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Advancing Social-Ecological Inclusivity: The Role of Spatial Design and Community-Led Governance in Dutch Residential Neighbourhoods

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Urban landscapes are increasingly understood as social-ecological systems, where social and ecological processes operate in complex interaction (Berkes & Folke, 1998; Colding & Barthel, 2019). Addressing the complexities of social systems alongside ecological ones is essential to achieving genuinely sustainable outcomes (De Block & Vicenzotti, 2018). This perspective has influenced how we conceive residential neighbourhoods, encouraging more inclusive spaces in both social and ecological spheres. However, the long-term viability of these social-ecologically inclusive neighbourhoods depends not only on spatial design but also on the governance structures that sustain them.

In several pioneering Dutch residential projects, community-led governance has played a pivotal role in the realisation and maintenance of public and semi-public spaces, shaping social interactions and ensuring access to green spaces while integrating ecological principles into daily urban life. However, tensions arise between actors across public, private, and collectively owned areas, where boundaries are continually negotiated.

This study examines two Dutch examples – Lanxmeer (Culemborg) and Kersentuin (Utrecht) – both established planned neighbourhoods where spatial structure and governance models interact to shape the urban environment. While these projects incorporate public, shared, and private green spaces within a coherent urban fabric, their governance relies on a distributed model involving residents, cooperatives, and municipal bodies. Through detailed field observations and interviews with residents and community representatives, this study analyses the governance structure, key actors, and interactions that determine how these spaces are managed over time.

The discussion critically assesses how spatial design enables or hinders

governance viability, highlighting cases where community agency enhances social-ecological inclusivity, as well as instances where governance challenges emerge. Specific tensions include conflicts over land use and accessibility, spatial appropriation, and the negotiation of ecological ideals with individual interests. These dynamics are illustrated through diagrams, satellite images, photographs, and collages, providing a spatial reading of governance practices in action.

By linking urban design plans to governance realities, this study contributes to broader discussions on the role of spatial design in enabling community-led urban management. It raises key questions about how public and semi-public spaces can remain inclusive, adaptable, and ecologically responsive over time, offering insights for the future design and governance of socially and ecologically integrated neighbourhoods.

Keywords

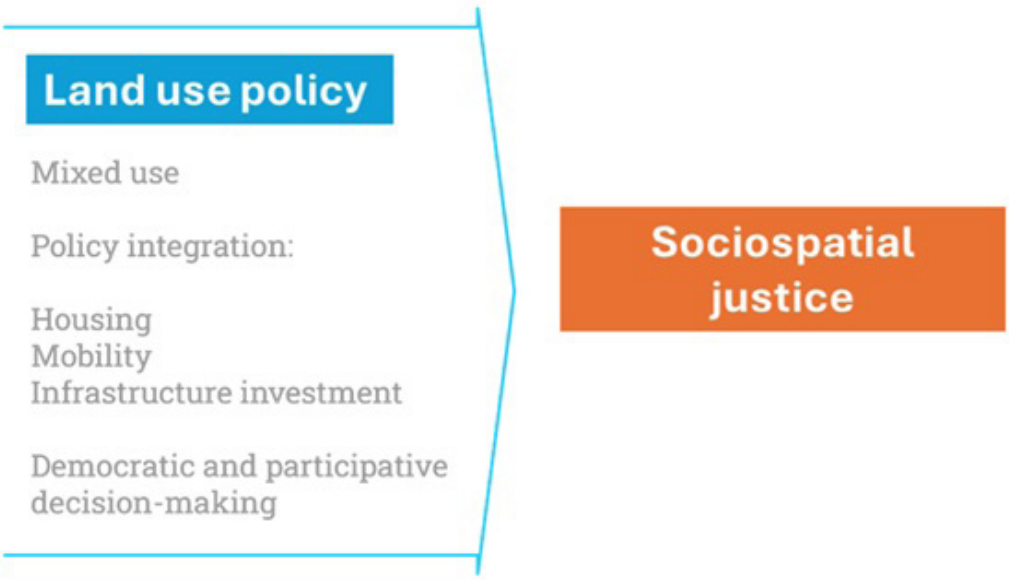
Community-led governance, Social-ecological inclusivity, Design of shared spaces

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