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Challenges in managing public space: insights from public space management practice

Mozafar Said[a,b]* and Barbara Tempels[a]

[a]*Land Use Planning Group, Department of Environmental Sciences, Wageningen University, Wageningen, the Netherlands;* [b]*Department of Urban Management, City of Rotterdam, Rotterdam, the Netherlands*

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Public spaces face long-term challenges, such as energy transition and climate adaptation, which involve a range of adaptations in the existing public spaces. Simultaneously, managers face short-term everyday challenges. This article explores how Dutch public space managers deal with short- and long-term challenges that affect the effectiveness of public space management. This qualitative study based on exploratory interviews with managers provides insight into the obstacles public space managers face in dealing with these long-term and short-term challenges. The study found four characteristics of the current practice: (1) the sectoral division between design and management, (2) the conflict-and-action approach, (3) the asset-based focus, and (4) the linear approach. Together, these characteristics prevent the current practice from effectively facing both long-term and short-term challenges. The findings provide a starting point to think about how public space management could be reorganized to ensure the quality and functionality of public space in the future.

Keywords: public space; public space management; challenges; use phase; process analysis

1. Introduction

Public spaces are important structuring elements of the urban landscape, forming an integral part of everyday life. They are available to all members of society and include vegetation-dominated "green spaces" (parks, street trees, playgrounds) and paved "open spaces" (squares, pedestrian streets, piers) (Randrup and Persson 2009; Habitat 2018). Public spaces have played a fundamental role in the way civil society has functioned throughout history: from the ancient Greek agora and the medieval marketplace to Renaissance boulevards and today's pedestrian precincts and parks (Andersson 2016; Leveratto, Gotti, and Lanz 2022; Madanipour 2003). As society changes, public spaces have gone through several transitions over time, and they will continue to evolve. For instance, in the Dutch city of Rotterdam, an old freight railway has been redeveloped into a shopping mall with a public park on the roof. Today, the importance of creating and managing public spaces is

*Corresponding author. Email: mozafar.said@wur.nl

recognized and safeguarded not only at the local level but also at the national and international levels (Dempsey and Burton 2012; Spijker and Parra 2018).

Scholars argue that the management of public space, due to its focus on users, can ensure that the output of planning and design is well aligned with society's real needs and preferences through an integral and strategic management approach (Dempsey and Burton 2012; Dempsey, Smith, and Burton 2014; Mattijssen *et al*. 2018; Spijker and Parra 2018). To ensure that public spaces perform their various roles effectively, they require regular maintenance of their physical elements (assets) and the management of activities that include regulation and coordination. In addition, public spaces also require long-term planning and strategic management, including investments for renewal, adaptation, and upgrade to ensure the quality and functionality of existing public spaces against unpredictable changes, such as climate change and energy transition (Duivenvoorden *et al*. 2021; Fors *et al*. 2021; Randrup *et al*. 2021). Indeed, successfully coordinated management of public space would consist of a long-term quality and efficiency-based strategy that is underpinned by reliable funding sources and a regular evaluation process (de Magalhães and Carmona 2009; Dempsey and Burton 2012). Public space management is not only about preserving existing spaces but also about regulating and coordinating changes in the use of public space after the designer has left the scene. For example, the energy transition might prompt the installation of charging stations for electric vehicles. The management of public space thus requires dealing with both short-term challenges (e.g. solving day-to-day problems) and long-term challenges (e.g. climate adaptation and energy transition), to ensure that the public space can fulfill its function as a venue for social contacts, economic growth, and innovation.

Since public space is not immune to changes affecting its functionality, the process of reshaping and adapting existing spaces continues after the implementation of a plan (de Magalhães and Carmona 2009). Especially in the current era where cities are facing new challenges, the problems will be more noticeable than ever before. The energy transition, climate adaptation, circular economy, and mobility, are major challenges that influence the way cities are planned and managed (Carmona 2019; Duivenvoorden *et al*. 2021; Maring and Blauw 2018). In practice, the impact of these challenges on, for example, accessibility (such as dysfunction of infrastructure systems due to flooding) and quality of life (e.g. environmental and air pollution) has negative consequences for society. Coping with these challenges will involve a range of transitions and changes to the public space in cities.

Therefore, managers of public space are confronted with costs and actions that are not foreseen in their initial plans. An example is the shortening of a moving steel bridge deck that is stuck because it expanded due to high temperatures. Consequently, managers are being forced to settle for temporary solutions or, due to lack of resources, postpone solving problems. This situation can lead to a downward spiral of public spaces, resulting in damage, decay, and insufficient maintenance (Nash and Christie 2003). In some cases, the designer is not aware of changes and adjustments public space has recently undergone (e.g. improving accessibility of buildings, or climate-adaptive measures) which could lead to the outcome of the design process not meeting the real needs and preferences of users (Banerjee and Loukaitou-Sideris 2011).

However, public space management has not been given sufficient priority in both practice and academic debate (Aly and Dimitrijevic 2022; Carmona 2019; Dempsey and Burton 2012; Duivenvoorden *et al*. 2021; Maring and Blauw 2018). Addressing both the lack of attention on managing public space in academic debate and the need

for a long-term vision of public space in relation to societal challenges, this paper studies the current process of managing public space in Dutch practice. The central question is: "How do managers of public space deal with short-term and long-term challenges affecting the quality and functionality of public spaces?" The findings are based on qualitative interviews with managers involved in the practice of short-term management (e.g. maintenance of physical assets, regulation, and coordination of use) as well as managers involved in long-term management (e.g. strategies and investments) of public space in the Netherlands.

2. Managing public space—conceptualization

This section highlights the debate on the management of public space, and the changes managing public space has undergone including its challenges, followed by describing managing public space in Dutch practice. Relying on the concepts mentioned in the literature that are the most appropriate for Dutch practice, the following definitions are central to this debate. *Public spaces* are open urban spaces that are available for all members of society containing various physical elements (assets) such as green (e.g. parks, playgrounds), blue (e.g. canals, lakes), grey (e.g. avenues, pedestrian paths, roads including bridges and tunnels) and brown (e.g. industrial areas) (Randrup *et al*. 2021). *Managing public space* contains the set of processes and practices that attempt to ensure that public space can fulfill all its legitimate roles, in a way that is acceptable for the users (de Magalhães and Carmona 2009). Managing public space has been regarded as the end phase of the process of urban development (Jansson *et al*. 2019), starting from the moment public space is put into use. In the Netherlands, this is understood as the "use phase."

2.1. Management of public space—origins and developments

Until recently, the management of public space in practice has been focused on the functions and activities of the use of the spaces rather than on the spaces themselves. Managing public space was limited to maintaining parks and iconic spaces, such as city squares and monumental civic buildings. The broader societal, economic, and technological transformations (e.g. industrialization, renewal and rebuilding of cities, economic and state restructuring) have caused changes in public spaces including creation, refurbishment, and management of public spaces (Banerjee 2001). Therefore, a growing body of literature understands the creation and management of public space as a dynamic process in which the definitions, rights, expectations, and delivery-and-management approaches are constantly changing and redefined (Carmona 2014; De Magalhães 2010; Langstraat and Van Melik 2013).

The process of maintenance of new or refurbished public spaces begins only after a plan or design has been implemented (Dempsey, Smith, and Burton 2014; Jansson *et al*. 2019). This has resulted in a linear logic separation in the process of creation and management of public space as the "end-phase" (Brinkhuijsen *et al*. 2021). Practice has shown that once public spaces are completed, the interest of governance as well as citizens decreases in public space in use, which in some cases can result in underestimating the management of public space. Scholars also argue that public space management is not given sufficient priority (Aly and Dimitrijevic 2022; Carmona 2019; Dempsey and Burton 2012; Duivenvoorden *et al*. 2021; Friedmann 2010;

Teriman 2012). As Nam and Dempsey (2019) mention, since the management of public space is not a statutory obligation in many countries around the world, when budgetary constraints are imposed, public space management and maintenance are disproportionately and adversely affected. For instance, inadequate attention to maintaining and managing public spaces in Western metropolises in the decades between the 1960s and 1990s has resulted in public spaces being littered, neglected, covered in graffiti, and polluted, which led to residents feeling unsafe in places that then become unused in favor of others (Nash and Christie 2003).

The literature on public space published in the last three decades focuses primarily on (1) *Urban design and development process*, by providing extensive insight into the role and relationships of actors in the process of design and development of public space (e.g. Carmona 2014, 2019; Dempsey and Dobson 2020; Dobson and Dempsey 2021; Adams and Tiesdell 2012), (2) *Urban (re)development*, often focusing on organizing citizens participation or private market co-production in the redevelopment of public space (e.g. Buijs *et al*. 2019; Hansen, Lindholst, and Greve 2020; Lee and Scholten 2022; Melik and van der Krabben 2016; Suomalainen, Tahvonen, and Kahiluoto 2022), and (3) *Urban Governance*, by focusing on institutional analyses, such as policies, procedures, and practices to increase our understanding of economic, political, and ideological forces (e.g. Bergström *et al*. 2021; de Magalhães and Carmona 2009; Jansson and Randrup 2020; Jansson *et al*. 2019; Kent 2013; Kumar-Nair and Landman 2023; Pierre 2005; Zamanifard, Alizadeh, and Bosman 2018; Alvarado Vazquez and Casiano Flores 2022). The most recently published literature on public space management focuses on green public or urban space (e.g. Aly and Dimitrijevic 2022; Buijs *et al*. 2019; Dobson and Dempsey 2021; Fongar *et al*. 2019; Fors *et al*. 2021). However, some of the latter studies (Jansson *et al*. 2019; Randrup *et al*. 2021), focus on governance and management of Urban Open Space (UOS), "a conglomeration of green, grey, brown and blue spaces" (Randrup *et al*. 2021, 1) which also includes hard surfaced "grey" elements managed by "green space management" or "park management."

However, as Zamanifard, Alizadeh, and Bosman (2018, 156) notice, "studies of public spaces tend to focus on the substantive dimensions of public spaces," while "studies of the procedural dimensions are limited." Procedural aspects (i.e. characteristics related to the process of managing public space) such as governance regulations, actors' positions, and how actors interact with each other receive less attention. While some studies conceptualize the different activities within public space management (i.e. regulation, investment, maintenance, and coordination) (Carmona and De Magalhaes 2006; de Magalhães and Carmona 2009), many noted that an integrative approach to the process of creation and management of public space is important but currently lacking (e.g. Dempsey, Smith, and Burton 2014; Duivenvoorden *et al*. 2021; Mattijssen *et al*. 2018; Brinkhuijsen *et al*. 2021). Therefore, this paper focuses on the procedural aspects of managing public space, such as governance and organizational aspects, as it aims to understand the barriers and obstacles managers encounter in the process of managing and maintaining public space.

2.2. Management of public space—Dutch context

In the Netherlands, public space as a meeting space for citizens was largely neglected from the 1950s until the 1980s. City centers of some large Dutch cities, such as

Rotterdam and Enschede were severely damaged by WWII bombings, while the spatial structure of other Dutch cities (e.g. Dordrecht and 's-Hertogenbosch) suffered from large-scale demolition activities in the 1960s. Many public spaces were transformed into large-scale traffic junctions, dominated by cars, trams, and buses, or turned into parking lots. As Hajer (1989) noted, public space (e.g. squares and streets) was only regarded as space that had to allow people to get from one point to another as quickly as possible. This transformation resulted in new planning processes, which were highly influenced by the modernist philosophy of the CIAM movement (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), believing social encounters should not take place in public space, but in adequate places like community centers (Jongepier 1988). In the Netherlands, this resulted in large clearances in the historic structure of cities, for example, the transformation of city squares in large cities, such as Amsterdam and Utrecht into parking spaces, rather than creating public spaces for social gatherings, leisure, and events (Brunt and Deben 2002). As a result, public spaces were typically void of public life and social activities, as at the time they were considered as being too spacious, uninviting, and insufficiently maintained (Hajer 1989).

Until the early 1980s, authorities showed little interest in urban public space in city centers, focusing instead on the poor economic performance and high unemployment rates in Dutch cities (Brunt and Deben 2002). Any attention directed to public space concerned residential neighborhoods in suburban areas. When the economy picked up, however, interest shifted to the quality of urban public space in city centers. This was first manifest in the "Fourth National Policy Document on Spatial Planning" (Vierde Nota Ruimtelijke Ordening) in 1988, resulting in an urban policy plan named "Healthy Core" (Kern Gezond) from 1989 aimed at upgrading most Dutch urban public space in city centers (Hajer 2001).

Historically in the Netherlands, the public sector has largely driven the delivery and management of public spaces (Lee and Scholten 2022; Lohof and Reijndorp 2006; Vigar 2009). Like most European countries, the Dutch nation-state has shifted many of its responsibilities either to provincial or local governments (Cullingworth and Nadin 2002; Healey *et al*. 1999), or to the private sector (Langstraat and Van Melik 2013; Van Melik, Van Aalst, and Van Weesep 2009). This started in the early 1980s with the adage "more market, less government," giving the private sector more room to participate in the design and development of public space (Lohof and Reijndorp 2006). This has not led, however, to the greater involvement of the private sector in the management of public space in the Netherlands. The involvement of the private sector appears to be limited to the creation of public space (i.e. redevelopment projects) (Lohof and Reijndorp 2006), while the public sector still largely drives the management of public space in the Netherlands (Hermans *et al*. 2019; Aardema *et al*. 2009). This is unlike in the US and the UK, where private enterprises are involved in the management of public space (de Magalhães and Carmona 2009; Zamanifard, Alizadeh, and Bosman 2018), or some Nordic countries, where co-creation of and participation in urban open and/or green space management is more common (Fongar *et al*. 2019; Jansson *et al*. 2019).

In the Netherlands, the creation and management of public space are considered two separate government tasks: *Urban development* including planning, design, and realization, and *Urban management* consisting of the management of public space (Brinkhuijsen *et al*. 2021). This approach could be indicated as a linear logic, by which projects are usually developed by the Urban development department in a

chronological, hierarchical way, from a plan set by authorities to a more detailed design, and eventually realized through construction. Thereafter it is transferred to the Urban management department as the end phase (Jansson *et al*. 2019). In most Dutch municipalities, the management of public space is organized under a single management department, with different teams working on a specific asset group (i.e. roads, green and trees, water, and lighting). Due to differences in lifespan (for example, roads have a longer lifespan than playgrounds or public lighting), the lifecycle management (e.g. budgeting and planning of renewal and replacement) may differ per element/asset. However, more complex public spaces consist of different types of assets that need to be managed together. Therefore, they are managed as a system, and their management is done across different asset groups. This means that the manager of, for example, the Maastunnel complex in Rotterdam deals not only with a traffic tunnel and roads but also manages the green space on top of the tunnel.

While an integral, dynamic process of creation, management, and involvement of different stakeholders is considered crucial for ensuring the functionality and quality of public space under a continuously changing context (see, e.g. Banerjee 2001; Dempsey and Burton 2012; Spijker and Parra 2018; Mattijssen *et al*. 2018), a shift towards this has not been fully achieved in the Netherlands (Duivenvoorden *et al*. 2021). To advance this shift, this paper explores how public space management deals with both short-term and long-term challenges that arise from existing governance and organization structures and larger societal challenges and transitions in the current approach.

3. Methodology

To understand how managers of public spaces deal with the short-term and long-term challenges affecting the quality and functionality of public spaces, we used a qualitative methodology based on interviews. To explore personal perceptions, experiences, and thoughts as well as explicit expert knowledge, the study used open-ended and semi-structured interview questions (Strauss and Corbin 1998) based on exploratory expert interviews. The interviews asked for (a) the involvement of respondents in managing public space; (b) a description of the process of managing public space according to the respondent; (c) the obstacles managers face in the use phase with regard to guaranteeing the functionality and quality of the public space; and (d) how they deal with these obstacles. For each question, in-depth follow-up questions were asked about the topics mentioned by the interviewees that were relevant to the purpose of this study. This allowed us to gather more in-depth data about important themes frequently mentioned by the respondents, and to gain a deeper understanding of the challenges managers deal with to ensure that public space can fulfill its function during its lifespan. While we did not explicitly frame any short- or long-term challenges in the interview questions, the interviewees addressed both in their answers. Specifically, respondents involved in the day-to-day management and maintenance of the existing public space (e.g. public space managers) mainly shared their experiences in dealing with short-term challenges (i.e. solving day-to-day problems). However, advisors and strategic managers who are involved with the long-term vision were concerned with barriers surrounding long-term challenges (e.g. climate adaptation and energy transition).

Interviews were conducted from June to December 2021 with a total of 17 respondents involved in the practice of managing public space in the Netherlands: 10

civil servants from four Dutch municipalities (i.e. Amsterdam, Rotterdam, The Hague, and Zoetermeer), one civil servant at the provincial level, one functionary of the national ministry, three consultants and two people associated with knowledge and educational institutes. Civil servants from these four municipalities were selected based on access to the research team. As this research focuses on the management of public space, mainly public space managers, some planners, and no designers were interviewed. The interviewees have different roles within their organization in relation to the management of public space (see Table 1). We chose to interview different institutions and stakeholders involved in the practice of managing public space in the Netherlands. This is to represent different perspectives and eventually obtain a comprehensive overview of challenges on diverse levels. We selected respondents who are involved with the management of public space. Most of the interviewees who participated in this study manage "grey" public spaces (e.g. roads, squares, bridges, traffic tunnels), and only a minority are involved in the management of "green" public spaces (e.g. parks). Although a few respondents (5) manage one specific type of asset (e.g. roads/tunnels, green), the majority manage public space as a system of different types of assets. This reflects the way public space management is organized in the Netherlands and more specifically the relative importance (in terms of budgeting, staffing, etc.) of the respective sections within the urban management department. All interviews were held in Dutch, transcribed, and translated into English. Transcriptions were progressively coded to build an initial list of themes and codes for analyzing the data. This step enabled us to cease data collection when it turned out that after around 17 interviews, the point had been reached where no new information was discovered in the data analysis. The coding process followed the approach of open, axial, and selective coding. Through open coding, these were derived from the respondents' answers, giving meaning to the answers. Overarching categories within answers were then detected using axial coding. Finally, relations between concepts and answers were found by exploring how different codes and categories were interrelated (selective coding) enabling, themes and codes to emerge from the data rather than being taken from theory or previous research (Charmaz 2006; Gioia, Corley, and Hamilton 2013). During the process, we iteratively moved back and forth between open and axial coding several times (Boeije 2014; Strauss and Corbin 1998). Doing so, thematic data analysis allowed us to identify emerging and overlapping issues surrounding public space management.

The in-depth analysis of the data revealed three hierarchically interconnected levels in which the obstacles can be situated: governance system, organizational level, and tactical level. To this end, the authors have attempted to establish a pragmatic link between these interpretations and general concepts from both practice and theory.

- *Governance structure* relates to how a network of actors governs (Pierre 2005; Rhodes 2007). Urban governance is defined as the processes of control, coordination, and regulation of urban affairs. Directing urban society towards collectively defined goals is strongly linked to the power structure in a political system and reflects the overarching values and practices of society (Pierre 2005). Traditionally, the ownership of public space is vested in the government (Carmona and De Magalhaes 2006). Therefore, developing and maintaining public space is associated with the public sector and local governments.

Table 1. Overview of interviewees.

Id. Code	Role	Years in post	Institution	Tasks and involvement with managing public space
A01-M	Manager public space	≥10	Municipality	Coordination of activities and developments of public space in districts
A02-M	Manager public space	≤5	Ministry of infrastructure and water	Coordination of plans for activities and developments of roads in use
A03-A	Advisor public space	≥5	Municipality	Advising management of public roads and parks at a strategic level
A04-B	Business controller	≤5	Municipality	Monitoring, and controlling financial matters of managing public space
A05-A	Advisor public space	≥10	Private consultancy	Advising organizations in the implementation of maintenance plans
A06-M	Manager public space	≥5	Municipality	Managing and maintaining civil constructions like bridges, tunnels
A07-A	Advisor/planner public space	≥5	Municipality	Monitoring technical and visual quality in public space at city level
A08-M	Manager public space	≥5	Municipality	Managing and maintaining greenery and parks
A09-AsM	Advisor asset management	≥5	Municipality	Advising, implementing, and coordinating asset management methods
A10-AsM	Asset manager	≥5	Municipality	Managing assets by implementing asset management plans
A11-M	Manager public space	≥5	The provincial department of public works	Managing and maintaining infrastructure, such as roads, highways
A12-S	Student asset management	≤5	University of applied science	Student university of applied science: minor asset management
A13-SA	Strategic advisor public space	≥10	Municipality	Advising, and implementing asset management methods
A14-SA*	Strategic advisor public space	≥10	Private consultancy	Advising organizations managing and maintaining public spaces
A15-SA*	Strategic advisor public space	≥5	Municipality	Advising city authorities about managing public space
A16-A*	Advisor public space	≥10	Private consultancy	Advising the city about managing public space at the strategic level
A17-L*	Lecturer asset management	≥5	University of applied science	Programming minor asset management, university of applied science

*Respondents A14–A17 were interviewed in two rounds. The first round was based on interview questions. The second round was held in de form of "in-depth sessions," to clarify their vision and to identify some important issues, such as a diverse challenge.

- *Organizational level:* refers to a goal-oriented combination of knowledge, skills, and strength of a group of people pursuing a goal together (Boella and van der Torre 2006). Referring to urban governance goals, a public space management organization would best be understood under both sociological and managerial definitions. In sociology, "organization" is understood as the planned, coordinated, and purposeful action of people to build or assemble a common material or intangible product or service. This action is usually determined by formal membership and form (institutional rules). Management is mainly interested in the organization from an instrumental point of view (Hanisch and Wald 2011).
- *Tactical level* comprises plans and steps that enable the organization to achieve long-term objectives by choosing from the possible paths and resources (Poister and Streib 1999). It is a professional level that includes planners who can translate the decisions made at the strategic level to appropriate feasible targets at the operational level. Activities at the tactical level include risk management, regular meetings, conflict resolution, and problem-solving.

4. Results

The analysis shows that the relationship and interactions between various levels can influence the effectiveness of public space management. On the one hand, the governance system determines the organizational and tactical levels. On the other hand, the tactical level is crucial for the successful management of the public space to guarantee its quality and functionality. The results below outline how understanding the interrelationships between the identified levels provides insight into the dynamics underlying the obstacles faced by public space managers. Based on the data analysis, common characteristics of the current practice of managing public space could be grouped into the following categories: (1) *the sectoral division between design and management*; as a product of decisions made at the governance level regarding the achievement of collective goals through directing, controlling and supervising organization, (2) *conflict-and-action approach*, policy-oriented coordination of actions at the organizational level regarding problem-solving, accountability and reporting, (3) *asset-based focus*, plans and directions at a tactical level to support organizational accountability, and (4) *linear approach*, ability or limitation to make choices for the best tactics or methods for each situation that arises.

4.1. Governance system: sectoral division between design and management

Respondents indicate the governance structure (e.g. power, the way it is distributed, authority) as the most influential component that affects the entire process of public space management. In their opinion, in the current "governance structure" power is fully concentrated in the public sector. In their view, the (political) choice to gain greater insight and control over financial resources through a sectoral model, has resulted in the process of creation and management of public space being organized separately. Respondents employed by a municipal organization referred to two separate functioning departments; *urban development* and *urban management*, described below:

- *Urban development* is responsible for the planning, design, and implementation of a plan in the public space, and has its own organizational, management, and

financial structure, with its reporting and accountability line for governance. Urban development's tasks begin by translating aspirations and needs into ideas and plans for creating or redeveloping public spaces, and end once a plan has been implemented.

- *Urban management* is responsible for the public space during the period of use (use phase), including interim reconstruction, *and* has its own organizational, management, and financial structure, with its reporting and accountability line for the governance. Urban management tasks begin when new assets are transferred to managers at the start of the use phase. Managers maintain assets, coordinate, and regulate the use of assets, and renew, refurbish, or replace assets as needed (e.g., due to aging, changes in the environment, and changing demands for public space).

Respondents believe that the sectoral division works effectively as long as the public space does not require significant adaptation (changes in the environment). However, the current situation has also led to a complex discipline-based accounting system within the governance system.

> That split between urban development and urban management was perhaps a logical choice 20 years ago. But in the current complex situation, many ambitions e.g., biodiversity, energy transition, and sustainability extend across departments. (A17-L)

The general response is that the divided financing and accountability structure has created two sector-based worlds in public space: the world of the designer and the world of the manager of public space, resulting in a sector-oriented structure, which in most cases has led to a lack of striving for common interests.

> … so, the separation in the creation phase and use phase determines the mechanism of choices and powers per phase. It ensures that people think in their interests. You read the common interest on the policy document, but in practice, everyone is forced to think of their world and their interests (A09-AsM)

Respondents mentioned a sectoral division as an important reason for the lack of interaction and collaboration between designer and manager. Based on their experiences, the results of this include: (1) due to a lack of involvement of designers in the use phase, the manager of public space has to postpone sustainable solutions for unexpected problems that arise due to changes during the period of use; and (2) due to a lack of involvement of public space managers in the creation phase, the planner is not aware of changes public spaces have undergone during the use phase. As a result, plans do not match the existing situation. This has led to discussions about the necessary costs to retrofit new designs within the existing spaces. As an example, a respondent mentioned that, in one case, during the design phase, the designer did not coordinate the spatial requirements for the installation of new pipes for sustainable energy with the manager of the subsurface. Only in the realization phase, conflicts with existing pipes (e.g. sewerage) become clear. This led to two options: relocating the existing pipes or adjusting the design. Both options included additional costs and time (for the manager in the first option, and for the designer in the second) that neither the designer nor the manager foresaw.

Based on the experiences of interviewees, the separation between creation and management hinders the interaction and collaboration between the designer and the manager of the public space. As one respondent mentioned, feasibility and impact analysis are lacking before implementing a plan.

> The process of creating and managing public space is complex and contains multiple dimensions: such as system dimension, organization dimension, and time dimension. You must bring all those dimensions together. This is never possible without an integrated approach that starts with an analysis and feasibility study and ends with evaluation and improvements. (A17-L)

In the respondents' view, based on the current sector-driven governance model, it is hard to deal with the major challenges public spaces face in their use period. They believe that breaking through the current separation between two sub-processes is a structural issue that goes beyond the manager's authority and should be discussed at the governance level.

4.2. Organizational level: conflict-and-action approach

Most respondents describe the current organization of managing public space as a "conflict-and-action approach." "Conflict" is a local terminology in the workspace, to indicate a disruption in the functionality of assets, either due to a problem within the system or an external influence (e.g. climate), which leads to problems in the functioning of assets. The respondents agree that ensuring the functionality of the public space by preventing or resolving daily problems caused by such conflicts is the responsibility of the manager. However, they argue that the current organizational structure hinders a long-term vision. As described by an advisor, action-oriented organizing has created a paradox in the world of the management of public space.

> We say 'public space management is for the long term,' but most managers are not long term at all. They are responsible for solving day-to-day problems and that is something the manager is expected to do first. (A05-A)

Furthermore, respondents argue that the conflict-and-action approach limits the action field of the manager to operational tasks. As a result, the manager lacks the knowledge and time to approach the management process in a long-term tactical-analytical way.

> The challenge is that we are concerned with the here and now and not with what we have done in the past. We do not even know those experiences anymore. (A06-M)

Although several changes in the organizational structure have been experienced over the years, especially experienced respondents (>5 years in post) mentioned that despite the introduction of new organizational models, a significant part of the intended changes is not realized. A strategic advisor put it as follows:

> I have experienced several organizational changes. The so-called secretarial model, sector model, and management model. All with good intentions such as combating fragmentation [in local policy], increasing the quality of the service, and increasing

> flexibility and efficiency. But in practice, I say that many municipalities still have a multi-headed organization and management structure. (A15-SA)

Most respondents wondered whether, with the short-term focus of the current conflict-and-action approach, it is possible to tackle the major challenges public spaces are facing. They believe that both organizational objectives and ongoing long-term challenges they face in practice (as the respondents mentioned: climate adaptation, circular economy, and energy transition) require a long-term vision.

> Each discipline has its importance and its truth and believes in its own truth (…). Tackling major social challenges and common objectives, we are not actively involved with. We often have no time and no resources for adaptation. Those fancy terms climate-proof, etc. are not yet properly secured. (A01-M)

According to some interviewees, joint management staff or an overarching task force is needed to ensure that activities and resources required to achieve common objectives are arranged based on a long-term and integrative strategy.

4.3. Tactical level: asset-based focus

Respondents see the tactical level as the most essential element to plan and implement activities. The interviews showed that most management organizations do have plans and visions that serve as an important starting point for pursuing organizational goals. The interviewees state that in Dutch practice, public space management is organized based on knowledge and expertise on specific assets resulting in different disciplines, such as Roads, Parks, Green, and Sewerage. According to participants, due to this asset-based approach, the knowledge and contribution of the manager are limited to maintaining the specific discipline. They believe this approach has led to a limited view of the manager on the broad values of public space. For example, managers feel responsible for the functionality of assets (e.g. culverts and bridges) rather than the role of a water system in a livable environment.

> Our public space is full of diverse economic, social, and human values such as sustainability, quality of life, participation, and diverse interests of stakeholders. You cannot contribute to all those values with only actions aimed to secure the availability and safety of physical assets. It is time to approach the entire public space as a system, not as separate objects. (A13-SA)

However, respondents involved at a strategic level, believe that common goals can be achieved mainly by upgrading the existing public space, which requires a broad long-term vision, based on the current circumstances. They indicated that the public space in use can be affected by various changes and therefore needs to be redeveloped/renovated. They see the redevelopment of the existing public space as part of the process of management and maintenance that must be addressed together with the designer. One respondent (A09-AsM) emphasizes the importance of today's modern public space and advocates a different approach to redesigning existing public space than the current separate process of creating and using public space.

> Looking back, in the past 20 years, most of the money has gone into maintaining and upgrading the existing assets, and few new assets were added to the public spaces of our city. So, the old thought: "the planner identifies the needs for the development of public spaces" is not the case nowadays. Isn't this something that needs to be worked on? (A09-AsM)

4.4. Tactical level: linear approach

The respondents argue that putting the management of public space as a separate "end-phase" of a linear process has ensured that, in most cases, management is limited to the conservation of existing assets. This means that it is not possible to reconsider design choices as problems arise in the use phase, so often sub-optimal ad hoc solutions are used. This has led managers to follow what they have been told, go straight to action, and to not question, for example, the financial consequences. In many cases, this means incurring extra costs for realizing ambitions that were not included or foreseen in the initial plan, on which the management budget is based.

> Funnily enough, we solve all daily problems, we embrace all ambitions and promise to make our contribution. But we do not indicate how and from which financial pot. Is it too soft or following "Yes-nodding behavior"? (A03-A)

During interviews, a kind of frustration was observed among some respondents that this has led some managers to adopt what respondent A16-A called "Calimero behavior[1]"; they feel like an underdog. According to them, this is not only contempt for the image and importance of the management of public space, but it is also detrimental to long-term sustainable management and maintenance strategy.

> The manager of public space must act professional and not always react from just preserving existing assets, but should come into thinking mode so that he/she is taken seriously. Otherwise, we will continue to maintain what has already been devised. That is how you make your world small. Maybe like architects and project managers, we should come in with suits and laptops too. (A16-A)

Most respondents believe that this situation has meant that the manager is not able to emphasize the importance of management and maintenance to create understanding and attention among decision-makers and/or city authorities.

> The link from managing public space to politics is quite weak. There are few people who speak the language of politics and explain the importance of managing public space. What is now being communicated is about the condition of existing objects. What is good and where are we at risk? Maybe we should add extra dimensions in the way of reporting. An extra section on challenges and uncertainties. (A05-A)

According to respondents, it is since both citizens and government are interested in something new, leading to the lack of attention to the importance of functioning public spaces for residents as well as the role of managers of public spaces in providing feedback to planning practice about the actual needs and preferences.

> Once a project has been completed and the new asset has been transferred to the manager of public space (and put into use), there is a significant decrease in attention

> and awareness that the asset must be maintained in a sustainable and responsible manner for a very long period. (A01-M)

5. Discussion

Based on in depth-analysis of interviews with public space managers in the Netherlands, we identified four common characteristics of public space management that together form obstacles in the face of long-term challenges: (1) the sectoral division between design and management, (2) conflict-and-action approach, (3) asset-based focus and (4) linear approach.

Many of the challenges identified can be related back to how Dutch municipalities have organized themselves to provide better service, efficiency, effectiveness, and policy implementation, typically captured in three models: the secretary model, the sector model, and the management model. The "sector model" is an efficiency and results-oriented approach to government characterized by its large degree of decentralization of powers and responsibilities and organizational fragmentation (Aardema *et al*. 2009; Hermans *et al*. 2019). This model was a reaction to the traditional, hierarchical, and bureaucratic administration, in the Netherlands known as the "secretary model" that dominated the Netherlands until the 1980s (Gruening 2001). The sector model is in line with New Public Management (NPM) (Alford and Hughes 2008), resulting in policy decentralization and organizational fragmentation. The central assumption is that the decentralized efficiency and results-oriented sector model would improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations to reduce the deficit and public debt (Alford and Hughes 2008). As a reaction to the sector model, the "management model," also known as Post New Public Management, was introduced around the 2000s, focusing on increased coordination across public organizations and other actors based on a holistic management style, boundary-spanning skills, and joined-up targets to address complex issues and challenges (Gruening 2001; Hermans *et al*. 2019). It reflects an outward-focused public sector as a hybrid and layered organization and introduces citizen participation to address complex issues and challenges. The identified characteristics and obstacles reflect the organizational fragmentation of the sector model. Indeed, for most Dutch municipalities, the sector model is still dominant (Hermans *et al*. 2019), resulting in fragmented municipal services.

These Dutch municipal organization models resemble the four governance structure arrangements described by Zamanifard, Alizadeh, and Bosman (2018) in the context of public space governance: traditional governance, managerial governance, market-based governance, and governance through networks. There are similarities between traditional governance and the Dutch secretary model (e.g. hierarchical bureaucratic administration), managerial governance and the Dutch sector model (e.g. decentralization of responsibilities), or governance through networks and the Dutch management model (e.g. involvement of different stakeholders including the private sector). However, while the involvement of private and voluntary sectors in managing green space is becoming increasingly important in some countries (Fongar *et al*. 2019; Jansson *et al*. 2019), our respondents did not report on any challenges related to private sector involvement, confirming the absence of a market-based governance model, as discussed above, in the Netherlands.

This finding cast some doubt on the assumption that the sector model (e.g. decentralization of responsibilities) would improve both the efficiency and effectiveness of public organizations. While the sectoral division has a positive effect on efficiency and

effectiveness in the short term (e.g. transparency in accountability and reporting procedures), the respondents mention additional costs for retrofitting ad-hoc solutions and delaying long-term solutions to problems that arise in the use phase. Efficiently tackling both short-term everyday challenges and long-term challenges (e.g. climate adaptation or energy transition) requires an analysis of the impact of these challenges on the existing public space before the project enters the development phase, to devise sustainable solutions. This study has shown that placing the management of public space as a separate "end-phase" in a linear process hinders the constructive and interactive processes noted as important prerequisites for creating common ground for tackling complex societal problems (Buijs *et al*. 2019; Jansson *et al*. 2019; Nokes-Malach, Meade, and Morrow 2012). This study shows that the decentralized model characterized by its fragmented departments promotes short-term solutions, which induce more nuisance for the user and lower cost-efficiency, because of repeated construction works for these suboptimal, temporary, or ad-hoc solutions. Instead, joint analysis of feasible and integrated solutions could lead to sustainable and cost-efficient answers to complex long-term challenges. This is in line with what Dempsey, Smith, and Burton (2014, 17) state: "ideally a two-way inter-dependent relationship between the two where place-keeping is considered from the outset as integral to place-making." Duivenvoorden *et al*. (2021) and Randrup *et al*. (2021) argue that an integral and strategic vision for the creation and management of public space could increase the effectiveness of public space management. However, as Duivenvoorden *et al*. (2021) note, integration of management does not only entail substantive challenges; it also requires integrating procedures requiring a different governance scheme to realize e.g. joint knowledge, aligned policies and synergies, and specific involvement and participation of different actors in decision-making. The question, however, remains which level of integration is needed. While higher levels of integration might seem appealing, "the merit of lower degrees of integration should not be underestimated, as these may sometimes be the most feasible or appropriate for the governance of a cross-cutting problem" (Candel and Biesbroek 2016, 211).

This study is based on data obtained from four Dutch cities with varying characteristics. It has produced contextual knowledge that can advance the discussion on making the management of public space more future proof. However, the findings may also be relevant for other countries, especially in countries with a strong government-led, sector-driven, top-down, and linear urban planning tradition, such as the Netherlands (De Roo, Hillier, and Van Wezemael 2016; Healey *et al*. 1999; Priemus 2002; Vigar 2009).

This paper contributed to the recent focus on the management of public space in academic debate (Carmona 2019; Dempsey and Burton 2012; Duivenvoorden *et al*. 2021), and more specifically the relatively understudied procedural aspects (Aly and Dimitrijevic 2022; Buijs *et al*. 2019), by contributing insights into the obstacles in the process of public space management in the Netherlands based on empirical evidence. With its broad focus on various typologies of public space (e.g. parks, roads, water, bridges, tunnels, and public lighting) this study extends the insights from empirical studies focused on specific domains of public space (Aly and Dimitrijevic 2022; Buijs *et al*. 2019; Fongar *et al*. 2019; Jansson *et al*. 2019).

6. Conclusion

This study aimed to explore the obstacles Dutch public space managers face in dealing with the daily practice of managing public space. Based on in depth-analysis of

interviews with public space managers in the Netherlands, we identified four common characteristics of public space management: (1) the sectoral division between design and management, (2) conflict-and-action approach, (3) asset-based focus and (4) linear approach. These challenges were traced back to three diverse levels of public space management practice: the governance structure (1), the organizational level (2), and the tactical level (3 and 4).

These characteristics together form obstacles in the face of long-term challenges. The linear process (4) and the sectoral division between design and management (1) do not allow for a feasibility-and-impact analysis before a plan undergoes implementation. However, considering long-term maintenance, also in the design phase, it is crucial to allow for adaptation along the way. The conflict-and-action approach (2) and asset-based focus (3) mean that public space management is primarily focused on avoiding disruptions and reducing conflicts. While this allows for transparency in accountability and reporting procedures, it also leads to a short-term perspective and limits managers' role in solving daily problems by maintenance, regulation, and coordination of the physical elements of public space. The respondents indicated that under current, and especially expected future circumstances, the current sectoral governance model will not be able to ensure the functionality and quality of public space in the face of short- and long-term challenges.

The results of this study indicate that a post-NPM approach to municipal organization, such as the Dutch management model, might be more appropriate to manage public space in the context of long-term challenges. Adopting such a model should lead to changes in both the governance model and the process approach to the creation and management of public space. Establishing a holistic management style, which focuses on interaction and coordination between two public departments (design and management) as well as the pursuit of joined-up targets ensures an effective and future-proof public space.

However, in the absence of a municipal-wide reorganization, adjustments within the existing sector model could also be formulated to counter the obstacles identified by the interviewees. While not providing cut-and-dried solutions, the findings point towards the need for an approach that (1) fosters collaboration between designers, planners, and managers; (2) enables strategic decision making; (3) supports a more comprehensive understanding of what needs to be managed; and (4) considers management aspects from the start of the design process, while allowing for adaptation along the way. Further research should analyze and test what changes in governance, organizational and tactical structures are needed to tackle the obstacles experienced by public space managers. Furthermore, as this study focused only on public space managers, it would be interesting to also study the practice of public space design and planning. Understanding the perceptions and experiences of designers and planners could provide useful insights into the obstacles encountered in the design and planning phase and to what degree this matches the needs of managers. In addition, since most of the respondents are concerned with the management of the public space of four Dutch cities, the results of this study may have been influenced by the relative emphasis on the accessibility of the city, i.e. on gray elements, such as roads and bridges. It is therefore interesting to assess the results of this study in suburban areas to explore which challenges the management of public space faces, where green and blue elements, such as forestry, biodiversity, or recreation, are considered more important.

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Note

1. This refers to an old cartoon that aired on Dutch television. The main character "Calimero" frequently complains about being unfairly treated by others.

ORCID

Barbara Tempels http://orcid.org/0000-0002-0017-9341

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