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# Public transport as public space: Introduction

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## Abstract

Introducing this special issue on public transport as public space, we discuss challenges in approaching public transport as public space and outline how incorporating approaches from different disciplines associated with urban studies is essential for this ambition. We offer an account of the multi-dimensional aspects of public transport as public space, including concepts of public space, questions of encounters and conviviality, linkages between micro- and macro-practices, regulations, discrepancies, conflicts and associated negative encounters, historicised experiences and political perspectives. We stress the need to expand existing perspectives on public space by embracing mobile spaces such as public transport. This entails scrutinising spaces inside public transport vehicles and stations as well as analysing the various ways across the sometimes physical and sometimes invisible barriers defined in written rules, separating public transport space from the remainder of the city's public spaces, notably that of the street. Thus, the special issue: explores questions about the spatiality of publicness; attends to public space as a normative ideal; considers critical aspects of passengering as related to conviviality and contested encounters; and, addresses how the publicness of public transport is affected by modernisation, post-colonialism and urban politics. As we strongly feel that these questions require learning from across disciplines, the special issue includes contributions from diverse fields across the realm of urban studies and humanities alike.

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## Keywords

conviviality, encounters, mobilities, public space, public transport

## 摘要

本文介绍了探讨将公共交通作为公共空间的本期特刊。我们讨论了将公共交通作为公共空间的挑战，并概述了整合与城市研究相关的不同学科的方法对于实现这一目标是如何至关重要。我们对公共交通作为公共空间进行了多层面的阐述，包括公共空间的概念、相遇和欢愉性问题、微观和宏观实践之间的联系、法规、差异、冲突和相关的负面相遇、历史化的经验和政治观点。我们强调通过支持公共交通等移动空间来扩大公共空间现有视角的必要性。这需要细致审视公共交通工具和车站内的空间，并分析跨越书面规则中定义的有时有形有时无形的障碍的各种方式，将公共交通空间与城市其他公共空间（尤其是街道）分开。因此，本期特刊：探讨公共区域空间性问题；将公共空间视为规范理想；关注与欢愉和有冲突的相遇有关的乘客方面的重要问题；并探讨了现代化、后殖民主义和城市政治如何影响公共交通的公共性。我们强烈认为这些问题需要跨学科研究，因此本期特刊包括来自城市研究和人文学科等不同领域的稿件。

## 关键词

欢愉性、相遇、流动性、公共空间、公共交通

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## Introduction

Public transport constitutes a visible and crucial set of urban infrastructures. Yet, it continues to be studied primarily by engineers and economists relying on dominant neoclassical approaches to mobility (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018), which is perhaps one of the reasons why public transport has remained peripheral in the social sciences and humanities. Public space, meanwhile, acts as a fundamental concept for exploring the social significance of spaces. In this introduction to the special issue, we connect the two notions. We advance the claim that public transport is public space and analyse what conditions its publicness. The special issue, on the one hand, reworks – that is, critically investigates, intersects with new perspectives and topics and revises – the existing understanding of public space that so far has focussed primarily on urban squares and streets, examining how public transport may be seen in its quality and character as public space. On the other

hand, the special issue conceptually integrates public transport within the diverse literatures that have reflected on the diverse spatialities of publicness and have expanded in recent years, notably on the pages of *Urban Studies*. To this end, the compilation we are introducing here explores various facets of encountering and passengering. The latter is investigated in relation to both positive and negative experience inside public transport vehicles. Equally, contributors to the special issue look into historical public transport contexts and various political narratives shaping and shaped by experiences of passengering. Public transport thus stands at the frontline of considering what is, can be, or should be *public* in the city.

The special issue embraces disciplinary and geographical diversity in order to unpack something that might seem ubiquitous – namely public space – but is yet highly diversified by geography and disciplinary perspective. Contributors present material from Western and Eastern Europe, Asia,

Africa, and the Americas, analysed from perspectives including those of urban geography, literary studies, mobility studies, history and sociology. The authors apply a wide range of theories and methodologies originating from different segments of urban studies and planning as well as those inspired by the broad and diverse field of the humanities, such as literary and visual studies. The articles gathered below demonstrate that a focus on urban mobility as a specific aspect of the urban may reveal many topics of high relevance for a wide range of research, touching upon encounters but also on exclusions, historicised experiences and methods, as well as urban contestations.

Growing out from an international project with a humanities-oriented approach to public space and public transport (Tuvikene et al., 2021), the special issue includes contributions from several humanities scholars (e.g. Franco, Toivanen, Lim and Perono Cacciafoco). In this way, we intend to add considerably to the still limited but expanding body of knowledge represented in *Urban Studies* which has previously considered urban representations in media such as novels and film, and their reception by audiences (e.g. Hewitt and Graham, 2015; Parker, 2018), as well as that which uses literary authors and theorists as part of a disruptive methodology in the analysis of actual city spaces (e.g. Wilson, 2023). Recent work in spatial literary studies and literary urban studies, for example, demonstrates how understanding the operation of storytelling and narrative in general can cast new light on projections of urban futures (Finch, 2016; Lanigan, 2014). In studying public transport as public space, literary urban scholarship enables insights into experience not readily accessible otherwise, for example the ways in which literary accounts convey complicated encounters and imaginations (such as Beville, 2013 on uncanny spectrality). Literary texts provide insights into how people grasp dimensions of urban space, such as verticality (Hewitt and Graham, 2015)

or features of landscape (Martin, 2014). Therefore, public space is a particularly useful concept for such intersectional urban studies: it occupies an important place in philosophy as well as in urban design as a practical problematic.

Public space is an important theme in urban studies, around which an extensive and diverse set of literatures has developed. Within urban studies, public space has been typically discussed through the lenses of right to the city (Mitchell, 2003), urban design (Varna and Tiesdell, 2010), encounters and conviviality (Koch and Latham, 2013). By paying attention to the political dimensions of public space, the special issue raises urban studies questions regarding ownership, control, and the public sphere, as well as publicness more generally, encompassing but moving beyond those urban spaces most often labelled *public*, spaces such as squares, streets or parks. As a concept, public space brings a philosophical perspective on what space *could* or *should* be to questions of planning and urban design that are concerned with specific contexts, and specific economic climates or governmental regimes. Public space literature benefits from interdisciplinary perspectives attentive to individuals' diversity of experiences and mundane interpersonal encounters, or which highlight historical facets of urban development often forgotten in urban studies research. As well as in public space considered conceptually, contributions to the special issue take an interest in the specific (and very diverse) spaces of public transport. These spaces include those inside public transport vehicles, in station buildings, and across the barrier, sometimes physical and sometimes invisible but defined in written rules, separating public transport space from the remainder of the city's public spaces, notably that of the street. It is the spatiality of publicness – meaning not just public space as a normative ideal but also attention to critical aspects of conviviality, contested encounters,

and debates and elaborations on urban politics in their spatial relations and in movement – that forms the centre of this special issue. Thinking in terms of the spatiality of publicness enables attention to various encounters and emergent publics beyond confined and fixed public spaces. Publicness emerges in different aspects and in the process of encounters unfolding in spatial relations.

Below we continue introducing the special issue by, first, assessing how the diverse perspectives on public transport can contribute to the broad field of urban studies. Second, we outline various approaches to studying public space, which have been attentive to the questions of politics, conviviality and encounters. Third, we provide an overview of specific contributions to the special issue, scrutinising how they address six key dimensions: conviviality and encounters in public transport; linking micro- and macro-practices; regulating; discrepancies and conflicts; historicising public transport experiences; and politics of the system – that highlight the ways in which public transport is public space.

### **Bringing public transport to urban studies**

To start with, transport and mobility have been recognised in urban studies owing to the links between transport and urban development (Mercier et al., 2015), which are an enduring interest among urban scholars (Pojani and Stead, 2015). Additionally, public transport has been analysed as a factor in social inclusion (Karner and Duckworth, 2019), because it plays a role in improving accessibility to basic urban functions such as employment (Bastiaanssen et al., 2022; Tyndall, 2017) and housing (Vidyattama et al., 2013). While urban transport debates tend to be de-politicised, focussing on public transport questions as predominantly technical or economic, they are subsequently re-politicised by some activists and researchers

drawing attention to spatial inequalities (Legacy, 2016). Often, public transport investment is an expression of urban globalism (Beier, 2020; Searle and Legacy, 2021), advancing a global vision of cities at the expense of vulnerable groups and their daily needs. Yet public transport is also a space marked by daily encounters that define urban experience. The key point nevertheless is that such daily experiences are closely related to urban politics. Commuting is an intensely political activity. Think, for example, of Rosa Parks's refusal to give up her seat on a city bus in Montgomery, Alabama in 1955 as part of a deliberate campaign which set out to 'break down segregation' (Williams, 2002: 67). Thus, public transport is a contested public space relating embodied encounters to urban politics.

While public space is an important object of research in urban studies and has been amply explored in this journal (Bodnar, 2015), connections between public transport and public space are much less scrutinised in urban studies. In particular, research into public spaces has focussed on the use and appropriation of *fixed* spaces, rather than exploring *mobile* spaces. This limits the definition of the research object to practices observed in parks, squares and streets, with researchers exploring how such spaces are negatively affected by dynamics of privatisation and commercialisation (Mehta, 2014; Németh, 2009; Smith and Walters, 2018). Nevertheless, the convergences between public transport with its particular uses, and conceptualisations of public space, are numerous and fruitful. Defined by Iveson (2007) as concrete physical space as well as a (never achieved) ideal, public space is an elusive entity that is always in process and becoming (Qian, 2020). By looking into the practices and politics of public transport – the public space side of this mundane urban infrastructure – it is possible to advance thinking on public spaces. Public transport

has specific characteristics as a public space. Its specificity as such rests in the intersectional, multi-scalar and multi-dimensional existence of what defines public transport as public space. Although not unique in this respect, public transport is yet characteristically marked by an intensity of encounters (short in duration and high in number) – encounters that are also often involuntary and not necessarily pleasant.

Public transport spaces are usually characterised by an extreme diversity of publics brought together in mobile vehicles where everyone is forced to share space. As noted, public transport is a mobile public space in contrast to a fixed one, and that makes it traverse different neighbourhoods and spaces thus potentially serving different social groups who encounter one another in bus, tram or metro rides (see, e.g. Bovo et al., 2023). Thus, in comparison to squares or parks, people do not only come to public space but public space comes to them as they engage in rides through the city. In this way, the mobile aspect works to define the constellation of public transport as public space, drawing in natural connections with the mobilities literature that has had a major impact on urban studies via the so-called mobilities turn (Howe, 2021; Sheller, 2017). That impact, we argue, could become still deeper by noting the importance of mobile spaces – such as public transport – in urban processes. Thus, the commentary written by a leading scholar in mobilities studies, Mimi Sheller, highlights the ways in which mobilities differentially produce publics (Sheller, 2023). In mobile spaces, the publics encountered are often ephemeral and disentangled (Sheller, 2004). Nevertheless, as in other public spaces discussed by urban studies scholars, there is explicit control by the state (policing, CCTV, ticket/fare controls). In addition, while public transport could seem less focussed on consumption than other public spaces, passengers are yet increasingly

approached as customers. In this way, different forms of politics are essential to understanding urban spaces, whether these spaces are fixed or mobile. Moreover, following mobilities studies and the mobilities turn that has affected a number of fields, including urban studies, immobility and fixity are integral to mobilities, as fixed spaces enable mobilities to emerge together with immobilities (Hannam et al., 2006). In the case of public transport, these processes become visible at stops and terminals, which also constitute public spaces (see Martin, 2023) alongside mobile in-vehicle public spaces.

### **Working with public space: Politics, conviviality and encounters**

In many parts of urban studies – particularly those influenced by architecture and design – public space has a rather concrete meaning as designating particular physical spaces (of course, with the political meaning attached). However, the concept of public space is rooted in the Ancient Greek agora, a public square combining social, spiritual, political and commercial functions, the most prominent example of which, in Athens, combined these roles for over a millennium (Camp, 2014). The notion of public space is thus closely tied to political conceptualisations, echoed by connected terms such as that of the public sphere. Public space, moreover, is as much present as always in becoming in (contested) processes (Iveson, 2007). Such a quality makes crucial questions to arise: not only about whether and to what extent particular spaces are public, but also about why publicness matters and what it means (Qian, 2020). For urban studies, this has brought about critical accounts of the extent to which streets act as public spaces – for example discussing the presence of homeless people, or sites for free expression of opinions, highlighting the existential dimension of publicness (Mitchell,

2005; Staeheli and Mitchell, 2008). That means contrasting aspects of public space: on the one hand, conviviality and encounters can be observed (Koch and Latham, 2013); on the other, conflicts may unfold. Public space is 'situated and lived'. It is characterised by the 'throwntogetherness' people experience when they enter it, 'ongoing, ambiguous and contested' (co-)presence that 'not only reconciles, but indeed occasionally reproduces, existing social differentiation and struggles' (Qian, 2020: 80). Seeing public transport in this light enables a closer, more-than-engineering perspective on one of the mundane aspects of urban life.

Nevertheless, there is plenty we can learn from urban-design-focussed and practical accounts of public spaces vis-à-vis public transport as public space while not forgetting some limits that such literature still has. Taking the influential account by Varna and Tiesdell (2010), we can address issues of ownership, control, civility, physical configuration, and animation as central to understanding and to managing public space. We agree that these crucial themes underpinning inquiries into public space have the capacity to produce new knowledge about public transport. Namely, ownership is often a key defining feature of public transport. In much of the Global North and many localities in the Global East and South, public transport systems are owned and run by the state, represented by relevant local, regional and national authorities. When it is not, for instance in the case of transport services tendered out to private entities, public transport is often nonetheless controlled by state institutions, who hold power over formal recognition of mobility practices and persecution of those considered 'informal' and 'illegal' (Rekhviashvili et al., 2022). Civility, a third feature of public space in the thesis of Varna and Tiesdell, in our case here concerns the internal publicness of vehicles, focussing on the kinds of encounters that take place on

public transport vehicles. In this vein, encounters and conviviality emerge as central features in our understanding of public space, and both are unpacked in the following section. The fourth dimension – the physical configuration of spaces – refers to the multiplicity of material scales and forms of vehicles, stations, interfaces and bodies, which are crucial for the sense of publicness that public transport conveys. Some public transport systems, such as trams, are enmeshed in the urban fabric, yet they could also foster segregation (Beier, 2020). Similarly, in-vehicle interactions could work to enhance civility or, on the contrary, result in encounters experienced as unpleasant. Finally, animation is central for mobile infrastructures, considering the ways in which systemic aspects manifest even in small details, on public transport. Announcements can affect the public atmosphere on public transport by bringing tension to the 'air' through vigilance warnings, for example, or make it more relaxed by explaining reasons for a delay (Bissell, 2010). Yet, the fact that public transport is formed by mobile spaces with their particularities has defined the emerging literature on public transport's public spaces. Such literature highlights various ways in which understandings of publicness emanating from the previous public space literature can productively be intertwined with public transport experiences. Nevertheless, the literature also marks the significant benefits attention to the forms of mobile publicness as well as urban regulations and politics can bring, aspects unpacked in this introduction through the six dimension mentioned above.

### **Doing public space research on public transport**

While public space perspectives on public transport remain novel, a literature focussing on public transport as public space has

steadily emerged. This highlights many similarities between public transport spaces and public spaces in general, all the while developing some important specificities owing to its mobile character, as well as by understanding the bodily dimension of public transport as a particular kind of public space. Public transport draws people together into physically close encounters in dense and potentially tense (even intense) urban environments. Thus, public transport shapes perceptions of others, adding to collective experience (Paget-Seekins and Tironi, 2016), conviviality and ‘intercultural dialogue’ (Koefoed et al., 2017), acting as a site of everyday multiculturalism (Lobo, 2014) and micro-encounters (Purifoye, 2015). Public transport is a site in which strangers are encountered, a site where one meets society in its diversity. Bus, tramway and metro rides might be solitary, but nonetheless they happen in the co-presence of fellow passengers, often in dense environments (Chowdhury and McFarlane, 2022). As Augé (2002: 30) claimed, a ride on the metro involves ‘collectivity without festival and solitude without isolation’. Public transport is usually constituted by a combination of multiple, largely unremarkable entanglements of passenger journeys that happen to come together in these particular moments and form temporary collectives very similarly to the throwing together of entities and trajectories described by Massey’s seminar work (2005). The interactions are ordered by forms of etiquette which could be both formal and informal (Schimkowsky, 2021), as noted in this special issue especially by Rink (2023). At the same time, the special issue demonstrates how public transport is entangled with processes of ‘differentiation and exclusion’ (Wilson, 2011: 635), which result in ‘racialisation, stigmatisation and intolerance’ (Koefoed et al., 2017: 738), and thus present particular challenges to female, minority, or disabled passengers. Apart from positive encounters, public transport is also the site of negative

ones (Wilson, 2011). Little acts, like putting bags on the seats or turning one’s head away could mark racially stereotyping behaviours (Shaker, 2021; Shaker et al., 2022). Nevertheless, public transport can also provide spaces for interaction in segregated cities (Rokem and Vaughan, 2018). Accordingly, several contributors to the special issue explore public transport as a site where citizens meet in close encounters and with intensity, unavoidability and the need for mutual trust – an aspect that has so far received limited attention in urban studies. Public transport is ‘one of the main contexts where urban dwellers experience two of the defining features of public space and urbanity: sharing space with strangers and dealing with diversity’ (Mattioli, 2014: 61).

In the following, six dimensions are used to unpack all the papers present in the special issue. These dimensions are inspired from the five aspects of public space proposed by Varna and Tiesdell (2010). Yet, they are adapted to be more attentive to the politics of mobilities (Cresswell, 2010) and the particular molar macropolitics and molecular micropolitics (Merriman, 2019) – the interconnectedness of physical as well as institutional bodies at various scales and degrees of perceptibility – that public transport highlights. These six dimensions bring together the various contributions of the special issue and combine those with our aim of having a diverse and interdisciplinary approach to urban studies.

### *Conviviality and encounters in public transport: The togetherness of sharing space*

All of the papers in this special issue deal in one way or another with the topics of encounters and passengering. Perhaps most clearly on this topic, Bovo et al. (2023) show a particular trolley-bus line in Milan as a space for encountering as the line goes



through different neighbourhoods of the city. Vehicles become concentrated areas for negotiating difference, bringing together citizens from different ethnic, economic, social and cultural backgrounds. This happens because of the line's particular route as well as the 24-hour service it offers. The trolleybus thus becomes a site for everyday multiculturalism wherein the focus lies not just on the divisive effects of cities but also the aspects of commingling, in which the particular spatiality of a bus plays an important role. As emphasised by Low and Smith (2006), the spatiality of encounters is crucial for examining the publicness of space. Public transport both enhances and curtails encounters, offering dense, unavoidable and mobile spaces, in which people are brought into contact with one another. An assemblage of heterogenous and often fleeting encounters has been identified as key among the qualities of public space (Stevens, 2007; Varna and Tiesdell, 2010) – an aspect that can be clearly detected in public transport, which acts not only as a site for such encounters, but also for conflicts and contestations over the right to the city (Parks, 2016). As highlighted by Simonsen and Koefoed (2020: 53) in an approach attentive to embodiment and interactions with strangers, encounters are not just about 'people meeting each other in public spaces'. Instead, encounters 'enable the collective power experiment', known on the terms of Henri Lefebvre as the 'right to the city' (Simonsen and Koefoed, 2020: 53).

Continuing on the topic of everyday encounters, Martin (2023) deals with the contact zones between public transport vehicles and streets: station areas. The article engages with interactions between passengering uses of public transport spaces and those of non-mobility uses. Hence, encountering is not only for those in public transport vehicles but also engages those whose mobility and immobility are dependent on the spaces

provided by public transport infrastructures. Using the spatial triad from the work of Lefebvre (1991), Martin shows the ways in which lived uses move far beyond the conceived uses of these spaces. The underground metro station here interacts with urban space above. Yet the flows of passengers through it are constitutive, providing context for workers as well as those who dwell or hang around in such spaces, engaging in activities that some would consider 'anti-social' but that are socially producing station spaces.

### *Linking micro- and macro-practices*

A seemingly mundane daily 'journey to work is fundamentally political' (Parks, 2016: 293), in senses related to who has access to public transport and when – not only in terms of the available purposefully planned-for infrastructure, but also in terms of access and the wanted and unwanted encounters which public transport throws up. The connection between micro-scale and macro-scale is crucial in the approach which views public transport as public space as one weaves between individual experiences on public transport and how they are tied to societal processes. To capture such connections, Kemmer et al. (2022: 289) argue for the notion of 'exposure', marking as it does 'the relationality between structure and agency in situational contexts'. In commuting, relatedly, 'an everyday politics of inclusion' is revealed in micro-encounters (Chowdhury and McFarlane, 2022: 1355).

Using Merriman's (2019) framework of molar and molecular, Joseph and Gopakumar (2023) approach buses as sites of molecular micropolitics and molar macropolitics. The former is marked by adaptability in the Bengaluru bus system, whereas the latter refers to fares as well as fare enforcement. They stress how the planning of fares is related to the close intermingling of passengers, the bus, and its staff. Through rich

ethnographic vignettes collected by riding Bengaluru's city buses, the authors draw out three situational moments – navigational, associational and configurational – as means of working between macro and micro-encounters on public transport. Questions about micro and macro relations also characterise the article by Sträuli and Kębłowski's (2023) on fare evasion. Working through observations and interviews, as well as online ethnographies, the article challenges simple views of fare evasion as an activity that, if not actually criminal, is very often viewed as anti-social. The article shows how fare evasion in Brussels is about solidarity as well as knowledge exchange and thus tied to markedly public characteristics of public transport. Contesting the official narratives of public transport as public space in Brussels that see fare evasion as anti-public, the article shows the formation of alternative publics in digital as well as daily micro-encounters on public transport stations and vehicles.

### Regulating

As the work on fares in the two papers just mentioned shows, questions about public transport regulations are important in building an understanding of the publicness of public transport. Most vividly here, regulations become present in an article by Rink (2023), concerning how the *Conditions of Carriage* on buses in Cape Town, South Africa, mediate the assemblage of actors in public space. Written norms work as both inclusion and exclusion, providing rules of conduct defining the space inside as against the public spaces outside. Rink argues that such regulations of public space constitute perhaps a more pronounced management and ordering than in the spaces outside. The *Conditions* clearly highlight the role of the state and its laws as means of regulating behaviour. Such regulations set the expected ways in which one is mobile as well as

immobile (for instance, stressing that one should take a seat immediately after getting on the bus). Nevertheless, public transport is always in flux, with its assemblage of passengers changing and thus also the relations between the passengers, with expectations about how goods or animals should be carried or how one should sit. While the *Conditions of Carriage* set the formal way of behaving and mediate different publics as well as humans and non-human aspects of public spaces, there are also informal ways of behaviour and regulation, both of convivial as well as of potentially unwanted encounters, beyond the scope of the *Conditions*.

### Discrepancies and conflicts

Typically, public transport regulations seek to achieve a balanced shared space, but in actual practice there are various contradictions of uses. There are both voluntary and involuntary incidences of exposure, and thus also insecurities about revealing oneself in public spaces (Kemmer et al., 2022). This is of course something that is particularly felt by those who are Othered, differing visibly from the categories of supposed 'normality' assumed, whether this judgement is based on religion (Shaker et al., 2022), race (Wilson, 2011) or sexuality (Kemmer et al., 2022; Lubitow et al., 2017). A stranger is both 'recognised as well as produced through embodied encounters' (Simonsen and Koefoed, 2020: 98), highlighting the shared presence in public spaces that can both be pleasant but also lead to acts of Othering. In this special issue, matters of exclusion and intrusive behaviour in public transport are also explored from a gendered perspective (see Franco, 2023; Wengłenski, 2023). For female users, public transport is often not a place of positive encounters or solitary experience but is marked by attention of the wrong kind, even abusive behaviour

(Gardner et al., 2017). Wenglenski (2023) shows the little arrangements on trains in the Paris urban area that mediate between the display of oneself and the aim of remaining hidden. By using video methods of analysis, she shows how feelings of familiarity coexist with acts of distancing of oneself from social roles, as permitted by the in-between space of public transport. Attending to the individual tactics of train use, her methods show public transport 'as a physically and socially constrained space and time characterised by the coexistence of a sense of both familiarity and anonymity' (p.2). Wenglenski's video ethnography also reveals moments of potentially contentious encounters where even without audible words, footage of physical interactions between passengers suggests an unwanted kind of attention to female passengers by men. Seemingly minute details of bodily position can reveal uncomfortable relations between passengers and constraints on the publicness of public transport.

Visual methods are similarly used by Franco (2023) as she attends to photographs of the users and uses of Mexican buses. The article highlights the gendering of public transport use. Franco's work with photo-journalism shows women's mobility practices and their cultural representations. The article shows the daily uses of public transport vehicles for gendered activities of care: the upkeep of home that requires various mobility activities. Franco highlights the mobility of care via activities such as putting on makeup – a common feature of the photographs discussed here – as a way to find a time for oneself to get ready for work after bearing the brunt of all the daily labour of getting a family ready for the day: such as preparing breakfast and getting children dressed and out of the house. She also highlights public transport spaces as sites of representation of social issues themselves, as sites of protest against 'femicide', also presented via photographic means.

Such work on visual material relies heavily on not-so-recent visual materials, moving easily 10 years and even more back in time. Thus, the approach challenges the prominence of presentism in urban studies, a topic taken up by another set of papers.

### *Historicising public transport experiences*

Different moments in time bring public transport to attention. These could be events such as the moment in 1950s Montgomery, Alabama, already discussed, when Rosa Parks refused to give up her seat (Parks, 2016) or occasions when extensive public transport systems are abandoned, such as the festive and disorderly moments accompanying the closure of the London tram network between 1938 and 1952 (Finch, 2022). Sometimes, as during the COVID-19 pandemic, extended time periods confer new senses of insecurity and new norms onto public transport use, with effects that are impossible to fully discern yet (Sträuli et al., 2022). New forms of publicness seeping into private spheres have emerged in the time of COVID-19 while different sorts of privateness have simultaneously emerged in public spaces (Hucko, 2022).

For these reasons, the special issue develops understandings of encounters by going beyond contemporary ethnographies. We strive to historicise experiences, uses and developments of public transport, arguing that contemporary acts of exclusion and inclusion within public transport spaces emerge from historically informed understandings of what kind of public space public transport is. While historical accounts are often neglected in urban studies oriented towards the contemporary, past moments contain narratives with contemporary appositeness (Harvey, 2006) as well as projecting then-possibilities. Moreover, the varied temporalities of public transport significantly contribute to public-space qualities by

invoking material and symbolic narratives of heritage as they appear in (popular) cultural productions (Ameel et al., 2020). The special issue builds on this stratigraphic view of public transport as public space (Westphal, 2011), unpacking layers of experience and meaning established across time, emerging in literary accounts of postcolonial urbanism as encountered in public transport use (Toivanen, 2023), mobile heritage experience (Tsang, 2023), and diverse histories embedded in linguistic landscapes of stations' names (Lim and Perono Cacciafoco, 2023).

In a postcolonial reading of public spaces, Toivanen (2023) works with literary representations of the Paris Metro from the mid-20th century to the 2010s. The article discusses the Metro as a symbol of modernity and of convivial encounters. At the same time, the Metro is also a site of alienation, disappointment and social inequalities. Her accounts of francophone texts by African and Afrodiasporic writers of different generations, writing between the 1950s and the 2010s, illuminate the migrant experience of being positioned both in and among other city dwellers who are not racialised or with experience of elsewhere, and also having a perspective on them and their surroundings which such fellow passengers do not share.

There are historical dimensions embedded in public transport as Tsang (2023) shows by studying the effects of introducing heritage buses to the London streets as a response to strikes on the London Underground, the city's metro system. In the article, this mobile heritage becomes a means of reflection on the vehicles themselves, highlighting the convivial aspects of public transport as related to both disruptions but also the unexpected positive emotions that heritage can bring forward. Attending to the heritage of stations' names, Lim and Perono Cacciafoco (2023) show how Singapore's everyday multiculturalism is embedded in the historical development of station names: different

linguistic groups occupy different territories within the city. Their critical toponymic perspective shows how the station name as a seemingly content-empty label for a node on a network in fact encodes changing urban power relations, in the case of Singapore those driving the altering status across time of languages including English, Malay and Mandarin Chinese.

### *Politics of the system*

Last but not least, the special issue emphasises the importance of political and economic choices, narratives and contestations, particularly regarding sustainability, accessibility, and the modernisation of public transport, which provide a structural framework for public transport encounters. Contemporary visions of transition to 'sustainable' transport advocate the development of public transport as a way of challenging automobility, and promote more 'liveable' and 'compact' urbanities. However, this framing rarely engages with *cui bono* questions, paying little attention to the diversity of publics in public transport and their encounters, conditions of access to public transport infrastructure, and related political agendas (Kębłowski and Bassens, 2018). Public transport planning is thus often driven by concerns other than mobility provision (Olesen, 2019). Public transport is tied to urban development, since it is used to boost urban image or real estate value in particular neighbourhoods. Following Enright (2016: 126), critical accounts of urban public transport infrastructure developments highlight how transit and networked infrastructures 'can certainly be employed in strategies for social justice, democracy, and freedom, but they can also be apparatuses of segregation, elitism, and authoritarianism'. Moreover, '[o]ften they are both simultaneously' (Enright, 2016: 126).

To respond to this gap in the literature, the special issue is inspired by ideas of

commoning – that is, making common beyond privatised and austerity-focussed politics – collective transport (Nikolaeva et al., 2019), and advocating for both social and spatial justice achieved through more equitable and empowering access to it. Politics and justice matter to several of the contributions. For instance, Sträuli and Kębłowski (2023) investigate varied understandings of public transport access by different actors as they are tied to fares and fare control. However, Weicker (2023) centralises the question of urban politics and publicness most vividly. He discusses the contradictions of modernisation as reflected in public transport infrastructures via actions of diverse players in the field. Examining the example of Volgograd, he shows how during Russia's preparation for hosting the football World Cup in 2018, the city intended to expand its metro services while cutting existing minibus lines. The argument of the paper centres on the need for local engagement by different actors to provide mobility solutions that actually service publics. Specifically, the new public transport system introduced remains less than adequate for the city as it tried to replace a commercial minibus service. The paper makes use of a politicised understanding of public space, within which the public sphere is constituted by different actors and stakeholders in the field. This approach shows that top-down reforms – even if driven by sustainable mobility aims – can lead to social inequalities and increased urban injustices on the ground. Weicker's article also shows acts of contestation, including the introduction of bottom-up measures to provide mobility for the publics even if those services were unlicensed and illegal. Thus, similarly to Sträuli and Kębłowski (2023), Weicker (2023) reveals the informal and even illegal forms of publicness which challenge but also expand the official state-provided public space, where forms of

mutual care and solidarity are more central than in the formal spaces and practices.

Public transport is thus a site of contestation, making it public in different ways. By intersecting studies of mobilities and public transport with historicised and political perspectives, a wider and presumably stronger embedding of public transport as public space in its relations with other aspects of publicness – including the public realm and public sphere – is expected. Public transport is public space not just as a confined space for human interaction but as a sphere of discussion and debate, including contestations, going far beyond the vehicles themselves to an understanding of what constitutes just space and a just society, who should have a voice and how they can get to be heard.

### **Conclusions: Working towards public spaces in urban mobilities**

By looking into public transport as public space, we work towards an understanding of the urban as a site of encounters, narratives and contestations. The starting points for this collection of articles are passengering and encounters that characterise the usage of public transport. Nevertheless, one never simply encounters others as an enclosed entity with clear and unchanging characteristics. Encounters always entail diverse relations one is entangled in, moving way beyond the bodily dimension of passengering. The entire special issue brings this perspective to the fore with papers noting passengering in relation to rules (Rink, 2023; Sträuli and Kębłowski, 2023), urban histories and heritage (Lim and Perono Cacciafoco, 2023; Tsang, 2023), as well as urban modernisation narratives (Weicker, 2023) and so on. Gathered together in this issue, these show that by focussing on how people move around cities with public transport an extensive network of relations reveals various topics of high relevance for a wide range of

urban researchers. Urban experiences of the past are, contributions to the special issue variously argue, relevant in answering current and future urban questions. The special issue, that is, does not just enrich our understanding with the varied case studies, geographical sites, historical moments and methodologies it introduces, but through narratives, experiences and contestations which provide means of structuring the ways in which public transport is public space, both formally and informally. The diversity it surveys complicates public transport as an object of research but also provides new insights for future urban research and policy-making.

Bringing together issues of mobility and public space, the special issue concludes with a commentary written by Sheller (2023), a sociologist who has worked extensively on mobilities with a focus on questions of justice and commons. Her contribution highlights the emergent and ephemeral nature of publics in mobile spaces such as public transport. Drawing from her earlier conceptualisation of mobile publics (Sheller, 2004) and kinopolitics (Sheller, 2018) she discusses public transport as a ‘fragile commons’ that only emerges in particular constellations in mundane encounters which might empower one another or might also not lead to much, in which case ‘the public sphere itself will wither and civic inattention will prevail’ (Sheller, 2023: 3163).

By giving a diverse account of public transport as public space, we work towards an approach in urban studies that is attentive to mobile spaces. It is an approach that draws together established urban studies topics such as regular as well as deviant urban practices, contestations and activism, with emerging urban studies literatures on narratives, cultures and histories as they are related to public transport vehicles and spaces.


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