ANNALS OF THE UNIVERSITY OF CRAIOVA

Series: ✓*Biology*
✓*Horticulture*
✓*Food products processing technology*
✓*Environmental engineering*

Vol. XXXI (LXVII) - 2026

THE LATENT POTENTIAL OF HISTORIC URBAN FABRIC: UNDERUTILIZED PUBLIC SPACES IN CENTRAL CRAIOVA

Trif Andreea[1]*
[1*]University of Craiova
* *Correspondence author. E-mail*: andreea.trif@edu.ucv.ro

Keywords*: underused public spaces; latent urban potential; urban voids; public space assessment; urban regeneration; Craiova.*

ABSTRACT

This study investigates the latent potential of overlooked public spaces in the civic centre of Craiova, Romania, an urban area substantially transformed by socialist-era interventions. The research employs a multidimensional methodology combining historical and morphological analysis, field observations, and the assessment of spatial, functional, environmental, and social characteristics. Selected case studies are examined through a comparative framework aimed at identifying the factors contributing to their underutilisation and their capacity for urban reintegration. Particular attention is given to accessibility, spatial connectivity, urban identity, and opportunities for public life. The study proposes an assessment framework for recognising and evaluating latent spatial potential, supporting more integrated and context-sensitive urban regeneration strategies.

INTRODUCTION

Public spaces are essential components of urban environments, supporting social interaction, spatial connectivity, environmental quality, and place identity. However, successive urban transformations, fragmented planning processes, and changing functional requirements frequently generate spaces that remain poorly integrated into the urban fabric or fail to fulfil their potential. Such spaces represent both challenges for urban development and opportunities for regeneration.

The concept of *lost space*, introduced by Trancik (1986), describes urban areas characterised by weak spatial definition, limited functionality, and insufficient relationships with their surroundings. More recent research has emphasised the importance of evaluating public spaces through their social, functional, and experiential qualities. Mehta (2014) proposed a multidimensional framework addressing inclusiveness, meaningfulness, safety, comfort, and pleasurability, while Carmona (2019) highlighted the need for integrated planning strategies that consider public space as a coherent urban system. Similarly, Gehl and Svarre (2013) demonstrated the relevance of systematic observations of everyday urban activities in understanding the relationship between spatial configuration and public life.

Despite these contributions, assessing the unrealised potential of overlooked public spaces remains a methodological challenge. Existing approaches primarily address spatial deficiencies, public space quality, or observed patterns of use, while

the distinction between current performance and potential future contribution requires further investigation. In this context, *latent urban potential* is understood as the capacity of an existing space to generate additional spatial, functional, social, or environmental value through improved integration into its urban context.

Craiova, Romania, provides a relevant case study due to the substantial transformations of its central urban structure during the socialist period. Large-scale demolitions and redevelopment operations altered the historical urban fabric, introducing new spatial configurations and discontinuities between existing and newly constructed areas. Within the civic centre, several public spaces exhibit characteristics of underutilisation despite their central location and proximity to important urban functions. Their spatial configuration, accessibility, and relationships with surrounding activities suggest opportunities that remain insufficiently explored.

This study aims to identify and assess the latent potential of selected overlooked public spaces within Craiova's civic centre. By combining historical and morphological analysis, field observations, and a comparative evaluation of spatial, functional, environmental, and social attributes, the research seeks to distinguish existing limitations from opportunities for urban reintegration. The proposed assessment framework contributes to understanding overlooked spaces as valuable urban resources and provides a methodological basis for context-sensitive regeneration strategies applicable to similarly transformed urban centres.

MATERIAL AND METHODS

The research focuses on the civic centre of Craiova, Romania, an urban area significantly transformed through large-scale redevelopment interventions during the socialist period. These transformations altered the historical urban fabric, generating new spatial relationships, discontinuities, and public spaces with varying degrees of functional integration.

The study adopts a multiple-case approach, focusing on selected overlooked or underutilised public spaces. Case selection is based on three criteria: (1) location within or adjacent to the civic centre; (2) evidence of limited functional activation or weak integration into the surrounding urban structure; and (3) potential relevance for improving urban connectivity, public activities, or environmental quality.

The methodology combines historical cartographic analysis, urban morphological investigation, and direct field observations. Historical maps and planning documents are examined to identify major transformations in the urban fabric and the processes contributing to the formation of the selected spaces.

Contemporary spatial configurations are analysed using available cartographic materials, aerial imagery, and on-site documentation. The assessment considers spatial boundaries, accessibility, pedestrian connections, relationships with adjacent buildings, land uses, vegetation, and existing urban amenities.

Field observations are designed to document current activities, pedestrian movement, patterns of occupation, and the physical condition of each site. Observations conducted during different periods are intended to capture variations in public space use.

A multidimensional assessment framework is proposed to evaluate the relationship between existing spatial performance and unrealised urban potential. Five analytical dimensions are considered:

1. **Spatial connectivity:** accessibility, pedestrian continuity, and integration into the surrounding urban network.

2. **Functional capacity:** existing uses, diversity of activities, and opportunities for functional diversification.
3. **Social activation:** observed public presence, interaction, and capacity to accommodate collective activities.
4. **Spatial identity:** morphological coherence, historical relationships, visual character, and potential for place-making.

Each dimension is assessed through qualitative observations and measurable spatial indicators, where data availability permits. The distinction between current performance and potential capacity provides the basis for identifying latent urban opportunities.

The selected case studies are examined using a common assessment matrix to identify recurring spatial deficiencies, contextual advantages, and opportunities for urban reintegration. The comparative analysis aims to distinguish between limitations associated with physical configuration and those resulting from insufficient functional activation or weak connections to surrounding urban activities.

The resulting framework supports the identification of site-specific regeneration priorities without prescribing detailed design interventions, providing a transferable analytical approach for similarly transformed urban environments.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The comparative investigation of three public spaces located at the interface between Craiova's historic urban fabric and its redeveloped civic centre revealed significant discrepancies between their strategic urban positions and their current spatial and functional performance. Although all three sites are situated in proximity to major pedestrian routes and central urban activities, they exhibit different forms of underutilisation, associated with restricted accessibility, insufficient functional activation, inadequate public amenities, and weak spatial identity.

The three sites share a common historical context, having been influenced by the extensive urban restructuring undertaken during the socialist period. These transformations introduced new built volumes and circulation patterns, altering the relationships between the historical street network and the emerging civic centre.

However, the analysis indicates that underutilisation does not result from a uniform set of spatial deficiencies. Instead, each site displays a distinct combination of physical, functional, and perceptual limitations, suggesting different mechanisms through which potentially valuable public spaces become disconnected from urban life.

Site 1 occupies a strategic position at the termination of a visual and pedestrian sequence connecting the historic centre with the civic centre. Its spatial configuration follows the sloping topography of the adjacent street, with public areas organised on two levels and access points located at both ends.

Although this arrangement provides a potentially coherent circulation structure, its current performance is significantly compromised by extensive parking and physical obstacles. Vehicles occupy the foreground of the site, obstructing pedestrian approaches and reducing visibility from the surrounding public spaces. Consequently, a location that could function as a transitional urban node remains poorly connected to the principal pedestrian movements.



Figure 1. Site 1 – transitional public space between the civic centre and the historical buildings

Functional limitations further reinforce this condition. While some commercial and service premises at street level remain active, their uses provide limited attraction for the broader public. Lower-level premises are largely inactive, creating discontinuities along the built frontage and reducing opportunities for interaction between indoor functions and the public realm.

The site also exhibits limited spatial identity. Its built environment reflects the redevelopment processes that followed the demolition and fragmentation of the historical urban fabric, without establishing distinctive cultural or symbolic references.

Nevertheless, its position within the central circulation network, the existing multilevel structure, and the availability of access points at both ends indicate substantial opportunities for reintegration. The analysis identifies accessibility, visual permeability, and functional activation as the principal dimensions through which its latent potential could be realised.

Site 2 is located opposite Site 1, at the termination of the historic centre's pedestrian network. Unlike the first site, it benefits from an existing landscape arrangement comprising paved platforms, steps, and planted areas. However, these physical improvements have not resulted in effective functional or social activation.

The spatial organisation is characterised by discontinuous pedestrian connections and limited permeability. Access from the adjoining street is affected by parked vehicles, waste collection facilities, and physical obstacles. The configuration requires pedestrians to descend into a relatively enclosed area before continuing through a narrow exit, reducing the space's effectiveness as a direct pedestrian connection.

The surrounding ground-floor premises exhibit limited activity and visibility, contributing to the absence of functional attractors capable of encouraging prolonged occupation. Although the site is physically connected to a major pedestrian system, its circulation configuration and weak relationship with adjacent activities restrict its integration into everyday urban life.



Figure 2. Site 2 – ending of pedestrian route of the civic centre

The limited visual quality of the surrounding frontages, together with inactive premises and signs of physical deterioration, further reduces the attractiveness of the space and may contribute to perceptions of insecurity.

The existing vegetation and paved surfaces provide a physical basis for future improvements. However, the findings indicate that the site's latent potential depends less on additional physical landscaping than on restoring pedestrian continuity, improving spatial visibility, and activating adjacent functions.

Site 2 therefore illustrates how an intentionally designed public space may remain underutilised when its spatial configuration and functional relationships fail to support natural pedestrian movement and meaningful public activities.

Site 3 is located at another important intersection between the historical street network and the redeveloped civic centre. In contrast to the previous sites, it benefits from favourable accessibility and visibility, as the central pedestrian system connects directly with the intersection.

Despite these advantages, its spatial organisation and environmental quality remain insufficient for its central urban role. The irregular, predominantly triangular configuration is largely occupied by vehicular circulation and parking, while pedestrian areas are fragmented and lack coherent spatial definition.

The surrounding built environment accommodates commercial activities, but their diversity, visual presentation, and relationship with the public realm offer limited support for the creation of an attractive urban destination. In addition, the absence of coordinated urban furniture, pedestrian amenities, and landscape improvements restricts opportunities for social interaction and prolonged occupation.



Figure 3. Site 3 – ending of pedestrian route of the civic centre –direction south

A defining characteristic of this site is the pronounced contrast between its current condition and the adjacent civic centre. While the latter benefits from coordinated pedestrian surfaces, landscape elements, and contemporary urban amenities, the investigated space retains a predominantly utilitarian character. This contrast produces a discontinuity in spatial quality at the transition between the historic and redeveloped urban fabrics.

Unlike Sites 1 and 2, where accessibility and pedestrian continuity represent major limitations, Site 3 demonstrates that favourable urban connectivity alone does not ensure effective public space performance.

Its latent potential is primarily associated with its strategic location, high visibility, existing pedestrian connections, and capacity to accommodate a more coherent public space configuration. Improvements in spatial organisation, functional attractiveness, environmental quality, and urban identity could transform the area into a more effective transitional node between the two urban structures.

The comparative analysis reveals three distinct mechanisms of public space underutilisation.

Site 1 is primarily affected by obstructed spatial connectivity, where an otherwise advantageous location is compromised by parking, physical barriers, and limited functional activation.

Site 2 represents a case of functional and spatial disconnection, in which existing pedestrian infrastructure and landscape improvements fail to generate meaningful public use because of discontinuous circulation and inactive adjacent functions.

Site 3 illustrates a qualitative discontinuity between connected urban areas, where accessibility and visibility are relatively favourable, but insufficient spatial quality, amenities, and functional attractiveness prevent the site from fulfilling its potential.

Across the three cases, the analysis identifies several recurring deficiencies, particularly the limited attractiveness of ground-floor functions, the insufficient provision of urban amenities, and weak spatial identity. However, the relative importance of these factors varies according to each site's position, configuration, and relationship with the surrounding public space network.

The findings suggest that latent urban potential cannot be inferred solely from the degree of current underutilisation. Instead, it emerges from the relationship between existing deficiencies and the spatial, functional, and environmental resources available for future activation.

The three sites therefore demonstrate different forms of unrealised potential: the recovery of obstructed connectivity, the functional reactivation of an existing pedestrian environment, and the improvement of qualitative continuity between historical and redeveloped urban areas.

Table 1

The structured items of the research

Assessment criteria	Site 1	Site 2	Site 3
Urban position	Visual termination of central pedestrian routes	Termination of the historic pedestrian network	Intersection of historic and civic centre networks
Accessibility	Restricted by parking and obstacles	Discontinuous and poorly legible	Generally favourable
Visibility	Limited	Limited	High
Functional activation	Partially inactive frontages	Predominantly inactive adjacent functions	Active but insufficiently attractive functions
Social activation	Limited	Limited	Limited
Environmental quality	Fragmented landscape elements	Existing vegetation and paving	Limited landscape integration
Urban amenities	Insufficient	Insufficient	Insufficient
Spatial identity	Weak	Weak	Weak
Dominant deficiency	Obstructed connectivity	Functional and spatial disconnection	Discontinuity in public space quality
Main latent resource	Strategic position and multilevel circulation	Existing pedestrian infrastructure	Visibility and urban network convergence
Regeneration priority	Accessibility and functional activation	Pedestrian continuity and active frontages	Spatial quality and urban identity

Beyond the individual characteristics of the investigated sites, the comparative analysis highlights a broader issue concerning the continuity of Craiova's central public space system.

Although the redeveloped civic centre contains pedestrian areas characterised by contemporary paving, landscape improvements, and urban amenities, these qualities are not consistently extended to the transitional spaces connecting it with the historic street network.

The resulting discontinuities are expressed through three interrelated dimensions: physical discontinuity, associated with obstacles and fragmented pedestrian circulation; functional discontinuity, resulting from inactive or insufficiently attractive adjacent uses; and perceptual discontinuity, reflected in differences in spatial quality, visual coherence, and urban identity.

The proximity of the investigated spaces to established central pedestrian routes indicates that their underutilisation cannot be explained simply by peripheral location or isolation from urban activity. Rather, it reflects shortcomings in the spatial and functional integration of transitional public spaces.

These findings support the interpretation of overlooked public spaces as components of a fragmented urban system rather than isolated residual areas. Their latent potential is therefore associated not only with site-specific improvements but also with opportunities to strengthen the continuity, coherence, and functional integration of the wider central public space network.

CONCLUSIONS

This study investigated the latent potential of three overlooked public spaces located at the interface between Craiova's historic urban fabric and its redeveloped civic centre. The findings reveal a significant discrepancy between the strategic

urban position of these spaces and their current functional, spatial, and environmental performance, highlighting the complexity of public space underutilisation in historically transformed urban centres.

The comparative analysis identified three distinct mechanisms of underutilisation: obstructed spatial connectivity, functional and spatial disconnection, and discontinuity in public space quality. While the first site is primarily affected by parking pressure and restricted pedestrian accessibility, the second illustrates the limitations of an existing pedestrian environment lacking functional activation and effective circulation. The third demonstrates that favourable accessibility and visibility do not necessarily ensure successful public space performance when environmental quality, urban amenities, and functional attractiveness remain insufficient.

A common characteristic of the three sites is the weak relationship between their existing spatial resources and their capacity to support meaningful public activities. Their underutilisation cannot therefore be attributed exclusively to physical deterioration or inadequate location, but rather to the combined effects of spatial fragmentation, insufficient functional diversity, and limited integration into the surrounding urban system.

The findings suggest that latent urban potential should be understood not simply as the absence of current activity, but as the capacity of existing spatial and contextual resources to support improved urban performance. This distinction provides a basis for evaluating overlooked spaces beyond their visible deficiencies and identifying opportunities for context-sensitive regeneration.

REFERENCES

Carmona, M. (2019). Principles for public space design, planning to do better. Urban Design International, 24(1), 47–59.

Gehl, J., & Svarre, B. (2013). How to Study Public Life. Island Press.

Hashem, O. M., Wahba, S. M. E., & Nasr-Eldin, T. I. (2022). Urban voids: Identifying and optimizing urban voids potential as a revitalization source in enhancing developing countries' city income. Journal of Engineering and Applied Science, 69, Article 6.

Mehta, V. (2014). Evaluating public space. Journal of Urban Design, 19(1), 53–88.

Milias, V., Teeuwen, R., Bozzon, A., & Psyllidis, A. (2024). Crowdsourcing the influence of physical features on the likely use of public open spaces. Computational Urban Science, 4, Article 15.

Paudel, U., & Pant, K. P. (2023). Understanding vitality of public space: A review with an example of capital city Kathmandu in Nepal. Land Use Policy, 133, 106860.

Qi, J., Mazumdar, S., & Vasconcelos, A. C. (2024). Understanding the relationship between urban public space and social cohesion: A systematic review. International Journal of Community Well-Being, 7, 155–212.

Trancik, R. (1986). Finding Lost Space: Theories of Urban Design. John Wiley & Sons.

Vazquez, S. A., Ostermann, F. O., Madureira, A. M. P. S., et al. (2025). Using a digital participatory platform to evaluate public space quality. GeoJournal, 90, Article 145.