

LINKING URBAN PUBLIC SPACES AND CULTURAL INSTITUTIONS TO QUALITY OF LIFE

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This study examines four public squares in Maribor–Grajski trg, Trg Generala Maistra, Trg Leona Štuklja, and Židovski trg—across seven dimensions: physical structure, aesthetics, functionality, comfort and safety, utilisation, atmosphere, and accessibility. Results suggest that Grajski trg and Židovski trg carry historical value and symbolic meanings, yet their infrastructure and safety features could be improved. Trg Generala Maistra is a transitional area of social and symbolic significance, but it lacks vibrancy, while Trg Leona Štuklja is the most socially inclusive and dynamic square. The findings highlight that public space quality is not merely a physical design function but also a function of social use and subjective perception. Combining cultural institutions with city squares helps activate the spaces and make them more responsive to citizens. This approach to addressing the quality of urban spaces contributes to long-term urban sustainability, social inclusivity, and overall quality of life.

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POVEZOVANJE JAVNIH URBANIH PROSTOROV IN KULTURNIH INSTITUCIJ S KAKOVOSTJO ŽIVLJENJA

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Ključne besede:
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Študija preučuje štiri javne trge v Mariboru – Grajski trg, Trg generala Maistra, Trg Leona Štuklja in Židovski trg – skozi sedem razsežnosti: fizično strukturo, estetiko, funkcionalnost, udobje in varnost, rabo, atmosfero ter dostopnost. Rezultati kažejo, da imata Grajski in Židovski trg zgodovinsko vrednost in simbolni pomen, vendar bi bilo njuno infrastrukturo in varnostne vidike treba izboljšati. Trg generala Maistra je prehodno območje s socialnim in simbolnim pomenom, vendar mu primanjkuje živahnosti, medtem ko je Trg Leona Štuklja najbolj socialno vključujoč in dinamičen trg. Ugotovitve poudarjajo, da kakovost javnega prostora ni zgolj funkcija fizičnega oblikovanja, temveč tudi družbene rabe in subjektivnega zaznavanja. Povezovanje kulturnih institucij z mestnimi trgi pomaga aktivirati prostore in jih narediti bolj odzivne na potrebe prebivalcev. Takšen pristop k obravnavi kakovosti urbanih prostorov prispeva k dolgoročni urbani trajnosti, socialni vključenosti in splošni kakovosti življenja.



Univerzitetna založba
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1 Introduction: Dimensions of the quality and functioning of public spaces

This report builds on the analytical framework developed collectively during the Summer School research activity, which guided the evaluation of selected urban public spaces in Maribor.

The framework provided a structured lens for observing spatial configuration, public usage, and perceived qualities of the squares, allowing for consistent comparison across locations. It encompassed the following dimensions: 1) Physical and Structural Aspects, 2) Aesthetic Quality and Design, 3) Functionality and Activities, 4) Comfort and Safety, 5) Utilisation by People, 6) Atmosphere and Subjective Experience, and 7) Accessibility and Inclusiveness. Rather than relying on predefined literature models, the analysis emphasises site-based interpretation rooted in observed patterns of interaction, accessibility, and urban character. It was, however, guided by existing knowledge on the role of high-quality public spaces in stimulating the social, cultural, and economic life of cities (Gehl, 2010; UN-Habitat, 2015, 2020; Carmona, 2019).

Physical and structural aspects include the size and shape of the space, its connections to main streets and entrances, accessibility for various modes of transportation, the functions of surrounding buildings, and the presence of historic landmarks. Aesthetic qualities and design relate to greenery, seating, interactive features, surface materials, lighting, signage, the scale of the built environment, and the harmony of design with local heritage and identity.

Functionality and activities are reflected in everyday uses such as walking, playing, eating, resting, or working, supported by nearby services, designated spaces for children, sports, and cultural events, as well as digital infrastructure like Wi-Fi. Comfort and safety depend on shade and weather protection, cleanliness, traffic safety, lighting, security, accessible surfaces, toilets, and drinking fountains. Use by people can be observed in the number and types of users, the duration of stays, and patterns of movement and flow.

Atmosphere and subjective experience involve sensory impressions such as noise, smell, and visual appeal, alongside perceptions of safety, hospitality, repair, crowdedness, and commercialisation; public art also enriches this dimension.

Finally, accessibility and inclusiveness concern the ease of access for people with disabilities, bicycle and public transport connections, and the openness of the square to all social and cultural groups.

In this context, cultural institutions and heritage sites situated near public spaces can play significant roles, not only by providing an attractive backdrop for everyday activities, but also by actively engaging with these spaces. Their involvement may include offering street furniture and design elements related to their profile, providing educational boards that communicate history and local heritage, and organising events that enliven and stimulate the use of public space. In doing so, they extend the functions they already perform within their buildings—strengthening social capital, fostering local identity, and enhancing place attachment (Murzyn-Kupisz & Dzialek, 2013).

2 Research methods

2.1 Research area

Four urban squares in the historic centre of Maribor—Grajski trg, Trg Generala Maistra, Trg Leona Štuklja, and Židovski trg—were selected for assessment of public space quality according to the framework (Fig. 1). They were chosen from among the relatively large number of squares in the city centre, representing smaller yet diverse spaces that could be studied within a limited time period. Consequently, the largest and best-known public spaces of Maribor, such as Lent, Glavni trg, and Slomškov trg, were not included. Nonetheless, Grajski trg is among the city's most recognisable tourist places, while the other three are located farther from the most common tourist routes (Horvat & Stubičar, 2021).

Grajski trg is a small historic square beside Maribor Castle, paved with cobblestones and almost devoid of vegetation. It primarily serves as a passageway for locals and visitors, featuring a large restaurant and café terraces, but it offers limited publicly available seating. Trg Generala Maistra lies on the opposite side of the castle, surrounded mostly by public institutions and historic buildings. Most of its area is arranged as a park, with a smaller western section paved, and it serves a symbolic role through monuments dedicated to important Slovenian personalities.

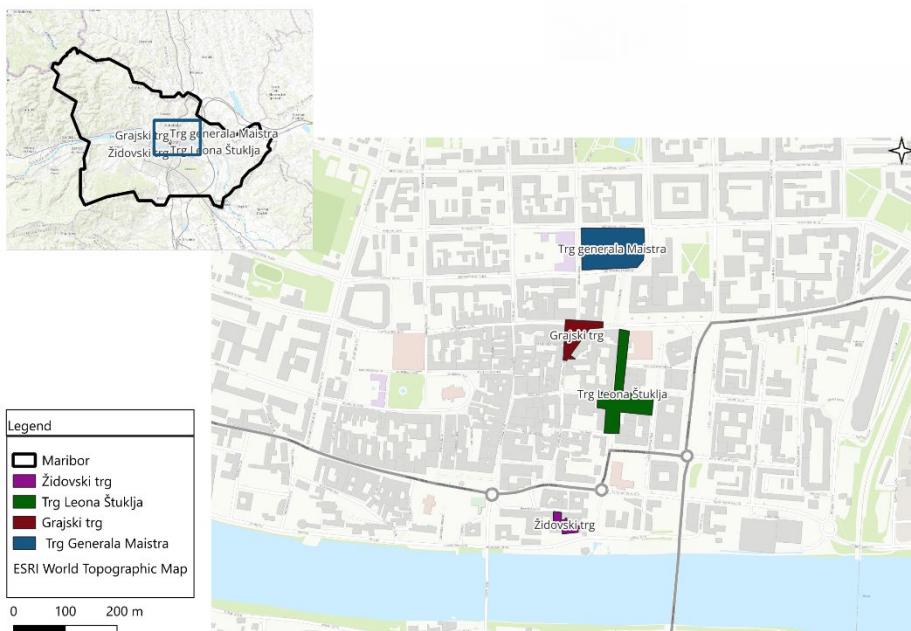


Figure 1: The four analysed public spaces in Maribor

Author: Elmedina Jashari, 2025. Map source: ESRI World Topographic Map (digitalized and processed in QGIS)

Trg Leona Štuklja is a much larger space, framed by modern buildings, which frequently hosts urban and cultural events. It is flanked by cafés and shops and offers a relatively high number of trees, benches, and other interesting design elements. Finally, Židovski trg is a much smaller, quieter, and more peripheral square with historical significance, located in the old Jewish quarter. Today, it has undergone a transformation and features a creative quarter, housing several cultural institutions.

2.2 Research design

Field research examined the features and use of four central squares in Maribor through direct observation at different times of day and week (morning, afternoon, and evening; weekdays and weekends) (UN-Habitat, 2020). The assessment was guided by a framework encompassing seven dimensions of public spaces. During the observations, notes were taken, photos and videos were captured, and sketches

and maps of existing features and uses were produced. This approach provided an overview of the squares' accessibility, inclusiveness, ambience, and the ways in which history, aesthetics, and contemporary needs are accommodated.

3 Results

The study of four selected public squares in Maribor—Grajski trg, Trg Generala Maistra, Trg Leona Štuklja, and Židovski trg—revealed their distinct yet complementary functions within the urban fabric (Table 1).

Grajski trg primarily serves a commercial purpose, with restaurants and shops dominating the space. It also functions as a passage area, connecting people to other parts of the city. Trg Generala Maistra is characterised as a meeting and relaxation spot, where social interaction and greenery play a crucial role. Trg Leona Štuklja is designed as an event space, hosting festivals and larger gatherings, while Židovski trg remains a smaller and more symbolic square with a tranquil atmosphere.

The user profiles differ between squares. Grajski trg is visited by a diverse range of people, including many tourists, and remains lively throughout the day and into the evening. Trg Generala Maistra attracts mainly young people, especially in the afternoons and evenings, while mornings remain less frequented. Trg Leona Štuklja experiences fluctuating use – relatively calm most of the time, but heavily populated during events. In contrast, Židovski trg offers a quieter experience and is particularly appealing to younger visitors seeking calm spaces.

Each square offers unique elements that enhance its character: Grajski trg features historical panels (though their placement could be improved), Trg Generala Maistra boasts greenery that supports relaxation, Trg Leona Štuklja offers a safe, car-restricted open space, and Židovski trg is enriched by street art and modern art galleries.

Individually, the squares fulfil only selected functions, yet their proximity ensures complementarity. Together, they create a diverse network of commercial, cultural, social, and contemplative spaces in the city centre.

Table 1: Comparative assessment of four public spaces in Maribor across seven dimensions of public space quality

| Dimensions | Trg Generala Maistra | Grajski trg | Trg Leona Štuklja | Židovski trg |
|---|---|--|---|---|
| Physical & Structural Aspects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Rectangular spaces - Park and greenery - Surrounded by car roads and historic buildings - Very open | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Historic square in front of Maribor Castle - Small, narrow, triangular square - Tourist-oriented and surrounded by shops and services - Close to the train station and main road | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Second to third largest square in Maribor (~9,000 m²) - Rectangular public space - Surrounded by modern buildings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Small, intimate square near the Drava River - Framed by old town alleys - Historic charm and small buildings |
| Aesthetic Quality & Design | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paved, limited greenery, a lot of trees - Leisure function - Seating opportunities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Paved - Renaissance, and Baroque facades - Some seating - Strong presence of the castle - Some cafés | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Modern design (2000s) - Large, paved surface - Minimal greenery - Monumental feel - Narrowing view due to high buildings | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cobblestones - Historic buildings - Only one tree and no greenery - Very atmospheric and “old town” characteristics |
| Functionality & Activities | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Meeting point at the start of the old town - Transition between the city centre and the Mestni park | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Transitional space and can be seen as the second “Glavni trg” (main square), i.e., as the second central place in Maribor - Gastronomy, tourism (Castle Museum) - Small events and markets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Main venue for large-scale events (concerts, festivals, political gatherings, sports screenings) - Cafés and restaurants surrounding it | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intimate meeting place - Only popular for sitting in quiet surroundings - Small cultural activities (historic and art tours) - Niche and alternative uses - Alternative, artisan, and artsy |
| Comfort & Safety | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Near traffic, therefore noisy at the edge of the park - Enough shaded areas - Partly illuminated at night; mostly safe but functional - Missing public toilets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pleasant, sheltered from wind due to enclosed form - Little shade and hot in the summer; shade only in cafés - Seating is available, but not sufficient - Safe and tourist-friendly - Missing public toilets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very open and little shade, hot in summer - Light at night, but the lights are installed very high - Provides a feeling of safety, but can also feel “empty” during the day as well as at night - Missing public toilets | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Pleasant, quiet - Shade from one huge tree, but other parts of the space do not have shade - Limited infrastructure (e.g. toilets missing) |
| Utilisation by People | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mixed users - Many inhabitants for meetings - Passers-by, commuters - Tourists and short stays | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mostly tourists - Museum visitors - Café guests - Families in summer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Used by all age groups - Very crowded during events - Otherwise often empty - Young people and tourists | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Mostly locals - Alternative groups - Small events - Alternative groups - Longer, more relaxed stays. |
| Atmosphere & Subjective Experience | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Busy (as a meeting point) - Meeting/sitting, but also a transitional character - Stay quality | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Historical - Atmospheric - Culturally interesting - Lively in summer | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Monumental, spacious, but sometimes unwelcoming - Strongly “urban” | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intimate, charming - Historical - Mixed quality of stay |
| Accessibility & Inclusiveness | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Good public transport connection (close to the train station) - Barrier-free - Bicycle access | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Central, walkable, barrier-free - Tourist-oriented signage | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very well connected - Barrier-free - Suitable for large events - Digital services are possible | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Slightly hidden - Less signage - Mostly barrier-free, but cobblestones limit wheelchair access |

Notes: Colours denote the quality of public spaces: darkest blue – high quality; dark blue – above-average quality; light blue – below-average quality; and the lightest blue – low quality.

Source: own elaboration.

4 Recommendations and conclusions

To strengthen the usability and inclusivity of the squares, several improvements are suggested. Grajski trg would benefit from additional shading elements, while the unused corners of Trg Generala Maistra could be activated through interactive features for young people, such as outdoor games. Trg Leona Štuklja could be enhanced with facilities that make it more attractive outside of major events, and Židovski trg could reinforce its cultural identity by further developing street art in its passageway. The wider presence of cultural institutions in urban public spaces appears to be an untapped potential. More generally, all squares would profit from better lighting to improve safety, the installation of drinking fountains (including for pets), accessible Wi-Fi, benches with charging points, mist cooling systems for hot days, additional greenery and as well as the provision of accessible and free public toilets, which are currently absent but essential for comfort.

The main limitation of this study was time, which restricted the methods employed to direct observation only. Incorporating additional approaches such as surveys, interviews, or questionnaires could provide deeper insights into user perceptions, preferences, and needs (UN-Habitat, 2020).

The four squares of Maribor demonstrate the richness and diversity of urban public spaces, which, while functioning differently, collectively form an interconnected network. Their complementary character underscores the importance of variety in urban design, ensuring that public spaces cater to multiple social groups and serve various purposes within the city.

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