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## Original Research Article

# A Comparative Assessment of the Rhythms of Public Life in Leicester Square and Times Square\*

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## Abstract

**Problem statement:** In studies related to the social context of public spaces, two distinct perspectives have been proposed: first, an approach emphasizing the similarity of recurring behavioral patterns in squares; and second, an approach that focuses on the complexity and unpredictability of public life, considering behavioral patterns as non-repetitive and context-dependent.

**Research objective:** This research aims to integrate the aforementioned perspectives by, on the one hand, identifying dimensions and elements shaping the rhythms of public life (general behavioral patterns) and examining them in two iconic public spaces -Leicester Square and Times Square- and on the other hand, analyzing differences in the quality of manifestation of certain key activity patterns in these spaces.

**Research method:** The study employed a descriptive research method with a comparative approach. Initially, the components and factors influencing the rhythms of public life were identified descriptively. Subsequently, using a comparative approach, Leicester Square and Times Square were evaluated and compared. In this process, data were collected through library and documentary research, as well as photographic and film archives from media agencies. During the analysis phase, within the framework of qualitative methods, techniques such as tracking activities in photos and videos, coding based on the type and location of activities, and mapping -by identifying recurring behavioral patterns through activity frequency counts- were applied.

**Conclusion:** The findings indicate that both squares exhibit characteristics consistent with inviting, lively, and convivial public spaces; however, the quality of these characteristics differs. Leicester Square demonstrates dynamic and diverse rhythms in conviviality due to spontaneous street performances, whereas street performances in Times Square are predominantly planned, reflecting more controlled and limited rhythms in its convivial experience.

**Keywords:** *Invitingness, Vitality, Conviviality, Public life, Public space.*

## Introduction and Problem Statement

The simultaneous discourse on the decline and even

death of collective spaces in modernist urban planning (Jacobs, 1961), alongside intellectual currents that, through environmental philosophy and psychology, explained human experience and perceived meaning of space via the concept of “place” - considering the place as the central locus for forming deep emotional and physical relationships among people

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(Norberg-Schulz, 1974; Relph, 1976; Canter, 1977)- has led to attention toward the “semantic” and “social” dimensions of public realms alongside formal and functional dimensions. However, research on the social context of public space remained relatively scarce until the late 1980s and was still largely regarded primarily as a design issue (Mitchell, 2017). Yet, by the late 20th and early 21st centuries, empirical studies emerged highlighting the benefits of people and the social context of public space as foundational to the formation of collective human life and activities (Madanipour, 1996; Gehl, 2001; Woolley, 2003). This paradigm shift brought a focus on public life rather than public space (Whyte, 1980; Gehl & Gemzoe, 1996; Oldenburg, 1999; Banerjee, 2001; Tibbalds, 2012; Gehl & Svarre, 2013). Such that, in recent years, studies on “public life” and “place-making” have developed concurrently within the field of urban design (Montgomery, 1998; Gehl, 2010; Shaftoe, 2012; Balsas, 2019).

There are two distinct perspectives in this regard. The first perspective is based on the research of scholars such as William Whyte and Jan Gehl. Whyte asserts that “The rhythms<sup>1</sup> of plaza life are much alike from place to place” (Whyte, 1980). He argues that “behavioral patterns in other cities are, with slight variations, similar to those in New York -just as Gehl has also mapped behavioral patterns in Copenhagen that closely resemble those observed in New York”. However, the second perspective emphasizes the differences among various rhythms of public life. In this regard, Lefebvre (1991) critically asserts: ‘We produce space without focusing on fragmented perceptions where the mind intervenes, or without assembling details into a “real” whole, or even without comprehending its content - in terms of its internal relations between the container and contained’. By comparing the rhythms of Mediterranean cities with those of oceanic cities, he explains the reasons behind their differences (Lefebvre & Regulier, 1986). Following him, numerous studies have explored this direction (Habibi & Barzegar, 2018). The discourse of the second perspective highlights the complexity, unpredictability, and disorder inherent in public life -qualities that have led some to liken this phenomenon to

ballet, performance, drama, and so forth (Jacobs, 1961; Goffman, 1963; Mumford, 1964; Seamon, 1979; Madanipour, 2003). Conversely, the first perspective holds that the alphabet of this unconscious collective dance or performance can be discovered. These are the same general behavioral patterns and preferences in public spaces. In other words, one cannot disregard the patterns that are commonly shared among humans, influenced by psychological, aesthetic, and subconscious characteristics.

Therefore, this study, considering the two aforementioned perspectives, aims, on one hand, to identify general behavioral patterns in public life and examine them in two selected public spaces, and on the other hand, to analyze the differences in the quality of realization of certain key activity patterns within these spaces. To achieve this goal, by revisiting the theoretical foundations related to “public life” and “place-making,” a conceptual framework of dimensions and elements shaping the rhythms of public life is developed. Subsequently, this framework is applied to study and comparatively assess Leicester Square in London and Times Square in New York. These two iconic public spaces have been deliberately chosen because, while serving as settings for public life, they are also subject to pressures from commercial, recreational, and tourism interests -a condition that vividly reveals the tensions and complexities of the dual functions of public spaces in contemporary metropolises. Accordingly, the study seeks to address three central questions:

- What comprises the conceptual framework of the general rhythms of public life?
- How can the general rhythms in two iconic public spaces -Leicester Square and Times Square- be understood within the proposed framework?
- In what ways do the qualities of the key behavioral patterns differ across these spaces?

## Theoretical Foundation

### • The order of public life

For urban researchers, the behavior of crowds of strangers in public urban spaces (especially after the Industrial Revolution) was often interpreted as a form of “inhuman indifference.” However, with the evolution

of urban life and improvements in general conditions, the interpretation and definition of crowds in cities have transformed (Madanipour, 2003). It is now understood that the order emerging from strangers' tacit agreement to avoid conflict can be seen as a performance in which all pedestrians play a role as if participating in a "grand ballet." Although each acts as a solo performer, they miraculously and astonishingly support one another to create an "encompassing order" (Jacobs, 1961). This spatial order has also been referred to as the "ballet of place" (Seamon, 1979). Furthermore, human behavior in crowds is regarded as a type of "performance," a "coordinated effort" governed by "unspoken rules." Nonverbal cues such as body posture, eye contact, and personal space serve as signals from individuals to others about intentions and modes of interaction, facilitating coordination. On a broader scale, these unspoken rules help people avoid unpleasant situations and disruptions, thereby fostering a sense of order (Goffman, 1963). In this context, encounters, interactions, and conflicts among individuals and groups in desirable public spaces have been interpreted as the "performance of the drama of social life," enacted by actors who themselves also appear as spectators (Mumford, 1964). Therefore, the order resulting from public life, expressed as a performance in the public arenas of a city -where the actors are strangers to one another- represents a complex and non-repetitive order that unfolds impromptu for each place<sup>2</sup> (Madanipour, 2003).

To understand the components of this order, various classifications of public life activities have been proposed. Notably, Goffman (1963) distinguishes gatherings, situations, and social occasions, while Gehl (2001) identifies necessary activities, optional activities, and social activities. Despite their differences, these categories are largely analogous. Accordingly, first-category activities (e.g., waiting for a bus) occur without particular interaction; second-category activities (e.g., reading) take place only under favorable conditions and involve some acknowledgment of others' presence; and third-category activities (e.g., group play) are fundamentally dependent on the presence of others (Goffman, 1963; Gehl, 2001). Essentially, the foundation of public life consists of the

rhythms generated by the movement and circulation of these activities, which shape the overall landscape of a square (Shaftoe, 2012).

#### • **Invitingness**

The emergence of the rhythms of public life initially requires the "presence" of people in the public realm, following their necessary and optional activities. The most popular spaces for people's presence are those reclaimed from automobiles, not on raised decks or sunken plazas, but at human eye level (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2001), typically located at or near intersections of streets. These spaces also benefit from suitable views and seating areas shaded by trees, which provide favorable conditions for combating wind flow and drafts, access to light, a sense of enclosure, entertainment (Whyte, 1980), and color (Duttman et al., 1981). Moreover, the principle "People Come Where People Are" (Gehl, 2001) likely stems from the fact that humans are inherently social beings (Shaftoe, 2012) and from the need to gather for safety (Felson & Clarke, 1998). People feel safer when they observe others similar to themselves calmly occupying a space (Shaftoe, 2012). Although people desire cohesion and security in a space, they do not want blandness (Kaplan & Kaplan; 1989; Marsh, 1990). Humans prefer spaces that offer more complexity than what initially meets the eye (Shaftoe, 2012). This desire for complexity probably has evolutionary roots in humans' inclination to explore and understand (Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). In spaces possessing these qualities, people feel comfortable lingering, eating, and drinking, and instead of moving quickly, they immerse themselves in shops or cafés (Shaftoe, 2012). Therefore, generally, the most frequently used squares are friendly and social places where the ratio of loiterers is higher than in secluded areas (Whyte, 1980).

#### • **Vitality**

The mere presence of people in public realms is not sufficient for the desirable formation of rhythms of public life. Favorable conditions must be in place for the organization of activities that generate 'vitality', including social activities. In other words, while the gathering of people and events in space and time is a necessary condition for any occurrence, it is more important which activities -through their

arrangement and interrelations- are allowed to expand (Gehl, 2001). Generally, the self-reinforcing process of public life leads to the emergence of more numerous and complex activities<sup>3</sup>. Studies such as *The Social Logic of Space* (Hillier & Hanson, 1984), *Public Life Studies* (Gehl & Svarre, 2013), *Social Life* (Whyte, 1980), *Conviviality by Design* (Ganji & Rishbeth, 2020), and *Place-Temporality and Urban Place-Rhythms* (Wunderlich, 2013) have precisely examined general or context-specific patterns of people's activities. Revisiting the findings of these studies, although providing a general account of behavioral patterns, offers an improved understanding of the arrangement and interrelations of various activities within public spaces:

Human experience of the environment begins with movement (Shaftoe, 2012). Movement aimed at traveling between two destinations tends to follow direct paths and shortcuts (Hillier & Hanson, 1984; Gehl, 2001), whereas movement for enjoyment favors curved routes with serial vision. In both cases, the presence of a view at the end of the line of sight focuses movement (Cullen, 1961; Kaplan & Kaplan, 1989). People tend to move along edges rather than crossing wide open spaces or the center of a space (Gehl, 2001). When moving in groups, the rhythm of their steps tends to be uniform, as if governed by a silent language where usually no one speaks (Whyte, 1980), and the group moves along a path that accommodates all members. Walking may be accompanied by short or long pauses. Consequently, stopping zones are located along the edges of space (Gehl, 2001), which may also be due to the desire for a broad forward view and a sense of safety from behind. In this regard, men differ slightly; they generally prioritize facing the sidewalk. (Whyte, 1980). Importantly, people rarely choose the middle of a large open space for stopping (ibid.). During longer pauses, people carefully select places such as recesses, corners, gateways, columns, trees, streetlamps, and physical supports to stand in front of, beside, rest on, play around, or place belongings (Gehl, 2001). There is also a tendency to pause and converse near shop entrances, crowded spots, and similar locations (Whyte, 1980) -but not in dull places like office furniture stores or banks. Rather, pauses occur

in front of displays and shops directly related to other people and the surrounding social environment, such as newsstands, photo exhibitions, cinemas and theaters, clothing stores, toy shops, and so forth (Gehl, 2001). The greatest interest is shown in pausing to watch the flow of human activities on the street<sup>4</sup> (ibid.). Patterns of stopping and sitting, especially regarding the influence of edges, are similar (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2001). Just as the main flows of movement are territories of standing or moving conversations, people choose areas within or adjacent to these flows for sitting (Whyte, 1980). The number of seated individuals is a relatively constant fraction of those standing or moving (Gehl, 2001). Children and young people accept any place to sit: on the ground, street, steps, edges of water features, and so forth (ibid.). However, many people prefer desirable seating such as benches with appropriate width and height (Whyte, 1980). Generally, 6 to 10 percent of a square's open space belongs to sitting activities (ibid.). In cold seasons, people eagerly seek sunlight, move with its path, and sit wherever the sun is; in warm seasons, the opposite applies (Whyte, 1980; Wunderlich, 2013). Similarly, people are sensitive to wind and drafts (Whyte, 1980). Good seating opportunities open the way for many other activities that are the main attractions of public spaces: eating, sleeping, knitting, playing chess, sunbathing, people-watching, conversing, and more (Gehl, 2001). In terms of seeing, hearing, and conversing, factors such as social field of view, lighting, noise, and odors influence people's preferences (ibid.). The delightful sound of wind rustling through trees and birdsong acts as a welcome antidote to the harsh noise of urban traffic. Nonetheless, an active auditory dimension also exists, generated by conversation (Shaftoe, 2012). Conversations, whether seated or standing, often accompany eating in a corner or around a street food vendor gathering a crowd (Whyte, 1980). If a queue forms at a food booth, passersby are also encouraged to join. Generally, sunlight, greenery, and lawns in the city center, or natural connectors and transitional pathways, are favored picnic spots<sup>5</sup> (ibid.) -especially as alfresco food and drink provide a rich sensory pleasure, perhaps reconnecting us with our heritage as hunter-gatherers (Shaftoe, 2012). But play activities grow

from within and expand from edges toward the center of public spaces (Gehl, 2001). Finally, unpredictable activities (such as freerunning, protests, etc.) can occur at various points (Shaftoe, 2012). Overall, an inherent order emerges within the aggregate patterns of activity, underpinned by people’s instinctive sense of maximum population density (Whyte, 1980). People have an accurate perception of the appropriate number of people for a place and, as it was determined, do not distribute themselves evenly across the entire public space (Canter, 1974; Whyte, 1980).

• **Conviviality**

The expansion of social activity in public realms elevates the concept of vitality to “conviviality.” In other words, lively activities may naturally progress toward more advanced and enjoyable convivial social situations. This occurs under the influence of “resultant activities,” “positive processes,” the “third place,” or “triangulation states.” Resultant activities arise from the linkage of necessary and optional activities and expand in relation to other activities<sup>6</sup> (Gehl, 2001). Similarly, the “positive process” is described as: “something happens because something else happens” (ibid.). The phenomenon of the “third place” is understood as the result of the home functioning as the first place and the workplace as the second place (Oldenburg, 1999). In triangulation, individual A and individual B interact through a street event C (Whyte, 1980) (Figs. 1, 2 & 3).

In this context, events and street performances in public realms gain special significance under terms such as pause points (Whyte, 1980), animation (Shaftoe, 2012), and informal use of space (Carmona, 2012). It appears that the best places for events and ceremonies in traditional cities have grown organically. As Bernard Rudofsky (1964) and Christopher Alexander et al. (1977) suggest, it is preferable to “grow” good places and spaces rather than attempt to construct them from a predetermined plan. Alexander, for example, illustrates the morphogenetic evolution of St. Mark’s Square in Venice over hundreds of years (Alexander, 2004). Organic urban designs can “bend with the wind<sup>7</sup>,” be “pruned and grafted<sup>8</sup>,” and “adapt to prevailing conditions” (Building Living Neighbourhoods, 2021). Therefore, in contrast to inflexible approaches, a more flexible

approach termed “see what happens,” with funds saved for adjustments and changes, provides spaces fully suited to users’ needs (Brand, 1994). Consequently, themes such as gradual evolution, flexibility, and space management arise, most of which are deeply rooted in overarching visions and policies.

In fact, managerial insights and macropolitics determine

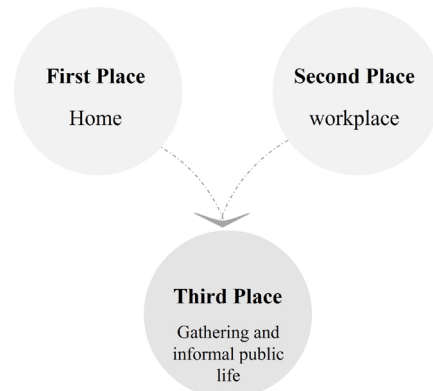


Fig. 1. Third place, as a result of first place and second place. Source: Authors.

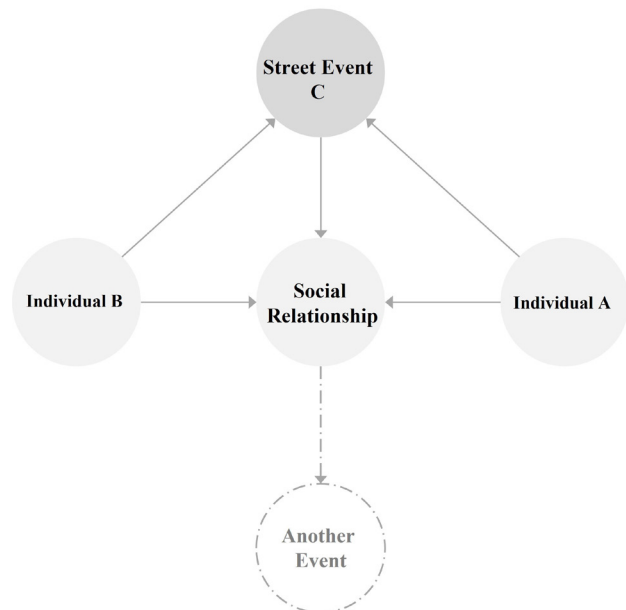


Fig. 2. Activity in triangulation state. Source: Authors.

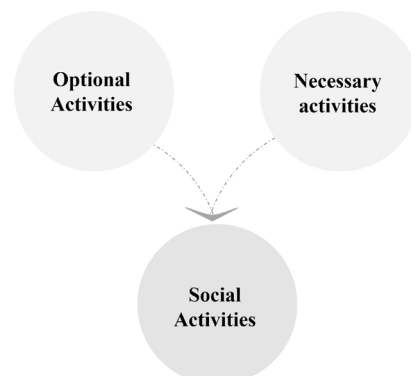


Fig. 3. Social activities as resultant activities. Source: Authors.

whether there is a willingness to embrace democratic flexibility to encounter the inherent uncertainty, unpredictability of urban activities, and acceptance of diverse rhythms of public life -similar to those experienced in organic public spaces. Meanwhile, under pretexts such as spatial security and providing a cleaner environment, there may be efforts to reduce the diversity of activities in public spaces, especially spontaneous and challenging ones like events and artistic performances. This approach, even if pursued in countries that ostensibly distance themselves from globalization or consumerism discourses, results in the same dominant trend of globalization of public spaces: Commodification, Control, and Exclusion. For example, activities such as street performances and busking are closely linked to the concept of “loitering space.” Carmona et al. (2008) argue that “loitering space, like seating space, can be defined as a setting for social interactions or rest, a space where an individual can stand still; a space for meeting someone, observing surrounding activities, or standing silently. Loitering space is vital for the civic and social nature of public space”. However, public space management may decide to eliminate such activities, which, in turn, transforms the space into a commercial commodity for consumption and weakens the emergence of unexpected and spontaneous activities and, consequently, the civility of the public space.

#### • Dimensions and elements shaping favorable rhythms of public life

Despite the significant impact of activity patterns, the role of urban form cannot be overlooked. Over the years, considerable attention and study have been devoted to the relationship between human behavior and urban form (Canter, 1974; Rapoport, 1977; Canter, 1977; Rapoport, 1990). In fact, it is plausible that humans both influence and are influenced by space (Shaftoe, 2012). This perspective has led to the concept of “Behavior Settings” as the physical substrate in which patterns of behavior occur. Accordingly, the more the spatial arrangement aligns with the arrangement of activities, the better the public space can respond to human needs and behaviors (Zekavat & Dehghan, 2012). In this regard, various urban design principles and guidelines have been proposed for public life within public spaces characterized as inviting, lively, and convivial (Whyte, 1980; Gehl, 2001;

Shaftoe, 2012; Gehl, 2010; Tibbalds, 2012). Synthesizing these sources reveals a high degree of overlap with the principles of Cities for People (Gehl, 2010), which can be further enhanced and refined by incorporating certain additional elements, as illustrated in Fig. 4.

### Research Methodology

This research is a descriptive study employing a comparative approach. The research process comprises four main stages: In the first step, a literature review and a re-examination of concepts related to the rhythms of public life were conducted. This stage aimed to establish a theoretical framework for analyzing the public spaces under study. In the second step, to understand the structure and quality of the studied spaces, six dimensions -physical, functional, semantic, social, managerial, and gradual evolution- were examined through urban plans, official reports, and documents from the relevant institutions. These documents included:

- Leicester Square: Publications by the City of Westminster (2002, 2006, 2008, 2011), Future City Ltd (2020), and redesign reports by BURNS + NICE (Urban Nous, 2018).
- Times Square: Publications by the Times Square Alliance (2007, 2015, 2017), Auckland Council (2020), NYC DOT (2020), NYC Planning (ZoLa..., 2021), and redesign reports by Dykers (2014) and Fellman & Koster (NBC News Learn, 2020).

In the third step, to examine the spatial arrangement of recurring activity patterns within the social dimension -the most significant dimension- qualitative methods were employed to accurately capture the spatial characteristics of these activities. This phase faced limitations due to the global COVID-19 pandemic in 2021, which restricted travel and direct observation. People’s public presence was not typical. Therefore, the techniques of “tracking in photos and videos” and then “mapping activities’ arrangement” were employed.

The data for this study were collected by searching for the terms Leicester Square and Times Square in various photo and video agencies. For Leicester Square, the images selected ranged from May 2012 (the date of the square’s redesign), and for Times Square, from December 2015 (the reopening date following redesign) up to July 2021 (the date of the study). Four main archives were utilized:

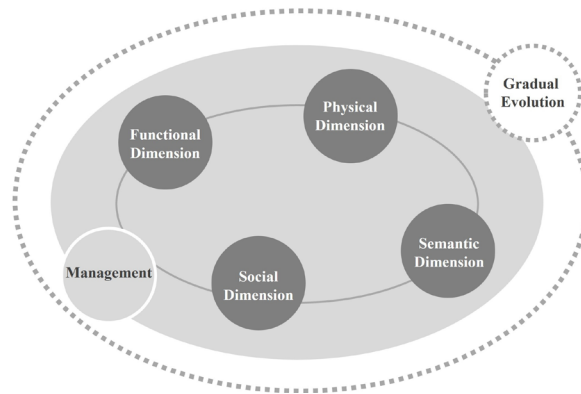
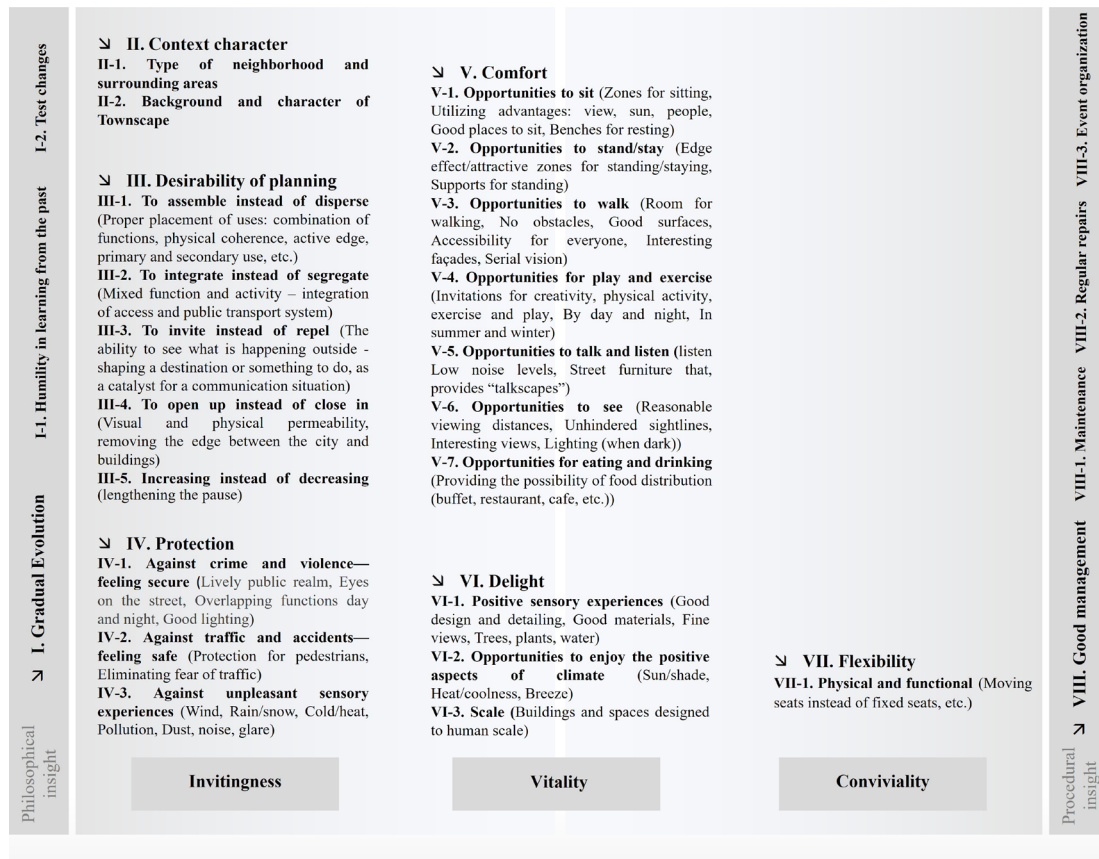


Fig.4. Dimensions and elements shaping rhythms of public life. Source: Authors.

- 1) Tourist videos of the squares on YouTube.
- 2) Photos and videos from agencies such as Alamy, Getty Images, Shutterstock, iStock, Architizer, and others.
- 3) Geotagged photographs from Google Earth and Google Maps.
- 4) Virtual presence at various points in the squares using Google Earth in Street View mode.

In the initial exploration, approximately 4,000 photographs and over 8 hours and 30 minutes of video were collected. Subsequently, the data were refined to remove duplicates, images lacking human activities, and other irrelevant

material. The refined data were then coded according to the type of activity and their spatial occurrence within different zones of the two squares. Finally, by counting the activities, recurring activity patterns were translated into maps. In the final step, a comparative assessment of all data -both documentary and visual- was conducted within two categories: inherent characteristics (structural and pre-existing features of the spaces) and redesign characteristics (changes resulting from contemporary planning and design interventions).<sup>9</sup>

In this comparative assessment, the study faces limitations regarding generalizability. Focusing on two iconic public spaces in large cities, which are subject to commercial and tourism pressures, highlights the prevailing trends in similar public spaces -trends that may be less widespread in smaller or non-touristic urban spaces. Therefore, statistical generalization of the findings is not implied. Accordingly, extending the qualitative evaluation undertaken in this study toward a quantitative assessment model in future research could enhance both comprehensiveness and generalizability.

## Findings

### • Leicester Square

Leicester Square, located in Central London, was established in the late seventeenth century alongside the aristocratic Leicester House. Initially, it served as a residence for nobility and renowned artists. In the eighteenth century, the aristocratic mansion on the north side of the square was first converted into a natural history museum and later transformed into an entertainment venue, including brothels and public displays of executed heads. With the opening of New Coventry Street, Leicester Square gradually evolved into an entertainment hub. Hotels such as the Brunet and Provence were built around it, and the Alhambra Theatre (now the Odeon Cinema) was established. In the 1980s, vehicular traffic was banned from the square. Thus, throughout its historical evolution, Leicester Square has transformed from an aristocratic residential area to a notorious zone and eventually into a center for theatre and cinema.

During the 1980s and 1990s, following a significant reduction in public sector budgets in the UK, government institutions became unable or unwilling to develop and maintain public spaces. Consequently, Leicester Square became a Late-Night Hedonistic Area, accompanied by increased conflicts and pressures on the social fabric. In response, in 2007, the square became one of the first public spaces in England to be covered by a Business Improvement District (BID) within the “Heart of London” area, a mechanism to attract private investment for public space management. The primary objectives of BIDs include enhancing security, improving cleanliness,

participating in redesign projects, branding, and marketing the place to users and investors (Carmona et al., 2008; Future City Ltd, 2020).

One of the impacts of the Heart of London BID was the redesign project of Leicester Square, which emphasized its historical roots. The design process began with the question, “Where is Leicester Square?” and led to defining a London context that extended beyond the boundaries of the central garden, surrounding buildings, and terraces. Thus, an urban block with a 350-year history was examined as the design basis, and interventions were carried out to continue the tradition of artistic and theatrical entertainment, albeit in a modern form (Urban Nous, 2018). However, in managerial terms, combating antisocial behaviors was defined as a core goal of the redesign. While this helped secure the square against certain extreme manifestations of the Late-Night Hedonistic culture and contributed to some commercial success, it also had the relative consequence of reducing social diversity.

Physically, Leicester Square possesses a unique identity characterized by a blend of historic and modern architecture. The redesign focused on enhancing the intrinsic qualities of the place. Boundaries between different spaces were blurred, and entrances were designed to naturally invite people into the area. Additionally, improved views toward landmark elements and the establishment of visual order in the surrounding streets have increased the legibility of the square (ibid.) (Fig. 5).

Functionally, Leicester Square operates as a tourist-oriented public space surrounded by key destinations (Fig. 6) and exhibits a mixed-use character dominated by entertainment functions (bars, cafés, nightclubs, restaurants) and leisure activities (cinemas, theaters) (Fig. 7). Prior to the redesign, the square -especially its northern area- had a notably vibrant yet challenging nightlife (Fig. 8) (City of Westminster, 2006). Residential presence within the core area of the square is low, with denser residential neighborhoods located in the outer layers of the square, suggesting the existence of a local community (Fig. 9) (ibid.). Leicester and Piccadilly metro stations to the east and west, the Charing Cross bus station, and nine pedestrian access paths collectively reflect the square’s high accessibility and permeability

(Fig.10) (City of Westminster, 2002). In the redesign, ornamental green spaces were transformed into socially functional gardens, and courtyards evolved from mere passageways to spaces for “presence.” Enhancing the square’s visual connectivity to surrounding key destinations also contributed to improving this function (Urban Nous, 2018). However, the redesign led to the replacement of small retail units with large chain stores (Fig. 7), often operated by multinational corporations. This change has created a sense of similarity with other public spaces and reduced opportunities for window shopping. Semantically, the overall image associated with theatre (formerly) and cinema (currently), along with pedestrian pathways and historic elements beside the London-style Garden, has contributed to the perception of a strong “sense of place” in Leicester Square. The redesign of the square, inspired by the form of late nineteenth-century



Fig. 5. Mass-space overlap with the proposed Leicester Square landscape. Source: City of Westminster, 2011.



Fig. 6. Location of Leicester Square relative to key surrounding destinations. Source: Urban Nous, 2018.

London central gardens and emphasizing the historic Shakespeare fountain, aimed to reinforce this sense of place. Measures such as framing the central garden with dark paving and the special use of water elements in the central section have been among the strategies employed in this regard (ibid.).

Prior to the redesign, Leicester Square, despite hosting social interactions such as window shopping, social conversations, and strolling, faced challenges including privatization of the inner square, conflicting bench placements, and certain antisocial behaviors at night. The new design aimed not only to eliminate disruptive factors affecting public presence but also to enhance the quality of that presence (ibid.). As shown in Fig. 11, the redesign has oriented the central area toward a family-friendly environment, creating a place for acquaintance and social interaction more than ever before. The most significant axis of everyday public life rhythms in Leicester Square runs from Covent Garden to Charing Cross Road, then spills into the northern courtyard of Leicester Square and continues to Piccadilly Square. People generally move along this axis, especially between Leicester and Piccadilly, with strolling forming part of this flow. In the northern courtyard, other well-organized activities occur: groups occasionally stop within the flow to converse, pause to take photos of or with the square’s symbols, or separate from their group. Upon reaching the Swiss Court, the presence of street painters alongside a historic musical monument that plays at specific hours creates a distinctive atmosphere for stopping and photography. Embedded within these activity patterns is a vibrant presence of street performers -including dancers, singers, magicians, musicians, and flash mobs- at the intersection of the northern courtyard with the eastern and western courtyards (Figs. 12 & 13). Spectators sometimes become part of the performance, providing evidence of local community presence in Leicester Square, as active audience participation is mostly by locals.

Regarding the rhythm of events in Leicester Square, beyond the redesign’s impact through courtyard expansion and barrier removal to increase flexibility, square management also plays a role. Leicester Square



Fig. 7. Ground floor Land use of Leicester Square. Source: Authors based on City of Westminster, 2006.

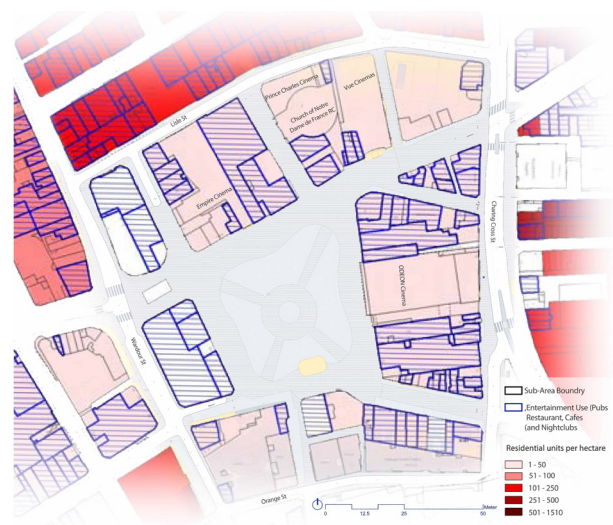


Fig. 9. Residential unit density and entertainments uses. Source: Authors based on City of Westminster, 2006.

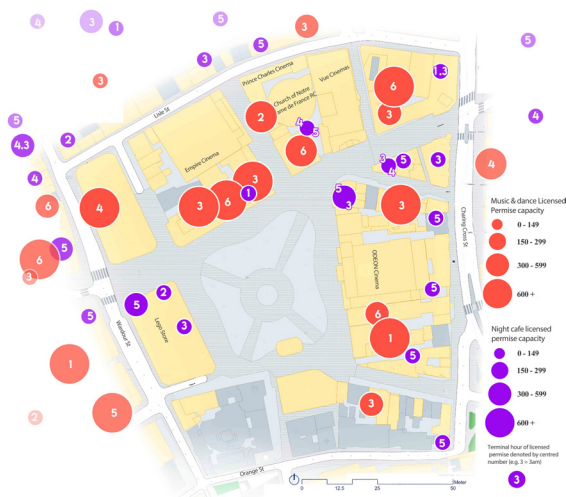


Fig. 8. Capacity and Authorized Hours for Public Entertainment. Source: Authors based on City of Westminster, 2006.

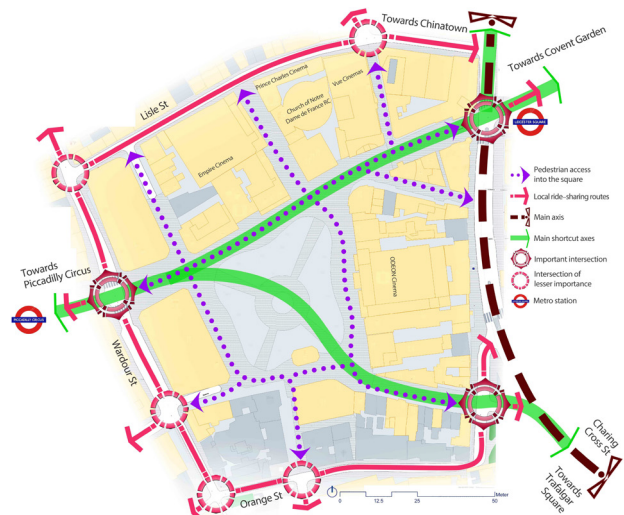


Fig. 10. Movement and Accessibility. Source: Authors based on City of Westminster, 2002.

has consistently hosted high-quality festivals and events such as the London Film Festival, Christmas celebrations, and open-air film festivals. These events obtain necessary approvals through layout proposals and permit processes (Urban Nous, 2018).

### • Times Square

Times Square, in the first half of the twentieth century, symbolized American civil, industrial, and commercial power by hosting civic gatherings (Berman, 1999). However, part of what gave Times Square its iconic appeal was also its long-standing status as a multicultural and socially diverse space of indulgence, containing

a mix of the seedy and the flashy, together with the middle-class theatres, restaurants, and hotels. Thus, the history of Times Square, like Leicester Square, was intertwined with entertainment, theater, and cinema, attracting both respectable and dissolute social groups (Carmona et al., 2008).

In the late twentieth century, Times Square -similar to Leicester Square- declined due to reduced governmental funding. To counter this, the Times Square BID was established in 1992, preceding Leicester Square's BID and with similar objectives. The Times Square BID implemented policies aimed at removing "undesirable"

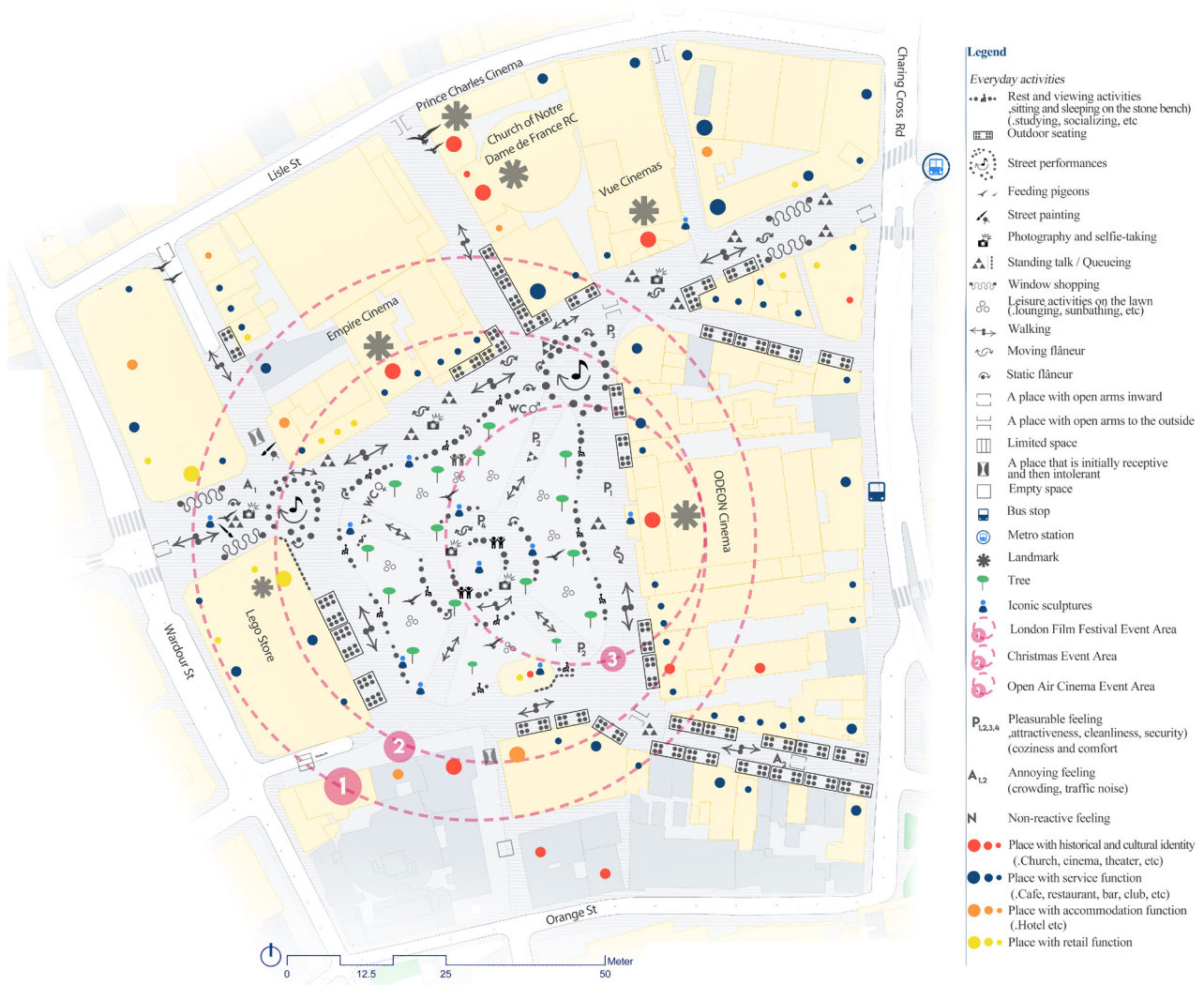


Fig. 11 . Activity Layout in Leicester Square. Source: Authors.



Fig. 12. (1): Sitting on a ribbon in Leicester Square, (2): Feeding pigeons in Leicester Square, (3): Alfresco dining and picnicking in Leicester Square, (4): Outdoor seating in Leicester Square, (5): Water play in Leicester Square. Source: www.alamy.com.

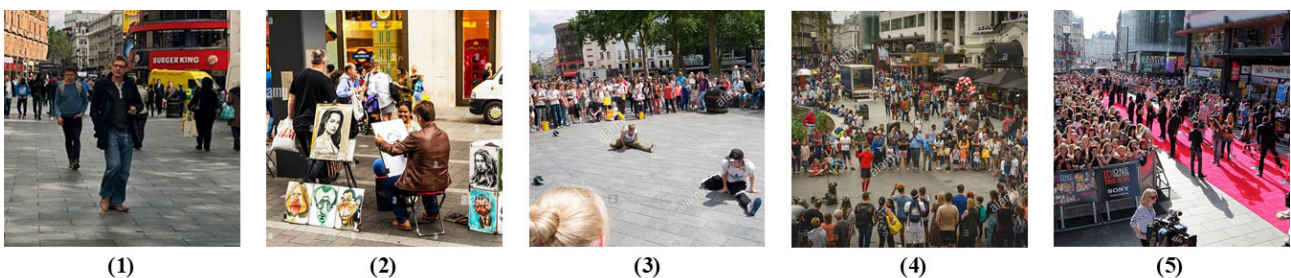


Fig. 13. (1): Flâneur in Leicester Square. Source: www.istockphoto.com, (2): Street painting in Leicester Square. Source: www.alamy.com, (3) & (4): Street performance in Leicester Square. Source: www.alamy.com, (5): Street performance in Leicester Square (Red-carpet festival). Source: www.irishmirror.ie.

land uses and users and controlling social diversity. Although these measures helped reduce crime and control unconventional industries, they jeopardized the cultural and social diversity of the square to the extent (ibid.) that New Yorkers felt alienated from the space (NBC News Learn, 2020).

However, the redesign of the square, aimed at revitalizing public life and honoring its theatrical legacy through the removal of vehicular traffic, creates not only a stage for events but also a setting for the everyday life of New Yorkers (Dykers, 2014). This project was implemented in phases using temporary pilot ideas to reduce costs and incorporate public feedback. Nevertheless, following implementation, challenges such as the presence of *Desnudas* led to criticism of the square's "vulgarity." -Instead of reverting to a vehicle-oriented space, Times Square management responded by designating color-coded zones for different activities. As Gehl emphasizes, "Balancing freedom of expression and public order requires careful planning and intelligent management of public spaces" (Gehl et al., 2015).

Physically, Times Square benefits from high permeability due to six intersections with elongated northwest-southeast blocks (Fig. 14). Its unique features include intense enclosure by skyscrapers, dominance of modern architecture, massive digital displays, and spatial connectivity with five adjacent squares. The redesign preserved edges and simplified paving (using durable and replaceable materials), allowing flexible pedestrian flow management. Urban furniture design, such as linear benches, organizes internal circulation without additional visual cues and facilitates gathering and pausing. This approach creates a low-stress environment for users to rest, interact, or play within what is typically a stimulating setting (NBC News Learn, 2020).

Times Square, situated along New York City's urban spine and adjacent to major public transportation terminals, serves as one of the city's primary gateways and a connector of key urban and transnational elements (Fig. 15). Following the establishment of the BID, the square was redefined as a destination for tourism and entertainment, a transformation accompanied by the growth of office towers and the introduction of

ground-floor leisure spaces such as restaurants, cafés, shops, and a few theaters (Carmona et al., 2008). Within the Commercial zone (C6), the square's main activities include office, lodging, media, and entertainment uses, all of which are commercial in nature (ZoLa..., 2021) (Fig. 16). This contrasts with Leicester Square, which has retained its cultural and cinematic identity. The primary stakeholders in Times Square, similar to Leicester, are multinational corporations and chain stores. Unlike Leicester Square, residential presence is absent in Times Square, with the nearest residential zone (R8) located in Midtown West (Fig. 17) (ibid.). The redesign and pedestrianization of the square, through the development and balanced distribution of public spaces, have enabled diverse and fluid pedestrian flows, facilitating natural and purposeful movement between various destinations (NYC Department of Transportation, 2020). These characteristics have made Times Square a platform for extensive social presence, although its intensity of consumerism and commercial concentration surpasses that of Leicester Square.

Semantically, Times Square has always evoked an "energetic" and "dynamic" character, stemming from its tall buildings and the bustling human flows it hosts (Dykers, 2014). Its unusual bowtie-shaped geometry and dazzling electronic displays amplify this perception. Although the square's advertising signs primarily serve commercial purposes, they also acquire a civic function through the sensory engagement



Fig. 14. Mass-Space of Times Square in Manhattan.  
Source: Authors.

of audiences, who, by watching and enjoying the spectacle, perceive themselves as part of a larger whole (Carmona et al., 2008).

Prior to the redesign, Times Square primarily functioned as a thoroughfare for employees and pedestrians moving quickly, with activity diversity increasing mainly during evenings and nights due to tourist presence. There were limited opportunities for sitting and pausing; the few recesses, such as the entrance to the Marriott Hotel, served as spots for resting and attracted street musicians and vendors (Carmona et al., 2008). After the redesign, dedicating half of the square to pedestrian use enhanced the safety of the space and created a platform for diverse activity patterns. Linear benches and pavement modifications have strengthened movement circulation and social interactions; additionally, movable chairs and canopies support a broader range of activities. The northernmost section of Times Square is the most prominent manifestation of the square's daily rhythms. There, people sit on the stepped roof of the ticket booth watching various street performances, and the linear seating areas are consistently crowded, with some individuals engaged in photography. Another group uses movable tables and chairs to eat, drink, and observe performances and daily life. Window shopping and both conventional and unconventional advertising displays within the blue-colored Activity Zones represent other activity patterns. These patterns, with slight variations, repeat across four other areas of the square: the central part is dedicated to artistic performances and social interactions, while surrounding zones with linear benches serve as passageways and spaces for strolling (Figs. 18, 19 & 20).

Similar to Leicester Square, the rhythm of events in Times Square is influenced by flexible redesign and permit management. The creation of stages in front of buildings has increased opportunities for hosting events, making Times Square a venue for over 350 major national and international events annually (Times Square Alliance, 2017). Consequently, the number of events there far exceeds that of Leicester Square, and almost any type of event is permitted with the payment of fees.



Fig. 15. Location of Times Square on the Functional Axis of Broadway. Source: <https://www.aucklanddesignmanual.co.nz>.

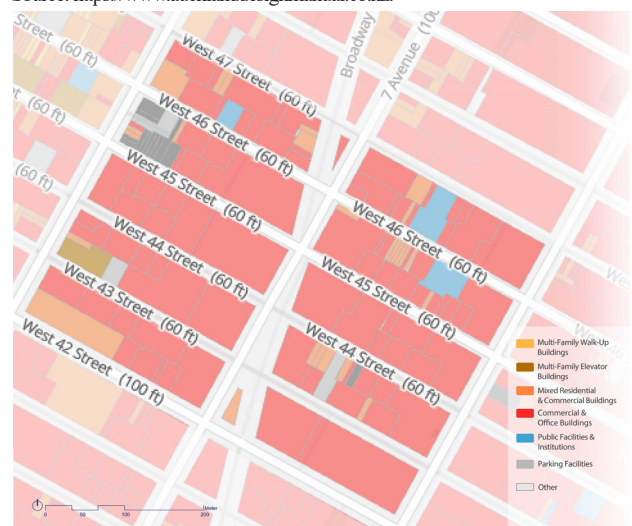


Fig. 16. Surrounding Land Uses of Times Square. Source: Authors based on ZoLa..., 2021.



Fig. 17. Zoning and Landmarks of Times Square. Source: Authors based on ZoLa..., 2021.

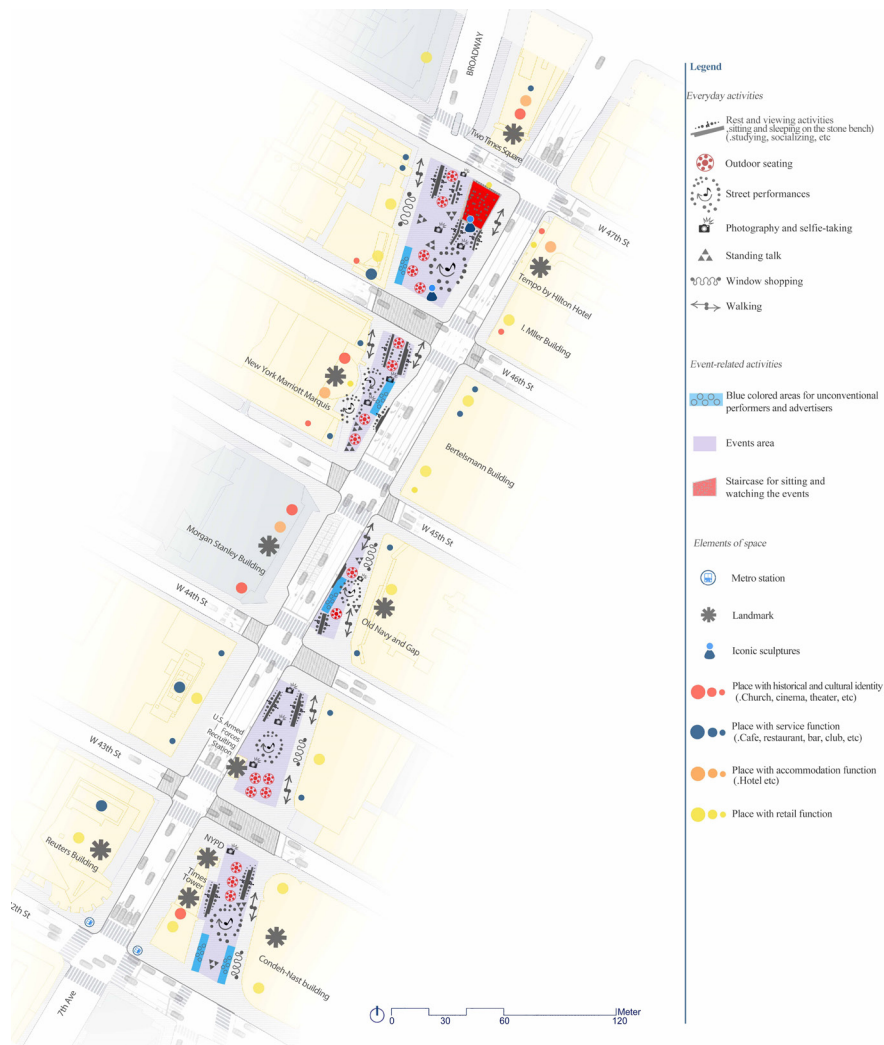


Fig. 18. Activity Layout in Times Square. Source: Authors.



Fig. 19. (1): Sitting and leaning in Times Square. Source: www.snohetta.com, (2): Photography in Times Square. Source: www.snohetta.com, (3): Outdoor seating in Times Square. Source: www.istockphoto.com, (4): TKTS seating in Times Square. Source: www.alamy.com, (5): Movement flows in Times Square. Source: www.dreamstime.com.



Fig. 20. (1): Play with installations in Times Square. Source: www.sohophoto.com, (2): Performers in the blue zone in Times Square. Source: www.newyorkcliche.com, (3): Street performance in Times Square. Source: www.newsweek.com, (4): Yoga event in Times Square. Source: www.dailymail.co.uk. (5): New Year's event in Times Square. Source: www.newsweek.com.

## Discussion

This research, based on theoretical foundations and a comparative study of two public spaces, demonstrates that the rhythms of public life in urban spaces are not only products of the complex interaction of physical, functional, semantic, and social elements but are also deeply dependent on cultural-historical and space management discourses. As such, public spaces may sometimes follow similar behavioral patterns in everyday life due to spatial elements, yet meaningful differences like these behavioral patterns emerge according to cultural and managerial discourses.

The study and comparison of Leicester Square and Times Square have clarified this claim. These two public spaces contain a variety of elements that influence the formation of favorable rhythms of public life and share similar behavioral patterns such as movement along edges, a tendency to pause at safe and visually open points, and the distribution of social activities around urban monuments and events. Therefore, it can be said that both squares to some extent conform to the characteristics of inviting, lively, and convivial public spaces. However, the quality of the manifestation of these features differs, with Leicester Square seemingly offering a more pleasant and authentic experience of conviviality than Times Square. Part of this difference stems from the overall ambience of the space, and another part relates to management discourse.

Leicester Square, free from traffic, noise, and out-of-scale buildings, benefits from a favorable soundscape, relatively historic monuments, a mix of leisure and entertainment uses ranging from street performances to dining, and a gentle combination of seating areas, transitional spaces, and openings toward the central garden. This creates a calm and suitable environment for various social interactions and spontaneous artistic performances.

Conversely, Times Square, characterized by excessive density and crowding, loud noise, dominance of tall buildings and commercial-official uses, and predominantly hard surfaces, presents a restless environment. While people may be present, sit on seating elements, and engage in social interactions, these interactions rarely

deepen enough to foster delicate and spontaneous street performances.

Management discourse also significantly influences this. Findings by Carmona et al. (2008) are noteworthy in this regard. Through a comparative analysis of these two squares, they argue that Times Square represents an extreme case of public space commercialization, where “publicness” is weakened, certain groups are excluded from presence, and extensive surveillance renders social life uniform and predictable. Meanwhile, Leicester Square, despite similar management mechanisms, still retains degrees of spontaneity -stemming from the presence of street artists, musicians, vendors, and others- as well as activity diversity and urban vitality. However, Carmona and colleagues warn that as the dominant management system becomes more established in Leicester Square, tensions between inclusion and exclusion, spontaneity and control, and public and private interests may intensify, potentially transforming the social character of the square. These findings relate to the conditions before the recent redesign of the two squares. Therefore, a comparison can be made with the situation after the recent redesigns.

In American cities, street performances -except those lacking special equipment- generally require permits from the municipality. Following the 2010 redesign of Times Square, which converted significant portions of vehicular spaces into pedestrian zones, the permit acquisition process has become relatively accessible, as the municipality seeks to promote the cultural use of public spaces and demonstrate its success in revitalizing these areas. This policy has been particularly effective in providing suitable platforms for performances and attracting street art performers. However, at the subsequent stage, the Times Square BID, where property owners play a prominent role, designates specific zones for each performance- corresponding to the blue-colored areas in the recent redesign. In this process, non-commercial performances are sometimes marginalized to present a “regulated” and “profitable” image to tourists and investors. Therefore, although Times Square has experienced safety improvements and increased opportunities for social activities following its redesign and partial pedestrianization, it remains an example of

a commodified public space where the nature of street performances is more planned.

In contrast, Leicester Square's BID is funded by occupiers or tenants of commercial property within the square, which carries both positive and negative consequences. On the negative side, this model leads management to focus on attracting tourists and increasing commercial revenues. Positively, tenants and occupiers, due to their continuous presence in the public realm -unlike the property owners who are the main actors in the Times Square BID- are closer to the local community. Moreover, Leicester Square's BID effectiveness is significantly influenced by the Westminster Local Council. This close relationship between BIDs and local councils is characteristic of English BIDs, preventing them from attaining the same level of power and independence from local government as seen in Times Square. These factors have resulted in Carmona and colleagues' prediction regarding Leicester Square's future transformation toward commodification -despite recent redesign trends supporting this, such as replacing small retail units with large chain stores to homogenize activities- not being fully realized, and spontaneous street performances continue in this public space.

## Conclusion

In this paper, the first research question was addressed through the formulation of the dimensions and elements shaping the general rhythms of public life. In this regard, the addition of two dimensions, gradual evolution and space management, to the earlier dimensions offers a novel insight into the flexibility and adaptability of public spaces in response to the changing needs of societies.

In response to the second question, the general rhythms of public life in Leicester Square and Times Square were examined based on the proposed framework. The analysis revealed that both spaces exhibit, to some extent, the qualities of inviting, lively, and convivial public spaces, thereby serving as potential references for improving such qualities in other public spaces. Specifically, Leicester Square provides outstanding urban design guidelines for

creating calm, intimate, and contemplative environments -such as artistic or spiritual public spaces- while Times Square offers noteworthy urban design guidelines for dynamic and energetic spaces that accommodate large flows of movement.

Finally, in addressing the third question, it was shown that the quality of street performances serves as a telling indicator. In fact, if the general rhythms of public life in a public space are to be evaluated through a kind of litmus test, the quality of performances can function as a reliable criterion. As Whyte (1980) points out, "It is no surprise that the best places produce the best performances, and thus receive the most audience encouragement". Accordingly, Leicester Square, as a public space with conviviality features, benefits from spontaneous and high-quality street performances, resulting in favorable rhythms of public life. In contrast, these features manifest more limitedly and in a controlled manner in Times Square. To enhance the social dimension in Times Square, a shift in management perspective from a purely commercial view to a human-centered approach is necessary, followed by reducing environmental noise and creating a calmer setting. These changes can foster deeper and higher-quality human interactions. Meanwhile, maintaining and strengthening Leicester Square's connection with local communities can support the continuity of social diversity and the vitality of spontaneous activities -rooted in the square's historic close relationship with its local residents.

Ultimately, this study, by integrating two perspectives -the similarities and differences of behavioral patterns- adopts a novel approach to examining the rhythms of public life. It demonstrates that, despite aligning with critical discourses that prioritize social and cultural factors over environmental ones in shaping behavioral patterns in public spaces (as in Lefebvre's view), the role of environmental factors in influencing the desirability of public life rhythms cannot be ignored. Rather, such factors can generate qualitative differences, such as spontaneously convivial interactions in Leicester Square versus more controlled interactions in Times Square. This insight could be further explored in future research through qualitative methods, such as interviews

and the examination of citizens' lived experiences, to achieve a deeper understanding of the interplay between environmental and behavioral factors.

### Interest of Conflict No of Declaration

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest in conducting this research.

### Endnotes

1. In this article, the term "rhythm of public life" refers to recurring patterns of behavior in public spaces, shaped by the interaction of various elements.
2. In fact, it is this dance and performance that imitates real life, not the other way around.
3. If activities and people come together, each event can trigger and stimulate another (Gehl, 2001).
4. The very place where men stand silently and amicably side by side, watching passersby. One slowly and rhythmically shifts weight from toe to heel; when he stops, another does the same. One man turns halfway to the right, and then after a rhythmic pause, another responds by turning left as if a meaningful communication occurs (Whyte, 1980).
5. Alfresco food and drink provide a rich sensory pleasure, perhaps reconnecting us with our heritage as hunter-gatherers (Shaftoe, 2012).
6. One plus one becomes three (Gehl, 2001).
7. Flexibility and Resilience to Challenging Incidents.
8. Pruning clarifies decision trees, and grafting adds nodes to decision trees to enhance prediction accuracy.
9. In Leicester Square, the second domain pertains to its 2012 redesign, which was part of the "Great Outdoors Scheme" aligned with London hosting the Olympics. The goal of this redesign was to enhance the square's social and event-hosting capabilities. In Times Square, the second domain relates to its redesign over approximately five years (2010–2015) across five triangular spaces, carried out by the Snøhetta office. The objective was to improve the quality of the place for tourists, locals, pedestrians, and cyclists, while reducing traffic barriers.

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