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## **Spatial Justice in Design Research: A Transdisciplinary Discourse**

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# Editorial: Spatial justice in design research: A transdisciplinary discourse

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**Abstract:** This is the introductory editorial to the papers in the track ‘Spatial Justice in Design Research: A Transdisciplinary Discourse’ for DRS2024. The track is an experimental opening of a transdisciplinary conversation between researchers and professionals on the spatialities of justice: how justice permeates everyday life, and spaces and communities we live in. It takes on the challenge to bringing spatial justice down from abstract theorisations, to how it can be practiced and achieved. Here the design research contribution becomes pivotal, as it shows the ‘how’ of navigating socio-spatial inequalities. This is what the papers in the track do: they discuss case studies, applications, tools of investigation, to explore novel paths toward more just spatial settings.

**Keywords:** spatial justice; design methods; transdisciplinarity; socio-spatial inequalities

## 1. Introduction

(In)justice is deeply entangled with space (Pavoni, 2018; Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos, 2014; Tedeschi, 2019). When it occurs, it always does in some kind of spatial settings. Space is not merely a background (Lefebvre, 1991; Massey, 2008) passively witnessing occurrences of (in)justice. It permeates (in)justice, enters, and modulates it in more or less visible and tangible ways. Becoming aware of the entanglements between space and justice is a journey worth making. It is a journey that we embark on with this track on spatial justice, where spatial justice is experienced not as an abstract, obscure concept, something other, or distant from humans and the environments they inhabit, but rather as an integral part of everyday life and spaces. Spatial justice permeates everyday micro-actions and movements, behaviours, gestures, and decisions, ultimately influencing broader geographical scales (e.g. urban environments).

In the micro-scale, (in)justice takes place in the routine of everyday urban journeys, encounters (Young, 2023), and practices. It occurs when finding tactics (De Certeau, 1984) to make a



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private space public by e.g. occupying abandoned buildings for cultural or recreational activities (Vallance et al., 2017); attempting to process unregulated events such as harassment on the street (Logan, 2015); self-regulating and adjusting spatial behaviour (Brighenti & Pavoni, 2022) in front of surveillance cameras in public spaces (Koskela, 2011); adjusting, slowing down, or arresting spatial mobility to counter online and offline hate crime (Awan & Zempi, 2016). These micro-practices encapsulate the complex multiplicity of social, cultural, emotional, physical, and digital/tech elements that constitute the fabric of space and justice.

At the macro-scale, (in)justice reaches 'spatial processes (e.g. globalization, urbanization, suburbanization, gentrification, immigration, environmental nuisances, and hazards), which can lead to social consequences, such as inequality, segregation, exclusion, and shunning' (Israel & Frenkel, 2018: 647).

As (in)justice is so spatially diffuse and pervasive, encountering and becoming aware of it leads to walking a necessarily transdisciplinary path. Not only does spatial justice cross disciplines, but also moves beyond academia, inviting a wide spectrum of professionals—designers, technologists, legal advocates, and policymakers—to find ways to implement and foster it. This is something that we have tried to achieve with this track: open and support a transdisciplinary conversation with both researchers and practitioners to find new directions to achieve justice in a variety of spatial settings.

This is also where the contribution of design research for justice (Costanza-Chock, 2018) becomes pivotal. The 'how' of achieving spatial justice is in fact an impervious path, and emotionally demanding: it has to do with facing power imbalances, inequalities, socio-spatial marginalisation and segregation, exclusion. Design research can help finding alternative and creative paths for this 'how to achieve spatial justice,' in ways that the papers in this track showcase.

The initial Call for Papers sought work exploring spatial justice as a radically transdisciplinary discourse, as a challenge and open discourse leading to developing design tools to empower local communities navigating the intricacies of social, spatial, economic, and digital inequalities. Six papers were accepted in the track, and they all explore some relevant aspect of spatial justice in relation to design practice.

In *Unraveling the Map: Black Psychogeographies and Other Spells for Undoing the Lasting Spatial Injustice of Colonial Cartography*, Cara Mitchell challenges maps-making in Western pedagogy, which reproduces the same representational techniques emerging from the colonisation of the Americas, thus reinforcing spaces of injustice. To counter this, she draws from black psychogeography theories and experiments with more culturally responsive participatory mappings via liberatory cartographic methods emerging from spaces outside Western capitalism. In the paper, she describes the successes, failures, and lessons learned from three participatory mapping processes that she led in workshops taking place in New York City, NY and Boston, MA.

In *Spatial Justice Through Immersive Art: An Interdisciplinary Approach*, Asma Mehan, Sina Mostafavi, and Asma Mehana explore spatial justice combining immersive art and urban

heritage through elements such as circular design, artisanal craftsmanship, robotics, and augmented reality. Focused on the cities of Amsterdam and Houston, the paper examines a case presented at the Venice Biennale 2023. The study showcases the integration of immersive art and digital technology in reimagining urban spaces, understood as ‘phygital’ spaces (physical + digital). It combines GIS-based spatial analyses with qualitative ethnographic observations, as well as participatory workshops with local communities, unveiling the potentialities for art and design to explore socio-spatial inequalities.

In *Reimagining Public Spaces Through Translating Cultural & Heritage Narratives into Public Art-Lessons from Roxbury’s Black Panther Commemoration Community Garden & Art Mural Project*, Killion Mokwete uses the concept of spatial justice to respond to socio-economic imbalances—remnants of exclusionary policies—still existing in some Boston neighbourhoods, such as Roxbury, and to find alternative paths to empower the local community stakeholders. The Author engages with spatial justice through PAR (Participation Action research) tools, to design the Black Panther Commemoration Installation at the Winthrop Gardens in Roxbury. This community-led and design-based project not only preserves the cultural heritage of the place, but also builds a community garden to provide access to healthy food.

In *The Heritage Language and Graphic Landscape of London’s Chinatown*, Robert Harland, Angelina Pan, and Alison Barnes explore the critical role of graphic heritage in supporting ethnic identities within multicultural environments. The Authors focus on London’s Chinatown, where Chinese identity is visibly affirmed through e.g. street nameplates that outline geographic boundaries and reflect the cultural impact of this community. The study examines 209 retail signs featuring 313 instances of writing—some of which are bilingual or trilingual—to assess how well the heritage language is preserved in the area. This analysis maps linguistic codes and spatial distribution of graphic elements in Chinatown and establishes a framework for understanding the development of Chinese ‘designscapes’ globally.

In *Adelaide’s Graphic Heritage: The Quintessential ‘Contested’ Colonial City*, Robert Harland explores how colonialism has altered the indigenous concept of ‘Country’ in city spaces in Adelaide, the state capital of South Australia. The Author advocates for reimagining Australia as a shared territory that respects and honours indigenous identities. Drawing on insights from academic research and the United Kingdom National Commission for UNESCO, Harland discusses the ambiguous relationship between the interpretation, presentation, and representation of heritage. He proposes that Aboriginal Adelaide urban graphic interventions, with their varied forms and media, may serve as a catalyst for fostering discussions and collaborations that improve the portrayal and conservation of cultural heritage.

In *Coastliners Lab: Mapping for Environmental Spatial Justice at the Water’s Edge*, Gokcen Erkilic draws upon critical urban and posthuman theories to explore a trans-media critical mapping practice focused on bodies of water in urban and extra-urban settings, examining their socio-material impact on human-environment relations. The Lab employs cartographic layering of aerial photographs, historic maps, news reports, video footage, field notes, interviews, and more to redefine design’s role toward spatial justice. The research highlights the

interplay of agencies and political ecologies in contested anthropogenic impacts on transforming landscapes, specifically focusing on Istanbul's political and ecological struggles concerning coastlines.

With such a variety of contributions, the DRS2024 track on spatial justice showcases the key role that design research and practice can play in visualising and navigating socio-spatial challenges in multiple, contested, and diverse spatial (especially urban) settings. It demonstrates how incorporating contributions from e.g. sociology, law, critical urban theory, policy studies, anthropology, digital geographies, and urban planning can enrich our understanding of spatial (in)justice. Each paper connects theoretical insights with practical, transdisciplinary applications, underscoring design's role in making spatial justice a visible, tangible, and explorable concept. Through these conversations, it becomes evident that moving towards spatial justice requires experimenting with creative methods to delve into the intricacies of how bodies, spaces, technologies, and normativities connect to inform everyday lives and experiences at different geographical scales.

Within and beyond design research, in the track participatory methods stand out for their transformative power, democratising the research process and ensuring that community voices are central to making spaces more just. At the same time, visual and material tools experimented with by the Authors achieve the ambitious goal of making complex socio-spatial inequalities apparent to a wider audience.

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