

PRODUCING OWNERSHIP THROUGH PLAY: EVERYDAY PUBLIC SPACE PRACTICES IN THE FRANKENBERGER NEIGHBOURHOOD

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Abstract. Play is commonly associated with childhood as a creative and productive activity that supports learning and innovation. However, its relevance extends beyond childhood and offers a critical lens for examining the consumption-oriented and rationalised patterns of contemporary urban life. In public space, playful activities often emerge as spontaneous and voluntary practices through which individuals engage with their surroundings, develop a sense of belonging, participate in shaping everyday spatial use, and move beyond purely functional or passive interpretations of space. In this article, owning space is understood not as a legal or formal condition, but as a situational and experiential process enacted through everyday use, interaction, and spatial adaptation by city residents. Such practices demonstrate how public space can be actively produced through use rather than passively consumed, and how everyday activities may resist tendencies toward standardisation and privatisation.

This study investigates the relationship between play theory and urban public space through a case study of the Frankenberger Neighbourhood in Aachen. Moving beyond playground-based and child-centred interpretations of play, the research focuses on playful and social practices embedded in everyday public space use, while critically engaging with processes of privatisation and control. The study draws on systematic observations, behavioural mapping, visual documentation, and questionnaires designed to explore users' preferences, choices, and expectations regarding public space. Together, these methods illustrate how residents participate in and activate public space through playful practices, how owning space is produced through everyday use, and how such insights can inform public space design. The article argues that urban designers and planners can support more inclusive and playful public spaces not by prescribing specific functions, but by enabling spatial conditions that allow users to shape, reinterpret, and co-produce space through their everyday practices.

Keywords: play theory, urban public space, everyday practices, owning space, public space design.

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1. Introduction

Public spaces have long been recognised as essential components of urban life, providing settings for social interaction, everyday encounters, political expression, and the formation of collective urban culture (Jacobs, 1961; Gehl, 2004; Madanipour, 2015). Defined broadly as spaces that are publicly accessible and situated outside the boundaries of private property, such as streets, squares, and parks, public spaces support diverse social practices and contribute to the social and spatial vitality of cities (Madanipour, 1999; Duivenvoorden et al., 2021). As UN-Habitat emphasises, public spaces are “places publicly owned or of public use, accessible and enjoyable by all for free and without a profit motive” (Garau, 2015, p. 6). In this sense, they function not only as physical infrastructure but also as shared social resources that enhance quality of life and urban inclusivity.

Despite their recognised importance, many contemporary public spaces are characterised by declining levels of active use and social engagement. Processes of privatisation, regulation, and standardisation increasingly shape public space design and management, often prioritising circulation, control, and consumption over everyday social life (Harvey, 2000; Madanipour, 2015). As a result, users are frequently positioned as passive observers rather than active participants, limiting opportunities for spontaneous interaction, informal appropriation, and collective use (Jacobs, 1961; Putnam, 2000). This shift raises critical questions about how public spaces can support more engaged forms of urban life and how design and everyday practices might counteract tendencies toward passivity and exclusion.

Within urban studies and design research, scholars have argued that public spaces should enable openness, flexibility, and minimal behavioural constraints in order to foster social interaction and spontaneous activity (Gehl &

Svarre, 2013; Li et al., 2022). However, while these qualities are frequently invoked as design principles, there remains a need for analytical frameworks that explain how people actively engage with public spaces in everyday life and how such engagement contributes to a sense of belonging and shared use (Purcell, 2013; Işık, 2025). In this context, attention to everyday practices offers a way to understand public space not as a static container, but as something continuously produced through use, interaction, and interpretation.

Play theory provides a productive lens for examining these everyday practices in public space. Rather than being limited to childhood or formal playgrounds, play has been theorised as a voluntary, open-ended, and socially meaningful activity that allows individuals to temporarily suspend utilitarian logics and engage with their surroundings in imaginative and embodied ways (Huizinga, 1955; Caillois, 1961; Sutton-Smith, 1997). In urban contexts, playful practices can emerge through informal sitting, social gatherings, creative adaptations of space, and spontaneous interactions that exceed prescribed functions (Stevens, 2007). Such practices challenge rationalised and consumption-oriented uses of space, revealing alternative modes of engagement that are experiential, relational, and situational.

In this article, owning public space is understood not as a legal or formal condition, but as a process that unfolds through everyday use and playful engagement. Drawing on observations from public space studies (Whyte, 1980), owning space is approached as something enacted through presence, interaction, and spatial adaptation, as well as through individual freedom experienced by coming, using, and sensing space within everyday social life. The article investigates this relationship through a case study of the Frankenberger Neighbourhood in Aachen, focusing on how playful and social practices are embedded in everyday public space use. The study employs systematic observations, behavioural mapping, visual documentation, and questionnaires to examine how residents use, interpret, and adapt public spaces in their daily routines. The analysis explores how existing spatial conditions enable or constrain playful practices, and how these conditions can be understood by urban designers through the lens of play.

By situating play within broader debates on public space, everyday practices, and urban participation, this article aims to contribute to discussions on how public spaces can support more inclusive and engaged forms of urban life. It argues that urban design and planning can foster such engagement not by prescribing fixed functions, but by enabling spatial conditions that allow users to shape, reinterpret, and co-produce public space through their everyday practices. The following sections elaborate the theoretical framework, methodology, and empirical findings of the study.

2. Theoretical framework

Public spaces are essential conduits in cities, acting as channels through which the vibrancy of urban life flows, enriching the social, economic, cultural, and political fabric

of communities. However, these vital areas are currently facing a significant challenge: the trend towards privatization and its effects on public engagement. This shift has led to users becoming passive participants in the management and design processes, diminishing their active engagement and owning public spaces. To address these issues effectively, it is imperative to first establish a clear and comprehensive definition of what public spaces should embody, setting the stage for a deeper exploration of their current challenges and then potential solutions by play theory.

2.1. Privatization, control, and the production of passive public space

In contemporary urban environments, public spaces are increasingly diverging from their democratic ideals as forums for sharing, confronting differences, and expressing ideas. A fundamental problem underpinning this shift is the growing trend of privatization. In many cities, the streets once solely managed by local governments are now being matched by the emergence of private, managed spaces (Madanipour, 2019; Németh & Schmidt, 2011). Under contemporary market-driven urban development, privatization has led to the establishment of design rules by city planners, notably in cities like New York and London, aiming for open and varied public use. However, this often results in public areas that lack a sense of owning and belonging. The takeover of urban life by private interests is a gradual process, leading to a practical, but restrictive approach to managing and protecting public spaces (de Lima Amaral, 2016; Carmona, 2022; Gałkowski & Antosz, 2022). Research on privately owned and privately managed public spaces demonstrates that such spaces tend to employ more extensive mechanisms to regulate use, behaviour, and access than publicly owned ones (Németh & Schmidt, 2011; Chitrakar et al., 2022).

The rise of neoliberal urbanism has reshaped public space through governance and management practices that prioritise economic growth, market efficiency, and profit-making over social and ecological values (Harvey, 1989; Zukin, 1995). Rather than disappearing altogether, public spaces are increasingly reconfigured as consumption-oriented environments, where access and participation are implicitly structured around economic activity. In many publicly accessible but privately managed spaces, design and management decisions are guided less by concerns for social interaction, diversity, or democratic use than by financial returns, cleanliness, control, and brand image (Mitchell, 2003; Kohn, 2004). As Németh and Schmidt (2011) argue, such spaces often remain formally open while subtly limiting forms of use that do not align with commercial interests, thereby redefining publicness through managerial and economic criteria rather than civic ones. Drawing on Simmel's analysis of the metropolis, money once functioned as an abstract mediator of social relations; in contemporary urban space, however, consumption itself becomes the primary condition for belonging. Place

attachment is no longer produced through shared social life but through repeated acts of consumption, in which spending operates as the dominant mode of engagement and legitimacy (de Lima Amaral, 2016). This shift risks reducing public space to a platform for economic exchange, weakening its capacity to support diverse practices, informal social life, and experiential forms of spatial ownership grounded in presence, use, and interaction rather than profit.

Building on historical accounts in which public spaces functioned as integral arenas of urban social life, Ali Madanipour critically traces how these spaces have been transformed in recent decades. Since the post-1980s period, he observes a shift toward increasingly regulated, managed, and controlled environments, replacing earlier ideals of openness, diversity, and spontaneity (Madanipour, 2010). While these changes are frequently justified through discourses of safety, security, and risk management, they have been closely aligned with the interests of private developers and property owners seeking to protect investments and ensure predictability. Concern for real and perceived safety has become a dominant planning priority, reflecting a broad consensus that public spaces must appear secure in order to function successfully (Talen, 2008; Chitrakar et al., 2022). However, when security becomes the primary organizing principle, it often leads to subtle forms of exclusion, as spaces are curated to attract an “appropriate” population while discouraging uses and users perceived as undesirable (Whyte, 1988; Gałkowski & Antosz, 2022).

This logic is reinforced through planning strategies rooted in Jacobs’s (1961) notion of “eyes on the street,” which emphasize natural surveillance, continuous activity, and the presence of law-abiding users. In practice, such approaches are frequently operationalized through extensive programming, event planning, and design controls that favour predictability over openness. Rather than supporting diverse and unplanned forms of use, these measures tend to homogenize public space, producing environments that look, feel, and function similarly regardless of local context. Privately owned but publicly accessible spaces are not necessarily closed, but they are more controlled, with publicness redefined through surveillance, policing, and design features that regulate behaviour and limit improvisation (Kohn, 2004; Németh, 2009).

Richard Sennett critically argues that the privatization of public space undermines its civic and social function by displacing spontaneous, unscripted interaction with managed and predictable forms of public life (Sennett, 1977). For Sennett, a vibrant public realm depends on the coexistence of difference, friction, and uncertainty—conditions that allow diverse populations to encounter one another without prior scripting. In contrast, privatized and privately managed public spaces tend to operate through temporal regulation and behavioural control: although such spaces may remain formally accessible, owners retain the right to limit access, regulate opening hours, and exclude certain users or activities deemed inappropriate (Sorkin, 1992; Németh & Schmidt, 2011). As a result, public life

is increasingly confined to specific times, activities, and modes of conduct.

This mode of control fosters a passive relationship between users and public space, weakening the possibility of ownership understood as lived engagement. When activities are pre-scripted and behaviour is regulated, users are positioned as consumers or spectators rather than active participants in shaping space. Such passivity is reinforced through spatial management techniques that range from enabling freedom of use—such as the provision of accessible seating—to more restrictive measures, including surveillance cameras, policing, and security personnel that monitor and discipline behaviour (Sandercock, 1998; Chitrakar et al., 2022). While often justified in the name of safety and order, these forms of control have broader consequences for inclusiveness and social diversity, as they tend to discourage informal use and exclude behaviours or users perceived as undesirable (de Lima Amaral, 2016; Gałkowski & Antosz, 2022). In such managed settings, public space becomes something to be consumed or observed rather than actively inhabited, undermining the experiential foundations of owning and participation. Against this backdrop, attention to playful practices offers a way to understand how users may appropriate and experience ownership of public space through everyday use.

2.2. Play as spatial practice: ownership, belonging, and active participation

In the face of escalating privatization, the pressing challenge in urban design is to create public spaces that resist being overtaken by private interests and maintain their status as communal assets. These spaces should cultivate a sense of belonging and encourage active participation and ownership, standing in contrast to environments that promote passive consumption (Soja, 1996). It’s within this context that play activities become essential, serving as a catalyst for participation, personal connection, and ownership of the space. To understand the transformative power of play in urban spaces, we must first explore the fundamental question: What is play?

Play is often seen as a creative and productive activity that fosters a child’s innovative potential. However, it is not limited to children; rather, it is a voluntary engagement that individuals undertake throughout their lives in various spaces and times. The foundational work on play comes from the Dutch historian Johan Huizinga, who introduced his work “*Homo Ludens*” in 1938. Huizinga explores the historical significance of play, asserting that it played a crucial role in the emergence of culture. He conceptualizes human beings as “*Homo Ludens*” or playing humans, suggesting that actions performed in social life serve to produce the essential needs and requirements of life, thereby fostering a sense of ownership and active participation. Huizinga characterizes early human societies’ life-sustaining activities, such as building shelters, hunting, and gathering, as acts of play. As human beings started creating their reality, they initially shaped everything in a rhythm,

arrangement, and repetition. In essence, reality emerges as a product of playful social interactions (Huizinga, 1995).

Within architectural and urban discourse, play enters the discussion as a critical tool for questioning functionalist, profit-driven, and privatized models of space production. The Situationist International positioned play not as a recreational supplement but as a transformative mode of inhabiting and producing urban space, directly challenging the commodification and regulation of everyday life (Constant & Debord, 1958; Heynen, 1999). By rejecting fixed programs, rigid functional zoning, and predetermined uses, Situationist thinking exposed how controlled and managed urban environments tend to reduce users to passive occupants rather than active spatial agents (Heynen, 1999; Işık, 2025). In contrast, play was proposed as a collective, open-ended practice through which space could be continuously appropriated, reconfigured, and reimagined in everyday life (Constant, 1960). This shift reframed ownership away from legal possession or managerial control toward lived and sensory engagement, where public space is “owned” through presence, interaction, and spatial adaptation rather than formal rights (de Lima Amaral, 2016; Işık, 2025). In this sense, play operates both as a critique of privatized urban order and as a framework for alternative forms of publicness grounded in participation, freedom, and shared spatial authorship (Heynen, 1999).

Drawing on Lefebvre’s theory of everyday life, play is understood as a practice that exceeds functionality and enables the reproduction of space. Lefebvre situates play within everyday life, defining it as a spontaneous and voluntary action that suspends social hierarchies and disrupts normative systems of control (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). While privatized urban planning tends to confine space to pre-defined, functional, and controllable uses, play operates beyond instrumental logic, allowing art and creativity to permeate daily life. Lefebvre argues that separating play from everyday practices produces standardized spaces and synchronized temporalities, whereas play generates differential actions through which individuals and communities actively produce time-space. In this sense, play is not marginal but central to the lived production of space, unfolding across everyday urban life rather than within designated or isolated zones (Lefebvre, 1974/1991; Sennett, 1998).

Another defining aspect of play is its inherently fictional nature, evolving into a structured system characterized by rhythm and repetition over time. Governed by specific rules, albeit subject to change, this system operates on the principle of voluntarism, promoting active engagement and a sense of ownership over the activity. Bernard Suits emphasizes the importance of rules in the understanding of play. He stresses that the violation of these rules is prohibited, while adhering to the rules and making minor modifications can add significant value to the play. Despite the uncertainty of the outcome, Suits argues that the rules of play can be pre-determined, even if they are subject to change during play. Suits asserts that play is not simply

a casual or trivial activity, but it can be defined as “doing what one wants to do” (Suits, 1978).

Caillois (1961) suggests that all forms of playful activities can be evaluated on a spectrum ranging between two fundamental aspects: *paidia* and *ludus*. *Paidia* encompasses spontaneous and improvisational actions that offer a departure from daily routines and foster active participation and a sense of ownership. It involves exploring alternative social interactions and fostering the emergence of novel social structures. Picture the playful actions of children as a prime example of *paidia*; they engage without self-awareness in their emotions and behaviours. Interestingly, adults also show a liking for unstructured behaviour and embracing risks. On the other hand, *ludus* refers to play that has been formalized into structured games. This type of play adheres to predetermined rules and established routines, often intentionally designed to be intricate and somewhat arbitrary. *Ludus*, essentially, embodies a “secondary and gratuitous” pursuit—an activity undertaken purely for the joy it brings, promoting ownership and active participation. It serves as a counterbalance to the impact of routine, monotonous work on one’s sense of self (Caillois, 1961; Stevens, 2007). By encouraging individuals to engage deeply and personally with public spaces, both *paidia* and *ludus* support forms of ownership grounded in use, experimentation, and interaction. These forms of playful engagement provide a conceptual lens for analysing how everyday practices produce belonging and active participation in public space.

3. Study areas

Frankenger Park and Neumarkt are two prominent public spaces located in the Frankenger neighbourhood of Aachen, a district situated close to the city centre and adjacent to the Aachen ring. The neighbourhood includes Frankenger Castle, a former water castle that now functions as a museum and cultural centre, reinforcing the area’s strong historical and cultural identity. Predominantly inhabited by middle-class residents and students, the Frankenger neighbourhood is characterized by a heterogeneous urban fabric that combines residential buildings with a wide range of amenities, including schools, cafés, restaurants, bookstores, markets, museums, and a large indoor concert hall. This diversity contributes to a lively everyday atmosphere and provides a rich context for examining how public spaces are used, adapted, and experienced in daily life.

Frankenger Park is a well-loved green space located at the heart of the neighbourhood, offering a calm yet active environment for relaxation and recreation. It is frequently used by families, children, students, and elderly residents, serving as a space for both organized and informal activities. The park features expansive lawns, mature trees, and well-maintained pathways that support walking, jogging, and sitting, while playgrounds and sports facilities encourage playful engagement across different age groups. These spatial qualities make the park an important

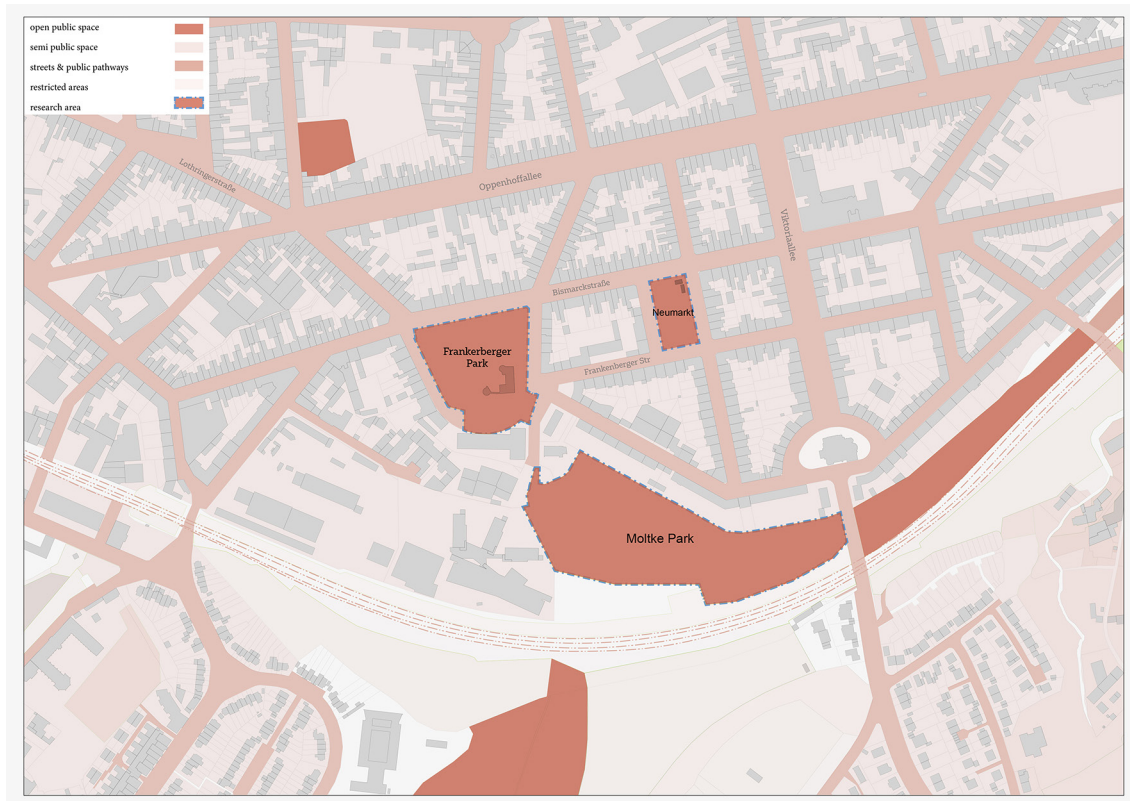


Figure 1. Public space map of Frankenberger Neighbourhood

setting for observing everyday playful practices and social interactions embedded in routine urban life.

Neumarkt, the second case study area, functions as a central urban square and a key gathering point within the neighbourhood. Surrounded by cafés, restaurants, and small shops, it forms a vibrant social hub where everyday activities such as sitting, meeting, waiting, and observing intersect with more organized uses. Neumarkt regularly hosts markets, cultural events, and festivals, contributing to its dynamic and temporally layered character. The square's openness and accessibility support diverse patterns of use, ranging from brief encounters to prolonged stays, making it a valuable site for studying how play and social interaction unfold in more intensely programmed urban settings.

A notable characteristic of the Frankenberger neighbourhood is the strong spatial connectivity between its public spaces. As illustrated in the public space map (Figure 1), parks, squares, and cultural facilities are closely integrated, forming a cohesive network of green and communal spaces. This spatial continuity enhances walkability and encourages movement between different public areas, fostering everyday encounters and informal social interaction. The integration of these spaces supports a sense of familiarity and belonging, creating conditions in which residents engage actively with their surroundings and enact forms of ownership through repeated use, presence, and participation rather than formal control.

4. Methodology

This research employs a mixed-methods approach combining GIS mapping, on-site observation, photography, and questionnaires to examine playful behaviours and practices of spatial ownership in public space. The study focuses on two key public spaces in the Frankenberger neighbourhood of Aachen: Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt. Fieldwork was conducted between June and August 2023 during weekday afternoons between 4:00 and 5:00 pm. This time period was selected to capture a wide range of everyday activities and social interactions under hot weather conditions, when public space use tends to be particularly intensive.

GIS mapping was used to conduct a systematic spatial analysis and visualization of playful behaviours within the selected public spaces. By collecting and analysing spatial data, this method enabled the identification of spatial patterns, concentrations, and hotspots of playful activity, adding a spatial dimension to understanding how play unfolds in urban environments. On-site observations were carried out following the principles of behavioural mapping (Ittelson, 1970), documenting playful behaviours, social interactions, and patterns of use. These structured observations focused on the types of activities, their spatial distribution, and the social contexts in which they occurred, allowing the dynamic and situational nature of play to be recorded. Photography complemented these methods by providing

visual documentation of behaviours and their spatial settings, capturing material conditions and forms of interaction that may not be fully conveyed through mapping alone.

In addition to observational methods, questionnaires were employed to understand how users themselves perceive play, participation, and ownership in public space. Questionnaires made it possible to collect data on everyday practices, preferences, and meanings attributed to public space use, offering insight into how individuals incorporate these spaces into daily life for leisure, social interaction, or retreat (Burgess, 2001). By including targeted questions on play, the survey explored how users interpret playful elements and activities, and whether these experiences contribute to feelings of engagement, belonging, and ownership understood as lived and experiential rather than legal (Glasow, 2005). As a cost-effective and inclusive method, questionnaires enabled the collection of perspectives from a diverse range of users, while their structured format ensured consistency and comparability across responses (Bryman, 2004).

Qualitative analysis was conducted through the coding and categorization of observed behaviours and questionnaire responses to identify recurring themes related to play, participation, and spatial ownership. To enhance reliability, triangulation was applied by cross-referencing observational data, GIS mapping, photographic material, and questionnaire results. Building on the framework proposed

by Goličnik (2005), behavioural maps linked spatial characteristics with observed and reported behaviours, enabling an integrated understanding of how playful practices shape public space and contribute to experiential forms of ownership.

5. Case studies: Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt

5.1. Behaviour maps and everyday life dynamics

The behavioral map of Frankenberger Park (Figure 2) reveals a lively environment where a variety of activities take place, such as dancing, playing music, picnicking, and sports. The park offers a variety of sensory experiences, including activities such as watching kids, walking, slacklining, playing frisbee, eating ice cream, sitting on the stairs, chatting, sitting on the grass, playing in the playground, playing football, outdoor art and painting, group fitness classes, picnic parties, dog walking, dancing, mind-body exercises, playing guitar and singing, and playing basketball. These activities foster positive interactions across diverse age groups, creating a vibrant community atmosphere. In Neumarkt, activities such as sitting on the bench, sitting at the card tables and chatting while drinking, children playing, families chatting, and playing table tennis are observed.



Figure 2. The GIS behavior map of Frankenberger Park 10.7.23, 4–4.30 pm

Frankenberger Park brings together recreational and historical layers, creating an environment that supports diverse forms of everyday play and spatial appropriation. As observed in Figure 3, users of different ages engage in a variety of activities, often personalizing space through informal arrangements and the creative use of natural materials as play elements. The playground design takes advantage of the park's natural slope, encouraging social interaction among families while visually and physically connecting the play area to its historical surroundings. The presence of the renovated historic water castle, now functioning as a cultural centre, further enriches the park's spatial and symbolic character. Sitting areas located near the castle allow visitors to observe activities unfolding across the park, supporting practices of watching, resting, and informal social interaction within a historically significant setting. Figure 4 illustrates how flexible wooden structures within the park are appropriated by young people for sitting, drinking, dining, and making music, demonstrating how open-ended design supports multiple, self-directed uses.

Figure 5 illustrates children engaged in play at Neumarkt, while families and older residents occupy nearby seating areas. Different age groups are present simultaneously, with older users remaining seated and observing children at play. This configuration allows multiple forms of play to occur at the same time, including active play and passive presence, and supports extended stays within the square. Neumarkt is unfenced and directly surrounded by residential buildings, creating a spatial continuity between the square and the surrounding neighbourhood. As a result, everyday activities unfold without clear boundaries between the public space and adjacent residential life. Figure 6 shows the open library area, which includes fixed seating elements integrated into the square. Users are observed sitting, reading, eating, and spending time in the space without a predefined activity. These amenities support unstructured use and allow individuals to remain in the area for varying durations. Together, these observations demonstrate how Neumarkt accommodates both active and passive uses through its spatial openness, seating arrangements, and everyday patterns of occupation.



Figure 3. People are engaging in diverse activities



Figure 4. Open and flexible seating units



Figure 5. Children are playing and families nearby



Figure 6. Open library reading area



Figure 7. A drink car with seated patrons with flowers

Figure 7 portrays a drink cart with seated patrons, illustrating how the park accommodates informal social gatherings and leisure activities. Chairs and tables are arranged beneath a steel structure, where local users have added their own flowerpots. These user-added elements are visible within the structure and contribute to a flexible, open-use setting that can be adapted to different weather conditions. The presence of movable furniture and personal objects indicates how the space is arranged and used on a daily basis. Figure 8 shows the street connecting Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt, which is closed to vehicular traffic, particularly on weekends. As visible in the photograph, café users extend their activities into the street, and children play in the roadway. During these periods, the street functions as a shared social space, temporarily accommodating play, sitting, and social interaction away from cars and traffic.

5.2. Questionnaires findings

The questionnaire survey was completed by 138 participants using Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt. The respondent group included a higher proportion of female participants than male participants, with representation across a wide range of age groups. While younger adults were present, the sample was largely composed of middle-aged and older users, reflecting the everyday user profile

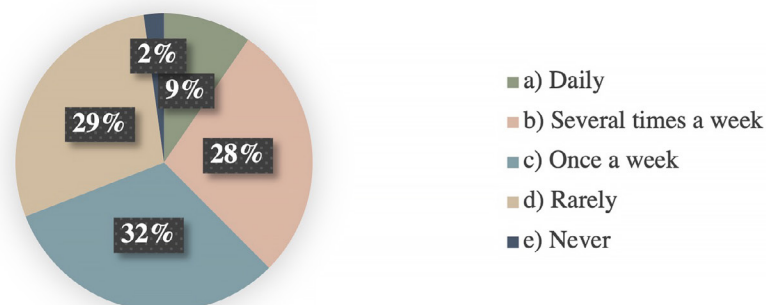


Figure 9. How often do you use public spaces in your neighbourhood? (Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt)



Figure 8. People are playing in the street

of the neighbourhood's public spaces. Patterns of public space use indicate that most respondents visit Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt regularly, ranging from daily use to several times a week or once a week, while a smaller share reported rare or no use. These usage frequencies are illustrated in Figure 9, which demonstrates the central role of these spaces in the daily and weekly routines of neighbourhood residents.

Responses regarding preferred types of public space are presented in Figure 10. The results show that open and freely accessible environments—such as parks and gardens, streets, squares, and marketplaces—are selected more frequently than enclosed or activity-specific spaces. Cafés and restaurants are also commonly chosen, while more specialized or institutionally defined spaces, such as playgrounds, sports fields, forests, or politically oriented spaces, are selected less often. Overall, the findings indicate a strong preference for everyday public environments that allow flexible use and informal presence across different social contexts.

Figure 11 presents participants' interpretations of what constitutes play in public spaces. Responses indicate that play is primarily associated with sports and games, socializing with friends, relaxing and enjoying nature, and children's games. Creative or artistic activities and exploratory practices are also frequently identified as playful. In contrast, purchasing goods and window shopping are

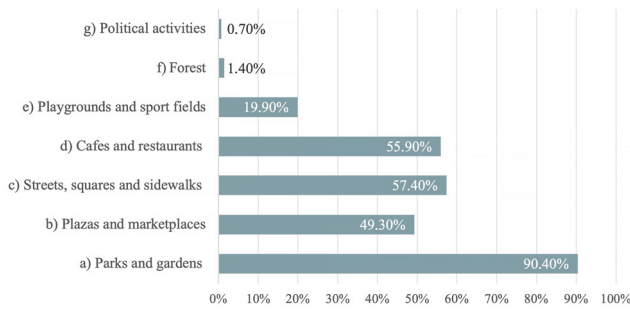


Figure 10. Participants' preferences for different types of public spaces

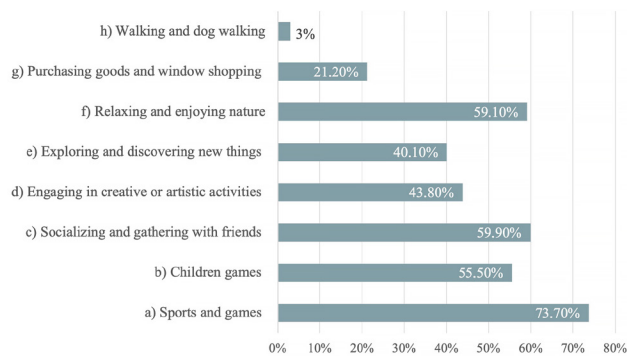


Figure 11. Activities considered as play in public spaces by survey participants

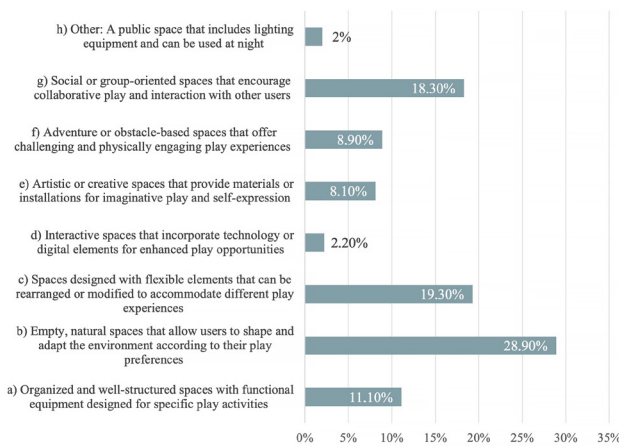


Figure 12. Users' preferences for types of playful public space design

selected by a noticeably smaller proportion of participants, suggesting that economic and consumption-oriented activities are less commonly perceived as forms of play in public space.

Figure 12 illustrates participants' preferences regarding the physical characteristics of playful public spaces. The results show a strong inclination toward spaces that allow openness, flexibility, and user adaptation. Empty or natural spaces that enable users to shape and adapt the environment according to their own play practices are the most preferred option, followed by spaces with flexible elements that can be rearranged and social or group-oriented spaces

that support collective interaction. In contrast, highly organized and well-structured spaces designed for specific play activities receive comparatively limited preference, while technologically driven interactive spaces are selected by only a small proportion of participants. These findings indicate a general preference for adaptable, open-ended, and socially oriented environments rather than fixed, highly programmed, or technologically mediated play settings.

6. Discussion: play, participation, and open-ended public space design

The findings from Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt demonstrate that play functions as a central mechanism through which public spaces are actively inhabited, shaped, and experienced as collectively produced environments through individual acts of use and appropriation. Behavioural mapping, photographic documentation, and questionnaire results consistently show that everyday practices—such as informal sitting, watching others, children's play, music-making, reading, and temporary street appropriation—are not marginal or incidental activities but constitute dominant modes of spatial engagement. These practices align closely with play theory's emphasis on voluntary participation, freedom of action, open-ended use, and experiential ownership, directly challenging privatized models of public space that prioritize control, predictability, and consumption (Bateson, 1987; Stevens, 2007; Shaf-toe, 2008).

The behavioural maps reveal that playful practices emerge across diverse spatial conditions rather than being confined to formally designated play areas. In Frankenberger Park, users engage with space through both organized activities and improvised uses of slopes, stairs, grass, and flexible wooden elements, continuously reinterpreting the environment according to situational needs and social dynamics. Similarly, Neumarkt supports a coexistence of active and passive play, where children's activities unfold alongside observation, resting, reading, and everyday social presence. These patterns confirm Lefebvre's argument that play is embedded within everyday life and contributes to the lived production of space rather than functioning as a separate or exceptional activity (Lefebvre, 1974/1991). Spatial characteristics such as the absence of fences, the integration of informal seating, and continuity with surrounding residential fabric reinforce permeability between public space and daily neighbourhood life (Whyte, 1980; Stevens, 2007).

The questionnaire findings further strengthen this interpretation by foregrounding users' own understandings of play and public space. Participants predominantly associate play with socializing, relaxation, nature, creativity, and informal exploration, while consumption-oriented activities such as shopping are rarely perceived as playful. This distinction highlights a clear separation in users' minds between public life and economic consumption, reinforcing critiques of privatized public spaces that equate activity with commercial use (Simmel, 1950; Madanipour,

1996). Preferences for parks, streets, squares, and gardens over enclosed or institutionally defined spaces indicate a desire for environments that allow unstructured presence, freedom of movement, and multiple forms of participation (Whyte, 1980; Shaftoe, 2008).

Responses concerning the physical characteristics of playful environments reveal a consistent preference for openness, flexibility, and adaptability. Participants favour empty or loosely defined spaces that allow users to shape their environment through use, as well as spaces with flexible elements that support collective and spontaneous activities. In contrast, highly programmed, technologically driven, or tightly controlled play environments receive limited support. These findings directly challenge privatized and heavily managed public spaces, where behaviour is regulated through design, programming, and surveillance, often resulting in environments that neglect user preferences and diminish feelings of connection and ownership (Madanipour, 1996; Shaftoe, 2008). Instead, they point toward a form of spatial ownership grounded in everyday use and appropriation rather than legal possession or managerial control (Stevens, 2007; Chitrakar et al., 2022).

From a design perspective, the cases of Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt illustrate how play and participation operate as mutually reinforcing processes. Users do not merely consume space but actively contribute to its atmosphere and meaning through small-scale adaptations, such as rearranging furniture, adding flowerpots, extending café activities into the street, or occupying space through routine presence. These practices resonate with participatory design principles that emphasize understanding diverse community needs, preferences, and behaviours as a foundation for public space design (Canter, 1974; Madanipour, 1996; Whyte, 1980). Engaging users—either directly through design processes or indirectly by allowing appropriation—enables spaces to evolve in response to lived practices rather than predetermined functions (Shaftoe, 2008; Işık et al., 2023).

Play theory further strengthens this participatory perspective by framing play as a response to uncertainty, tension, and everyday negotiation within urban life (Bateson, 1987). In this sense, play parallels participatory design by encouraging interaction, experimentation, and collective problem-solving. Both approaches foster shared ownership and social cohesion, enabling residents to actively shape their environment and bridge social differences through everyday encounters (Simmel, 1950; Stevens, 2007). The observed dynamics in Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt demonstrate how tactile engagement, flexibility, and open-ended spatial conditions generate immediate and reciprocal transformations between users and space, turning public environments into interactive fields of social production rather than static stages (Stevens, 2007; Işık, 2025).

Taken together, these findings suggest that play functions not only as a critique of privatized urban order but also as a practical design framework for alternative forms of publicness. By prioritizing freedom of use, flexibility, spontaneity, and user participation, public spaces can resist

enclosure, commercialization, and passive consumption. Designing for play does not require extensive programming or specialized infrastructure; rather, it depends on creating spatial conditions that tolerate uncertainty, allow temporary emptiness, and invite users to actively participate in shaping space over time (Stevens, 2007; Bateson, 1987). Through these qualities, public spaces can strengthen social interaction, foster inclusivity, encourage creativity and risk-taking, and cultivate a shared sense of ownership rooted in everyday life and collective presence (Mumford, 1961/1996; Maslow, 1943; Mahdjoubi & Spencer, 2015).

7. Conclusions

Public spaces in contemporary cities are commonly defined as inclusive and accessible environments that support collective life. However, as this study demonstrates, inclusion is not achieved solely through physical access or formal openness but through the ways spaces allow people to inhabit, shape, and reinterpret them in everyday life. Public space becomes genuinely “public” when it accommodates diversity not only in users but also in practices, rhythms, and degrees of participation (Madanipour, 2010).

This research has shown that play functions as a key mechanism through which urban diversity is activated and sustained in public space. In the Frankenberger Neighbourhood—particularly in Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt—play emerges not as a specialized or designated activity confined to playgrounds, but as an everyday mode of spatial engagement. Informal sitting, watching, children’s play, music-making, reading, and temporary street appropriation illustrate how users actively transform space through spontaneous, voluntary, and open-ended practices. These forms of engagement stand in contrast to privatized and heavily managed public spaces, where behaviour is often regulated through surveillance, time restrictions, and programmed activities designed to optimize consumption, cleanliness, and control (Sorkin, 1992; Németh, 2009; Németh & Schmidt, 2011). In such environments, users are frequently positioned as passive consumers rather than active participants, and social interaction is mediated through economic activity rather than collective presence (Zukin, 1995; Mitchell, 2003; Kohn, 2004).

The case studies demonstrate that public spaces thrive when they allow unpredictability rather than suppress it. As theorists such as Zukin (2011) and Sennett (1977/2002) argue, contemporary urban environments often prioritize calmness, order, and comfort through control and regulation, limiting the expression of social complexity. In contrast, Frankenberger Park and Neumarkt accommodate moments of uncertainty, encounter, and improvisation—conditions that are essential for democratic public life. The absence of fences, the continuity with residential surroundings, and the availability of flexible and undefined areas enable users to move between active and passive roles, reinforcing the city as a lived and negotiated space rather than a fixed product.

These findings confirm that play is deeply embedded in daily urban life and operates as a means of reclaiming agency, freedom, and presence within the city. Rather than producing disorder, playful practices generate social visibility, informal surveillance, and shared responsibility through everyday occupation—challenging assumptions that safety and publicness must be achieved through policing, surveillance, or economic regulation (Jacobs, 1961; Kohn, 2004). By allowing users to shape space through use rather than ownership through control and planning, play enables public spaces to function as collectively produced environments emerging from individual acts of appropriation, where participation, social interaction, and diversity arise from lived experience rather than managerial intent (Lefebvre, 1968/2001; Franck & Stevens, 2006).

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