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# Co-design in the street: everyday urban space, neoliberalism, and the limits of participation in England

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## ABSTRACT

Co-design has become a prominent vocabulary in UK urban design and planning, frequently associated with participation, inclusion, and community empowerment, especially in street-based interventions and placemaking. This article examines co-design as an urban practice embedded in everyday spatial conditions shaped by neoliberal restructuring and austerity. Methodologically, it combines a critical narrative review, used here as a selective and interpretive synthesis of relevant debates, with qualitative analysis of 23 policy and municipal documents from England, primarily London borough materials, to examine how participation is organised in practice. Through comparative reading of these materials and relevant literature, the article develops three analytical categories through which the limits of street-based co-design can be examined: temporal compression driven by funding and delivery timetables, responsabilisation through delegated maintenance and stewardship, and the datafication of lived conflict through digital engagement platforms and feedback tools. Together, these categories show how co-design operates as an interface that sustains intervention and legitimacy under constrained public capacity rather than redistributing power or resources. The article therefore reframes participation and spatial justice as questions of institutional capacity and material conditions in contemporary cities.

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## 1. Introduction

Over the past two decades, co-design has become a prominent vocabulary across urban design, planning, and governance in the UK. It is widely presented as a route to participation, inclusion, and community empowerment, particularly in relation to public space, placemaking, and civic engagement (Luck 2018; Sanders and Stappers 2008; Sara, Jones, and Rice 2021). Streets, squares, parks, and everyday public infrastructures have become recurring sites for these ambitions. Street interventions are increasingly framed as settings in which democratic aspirations can be translated into situated spatial change (Lydon and Garcia 2015).

Critical scholarship, however, has shown that participatory practices also perform political work inside contemporary governance. Participation can operate as a governing

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technology, shaped by institutional rules, fiscal constraints, and pre-structured decision spaces (Arnstein 1969; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Miessen 2010). Under neoliberal restructuring and prolonged austerity, co-design may be asked to legitimise predetermined agendas, manage dissent, and compensate for the retreat of public provision, redistributing responsibility without redistributing power (Dore 2023; Hastings et al. 2017; Peck 2012). These tensions are especially visible in UK urban contexts, where participation expands alongside outsourcing, budget cuts, and the erosion of local state capacity.

This article addresses a persistent gap in the co-design literature. Design studies often foreground co-design as a methodological repertoire, focusing on tools, workshops, and collaborative formats (Luck 2018; Sanders and Stappers 2008). Planning and urban studies frequently approach participation through institutional procedures, consultation frameworks, and digital engagement platforms (Wilson, Tewdwr-Jones, and Comber 2017). Critical urban theory situates participation within political – economic transformations, including neoliberal governance and austerity urbanism (Harvey 2012; Peck 2012; Peck and Tickell 2002). Taken together, these debates show that co-design is discussed variously as method, procedure, and governance interface, yet the material and operational conditions that shape what participation can do in everyday public space remain less examined.

The street offers a productive site for consolidating these debates. Streets concentrate movement, encounter, maintenance, surveillance, and informal appropriation. Minor design decisions in the street can produce immediate consequences for who can linger, gather, rest, or pass through (Imrie and Street 2009; Petty 2016; Wang 2025). Streets also foreground the ongoing work of upkeep and governance that stabilises public space over time. For this reason, street-based co-design cannot be assessed through the presence of workshops or consultations alone. It must be examined through the design – maintenance – evaluation chain that conditions how interventions are delivered, sustained, and justified.

This article develops an analytic framework for examining the limits of participation in street-based co-design through three recurring mechanisms. Identified through dialogue between the literature reviewed here and comparative reading of policy and municipal documents, these mechanisms are used as analytically distinct but empirically refined categories for tracing how participation is structured and limited in practice. First, participation is frequently shaped by delivery timetables and funding conditions that compress co-design into short engagement windows, while street life unfolds through longer rhythms of routine, negotiation, and adaptation. Second, once interventions materialise in the street – planters, seating, barriers, parklets – participation often extends into expectations of stewardship, monitoring, liability, and upkeep, redistributing responsibility downward without commensurate resources. Third, street controversies are increasingly processed through surveys and feedback platforms that convert lived conflicts into evaluable data, enabling accountability and reporting while narrowing what can be articulated and negotiated. Together, these mechanisms position co-design as an operational interface within constrained governance systems.

England provides a salient context for this inquiry because street participation has expanded amid long-term neoliberal restructuring, post-2010 austerity, and the accelerated delivery logics of pandemic-era street programmes (DfT 2020; Peck 2012; Peck and

Tickell 2002; TfL 2020). Since 2022, renewed fiscal pressure on local authorities has further tightened discretionary capacity, sharpening the conditions under which participation is asked to do more with less (House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee 2024; Institute for Fiscal Studies 2022). Empirically, the article focuses on England's metropolitan governance conditions and draws on a purposive corpus of 23 policy and municipal documents produced between 2008 and 2025, including national policy and fiscal guidance, pan-London programme documents, and borough-level cabinet reports, consultation summaries, workshop reports, scheme guidance, and engagement or evaluation materials. London provides the primary concentration of cases, not as a proxy for all English cities, but because its borough documentation offers unusually dense and publicly traceable evidence of how street-based participation is formalised, delivered, and contested.

Methodologically, the article combines a critical narrative review with qualitative analysis of policy and municipal documents. Cases and documents were included where they concerned street-based or public-realm interventions in England, referred explicitly to co-design, engagement, consultation, or participatory redesign, and provided evidence relevant to at least one stage of delivery, maintenance, or evaluation. The analysis proceeded through comparative close reading of these materials to trace recurring patterns in how participation was timed, materialised, and assessed. From this dialogue between literature and documentary material, the three recurring mechanisms were identified, which are used in the following sections for interpreting street-based co-design. Because the article relies primarily on documentary sources, it does not seek to reconstruct participants' lived experiences in full or to evaluate outcomes directly; its aim is to analyse how co-design becomes operationally legible within constrained systems of urban governance.

The article makes three contributions to co-design research. First, it re-situates street co-design as a materially and institutionally conditioned practice rather than a participatory format alone. Second, it offers a mechanism-based framework for comparing how participation is limited through temporal compression, maintenance responsibility, and datafication. Third, it reframes spatial justice as a question of the conditions and capacities that sustain participation in everyday public space, clarifying why participatory procedures may not translate into redistributive outcomes (Harvey 2012; Soja 2010).

The remainder of the article proceeds in four steps. The first section traces key genealogies of participation, placemaking, and co-design in urban contexts. The second examines co-design under neoliberalism and austerity urbanism in the UK, focusing on how fiscal and governance pressures shape participatory roles. The third develops the three mechanisms through which street co-design is reorganised in practice. The final section consolidates the argument on the limits of participation and specifies the conditions under which co-design can contribute to spatial justice.

## **2. Co-design as an urban practice: genealogies of participation in the city**

Co-design did not enter urban space as a discrete design methodology. In the UK, its consolidation as a recognisable practice must be understood through longer trajectories of placemaking, participatory planning, and urban governance, within which streets and

everyday public space gradually became targets of design intervention. Situating co-design within this genealogy clarifies that its contemporary forms are shaped less by disciplinary innovation than by successive translations of participation into administratively workable formats.

Early critiques of post-war modernist planning provided an important foundation for this trajectory. From the 1960s onwards, urban observers challenged functional zoning and abstract spatial order by foregrounding the social life of streets, informal encounters, and everyday routines of use (Jacobs 1961; Whyte 1980). These interventions did not advance participation as a procedural method. Instead, they reframed the street as a lived environment whose qualities emerged through continuous occupation, observation, and adjustment. Everyday life thus entered urban discourse as a reminder that streets could not be fully designed in advance, because they were continuously produced through use over time.

In the UK, these ideas were absorbed into the development of urban design as a field positioned between architecture and planning. From the 1970s through the 1980s, urban design sought to address perceived deficiencies of post-war planning by emphasising public realm quality, townscape coherence, and human-scale environments (Madanipour 1996). Placemaking emerged as a key term through which these concerns were articulated. Crucially, placemaking translated attention to everyday life into a language compatible with the discretionary British planning system, where negotiated judgement and project-based delivery played central roles. Streets became focal sites for demonstrating design quality, yet everyday practice was more often translated into professional judgement and project framing than into ongoing shared control over space (Herring 2016).

During the 1990s and early 2000s, placemaking was increasingly institutionalised. Policy bodies and advisory organisations promoted public realm enhancement through design guidance, benchmarking, and review processes (Carmona 2021). In this context, placemaking was reframed as a governable object: streets and public spaces could be assessed, improved, and compared through criteria linked to regeneration outcomes, economic vitality, and civic image. This institutionalisation elevated the visibility of the street within urban policy while simultaneously reconfiguring it as a project space, subject to funding cycles, delivery timelines, and performance metrics. Everyday use remained a reference point, but it was increasingly mediated through evaluative frameworks rather than sustained engagement. At the same time, subsequent debates on co-production and collaborative governance further extended this shift by framing collaboration and shared responsibility as part of project delivery, even where decision-making power remained unevenly distributed (Lee, Mouter, and Van Cranenburgh 2024).

Participation entered this landscape as a complementary yet tension-filled dimension. Planning theory increasingly framed participation as a requirement for legitimacy in complex urban contexts (Healey 1997). In practice, UK cities formalised participation through consultation exercises, stakeholder workshops, and partnership arrangements embedded in regeneration programmes. Within placemaking initiatives, community input was positioned as a means of grounding design decisions in local knowledge while remaining compatible with project-based delivery structures (Cilliers and Timmermans 2014). Participation thus became temporally bounded and procedurally

defined, shaping when and how engagement could occur without fundamentally altering decision authority.

Critical scholarship has long highlighted the limits of such arrangements. Arnstein's ladder of participation distinguished symbolic inclusion from substantive redistribution of power, while later critiques showed how participatory processes could be mobilised to manage dissent or secure consent without challenging underlying structures (Arnstein 1969; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Miessen 2010). Within placemaking, participation often operated as a discrete phase within delivery sequences rather than as an ongoing condition of spatial production. Streets offered accessible and visible settings for these practices, but the scope of participation was frequently delimited by project objectives, resource constraints, and predefined design parameters.

From the early 2000s onwards, temporary and tactical approaches further reshaped this participatory landscape. Tactical urbanism promoted low-cost, short-term interventions intended to catalyse longer-term change (Lydon and Garcia 2015). In UK cities, such practices were frequently framed as participatory and experimental, aligning with agendas of community activation and local stewardship. Streets became laboratories for intervention, enabling rapid implementation and visible engagement. At the same time, the temporary character of these projects limited exposure to long-term institutional commitments, reinforcing a model in which participation was concentrated at moments of initiation rather than sustained through maintenance and adaptation (Hall 2015).

It is within this institutional and practical context that co-design emerged as a distinct urban practice. Drawing on participatory design traditions, co-design introduced a process-oriented vocabulary emphasising collaboration, iteration, and collective creativity (Sanders and Stappers 2008). In urban settings, co-design inherited placemaking's focus on everyday experience while offering structured formats – workshops, charrettes, co-creation sessions – through which participation could be organised, documented, and evaluated (Luck 2018; Slingerland and Brodersen Hansen 2025). These formats rendered participation legible within contemporary governance systems, allowing engagement to be scheduled, reported, and assessed alongside delivery milestones. Recent reviews also note that co-design, co-creation, and co-production are often used interchangeably in public-space research, while digital participation increasingly channels engagement through auditable and platform-based formats (Lee, Mouter, and Van Cranenburgh 2024; Marshall et al. 2024; Tappert et al. 2024).

In UK cities, co-design was readily incorporated into planning and regeneration frameworks. Digital engagement platforms, neighbourhood planning exercises, and design-led consultations illustrate how co-design became embedded within routine governance practices (Wilson, Tewdwr-Jones, and Comber 2017). This integration expanded the repertoire of participation, but it also aligned co-design with existing institutional logics of delivery, reporting, and public legitimacy. Co-design functioned less as an open-ended collective practice and more as a procedural interface between policy ambition, design delivery, and public legitimacy (Dore 2023).

Understanding co-design as an urban practice therefore requires attention to these genealogical translations. Placemaking provided the conceptual bridge through which streets and everyday life entered urban design discourse. Participation introduced procedural legitimacy within project-based governance. Co-design consolidated these

trajectories by offering formats that could be scheduled, documented, and assessed within contemporary systems of urban delivery.

This genealogy establishes the conditions examined in the following section. As urban governance becomes increasingly shaped by neoliberal restructuring and austerity, the next section examines how fiscal pressure and institutional retrenchment intensify this delivery logic in UK urban governance.

### 3. Co-design under neoliberalism and austerity urbanism

Co-design's consolidation within UK cities must be understood through successive moments of fiscal disruption and institutional response, in which participation was repeatedly mobilised as a delivery logic under constraint. Across these moments, design and co-design were not invoked solely as democratic ideals but were increasingly written into policy and administrative documents as operational formats through which urban programmes could continue despite declining public capacity. Co-design became a means of sustaining action, legitimising decisions, and demonstrating responsiveness under tightening fiscal and institutional constraints. This positioning does not render co-design inherently complicit. It indicates that its contemporary role cannot be inferred from participatory aspirations alone, but must be situated within broader transformations of urban governance under neoliberal restructuring and austerity (Dore 2023; Hastings et al. 2017; Peck 2012; Peck and Tickell 2002).

A key crystallisation of this shift emerged in the post-2008 period of public-sector reform, when fiscal restraint was articulated explicitly as a governing premise. The Design Council Review, commissioned to reposition the Design Council within public-sector reform, stated unambiguously that 'Government needs to save money by doing more for less' (Design Council 2008, 2011). Within this framing, design approaches were characterised as 'open, collaborative and human-centred' and directly associated with service development through reference to 'this co-design approach' (Design Council 2011). The significance of this formulation lies in its operational clarity. Co-design was not presented as an auxiliary engagement technique, but as a response to fiscal pressure, expected to mobilise public-sector workers, civil society organisations, and citizens in the reconfiguration of service provision. Read alongside analyses of austerity urbanism that document the disproportionate impact of retrenchment on place-based and discretionary services, the institutional appeal of co-design becomes evident: it enables activity to continue while recalibrating expectations of what public institutions can provide (Hastings et al. 2017; Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013).

This helps explain why participation has been repeatedly selected as a governance instrument under austerity conditions. Relative to long-term infrastructural provision, participatory processes are comparatively inexpensive, generate artefacts that can be documented and reported, and offer a visible narrative of inclusion even when decision parameters remain narrow. In this setting, co-design becomes legible as a managerial asset: it can be scheduled, evaluated, and aligned with delivery milestones more readily than structural transformation or sustained public investment (Arnstein 1969; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Dore 2023; Miessen 2010).

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified these dynamics by reshaping both the tempo and legal framing of street-level intervention. In May 2020, statutory guidance issued by

the Department for Transport required local authorities in England to rapidly reallocate road space in response to public health needs, explicitly encouraging temporary and experimental measures (DfT 2020). This guidance compressed expectations of deliberation while expanding demands for immediate and visible action. In London, the Streetspace for London programme translated this urgency into operational terms, specifying funding conditions, implementation procedures, monitoring requirements, and streamlined engagement formats (TfL 2020). Within these documents, participation appeared primarily as a procedural component of delivery and evaluation, often relying on surveys, online feedback tools, and time-limited consultations.

Borough-level documentation shows this governance logic more concretely. Across Ealing, Tower Hamlets, Lambeth, and Waltham Forest, co-design appears in a comparable position within programme sequence: after strategic direction and funding parameters have been established, but before detailed design and final scheme adjustment. Ealing cabinet reports describe co-design workshops as part of the review and modification of Streetspace proposals within accelerated delivery programmes (Ealing Council 2020). Tower Hamlets' Liveable Streets documentation places co-design workshops with residents and stakeholders between initial proposals and detailed design stages (London Borough of Tower Hamlets 2019, 2021). Lambeth's Streatham Wells Low Traffic Neighbourhood formalises an 'identify and co-design' phase combining workshops, meetings, and feedback before scheme finalisation (Lambeth Council 2021, 2022). Waltham Forest similarly incorporates design workshops into borough-led public realm and neighbourhood improvement projects as part of shaping layouts and interventions (London Borough of Waltham Forest 2018, 2022). Read comparatively, these cases do not present co-design as open-ended collective agenda-setting. They position it as a bounded administrative stage through which proposals are refined, contestation is managed, and procedural accountability is evidenced within accelerated programmes (Dore 2023; Hall 2015).

The fiscal rupture associated with the UK government's September 2022 'mini-budget' further clarifies the conditions under which co-design is mobilised as a governance format. Immediate assessments highlighted the scale of unfunded commitments and the fragility of fiscal credibility in the absence of established scrutiny mechanisms (House of Commons Library 2022; Institute for Fiscal Studies 2022). Although the Truss administration was short-lived, subsequent analyses pointed to renewed pressures for spending restraint and heightened uncertainty in local government finance (Institute for Government 2023). Parliamentary committee reports then described escalating risks to local authority solvency, increasing reliance on exceptional financial support, and continued contraction of discretionary services (House of Commons Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee 2024). Within this environment, participatory and co-design initiatives acquire a dual function: they provide mechanisms through which scarcity can be managed and priorities negotiated, while also offering a public-facing narrative that decisions are collectively shaped, even when fiscal parameters are externally imposed (Dore 2023; Hastings et al. 2017; Peck 2012).

Taken together, these episodes – post-2008 public-sector reform, pandemic-era street governance, and post-2022 fiscal volatility – clarify the contemporary governance role of co-design. Co-design enables intervention to proceed under constrained resources; it produces visible outputs compatible with accountability and funding systems; and it

aligns with normative expectations of transparency and inclusion in the absence of substantive redistribution. The analytical task, therefore, is not to judge co-design against participatory ideals in the abstract, but to specify the institutional conditions under which it is mobilised and the forms of work it is expected to perform. The following section turns to the street as a site of everyday spatial practice, where these governance logics encounter informal appropriation, maintenance labour, and lived conflict – conditions under which the limits of participation become most visible.

#### **4. The street and everyday life: producing the limits of co-design as spatial practice**

When co-design moves from policy frameworks and funding guidance into the street, it enters a spatial field already produced through everyday routines, material constraints, and accumulated practices. Streets are not neutral platforms awaiting collaborative imagination, but environments continuously organised through movement, maintenance, informal occupation, and conflict (Hall 2015; Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith 1991). Within such settings, participatory intentions are mediated by existing forms of use and appropriation, reconfiguring co-design from a procedural format into a spatial practice embedded in daily urban life (Dore 2023; Petty 2016). It is in this encounter between participatory procedure and lived space that the practical limits of participation become visible. The analysis below examines these limits through three mechanisms:

The first mechanism is temporal compression: the reduction of participation to engagement windows defined by programme timetables, funding conditions, and delivery schedules rather than by the longer rhythms through which everyday street life is organised. Co-design processes are typically structured around workshops, consultation windows, and feedback periods tied to funding conditions and delivery schedules. These temporalities rarely align with the rhythms through which streets are routinely used. In several London neighbourhood schemes, co-design phases were conducted within narrowly defined timeframes. Documentation from the Dartmouth Park Healthy Neighbourhood indicates that engagement activities were organised within a 2 × 6-week period, explicitly acknowledged as shorter than would normally be expected for neighbourhood-scale change (Camden Council 2021b). Such compression does not simply shorten participation; it reshapes what participation can register. Co-design is required to capture established patterns of use – school runs, commuting flows, deliveries – within a limited temporal frame, leaving little room for slower negotiation or the emergence of alternative spatial claims.

By contrast, other neighbourhood schemes have adopted more extended and staged engagement timelines, illustrating how temporal structuring conditions participatory capacity. The Mildmay Liveable Neighbourhood in the London Borough of Islington combined early engagement activities in late 2022 with a dedicated co-design phase between February and April 2023, followed by formal consultation on refined proposals later in the year (Islington Council 2023). This longer sequence created multiple moments for residents and stakeholders to engage with evolving designs, rather than requiring everyday practices to be translated into fixed inputs within a single compressed window. The contrast between Dartmouth Park and Mildmay is analytically important. Both cases are framed as participatory street redesign, yet they position co-design

differently in time. In Dartmouth Park, participation is compressed into a short period in which existing routines must be rapidly translated into administratively usable feedback. In Mildmay, co-design remains bounded but is staged across several moments, allowing proposals to be revisited and adjusted. Read comparatively, the cases show that temporal compression is not simply a matter of having 'less time'; it is a governance condition that determines whether co-design can support iterative negotiation or merely extract usable inputs from already established patterns of street life. The comparison therefore makes clear that the temporal sequencing of participation shapes what can be registered, contested, and revised within street-based co-design.

The second mechanism is responsabilisation through maintenance: the downward redistribution of upkeep, supervision, and material risk once participatory interventions take physical form. Once participatory proposals take physical form – planters, seating, barriers, parklets – questions of use become inseparable from upkeep, supervision, and control. In London boroughs where parklets have been introduced as participatory street interventions, project documentation shows that responsibility for installations is routinely delegated to non-governmental actors. In Hackney, parklet schemes operate through keeper arrangements that require nearby businesses or residents to act as informal stewards, undertaking day-to-day maintenance and monitoring as a condition of installation (Hackney Council 2025). Similar expectations appear in Lambeth's business parklet scheme, where applicants are formally responsible for ongoing upkeep and eventual removal, while the council retains only a supervisory role (Lambeth Council 2024). Design features such as foldable or lockable seating further indicate how participation is channelled towards maintenance and regulation. The comparison between Hackney and Lambeth shows that the specific institutional form may vary – keeper model in one case, applicant responsibility in the other – yet the underlying mechanism is the same. In both cases, co-design does not end with installation. It extends into delegated obligations for care, monitoring, and eventual removal, shifting the burden of everyday stabilisation onto actors outside the local state. Participation is thus reconfigured from collective influence over design into a materially grounded expectation of stewardship. Read in this light, the cases show that material participation is not exhausted by installation, but is tied to ongoing regimes of upkeep, supervision, and control.

This shift reflects constraints imposed by limited institutional capacity. Streets require continuous maintenance, yet public authorities often lack the resources to sustain this work directly. Participatory involvement therefore becomes a means of stabilising material arrangements over time, embedding expectations of co-management within everyday routines of use and care. The key analytical point is that maintenance is not external to co-design's effects. It is one of the principal ways in which participation is reworked as distributed governance under conditions of limited capacity.

The third mechanism is datafication of lived conflict: the conversion of everyday encounters, disputes, and unequal impacts into standardised feedback formats that can be aggregated, compared, and reported. Engagement processes associated with street reconfiguration are frequently mediated through surveys, digital platforms, and feedback tools that translate everyday encounters into analysable inputs. In the South Leytonstone Low Traffic Neighbourhood, for example, perception surveys and design questionnaires were used to inform what was described as a co-design process for the final scheme, with decisions justified

through the aggregation and analysis of responses (London Borough of Waltham Forest 2021). Similar approaches are evident elsewhere in London. In the St Peter's people-friendly streets trial in the London Borough of Islington, engagement relied heavily on online platforms and structured trial feedback and consultation questionnaires, generating hundreds to over a thousand responses that were subsequently analysed to inform design adjustments and decision-making (Islington Council 2021a). While such tools broaden participation numerically, they also reshape its substance. Conflicts over access, displacement, or unequal impacts are rendered as preference rankings or sentiment scores, filtering the complexity of street life through formats compatible with evaluation and reporting.

Read comparatively, the South Leytonstone and St Peter's cases show that datification does not simply mean 'using surveys'. In both schemes, participation is reorganised through instruments that make experience countable and administratively legible, but the effect is not neutral. Survey responses, feedback scores, and platform-based inputs can register volume and distribution of opinion, yet they also reduce conflict to categories that fit reporting requirements and decision logs. What is lost is not participation itself, but the thicker articulation of how different users encounter street change unequally. The comparison therefore supports the article's argument about evaluative form by showing how lived conflict is translated into evidence that can circulate within administrative and funding systems.

Taken together, these three mechanisms show that the limits of co-design do not arise because participation is absent, but because it is reorganised through bounded temporalities, delegated material obligations, and evaluative knowledge formats. Streets remain sites of informal appropriation, adaptation, and negotiation that exceed participatory procedures. Users repurpose interventions, resist imposed arrangements, or adapt them to local routines in ways that are not easily captured within formal engagement frameworks. The analytical implication is that co-design's limits are produced not at the level of aspiration, but at the point where participatory formats encounter already inhabited and unevenly governed urban space.

These gaps become particularly pronounced where street interventions intersect with exclusion and securitisation. Debates around hostile architecture in London demonstrate how design interventions can marginalise specific groups while remaining insulated from meaningful participatory challenge (Petty 2016). In such cases, participatory processes tend to focus on environmental quality or user experience, while questions of power, exclusion, and redistribution remain difficult to articulate within procedural formats. Participation becomes oriented towards negotiable preferences rather than structural inequalities, constraining its capacity to address deeper spatial injustices.

Read through everyday spatial practice, co-design in the street appears less as a singular method than as a series of encounters between governance procedures and lived space. Streets expose the temporal, material, and political limits of participation by situating co-design within rhythms of use, obligations of maintenance, and conflicts that precede and exceed formal engagement. These encounters do not invalidate co-design, but they qualify its claims by showing that participatory practices are reshaped by the spaces they enter and by the governance arrangements through which those spaces are managed. Spatial justice therefore emerges as a question of conditions and capacities

embedded in everyday urban space, rather than an automatic outcome of participatory procedure.

## 5. Discussion and conclusion: participation, spatial justice, and the conditions of co-design

The limits identified through co-design practices should not be understood as contingent outcomes of particular projects or sites, nor as deficiencies that can be resolved through improved participatory technique alone. Rather, they align with a longer critical tradition showing that inclusion within procedural frameworks does not necessarily redistribute power or resources (Arnstein 1969; Cooke and Kothari 2001; Miessen 2010). Read in relation to the cases examined here, the frictions visible in the street point to structural limits embedded in how participation is organised, timed, and operationalised within urban governance.

This argument becomes sharper under conditions of neoliberal restructuring and austerity. As public institutions face fiscal constraint and organisational retrenchment, participatory processes are increasingly asked to compensate for reduced public capacity. Participation is mobilised to manage scarcity, mediate contestation, and stabilise withdrawal rather than to supplement robust public provision (Hastings et al. 2017; Peck 2012; Tonkiss 2013). The three mechanisms identified in this article – temporal compression, responsabilisation through maintenance, and datafication of lived conflict – show how this occurs in practice. Co-design is compressed into bounded engagement windows, extended into delegated obligations of upkeep and stewardship, and translated into evaluative formats that render conflict measurable but less politically articulate. In this sense, participation does not simply succeed or fail; it is reorganised through conditions that shape what kinds of engagement, negotiation, and contestation remain possible.

Understanding participation in relation to spatial justice therefore requires a shift in emphasis. Spatial justice concerns the distribution of resources, access, and control over space, not procedural inclusion alone (Harvey 2012; Soja 2010). Yet co-design and participatory planning are often invested with expectations that exceed their structural remit. Participation is assumed to produce fairer urban space by virtue of its collaborative form, even where decision-making authority is narrow, responsibility is devolved without resources, and wider political-economic conditions remain untouched (Fainstein 2010; Marcuse 2009). The findings of this article suggest that the limits of co-design arise from this misalignment: participatory processes are frequently asked to deliver outcomes that depend on institutional capacity, material investment, and redistributive power beyond participation itself.

These findings have practical implications for urban design and planning. For local authorities and design teams, co-design should not be treated as a low-cost substitute for institutional capacity. Processes that appear participatory at the point of consultation may still reproduce inequality if implementation is rushed, maintenance is off-loaded onto residents or businesses, or conflict is reduced to administratively manageable feedback. Three practical implications follow. First, participatory timelines need to be designed in relation to the rhythms of everyday street use rather than solely around programme deadlines. Second, questions of maintenance, stewardship,

liability, and long-term care should be treated as integral design issues from the outset rather than as residual matters to be delegated after installation. Third, digital engagement and survey-based consultation should be used with caution: while they can widen the reach of participation, they should not stand in for richer forms of political articulation where exclusion, unequal impact, or competing claims to space are at stake.

The article also has implications for co-design research. It suggests the need to move beyond workshop-centred accounts of participation towards closer analysis of the delivery regimes, maintenance arrangements, evaluative infrastructures, and temporal structures through which co-design operates. It also indicates that future work should examine participatory design across linked scales, from street-level interventions to the governance frameworks that shape what participation can realistically do. More broadly, the article argues for treating co-design as a spatial practice embedded in everyday urban environments rather than as a discrete method whose democratic value can be assumed in advance.

Ultimately, this article argues that the question is not whether co-design is valuable in itself, but what kind of urban transformation it is materially and institutionally able to support. As Harvey (2008, 23) writes, the right to the city is ‘a right to change ourselves by changing the city’. Under the conditions traced here, co-design may enable visibility, negotiation, and limited adjustment, but it rarely secures that transformative collective power on its own. The task, then, is not to abandon co-design, but to reconnect it to the institutional capacity, material investment, and political contestation without which participation remains procedural while spatial justice remains deferred.

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## Author contributions

CRedit: **Sinan Wang**: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

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