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Sustaining Care-Full Public Spaces

Miriam Williams  | Justine Lloyd | Harriet Narwal | Donna Houston | Nerida Carter | Kate Lloyd | Bronwyn Rennex

School of Communications, Society and Culture, Macquarie University, Sydney, Australia

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ABSTRACT

This paper develops a multidimensional framework for sustaining care-full public spaces. We open by engaging with key understandings of the affective and relational dimensions of both public spaces and urban care scholarship. We then set out the elements of a framework for conceptualising the possibility of care-full public spaces. Writing from feminist and decolonial standpoints, we review emerging and foundational research to delineate three key components of such an approach: (1) governance, (2) materialities and design, and (3) performing public spaces. We then apply the framework, grounding our analysis of care in public spaces in a case study of caring for and as Country in Sydney, Australia. Throughout the paper we emphasise the generative possibility of care as an evaluative frame and central practice that sustains public spaces.

1 | Introduction

In this paper we survey scholarship on care and public spaces. By drawing upon Tronto's (1993) framing of care as an ordinary practice, politics and ethics that underpins how we relate to ourselves, other people and non-human entities, we map out the connections between a feminist ethics of care and public spaces. Care is an everyday practice sustaining our worlds defined as a

species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our 'world' so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life sustaining web

(Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40).

Care is also an ethics and orientation that assists us in evaluating how public spaces might become more just and caring (S. Low and Iveson 2016; S. M. Low 2023). We synthesise how care has been an implicit and crucial component of theorising,

enacting and inhabiting more just urban public spaces (S. Low and Iveson 2016; Nelischer et al. 2024). We begin by introducing public spaces and urban care scholarship, developing a relational and multidimensional approach to public spaces and engaging with scholarship that develops an expanded understanding of urban caring (Power and Williams 2020). Overall, this work relocates care from traditional spheres of invisible labour—such as the home and semi-private places including residential and welfare institutions—to the ordinary spaces of cities including public spaces such as parks (Nelischer et al. 2024), pavements (Kullman 2014), and urban governance and materialities (Alam and Houston 2020; Bates et al. 2017; Power and Williams 2020).

Starting from feminist and decolonial standpoints, we develop a framework of care-full public spaces, building on emerging research to delineate three key components: (1) governance, (2) materialities and design and (3) performing public spaces. We then ground our analysis of care in public spaces in a case study of caring for and as Country¹ in Sydney, Australia, emphasising the importance of understanding care contextually and relationally (Raghuram 2016) and that public spaces—in Australia

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—are always Country (Porter 2018). Care provides a helpful lens through which to understand the practices that sustain public spaces.

2 | Public Spaces and Care

Public Spaces have been a key area of scholarship because uses of and ideals about urban open and civic spaces are integral to the social life of cities. Broadly, scholars have highlighted the multiple and often conflicting meanings connected to ideas and practices of publicness and how these ideas, especially as social and legal norms around contentious behaviours and universal access, are spatially manifested in ‘rights to the city’, democratic participation and human flourishing (Iveson 2007; S. M. Low 2023; Qian 2014, 2020; Watson 2006; Zhang and He 2020). Care ethics are often implied in theories and practices of public space concerned with its role in nurturing social inclusion, diverse encounters and connectivities. Yet few researchers have explicitly focussed on an ethics of care and public spaces, and how public spaces are cared for, care for, and care with those who inhabit them (with the exception of Krenichyn 2004; Kullman 2014; Nelischer et al. 2024; Sandström 2019). This section provides a brief overview of approaches that highlight the relational aspects of public spaces before defining care.

2.1 | What Are Public Spaces?

Historically, urban scholarship has researched public spaces by defining and evaluating their role as places for ‘public’ encounters and interactions, especially how public spaces act as a stage for practices of freedom of expression and association that underpin social justice claims (Bodnar 2015; Cianciotto 2020;

Cook and Howell 2011; Iveson 2007; S. Low 2020; S. Low and Iveson 2016; S. M. Low 2023). Public spaces research has predominantly documented the social dynamics and sought to understand the varied political practices that make such spaces ‘public’ (Latham and Layton 2019; Miles 2012; Qian 2014, 2020). This research has emphasised that public spaces have complex topographical and procedural dimensions—delineated through governance and property regimes; uses, practices and political actions (Iveson 2007) and storied, symbolic and historical representations (Brodin 2007). The entangled dimensions of public spaces point to their existence as performative and material sites that call to a public, or multiple publics, to inhabit and appropriate them (Deutsche 1996, 59). S. Low (2020), S. Low and Iveson (2016) and S. M. Low (2023) work has been central in defining and documenting dynamics of public spaces as multidimensional entities.

S. M. Low (2023, 27) identifies six dimensions (visualised in Figure 1), which can be used to compare public spaces (streets, parks, playgrounds, plazas, etc.), evaluate their ‘degrees of publicness’, and how they contribute to urban spaces as being more or less just (S. M. Low 2023, 26–29). Low’s call for a multidimensional approach to understanding public spaces thus emphasises the complex relationalities between and within entities with responsibilities for caring for public space and provokes reflection on the ways that caring for public spaces is also caring for the public sphere.

Recent scholarship has sought to further understand the relational and affective aspects of public spaces. This includes how public spaces are constituted by and entangled with more-than-human spatial and temporal assemblages and imbued with attachments and meanings created through historically situated bodies and practices—those fleeting, ordinary interactions that perform them into being (Amin 2008, 2015; Gabauer et al. 2021).

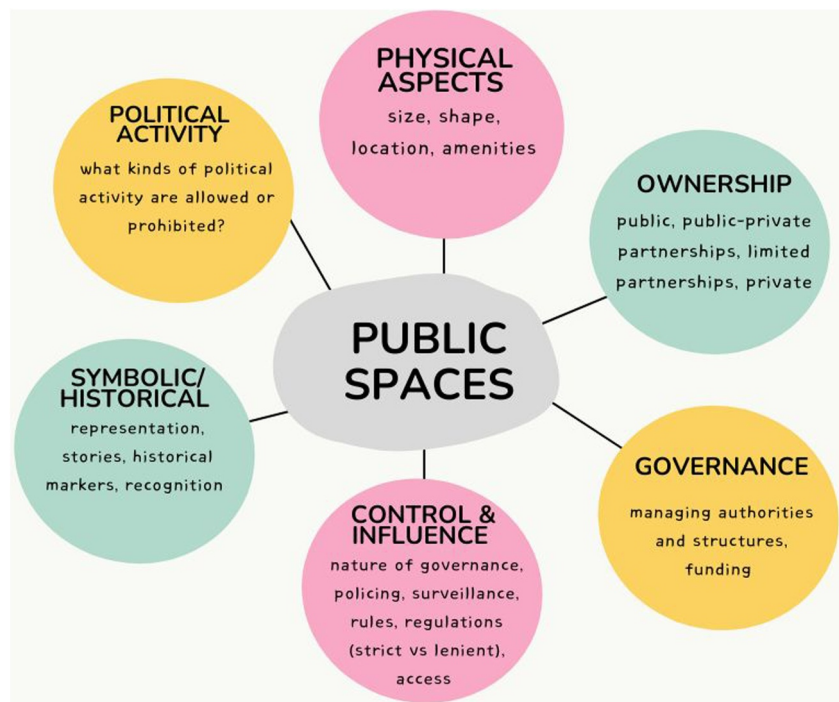


FIGURE 1 | Visual adaptation of Low’s multidimensional framework for defining the publicness of public spaces (Source: S. M. Low 2023, 27).

In this way, public spaces are connected to both real and virtual places elsewhere in space and time (Alex de Freitas 2010; Massey 2005; van Melik and Spierings 2020). As van Melik and Spierings (2020, 17) assert, public spaces are neither socially nor spatially self-sufficient, and therefore ‘...should be regarded as dynamic processes constituting and constituted by constant flows of and encounters with people, practices, goods, physical environments’.

Such multidirectional and more-than-human definitions of public spaces draw on the seminal work of Massey (2005, 7), who approached space as ‘a product of relations-between, relations which are necessarily embedded material practices which have to be carried out... always in the process of being made. It is never finished; never closed’. Thus public spaces are always emergent networks of bodies, material spaces and practices that are, as Qian (2014, 842) writes, ‘...lived, negotiated and practised in the formation of social relations, cultural meanings and power’. They are also ambivalent (Ye 2019), in that they are made ‘public’ through both everyday mundane interactions and structural forces that anchor discourses around who has a right to occupy public spaces, for example, in the ways that the state legitimates or sanctions forms of everyday racism and discrimination through labour rights and citizenship regimes. For Massey (2005, 152), negotiation and antagonism are central to what makes places public, and are a fundamental part of the ‘power-geometries’ that shape public spaces as more or less inclusive (Massey 1993, 62). Sandström (2020, 70) notes that public spaces have the potential to be used ‘as an instrument for fostering openness towards difference’, while Beebejaun (2016, 324) critiques the positioning of spaces ‘as an independent container within which we are enabled to live with difference’. Public spaces bring us into proximity with diverse others. Practices and ethics of care might be part of these relations, assisting us to speculate on how public spaces might become ‘as-good-as-possible’ (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 6).

2.2 | Public Spaces and the Ethics of Care

Care is a key area of research in urban studies, urban design and human geography more broadly (see e.g. Bates et al. 2017; J. Davis 2022; Gabauer et al. 2021; Lawson 2007; S. M. Low 2023; McEwan and Goodman 2010; Power and Williams 2020; Wiesel et al. 2020). Tronto’s (1993) definition of care as ‘a species activity’ (Tronto 1993, 113) has inspired scholars to consider how care transforms and sustains social and spatial relations. Initial scholarship was concerned with how care might be practised in public spaces, including an understanding of the constraints faced by women in using public spaces (Day 2000) due to the confinement of practices of care to the private, rather than public realm (McEwan and Goodman 2010; Smith 2005). Challenged by feminist scholarship, a more expansive understanding of how care might be practised and revalued in a range of public sites throughout cities has been developed (Popke 2006; Power and Williams 2020; Smith 2005; Williams 2017).

S. M. Low (2023, 63) notes that while ethics of care ‘are not well developed in public space research’, care ethics are often interwoven with intersectional environmental and social justice

activism. ‘An ethics of care in public space’, she writes, ‘would focus on attending to others’ needs, not just passively through recognition or interaction, but in pro-social and life-enhancing ways’ (S. M. Low 2023, 63). This is aligned with Till’s (2012) concept of ‘place-based ethics of care’, which was developed to emphasise diverse memories and interventions associated with urban injustice, difficult pasts and urban change. For Till (2012, 12), caring about and for place means acknowledging connections between the pasts and presents of ‘wounded places’ via memory-work and creative practices that responsibly and affectively enact forms of truth telling and allow for cities in turn to offer their residents care.

3 | Framework for Approaching Care-Full Public Spaces: Governance; Materialities and Design; and Performing Public Spaces

In this section, we develop a framework for approaching care-full public spaces to facilitate a more explicit focus on how public space governance, materialities and design, and performance can be care-full, or sustain more care-full public spaces. We bring together insights from public spaces and geographies of urban care literature, along with S. M. Low’s (2023) multidimensional approach to public spaces (Figure 1), to develop a framework for approaching care-full public space research, illustrated in Figure 2. We use the term ‘care-full’ as others have done before us to signal a speculative commitment to more caring worlds (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017), to make visible the inequities and injustices that might preclude public spaces from being caring, and to acknowledge the importance of engaging with care as a practice, ethics, and evaluative framing (Ergler et al. 2022; S. Low and Iveson 2016; S. M. Low 2023; Puig de la Bellacasa 2017; Williams 2017, 2020). Each element mapped out via this framework provide insights into how urban governance, materialities and design, and performing public spaces may facilitate care or highlight the need for more care-full approaches.

3.1 | Governance

What might the governance of care-full public spaces look like? Governance is a broad term, which refers to the ‘...systems of state and civil society engagement developed in response to what has been called the “hollowing out of the state” in the neoliberal era’ (Freeman and Nel 2024, 183). The governance of public spaces is influenced by urban actors, funding, management and coordination, along with values that guide who takes responsibility to shape, maintain and care for public spaces. The multiple actors involved in governance shape public spaces formally through management, regulation and policy, and informally through ‘cultural rules...[and] community values, aspirations and attachments’ (Zamanifard et al. 2018, 160). There are various ways an ethics of care might influence and shape ‘...the formal and informal institutions that provide the rules, mechanisms and processes of engagement within which society operates’ (Freeman and Nel 2024, 180). The questions of who organises, who benefits from, who decides and who takes responsibility to care for public spaces is central to understandings of governance.



FIGURE 2 | Conceptualising care-full public spaces (Source: Authors).

Governance and planning play key roles in facilitating access to resources for care, in supporting (or not) the work of care and carers (Binet et al. 2023; Ergler et al. 2022; Freeman and Nel 2024; Power and Mee 2020; Power and Williams 2020). Analysis of governance through the lens of care-full public space might evaluate equitable access to public space provisioning; interrogate the dynamics of the privatisation of public spaces (Leclercq et al. 2020); recognise the accessibility needs and inclusion of diverse groups (Nelischer et al. 2024; Ye 2019); consider safety and surveillance and the right to occupy public spaces (Cook and Whowell 2011); explore the ways governance might care-fully shape policies and manage spaces (Sandström 2019, 2020); investigate property regimes and intersections between commons and public spaces (Cianciotto 2020); and discuss how people are involved in decision-making processes and their ability to shape public spaces as their ‘right to the city’, amongst other areas (Binet et al. 2023; Cook and Whowell 2011; Freeman and Nel 2024; S. M. Low 2023). We pick up two pressing questions from these ideas: the extent to which participatory governance underpins care-full public spaces and its corollary, the extent to which the corporatisation and privatisation challenges it.

Firstly, we turn our attention to how care might emerge through the participatory governance of public spaces. Participatory governance has been positioned as ‘...a key mechanism through which local authorities can exercise care in the urban landscape... through directly involving local citizens in formal processes of decision making and planning’ (Freeman and Nel 2024, 189). For example, a study of Jubileumsparken in Gothenburg, Sweden, by Sandström (2019, 2020), described how a community was involved in designing and caring for a temporary public park. The public park was a ‘test pilot’ for a new way of working with urban

development in which an urban prototype for a public park was created through the combined effort of members of the public, an artist and architecture collective (known as MYCKET), and a non-government organisation focussed on activities for children and young people with disabilities (Passalen) (Sandström 2019, 187). The park brought together people from diverse socio-economic backgrounds to design and maintain it, which involved civic and public partnerships including with Passalen who employed young people every summer to maintain the park (apart from bin collection) and act as ‘park hosts’ (Sandström 2019, 234). Initially the park had an estimated lifespan of 5 months however permanent parts of the park have now been completed (Goteborgs Stad 2024). Jubileumsparken is an example of how care might be practised through participatory governance and incorporated into the ongoing management and vision for a public space (Sandström 2019, 2020).

Secondly, we attend to a controversial area of public spaces literature and policies—privately owned public spaces (including privately owned and managed public spaces, community-led and managed public spaces and public spaces developed through public-private partnerships)—which refers to an emergent kind of space that challenges traditional definitions of public spaces ‘as open to all people and managed by the state on people’s behalf’ (Leclercq et al. 2020, 1). This debate has been concerned with the growth of neoliberal urban governance regimes that deem particular bodies, such as the poor or unhomed, as unsuitable and unwanted occupants of public spaces, and leads to the proliferation of privately owned public spaces developed via public instruments such as zoning and planning agreements but managed and funded by private entities (Iveson 2007). This privatisation of public spaces has

emerged throughout the world due to urban austerity measures, the growth of neoliberal regimes, and private developers (Leclercq et al. 2020).

The emergence of privately owned public spaces troubles the intersection of questions of care with questions of responsibility, ownership and inclusion. It is assumed that privately owned public spaces are less inclusive, less democratic, involve more surveillance and policing, and are more homogenous in their design (Leclercq et al. 2020). The assumption that this is the case for all privately owned public spaces has been challenged, with Leclercq et al. (2020) finding that it is the inclusiveness of planning processes that shape perceptions and experiences of publicness, regardless of whether a space is privately or publicly owned. For Leclercq et al. (2020) an expanded definition of public spaces needs to consider more than ownership, but also accessibility, design quality, and the opportunities a space provides for a variety of use and users.

3.2 | Materialities and Design

Reflecting on material and design aspects of public spaces is crucial to surfacing hidden and implicit assumptions about who is cared for, where and how (J. Davis 2022). As Jacobs (1961) suggested, by paying attention to the impact of material aspects of the urban built and natural environment on social patterns of use and disuse, how care is choreographed by physical objects and material sites becomes apparent. Contemporary theorisations of how these possibilities are integrated into cities and set out for users of public spaces through the interlinked domains of materialities and design, governance and performing public space (Section 3.3) is highlighted in the concept of ‘affordances’—or the ‘salient feature[s] of either an object or the environment inviting a specific use or behaviour’ (Djebbara 2022, 2). A body of research is fruitfully enquiring how practical design aspects of public spaces signal to users how to perform ‘publicness’, as well as how well spaces themselves should be or are cared for, and how well users should or can care for such spaces (Djebbara 2022, 2).

These care-full design aspects are understood not to land on a ‘blank slate’ but are arranged according to principles of what people are imagined as wanting to do in public spaces. Assumptions about what their capacities are as citizens to associate in public, as well as the broader urban context that public places are embedded within, are increasingly seen as ‘baked in’ to public spaces during conceptualisation and design processes. Such design affordances include the way that privately-owned and managed spaces frame and support public life through positive experiences of space. Mundane but important design elements, such as shade and lighting, open areas and refuges, boundaries and transition points, and the presence of cultivated and wild places, all act as invitations to play, contemplate, socialise or rest in public spaces. This section therefore zooms into the ground plane of public spaces to understand how care is materialised, and how the ‘other’ of care-full public spaces, that is places that are absent of care or culturally unsafe, can also be seen to have material and social implications.

Following Jane Jacobs’ (1961) landmark work on urban streets as public spaces essential to urban social life, Scruton (1984) has argued that ‘the tacit cooperation’ that makes a successful public space is also a form of care for the negotiated and politically charged relationship between privacy and publicity—as in the capacity for asserting one’s personal space and autonomy in the public realm. Here he is referring to how occupying a collectively managed and inviting space that is neither centrally controlled nor too visible nor invisible to others, allows for non-threatening encounters with a diverse range of people (Weintraub 1997, 17–20). Scruton (1984, 10) perceptively describes Jacob’s (1961, 65) ‘street ballet’ as a form of care-full social interaction that is choreographed and supported by the streetscape:

The street has eyes which guard it, tongues which instruct it, hands which help it; it is a busy sphere of human understanding, whose perimeters are also the points of entry into private worlds.

Jacobs (1961, 72) herself famously saw the city block and its sidewalks as ‘built-in equipment’ for sociability. She noticed how pre-automobile urban spaces, such as dense, working-class inner-city neighbourhoods, were rich with opportunities for care and repair. Such neighbourhoods were well-used and felt safe for diverse users, including women and children, precisely because the city fabric was not ‘planned’ but could be easily appropriated within other forms of care work and incidental practices.

Recent feminist scholarship on urban transformations has highlighted the salient connections between care work and genderfication, an ongoing process whereby urban ‘space is produced for a specific gendered order’ (van den Berg 2018, 760), especially in ways that ‘fit’ ideologies of gender into post-Fordist cities based on ‘pink collar’ service economies and financialisation of real estate and tourism, rather than traditional ‘patriarchal’ industrial cities (van den Berg 2018). In this process, genderfication scholars argue, gentrification is given a gendered inflection. Public and private space is less strictly separated in the post-Fordist city, for example, as Ekin-smyth (2011, 106) found in her 2011 study of ‘mumpreneurship’, that public spaces such as ‘church halls, play-parks, Sunday schools... [are increasingly becoming] places where business gets done’. These processes have been accelerated by the material proliferation of information and communications technologies used for work, care and recreation. At the same time, the emergence of ‘hostile architecture’ (Jencks 1993, 91–92), such as benches with features designed to make it impossible to lie down and sleep in public spaces, or blank-fronted buildings that provide no incidental shelter from rain or sun to repel rough sleepers, demonstrate the class assumptions of the post-Fordist city.

A counter-narrative to this broad push to exclude and marginalise low-income and unemployed people is an emerging micro-geographic focus on the care-full potentials of specific material objects and their links to practices of care and self-care. Rishbeth and Rogaly’s (2017) study (and Bynon and Rishbeth’s (2017) associated *Manifesto for the Good Bench*) argues for

benches within the corporatised city as an antidote to the individuality and consumer-orientation of much contemporary public space. Their 'Bench Project' is nuanced and politically sensitive critique of the presence of benches in the post-Fordist, neo-liberal city, and is a plea for the 'right to pause' (Rishbeth and Rogaly 2017, 295). The example of the humble bench provides a key to understanding of how care for the social and the interpersonal in urban public spaces is 'designed into being' (Bates et al. 2017, 97; Rishbeth and Rogaly 2017, 295).

Finally, another emergent theme is that of inter-generational publics. Nelischer et al. (2024, 7) usefully broaden the 'context of care beyond the private sphere to include outdoor public environments' and seek to incorporate 'care as the object of public space design' and a form of spatial justice. Their case study of 'Golden Age Park', designed for older users in a heavily disinvested neighbourhood in Westlake, Los Angeles, owned and managed by a non-profit local land trust organisation, highlights how co-design can develop inclusive and meaningful care-full public spaces (Nelischer et al. 2024). The informal and important care networks provided by grandparents and extended families to working parents are recognised in the location of the park and also in opportunities for safe and low-cost or free recreational options, which are provided in the park via community gardening and low-impact exercise stations, as well as BBQs and children's play areas (Nelischer et al. 2024, 11).

3.3 | Performing Care-Full Public Spaces

Paying attention to the materialities of public spaces offers insights into how the everyday affordances of urban design practices (both intentional and unintentional) facilitate more caring or less caring public spaces. In this section, we attend to how those materialities are performed through visceral acts of doing, being, feeling and sensing—which contribute to relational care in public space. Amin (2008, 2015) and Watson (2006) have previously shown that ordinary and mundane encounters, interactions and doings in public spaces defy framings of what public space is or is not. Watson (2006, 6) was interested in the 'unseen' qualities of public spaces as

the site of multiple connections and interconnections of people who differ from one another in their cultural practices, their imaginaries, in their embodiment, in their desires, in their capacities, in their social, economic capital, in their religious beliefs, and in countless other ways...

For Watson (2006), it is the heterogeneous and performative elements of 'rubbing along together' that offer different possibilities for thinking with and about public space. Metzger (2014) takes this as a starting point for considering how urban planners might better 'care for place', where care is more-than-human and foregrounds a different ethico-political commitment to thinking about life-in-common in cities (Harcourt 2021).

Practices of care are always performed in conjunction with other beings and entities (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 2017).

These interdependent relations bring with them certain obligations and responsibilities to care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2012, 2017). Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 95) writes that 'the affective, ethical, and practical engagements of caring invoke involved embodied, embedded relations in closeness with concrete conditions'. For Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 120–121), performances and practices of the material obligations of care (caring for/by/with) are 'collectively distributed'. Care is more than a gendered relation between care givers and care receivers; every being is reliant upon care and care is more than a human activity with nonhumans sometimes reciprocating care (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 120). Working against restrictive notions of care, Puig de la Bellacasa (2017, 120) seeks to rethink the reciprocities of care through 'collective webs of obligations' rather than 'individual commitments'. In Puig de la Bellacasa's (2017, 121, original italics) words: 'reciprocity in *as well as possible* care circulates multilaterally, collectively: it is shared'. Care-full public spaces would thus be co-created by a multiplicity of actors, both human and nonhuman, who might collectively take up responsibilities to care.

Performing care-full public spaces requires working in tension with concrete conditions/particularities that characterise specific care entanglements and in interdependent relations (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 160; Wiesel et al. 2020). Ethics of care are grounded in everyday doings and practices and interwoven through ordinary and mundane interactions and inhabitations. They are ordinary practices and places that involve a multitude of beings, who are variously dependent and interdependent. Kullman (2014) demonstrates this via an analysis of how children, often positioned as vulnerable or in need of care, are active agents in caring for and with urban pavements as they walk to school in Helsinki. Children perform collective 'urban care' through their affective attunements to and embodied interactions with dogs, found objects, trees, pedestrian crossings and traffic. The varied ways in which children care for and with ordinary street spaces in turn cultivate competencies, empathies and sensibilities. While these everyday performances can be minute and fleeting, Kullman (2014, 2876) contends that they raise possibilities 'for a shared city' sustained by 'the fragile but manifold relations that constitute the city'.

The frame of performing care-full public spaces illuminate overlooked stories and practices and at the same time hold the potential to prefigure more pluralistic, inclusive and just possibilities for urban public politics and life (Alam and Houston 2020). In other words, as Lawson (2007, 8) has previously discussed in her work on geographies of care and responsibility, a care ethics approach moves us towards 'new forms of relationships, institutions, and action that enhance mutuality and wellbeing'. This brings us to the other key element of speculative ethics identified by Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) and demonstrated by Kullman (2014) in the example above: that care constitutes and is constitutive of more-than-human worlds. Here, care is a practice that is performed with other agential beings and entities in urban spaces and places (Amin 2015; Metzger 2014). Metzger (2014) and Wiesel et al. (2020, 2) highlight the ways in which ethics of care entangle and delineate complex relationships and encounters between humans and nonhumans, which are variously convivial, regulated and controlled or invoke belonging or exclusion.

Bonds and Holifield (2023) illustrate embodied ‘conflicts over care’ in New York’s Central Park in their analysis of the 2020 encounter between Christian Cooper, a black man and Amy Cooper, a white woman who called the police after she became angry that Mr Cooper requested that she leash her recently rescued dog, as per park rules. Mr Cooper, a bird watcher, was concerned about the impact of unleashed dogs on the park’s birdlife. The encounter told a ‘depressingly familiar story, one of many devastatingly common incidents in which white femininity is weaponised and wielded in public space, often with lethal ends’ (Bonds and Holifield 2023, 1631). But as Bonds and Holifield (2023, 1631) contend:

...the incident also raises questions about what it might mean to theorize the racialized space of parks—as sites of bird migration, refuge and recreation, displacement and erasure, protest, and encounter—in terms of intersectional thinking across species and a more-than-human ethic of care.

Performing care-full, more-than-human public spaces requires attentiveness to the ways in which care-ethics are enabled, constrained by, and challenge uneven structures of power fuelled by racism, sexism, settler-colonial, and neoliberal capitalist relations.

4 | Care-Full Public Spaces in Practice: Caring for and as Country as Public Space

In the final section of this paper, we apply our conceptualisation of care-full public spaces (see Figure 2) to examples from now-Australia on how governing, designing and performing public spaces can contribute to caring for and as Country. We draw on our framework for care-full public spaces to illustrate the complex relationalities between and within entities with responsibilities for caring for public spaces in context.

In now-Australian cities, public spaces have been part of violent settler-colonial urbanism, where the scale and nature of dispossession and destruction of Indigenous place and culture must be reckoned with (Novacevski 2023). As part of increased recognition of the injustices of the past and present, and the need to be ‘care-full’, all now-Australian places need to be understood expansively as ‘Country’ (Porter 2018). For Tynan (2021), 597):

Country inhabits all relationality and is used widely across Australia to describe how all land is Aboriginal land, Aboriginal Country; Country is agentic and encompasses everything from ants, memories, humans, fire, tides and research. Country sits at the heart of coming to know and understand relationality as it is the web that connects humans to a system of Lore/Law and knowledge that can never be human-centric.

Yet in the face of hundreds of years of systemic colonial practices and systems of erasure and assimilation, the governance, design and practice of caring for public spaces has been

dominated by extractive and exclusionary settler-colonial planning and placemaking practices (Edwards-Vandenhoeck 2021; Novacevski 2023; Porter 2018; Tomiak 2017; Tumarkin 2002; Wright 2020). Such practices are influenced by thinking which reflects the doctrine of ‘Terra nullius’, (land belonging to no one)—an ideological instrument legitimising Indigenous dispossession (Potter 2012), predominantly framing urban spaces as ‘underutilized’ and in need of ‘revitalization’ (Ellis-Young 2022; Moran and Berbary 2021).

Practices of settler-colonialism continue to perpetuate Indigeneity as ‘out-of-place’ in spite of public spaces continuing to sit on unceded territories (Porter and Yiftachel 2019). Yet there are emerging discussions, processes and practices of decolonisation and truth-telling that are alerting non-Indigenous people to the deeply problematic foundations of mainstream property, environmental, and legal systems in Australia (Bawaka Country et al. 2024; Young et al. 1991). Truth-telling is an essential aspect of decolonising a wide range of practices and performances of public space, by confronting histories of colonisation, dispossession, and incorporating Indigenous knowledge systems, cultural practices, and relationships to land and Country (M. Davis 2021; Maddison et al. 2023).

Caring for and as Country has emerged as a powerful bridging concept in these discussions as it challenges the separation between humans and nature by centring the concept of Country as a sentient being (Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013; Country et al. 2019). In caring for and as Country, processes and relational responsibilities of care are centred and humans are charged to be custodians with responsibilities and obligations to attend to the messages of nonhumans who are respected kin (Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013; Country et al. 2019). As Darug Ngurra et al. (2019, 282) remind us ‘Caring-as-Country recognises that Country is active and that, much as humans have an obligation to care for Country, Country also has an obligation to care for humans...’. We offer three examples of how the concept of Country and inclusion of Indigenous-led engagements and processes in the governance, materialities and design, and performing public spaces are emergent, offering insights into how public spaces might be sustained.

Firstly, in 2023, the Government Architect of New South Wales (2024), released the Connecting with Country Framework, ‘a framework to care for Country when designing built environments’. Led by Aboriginal built environment professionals, the framework offers guidance to non-Indigenous bodies around meaningfully engaging Indigenous communities and sets out ‘practices for enabling a new approach’ fundamental to seeing/thinking/doing planning through an Indigenous lens, providing guidance in shifting from a human-centred to a Country-centred approach. The framework provides insights into new ways of planning, participation processes and incorporating Country-informed design principles into built environment projects, which will ultimately shape how public spaces are experienced into the future. Outcomes are diverse and have included projects that celebrate living culture, public art programs, public memorials, masterplanning and urban renewal precincts that are informed by the framework (Government Architect NSW 2024).

Secondly, the Murama Healing Space (MHS) is an instance of how caring for and as Country is being practiced on a site where Aboriginal narratives and histories had largely been erased. Established in Sydney Olympic Park on Wangal Country, the MHS is a working example of Indigenous-led co-management of a public space driven by governance principles that aim to connect with and care for Country. The community-led and Country-centred co-management of the space exposed Sydney Olympic Park employees to an Indigenous ontological framework that places relations of care and responsibilities to each other and all things, including nonhumans, at the centre of stories about public space (Simon 2020). As an example of 'care-full justice' (Williams 2017), truth telling was embedded in the MHS' building design, which has become a space for the representation of layers of heritage, including the Indigenous history of the site and Indigenous-led social movements more generally (Simon 2020). The Indigenous-led engagement and performing of public spaces at the MHS provides a working example of care and repair, through its community-led focus on healing intergenerational trauma and the underlying premise that healing Country is the vehicle for healing people (Simon 2020).

Finally, caring for and as Country through the visceral acts of doing, being, feeling, sensing and attuning can also be seen at Yellomundee Regional Park, a site on Dharug Country at the edge of Western Sydney, alongside the ongoing struggle against the legacies of colonial agricultural and industrial practices on unceded urban lands (Ngurra et al. 2023). The Yamama Budyari Gumada research collective have undertaken care-giving as Country through culture camps and practices such as cultural burning and bush regeneration at Yellomundee (Ngurra et al. 2023). These care-full practices take place in a public space along Dyarubbin (Hawkesbury-Nepean River), and are co-constituted with nonhuman agencies like winds, fire, waters, plants and animals, by Dharug Lore/Law, by State government legislation, and by infrastructures like gates, shelters, roads. This entanglement demonstrates how obligations for humans to care for Country, and Country to care for humans are deepened when the boundary between Country and humans is blurred and we acknowledge that people care as part of Country (Darug Ngurra et al. 2019). Through exploring the lens of caring for and as Country, we can see how governance, materialities and design, and performances in public spaces might be informed by care both in specific Indigenous-led projects, and more broadly.

5 | Concluding on Care-Full Public Spaces

We began this paper by reviewing existing scholarship on care and public spaces, drawing on work seeking to define public spaces and developing a multidimensional approach. In Section 2 we approached public spaces as multifaceted and publicness as performed; requiring us to ask questions of how publicness might be spatially, temporally and performatively constituted rather than defined only by assumptions that public space is simply a sub-category of open-access property under state ownership. We then engaged with scholarship that developed an expanded understanding of urban caring (Power and Williams 2020), discussing the increasingly visible role an

ethics of care is playing as a component for evaluating just public spaces (Iveson 2007; S. Low 2020; S. Low and Iveson 2016; S. M. Low 2023).

In Section 3, we developed a framework for approaching care-full public spaces, drawing on foundational and emergent scholarship showcasing how such a framework might be applied to appraise public space governance, materialities and design, and how public spaces are performed by their users, as well as how care is structured in public spaces through power-relations, including but not limited to racism and sexism. We argued that these three domains and how they intersect or disconnect in everyday and mundane settings might interdependently provide a lens through which to approach understandings of how public spaces might care differently for their users, and draw attention to struggles over care and non-care. In Section 4 we applied our framework to the context from which we write- Sydney, now-Australia, providing insights into how in settler colonial Australia, all public spaces are Country. We offered three examples of how such work highlights the role of caring as always-already in process and immanent, through the foregrounding of Indigenous-led engagements and processes in the governance, design, materialities and performances of public space in Sydney.

While our contribution is limited by the context from which we write and our positionality as non-Indigenous academics and research students, we have drawn on insights from many years of collective experience collaborating in various research collectives (see e.g. Suchet-Pearson et al. 2013, 2019, 2024; Darug Ngurra et al. 2019, Ngurra et al. 2023; Winaga-li Gunimaa Gali Collective 2023). Conscious of the importance of understanding care in context, we have sought to demonstrate the application of our framework through engaging with grounded research that takes account of local specificities and understandings. Future research might further advance this work, applying the framework of care-full public space to document how public spaces are or might become more care-full. The richness of work that draws on an ethics of care framing comes from the ethical commitment to 'as well as possible worlds' (Puig de la Bellacasa 2017, 6), which works to consider existing practice and envision responses to present injustices. This work is never complete, yet such an approach is generative, as it prompts us to consider how public spaces are becoming, and need to become, more care-full.

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Ethics Statement

The research has been approved by the Macquarie University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Endnote

¹ The term 'Country' has a very specific meaning to the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people of Australia which we explain later on in the paper. The country called Australia is home to over 250 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander countries, language, groups and cultures. More information can be found here: <https://aiatsis.gov.au/explore/map-indigenous-australia> For a discussion on 'caring for and as Country' see Bawaka Country et al., (2022)

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