun to be seen, but not many are involved in the official planning process because the socialization is still lacking"* (A, interview 01 August 2025). These two statements show that the spirit of citizens to participate is strong, but it is still limited to the scope of informal activities that grow spontaneously from the community.

Dynamics of Formal and Informal Participation

Interviews with 10 key informants revealed a striking difference between formal and informal participation. **Informal participation** more dominant because it is considered more real and has a direct impact on the social sustainability of public spaces. A small business actor around the square said, *"If the event is big, we are involved through the merchant community. But for things like park planning or facilities, opinions are rarely asked."* (F, interview 07 August 2025). A similar view was expressed by the city planner who explained that *"In the planning forum, public participation is still limited to formal invitations, not really a two-way dialogue"* (B, interview August 05, 2025).

In addition, community leaders also assessed that informal activities such as mutual cooperation and cultural festivals are much more effective in building a sense of togetherness than official meeting forums. He said, *"The sense of togetherness arises when residents are directly involved in the field, not just coming to hear socialization"* (E, interview August 06, 2025). This condition shows that the community prefers a practical, inclusive, and results-oriented form of participation, rather than a administrative process that is often considered to limit the space for citizens' expression.

Perception of Inclusivity and Accessibility of Public Spaces

Quantitative analysis shows that public perception of the level of inclusivity of public spaces is relatively high with an average score **4.12 out of 5**. The majority of respondents considered that Tomohon City Square was quite

open to various social groups, although there was still a need to improve facilities for vulnerable groups.

Table 2. User Perception of Inclusivity and Accessibility of Public Space

Assessment Indicators	Average Score
Open space for all age groups	4.35
Disability-Friendly Facilities	3.78
Space comfort and safety	4.21
Availability of shaded areas and seating	3.95
Access to social and cultural activities	4.29

The results of the interviews reinforce this data. A person with a disability said, *"I'm happy because the lanes are quite wide, but for wheelchair users it's still a bit difficult in some parts, especially when it's crowded"* (H, interview August 08, 2025). Meanwhile, representatives of women's organizations added, *"The square is comfortable, but night lighting and surveillance still need to be improved so that women feel safer"* (J, August 10, 2025 interview). Both of these views show that while public spaces are generally inclusive, there is still a need to improve physical accessibility and a sense of security for all users. This is important so that the square truly functions as a fair and open public space.

Initiative, Collaboration, and Structural Limitations

The thematic analysis of qualitative data produced three main themes that illustrate the pattern of community participation, namely **Citizen Initiative**, **Social Collaboration** and **Structural limitations**. **Citizen initiative** It can be seen from the many spontaneous activities such as cultural festivals, environmental cleanliness competitions, and community sports events. The community leader explained, *"Every month we hold a small festival here, so that residents feel that this is a place of common belonging"* (E, August 6, 2025 interview). In line with that, the members of the youth organization said, *"We often coordinate with traders and residents to create weeknight activities so that the square remains lively and crowded"* (G, interview August 09, 2025).

Social collaboration shows that there is synergy between community groups, local business actors, and the government in maintaining public space activities. A local architect stated, *"Community activities here grow naturally, but it will be better if it is facilitated with a spatial design that supports social interaction"* (C, interview August 4, 2025). But **Structural limitations** is still the main obstacle in strengthening formal participation. An architectural academic assessed that *"There is still a distance between planners and residents. The design is often completed first and then asked for opinions, not the other way around."* (I, August 12, 2025 interview). This statement emphasizes the need for a shift in approach from top-down planning to a collaborative model that is more adaptive to the aspirations of citizens.

The Relationship of Participation and Social Inclusivity

The integration between quantitative and qualitative results shows that the higher the level of citizen participation, the more positive their perception of the inclusivity and comfort of public spaces will be. Citizens who were actively involved in joint activities showed higher levels of satisfaction and belonging than those who were only passive users.

This is reflected in the view of a member of the youth community who said, *"If we participate in management, we automatically care more. It feels like I have a responsibility to take care of this place."* (G, interview August 09, 2025). Meanwhile, local government officials also acknowledged that citizen involvement has a positive impact on space management. He stated, *"If residents are given a space to talk from the beginning, the results of the planning will be more appropriate and the community feels that they have a responsibility to take care of it."* (A, interview August 1, 2025). These findings show a mutual relationship between **Social Participation** and **Quality of inclusivity of public spaces**. The stronger the sense of community ownership of the common space, the more sustainable the social function of the space will be.

Implications for Urban Design and Policy

The findings of the study show that the establishment of inclusive public spaces in Tomohon City is not only determined by physical design, but also by **social interaction that grows from citizen participation**. Local governments need to strengthen participatory mechanisms such as regular citizen forums, cross-group community meetings, and digital platforms for public consultation.

Local architects propose that future public space designs consider interactive zones that allow residents to collaborate, *"Public spaces should have flexible areas for community activities, not just passive parks"* (C, interview August 4, 2025). While representatives of the women's community added the importance of the role of citizens in the early stages of the design, *"We want to be involved from the beginning, so that the space is really friendly for everyone, including children and women"* (J, August 10, 2025 interview). By involving the community from the planning stage to management, public spaces can be collaborative forums that strengthen a sense of belonging, expand access, and improve the social quality of the city in a sustainable manner.

DISCUSSION

This study found that community participation in the formation of public spaces in Tomohon City Square showed two main tendencies, namely formal and informal participation. Informal forms of participation, such as mutual cooperation activities, environmental cleanliness, joint gymnastics, and community festivals, are more dominant than formal participation such as planning deliberations and public consultations. Data shows that 72% of residents regularly use the square for social activities, while only 28% have ever been involved in a formal planning forum. This condition illustrates that Tomohon residents have high enthusiasm in utilizing public spaces, but have not been fully involved in the more structural planning process. These findings are

in line with the view of Cheung et al. (2022) who stated that informal forms of participation are a tangible expression of social ownership of urban space and play an important role in strengthening social ties between communities.

Such strong informal participation shows the existence of social initiatives that grow naturally from citizens. Theoretically, this phenomenon is in line with the concept of place attachment which explains that the active involvement of residents in public space activities can foster a sense of belonging and concern for the environment (Qi, 2024). The more often residents use and participate in social activities in public spaces, the greater the emotional attachment formed. This is reflected in the average score of inclusivity perception of 4.12, where the highest indicators are the openness of space for all age groups (4.35) and access to social and cultural activities (4.29). The data show that social participation has a positive influence on the perception of comfort, openness, and security of public spaces.

Nevertheless, there are still a number of weaknesses in the physical and structural aspects of public space. The indicator of disability-friendly facilities obtained the lowest score (3.78), followed by the availability of seating and shaded areas (3.95). Some user groups, such as women and people with disabilities, also express limitations in accessibility and safety, especially at night. This condition shows that the inclusivity of public spaces is not only determined by the frequency of use, but also by the extent to which the space pays attention to the needs of all groups of people. These results are in line with the findings of Lagrelus (2022) who affirm that the inclusivity of public spaces must be understood holistically, including physical access, psychological comfort, and social acceptance.

From the perspective of urban architecture, community participation has a close relationship with the concept of spatial justice. When the community is actively involved in the planning and management process of public space, access to space becomes more equitable and representative. Moroni (2024) explained that spatial justice is not only related to the distribution of physical facilities, but also to the opportunity for citizens to participate in decision-making related to space. The results of the study in Tomohon show that residents who actively participate, both through social and community activities, tend to have a more positive perception of the quality and fairness of public spaces.

In addition, the results of this study show that the formal mechanism of community participation is still limited to socialization and final project meetings. Residents are often not involved from the early stages of planning. This condition reflects the gap between the government's top-down policies and the aspirations of the community at the local level. Jiménez-Caldera et al. (2024) emphasize that effective participation should be dialogical and collaborative, not just ceremonial. Citizen involvement in the early stages of design and planning will result in a public space design that is more adaptive to the social and cultural needs of the community.

Factors that support the high level of informal participation in Tomohon include the culture of mutual cooperation, close social relationships, and the existence of an active community that often uses the square as a space for shared

activities. Meanwhile, inhibiting factors include a lack of socialization from the government, limited management budgets, and a lack of physical facilities that are friendly to vulnerable groups. This gap shows an imbalance between the social potential of the community and the capacity of government institutions to manage public participation in a sustainable manner. Kyttä et al. (2023) affirm that truly participatory urban planning requires a system that is able to bridge citizens' views with planning policies.

However, this research also has some limitations. A single case study in Tomohon City Square limited the generalization of findings to the context of other cities. The number of respondents (100 people) and key informants (10 people) is still limited to represent the entire social character of the city. In addition, data was obtained over a specific period of time (July–August 2025), so it may be influenced by seasonal conditions or special activities that increase participation. The use of the Likert questionnaire provides an overview of general perceptions, but does not fully describe the depth of the experience of space users, especially for marginalized groups. Future research needs to expand the context of the location, increase the variety of respondents, as well as consider longitudinal studies to see changes in community participation over time.

Based on these results and limitations, several recommendations can be proposed. Local governments need to strengthen the public consultation mechanism from the early stages of public space planning, not only at the implementation stage. Architects and urban planners need to apply the principles of universal design by adding disability-friendly facilities, shaded areas, and adequate lighting. In addition, citizen forums and digital platforms can be developed as participatory media that reach community groups that have been less involved. In line with the ideas of Du (2024), the integration of participatory technologies such as online surveys and interactive forums can improve the transparency and effectiveness of urban planning.

Overall, this study emphasizes that the development of inclusive public spaces does not only depend on the quality of physical design, but also on social processes that actively involve the community. Community participation, especially those growing from local initiatives, is an important social asset in creating public spaces that are sustainable, safe, and reflect the collective identity of citizens. By strengthening synergy between government, architects, and communities, public spaces in medium-sized cities like Tomohon can develop into collaborative forums that strengthen spatial justice and urban quality of life.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMEDATION

This research confirms that community participation has a central role in shaping an inclusive public space in Tomohon City. The results show that the level of citizen involvement is relatively high in the form of informal participation such as social activities, environmental cleanliness, and community initiatives, while formal participation in public space planning is still limited. This pattern of participation shows that the community has a strong social potential to maintain the sustainability of the function of public spaces through a sense of collective belonging and responsibility. In addition, the survey results

show that public perception of the inclusivity of public space is quite high, although the aspect of physical accessibility for vulnerable groups such as people with disabilities and women still needs to be improved. Thus, public spaces in Tomohon reflect dynamic social interactions, but require structural support so that inclusivity can be realized comprehensively.

Theoretically and practically, this research contributes to the development of urban architecture by emphasizing the importance of a planning approach based on citizen collaboration. Strengthening participatory mechanisms from the design stage to management is the key to creating an adaptive, fair, and sustainable public space. Local governments and urban designers are advised to integrate the principles of universal design, expand the space for citizen dialogue, and utilize participatory technology as a means of public consultation. In this way, public spaces are not only a forum for social activities, but also a reflection of the values of spatial justice, togetherness, and the collective identity of today's urban society.

FURTHER STUDY

Future research should further investigate the dynamics of community participation in public space development by comparing different forms of formal and informal engagement across various neighborhoods in Tomohon City. Studies using mixed-method or longitudinal approaches could provide deeper insights into how citizen involvement evolves and how it influences the long-term inclusivity of public spaces. In addition, future studies could examine the specific needs and experiences of vulnerable groups—such as people with disabilities, women, children, and the elderly—to better understand barriers to physical and social accessibility. Exploring the effectiveness of participatory technologies, collaborative planning tools, and universal design implementation would also contribute to advancing inclusive urban design. Comparative research with other cities could further highlight best practices and contextual challenges, strengthening the theoretical and practical foundation for inclusive and community-driven public space planning.

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