

SPATIAL JUSTICE

A BRIEF INTRODUCTION TO SPATIAL JUSTICE

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Abstract

This article introduces spatial justice as a way of understanding social justice through a spatial lens, grounded in an ontology that treats space as both constitutive of and constituted by social relations. Building on Lefebvre's account of the social production of space, elaborated by Massey and Soja, it argues that urban form, infrastructures and territorial governance actively shape the distribution of opportunities and vulnerabilities. The article presents a three-part framework—distributive, procedural and recognitional justice—showing how material allocation, decision-making processes and the recognition of identities and histories are interdependent. It situates planning within a triangle of governance that links public sector, private sector and civil society through formal and informal institutions, and interrogates power asymmetries using communicative planning (Healey, Forester) alongside agonistic perspectives that foreground productive conflict (Mouffe). The discussion connects spatial justice to the capabilities approach, emphasising how geography mediates substantive freedoms, and relates it to environmental justice by highlighting uneven exposures to risks and benefits. Finally, it contends that spatial justice, democracy and sustainability are co-constitutive, requiring institutions that enable parity of participation, equitable provision of public goods and ecologically responsible transformation. The article closes by motivating the benchmarking of spatial justice as a practical pathway for diagnosis, collective learning and action.

Keywords

Spatial Justice, Political Economy, Political Sciences , Spatial Planning

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The Centre for the Just City is a research, education, and engagement initiative based at TU Delft's Faculty of Architecture and the Built Environment (Department of Urbanism). Co-led by Dr. Roberto Rocco and Dr. Caroline Newton, it functions as a transdisciplinary platform dedicated to exploring the intersections between spatial justice, democracy, and sustainability in urban planning and design.

The Centre's mission is to advance understanding of how spatial planning, design, and governance can contribute to more equitable, inclusive, and sustainable urban futures. It operates through a combination of academic research, teaching, and public engagement—often in collaboration with international partners from universities, civil society, and government institutions.

Its key activities include:

Research: Developing critical and applied research on spatial justice, democratic governance, and public goods, often linked to European and global projects such as UP2030 and AMBITION.

Education: Running workshops, summer schools, and academic courses—such as Planning and Design for the Just City—that train students and professionals to address justice through design and governance.

Engagement: Organising events like the Manifesto for the Just City series, which gathers practitioners, scholars, and activists to debate and articulate principles of spatial justice in practice.

Through these activities, the Centre for the Just City positions itself as both a critical academic hub and a collaborative laboratory for rethinking how cities can be planned, designed, and governed to uphold human dignity, collective well-being, and ecological responsibility.

More information can be found at: <https://just-city.org/>

While at first glance the expression may sound unusual, spatial justice is a way of understanding social justice through a spatial or territorial lens. It rests on an ontology that sees space as both constituted by and constitutive of social relations. In other words, spatial arrangements and territorial configurations shape and are simultaneously shaped by economic, political, and cultural processes. The spatial organisation of cities, regions, and territories thus plays an active role in producing or mitigating inequality.

One of the earliest and most influential proponents of the concept was Edward Soja (2010), who asserts that spatial justice:

“(...) seeks to promote more progressive and participatory forms of democratic politics and social activism, and to provide new ideas about how to mobilise and maintain cohesive coalitions and regional confederations of grassroots social activists. (...) Spatial justice as such is not a substitute or alternative to social, economic, or other forms of justice but rather a way of looking at justice from a critical spatial perspective” (Soja, 2010, p. 60).

Soja's key argument was that the spatiality of (in)justice affects society and social life as much as social processes shape the geography of (in)justice (Soja, 2010, p. 5). This mutual constitution of space and society establishes spatial justice as a necessary dimension of any broader conception of justice.

This understanding of justice is rooted in an ontological turn in the social sciences that sees space as an active and constitutive dimension of social life. It is based on the ideas of Henri Lefebvre, whose seminal work *The Production of Space* (Lefebvre, 1974) argued that space is socially produced through the interplay of spatial practices, representations, and lived experiences. This conception was later developed by thinkers such as Doreen Massey (2005), who framed space as a relational and dynamic construct shaped by power, movement, and interconnection, and by Edward Soja (Soja, 1989, 2010), who advanced the notion of a spatial turn: The recognition that spatiality is fundamental to understanding social relations, justice, and the organisation of power.

In this lineage, spatial justice emerges as an inquiry into how spatial arrangements both reflect and reproduce social inequalities, and how they can be reconfigured to enable more just and democratic forms of coexistence.

Social Justice and Its Spatial Dimension

Social justice remains one of the greatest global challenges of our time. Rising inequality erodes the fabric of societies, undermines trust in governments, fuels violence and extremism, and corrodes the very foundations of democracy (Piketty, 2014; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2019). Widening socio-economic disparities, spatial segregation, and unequal access to public goods threaten urban sustainability when sustainability is understood holistically across social, economic, and environmental dimensions (Dillard et al., 2009; Larsen, 2012).

As John Rawls famously stated in *A Theory of Justice* (1971):

“Justice is the first virtue of social institutions, as truth is of systems of thought. A theory, however elegant and economical, must be rejected or revised if it is untrue; likewise, laws and institutions, no matter how efficient and well-arranged, must be reformed or abolished if they are unjust” (Rawls, 1971, p. 3).

Urban and territorial governance, therefore, cannot be judged solely by efficiency or economic output. They must also be evaluated by how they distribute the burdens and benefits of collective life. When we examine how justice manifests spatially, how urban form, infrastructure, and land use reproduce privilege or exclusion, the term spatial justice becomes indispensable.

Based on the literature cited and more, spatial justice is conceptualised here through three interrelated dimensions:

1. Distributive justice: the spatial distribution of the burdens and benefits of human association in cities and communities.
2. Procedural justice: the fairness of decision-making and governance processes that shape the built environment.
3. Recognition justice: the acknowledgement and respect for individual and collective identities, experiences, trajectories and cultural expressions that determine inclusion or marginalisation.

These three dimensions form a single analytical and normative framework for understanding how space mediates justice.

Distributive Justice

Distributive spatial justice concerns how the burdens and benefits of collective life are geographically distributed. It is realised through the fair allocation of, and equitable access to, public goods, amenities, resources, and services across a city or region.

Distributive spatial justice is generally mediated through

RECOGNITION Justice

Recognition of needs, interests, histories and aspirations

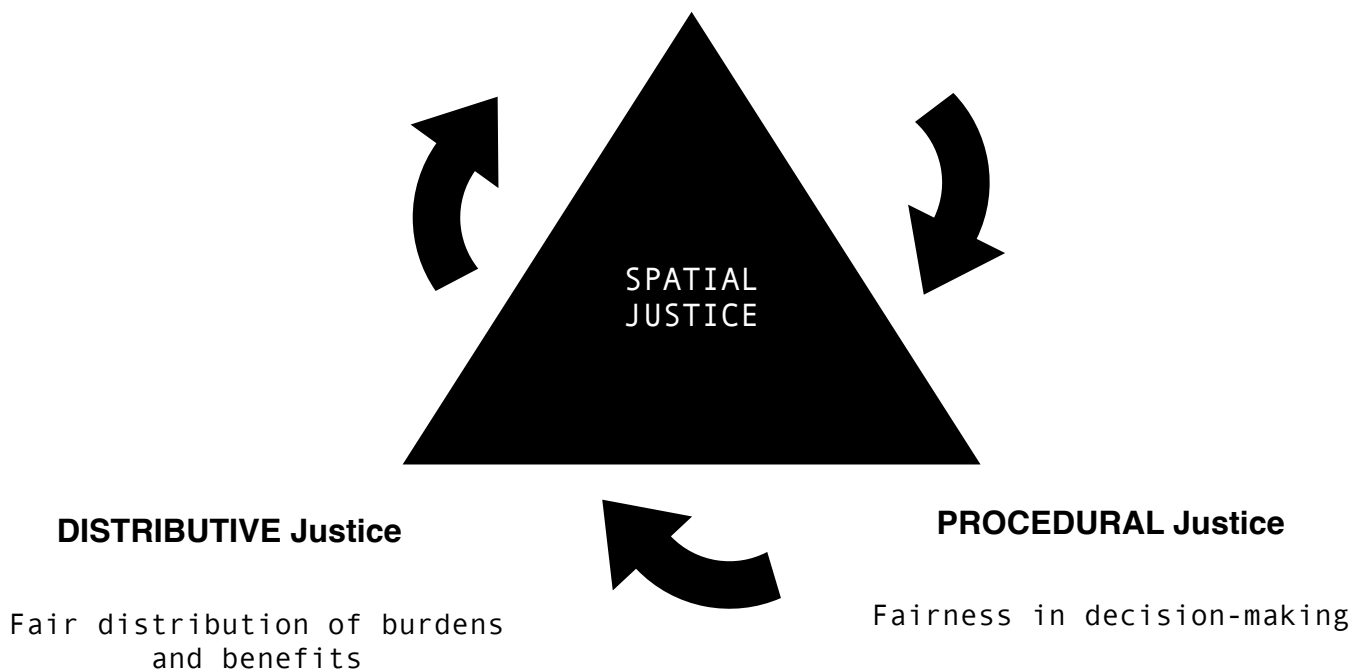


Fig. 1: The triangle of Spatial Justice. The figure illustrates the three interdependent dimensions of spatial justice—distributive, procedural, and recognitional—as proposed in the framework developed by the Centre for the Just City (TU Delft).

spatial planning, land policy, and infrastructure investment, which determine how resources, opportunities, and environmental qualities are allocated and accessed across territories. These mechanisms shape the geography of everyday life: Where people live, where they work and consume, how they move, and what services they can reach, thereby influencing social mobility and well-being (Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 2012).

Planning and governance decisions concerning housing, transport, education, healthcare, and public space inevitably embody distributive choices, whether explicit or implicit. Zoning regulations, fiscal transfers, and investment priorities all mediate who benefits from urban development and who bears its costs (Marcuse, 2009). When these spatial decisions systematically privilege certain areas or populations, often along lines of class, race, or citizenship, they reproduce structural injustice and deepen territorial inequality.

In contrast, a distributively just city is one in which spatial policy and design are guided by the equitable provision of public goods and the democratic redistribution of spatial opportunities. This requires recognising that justice is not achieved through equal treatment alone, but through equitable arrangements that address historical disadvantage

and account for differentiated needs within the urban fabric (Young, 1990).

As humans increasingly recognise their interdependence with planetary systems, distributive spatial justice overlaps with environmental justice: The principle that all individuals and communities should be treated fairly in the distribution of environmental benefits and burdens, regardless of race, income, or background (Bullard, 2000; Schlosberg, 2007). Environmental justice emerged to contest the disproportionate exposure of marginalised groups to environmental hazards and to promote sustainable and inclusive futures.

Spatial justice, however, extends beyond environmental justice. It provides a broader framework for analysing how spatial arrangements distribute not only ecological risks but also social opportunities: Access to housing, transport, education, public space and more. For instance, the unequal concentration of wealth and infrastructure in specific districts of London, Bangkok, or São Paulo reproduces structural advantages for some groups while marginalising others (Fainstein, 2010; Harvey, 2012). Spatial justice therefore demands that urban planning and design address the structural geographies of inequality, rather than treating

space as a neutral 'stage' for social life.

Procedural Justice

Justice, or injustice, also lies in how space is produced, negotiated, and governed. Procedural justice concerns the fairness and inclusiveness of planning, design, and decision-making processes that shape the built environment (Innes & Booher, 2004; Young, 1990).

A useful heuristic for understanding this dynamic is the triangle of governance, representing the interactions among three major groups in society: the public sector, the private sector, and civil society, understood as broad societal spheres characterised by distinct but interdependent forms of power, motivation, and responsibility. The public sector operates through authority and regulation, tasked with safeguarding the common good and ensuring accountability. The private sector is primarily driven by profit and innovation, shaping urban development through investment, production, and market exchange. Civil society, by contrast, embodies collective action, social solidarity, and civic engagement, encompassing community organisations, social movements, and informal networks that articulate public needs and aspirations (Healey, 2006; Ostrom, 1990).

These relationships operate through both formal and informal institutions. Formal institutions comprise codified laws, policies, and administrative frameworks that govern planning and resource distribution. In contrast, informal institutions include the social norms, conventions, and cultural practices through which cooperation and contestation occur in everyday life. Informal institutions, as theorised by Elinor Ostrom (1990), are unwritten norms, social conventions, and community practices that guide behaviour and foster cooperation. Together, they constitute the institutional ecology of governance, shaping how spatial decisions are negotiated, implemented, and contested across scales (North, 1990).

However, these relationships are often imbalanced. In many contexts, either the public or private sector dominates, marginalising civil society and excluding most citizens from meaningful participation. Such asymmetries distort governance, concentrate decision-making power in technocratic or market-driven institutions, and constrain democratic deliberation (Healey, 1997; Purcell, 2009).

The problem of power asymmetry in planning has been extensively addressed by critical and communicative planning theorists. Scholars such as Patsy Healey (1997), John Forester

(1999), and Bent Flyvbjerg (1998) have examined how knowledge and discourse become instruments of power, shaping whose interests are visibilised and legitimised in spatial decision-making. Healey's collaborative planning theory argues for the creation of institutional arenas where diverse actors can deliberate on equal footing, while Forester focuses on the planner's role as a mediator who facilitates communicative rationality amidst structural inequalities. Flyvbjerg's phronetic planning approach, drawing on Foucault, emphasises that planning is never neutral; it is always embedded in relations of power and rationalities of control. These perspectives converge in recognising that planning processes must actively counter hegemonic dominance by amplifying marginalised voices and institutionalising transparency and accountability.

Another take on the issue of power is presented by Chantal Mouffe (Mouffe, 2000, 2005), who challenges the consensus-oriented ideals of communicative planning. For Mouffe, the democratic public sphere is inherently agonistic: A field of contestation among legitimate adversaries rather than a space for technocratic consensus. Power imbalances, in her view, cannot be eliminated through dialogue: they must be acknowledged, negotiated, and rearticulated through democratic struggle. In this sense, a just and plural democracy depends on sustaining productive conflict rather than suppressing it. Agonistic planning theorists such as Pløger (2004) and Hillier (2003) have extended Mouffe's insights into urban contexts, suggesting that planners should act as facilitators of dissent, creating spatial and institutional arenas where differences can be expressed safely and constructively. Procedural justice, therefore, refers to fairness in the procedures of negotiation and decision-making. Planning processes that are transparent, participatory, and accountable are more likely to yield just outcomes than those that exclude public voice. Participation enhances legitimacy and equity by incorporating diverse forms of knowledge, including local and experiential expertise, into decision-making (Booher & Innes, 2002; Forester, 1999; Innes & Booher, 2004).

This reasoning finds strong support in communicative theory, also known as deliberative democracy. Developed by philosopher Jürgen Habermas (2015), the theory argues that effective democratic governance depends on open, inclusive dialogue among citizens and authorities. Rational deliberation, where participants exchange information and justify claims through reason, creates legitimate and better-informed decisions (Habermas, 1996).

Communicative theory thus provides several justifications for public participation:

- **Inclusive reasoning:** Every citizen possesses rational capacities and relevant insights that can contribute to public decision-making. Through open deliberation, individuals can collectively reason and share perspectives that policymakers might overlook (Dryzek, 2002).
- **Legitimacy through consent:** In truly democratic societies, legitimacy derives from the consent of the governed. Policy outcomes are more legitimate when citizens believe their voices have been heard and considered (Habermas, 1996).
- **Integration of tacit knowledge:** Citizens hold local and experiential knowledge about their own lives that experts may lack. Incorporating this knowledge improves policy relevance and quality (Forester, 1999).
- **Power redistribution:** Participation offers a platform for marginalised groups to be heard and their needs and aspirations to be taken into account. Institutionalised participation constitutes a form of 'invited space' for the exercise of citizenship, helping counter structural inequalities (Miraftab, 2004). Miraftab also speaks of 'invented spaces of citizenship', where citizens claim their citizenship through insurgent spatial practices.
- **Social learning:** Deliberation fosters civic responsibility and strengthens democratic culture by engaging citizens in collective reasoning (Innes & Booher, 2018).
- **Conflict engagement:** Taking Mouffe's and others' contributions, democratic participation must not only facilitate dialogue but also create legitimate spaces for disagreement, contestation, and dissent. From an agonistic perspective, conflict is inherent to plural societies and can become productive when channelled through democratic institutions (Hillier, 2003; Mouffe, 2005). Planning processes should therefore aim not to eliminate conflict through consensus, but to transform antagonism into respectful agonism, where opposing interests can confront one another without resorting to exclusion or violence.

Communicative planning does not advocate direct democracy or the rejection of expert knowledge. Instead, it seeks a dialogical synthesis, where technical expertise and public reasoning complement each other to produce legitimate and inclusive outcomes.

Procedural justice, therefore, extends beyond participation to include transparency, accountability, and responsiveness. It demands that decisions about land use, housing, infrastructure, and urban transformation be made in ways that respect plural voices and recognise the interdependence between society and the environment.

However, ecological collapse has presented humankind

with new challenges that profoundly reconfigure the terrain of governance and justice. On one hand, the accelerating climate crisis, biodiversity loss, and environmental degradation expose the failure of current political and economic systems to operate within planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). This has prompted a new wave of ecological modernisation and green growth agendas that often reinforce technocratic governance and corporate influence under the guise of sustainability. On the other hand, these crises have also catalysed movements for ecological democracy and planetary justice, which call for rethinking power relations beyond the human scale, recognising non-human agency, intergenerational responsibility, and the need for institutional representation of the planet itself (Dryzek & Pickering, 2018; Latour, 2017).

In this emerging paradigm, planning must navigate the tension between urgent ecological action and democratic legitimacy, ensuring that transitions to sustainability do not reproduce existing inequalities. The task is to create governance systems that are both ecologically responsible and socially just, where planetary survival and human dignity reinforce rather than undermine one another.

Contemporary views on governance increasingly incorporate the planet and future generations as stakeholders. Although they cannot speak directly, their interests must be represented in governance structures, through advocacy, regulation, and ethical responsibility (Jonas et al., 2011).

Recognition Justice

Recognition justice, also known as recognitional justice or the justice of recognition, focuses on the acknowledgement, validation, and respect for individual and collective identities, experiences, trajectories and cultural expressions. It addresses the historical and ongoing marginalisation, discrimination, and misrepresentation of specific groups within society (Fraser, 2000; Honneth, 2015; Pada, 2017; Taylor, 1992). Where distributive justice concerns the allocation of resources and procedural justice concerns the fairness of decision-making, recognition justice engages with the symbolic and cultural dimensions of justice. It insists that equitable social relations cannot be achieved without affirming difference, dignity, and a sense of belonging. At its core, recognition justice moves beyond the material distribution of goods to interrogate how certain groups are devalued or rendered invisible through dominant cultural norms. It draws heavily on theories of intersectionality, which recognise how multiple axes of identity (race, gender, class, sexuality, ability and more) intersect to shape experiences of

privilege and oppression (Crenshaw, 1991).

Key Dimensions of Recognition Justice

1. Identity Recognition:

Acknowledging and validating the identities of individuals and communities, particularly those who have been historically oppressed or excluded on the basis of race, ethnicity, gender, sexuality, religion, disability, or other characteristics (Taylor, 1992).

2. Cultural Recognition:

Valuing diverse cultural expressions, traditions, and practices, and ensuring that minority or Indigenous heritages are neither erased nor subordinated by dominant cultures (Young, 1990).

3. Historical Recognition:

Confronting and redressing the continuing effects of past injustices, such as colonialism, slavery, forced displacement, or segregation, which persist through spatial inequalities (Mignolo, 2011).

4. Representation:

Ensuring that all social groups, particularly those historically marginalised, are legitimately included in political, social, and institutional decision-making. This dimension of justice concerns who is recognised as a full participant in public deliberation and whose needs and perspectives shape collective outcomes. In Fraser's terms (Fraser, 1999, 2000), it refers to achieving parity of participation in the political sphere by rectifying injustices of misrepresentation, exclusion, or political voicelessness.

5. Respect and Dignity:

Upholding respect for individuals and communities regardless of their social position. Dignity is not merely a moral or psychological virtue but a social condition sustained by institutional arrangements that affirm individuals as peers in public life. In Fraser's terms (Fraser, 2000), recognition of dignity is integral to participatory parity, the capacity of all members of society to interact as equals. Conversely, misrecognition, expressed through disrespect or social subordination, constitutes a form of injustice that impairs equal participation in collective life.

Recognition justice, as articulated by Nancy Fraser, forms part of her three-dimensional conception of justice, which includes redistribution (economic), recognition (cultural), and representation (political). For Fraser, the ultimate goal of justice is participatory parity, a condition in which all individuals can interact as peers in social life (Fraser, 2010).

From this perspective, spatial justice requires not only material redistribution and procedural fairness but also the recognition of plural ways of inhabiting and producing space. Marginalised

groups, whether informal settlers, migrants, or Indigenous communities, must have their spatial practices and claims recognised as legitimate contributions to urban life.

Recognition justice also intersects with communicative theory, since genuine dialogue depends on the inclusion of diverse epistemologies and experiences. The failure to recognise difference impoverishes deliberation and perpetuates domination by the most powerful. Hence, recognition is not merely symbolic; it is a precondition for effective democracy and fair governance.

The Interdependence of the Three Dimensions

Distributive, procedural, and recognition justice are interdependent and mutually reinforcing. Distributive equity cannot be achieved without fair procedures and recognition of difference; procedural fairness loses meaning if structural inequalities persist; and recognition, though vital, must be coupled with material and institutional change to avoid tokenism (Fraser, 2010; Soja, 2010).

Spatial justice thus functions as both a diagnostic and prescriptive framework. Analytically, it allows scholars and practitioners to uncover how spatial configurations reproduce inequality. Normatively, it offers principles for transforming these configurations through democratic governance, equitable distribution, and inclusive recognition.

At the Centre for the Just City (TU Delft), spatial justice is understood not as an abstract ideal but as an actionable evaluative framework. It informs how planners, designers, and policymakers diagnose injustice and design interventions that make cities more liveable and socially sustainable. This involves recognising that space is both a medium and outcome of power relations (Massey, 2005), and that justice must therefore be spatially produced.

Spatial Justice in Practice

Efforts to promote spatial justice must grapple with global and local inequalities alike. Cities in the Global South often struggle to provide adequate living conditions for large segments of their populations, while those in the Global North experience rising inequality, gentrification, and spatial concentration of opportunities (UN-Habitat, 2020). Structural gentrification, such as that observed in London, New York, and Amsterdam, generates severe social challenges, unaffordable housing, increased commuting distances, fuel or energy poverty, and social fragmentation (Can et al., 2024;

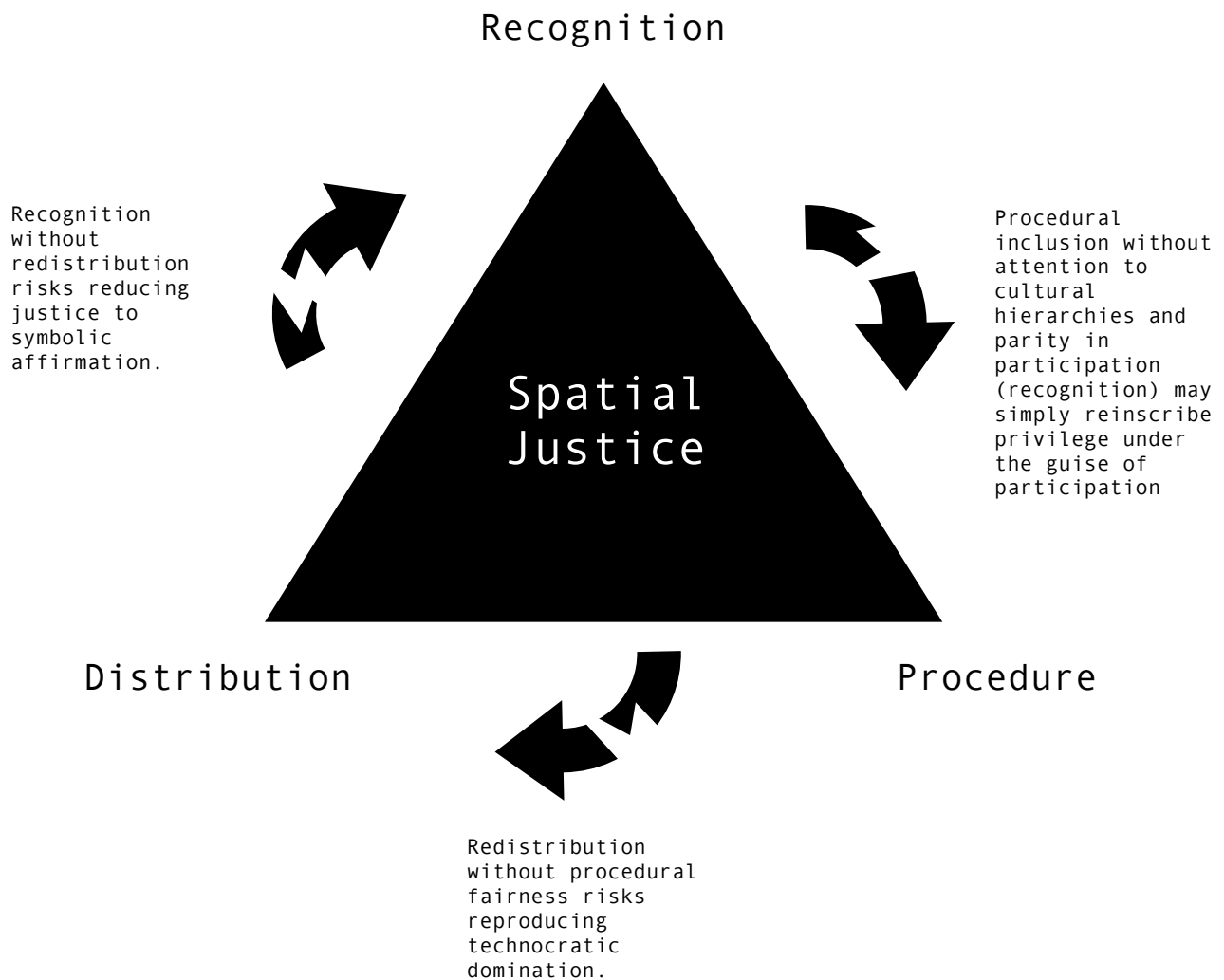


Fig. 2: Interdependence of the Three Dimensions of Spatial Justice. This diagram illustrates the mutual interdependence of distributive, procedural, and recognitional justice within the broader framework of spatial justice. It highlights how each dimension, when pursued in isolation, risks undermining the others.

Lees et al., 2008).

Spatial justice is also closely tied to the capabilities approach developed by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1985, 2004a, 2004b), which defines justice in terms of individuals' substantive freedoms: The real opportunities they have to achieve lives they have reason to value. Capabilities refer not merely to access to resources or services, but to the effective possibilities people possess to convert those resources into meaningful functionings, such as being educated, healthy, mobile, or secure. From this perspective, spatial arrangements play a decisive role in enabling or constraining capabilities, since access to education, employment, healthcare, public space, and environmental quality is mediated by geography and infrastructure. Inequalities in spatial access therefore translate into inequalities in capabilities, shaping individuals' life chances and their capacity for self-determination (Nussbaum, 2000; Sen, 2004b).

For this reason, benchmarking spatial justice through measurable indicators and participatory assessment has

become a central goal of current research at TU Delft.

Spatial justice is also a crucial pillar of sustainability, which requires the integration of social, economic, and environmental dimensions to ensure that future generations can lead healthy, fulfilling lives. A sustainable city is necessarily a just city, for sustainability without justice perpetuates privilege and exclusion (Agyeman et al., 2003).

Finally, spatial justice constitutes a foundational condition for democratic life. Democracy depends not only on formal institutions or electoral mechanisms but on the material and spatial conditions that make participation possible. Access to public spaces, infrastructures, and collective resources shapes who can appear, deliberate, and act as a political subject (Arendt, 1998; Young, 1990). In this sense, the spatial organisation of society is inseparable from the exercise of citizenship: when access to urban space is uneven or exclusionary, democratic participation itself becomes stratified. Achieving spatial justice, therefore,

entails more than distributive fairness; it requires institutional arrangements and governance practices that sustain parity of participation (Fraser, 2000) and recognise diverse spatial practices as legitimate forms of civic engagement (Miraftab, 2009).

Democracy without justice risks degenerating into a procedural form devoid of substance, confined to those already empowered by geography and privilege. Conversely, spatial justice without democracy risks reproducing paternalistic forms of governance rather than emancipatory transformation.

A genuinely democratic city, therefore, is one in which spatial arrangements, institutional structures, and civic capacities mutually reinforce one another to ensure that all inhabitants can co-shape the spaces they inhabit. Such a city also provides the precondition for sustainability, understood not merely as environmental efficiency or economic resilience but as the ongoing capacity of societies to reproduce life under conditions of justice, dignity, and ecological balance (Agyeman et al., 2003; Davoudi et al., 2012). From this perspective, spatial justice, democracy, and sustainability are co-constitutive: each depends on the others to realise the collective aspiration of a just, inclusive, and viable urban future.

This demands a vision for a radical transformation of how cities are planned, governed, and inhabited, one that moves beyond technocratic management toward the collective reimagining of urban life as a shared ethical and political project. Such transformation requires confronting entrenched systems of privilege, revaluing marginalised knowledges, and designing institutions capable of nurturing solidarity across difference. It also entails reclaiming the right to the city, not simply as a demand for access to urban resources, but as the right to participate in the continual making and remaking of urban space itself.

In this sense, spatial justice becomes both a diagnostic and a transformative horizon: it exposes the structural inequalities inscribed in space while offering a framework for democratic action and collective responsibility. A just and sustainable city, therefore, cannot emerge from design or policy alone: it must be co-produced through everyday practices of care, resistance, and imagination that reconnect the spatial, the social, and the ecological in the pursuit of a common urban future.

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