

HISTORIC PUBLIC SPACES

Heritage, Memory, and New Perspectives on Conservation

Mini-conference 16.04.2026 (12:00-17:30)

Join us at TU Delft on April 16 for this mini-conference about historic public open spaces!

Historic public open spaces, which are complex entities formed by continuous interaction between the physical environment and human activity, are reflections of and witnesses to history and the product of culture shaped by society. Due to their complex and multi-layered characteristics, they can adapt to new orders of the world through changes in their physical, functional, social and visual aspects, thereby sustain their heritage values through generations. Most of these changes are primarily activated through the transformation of the socio-cultural, ideological, and political milieu, since public open spaces mainly emerge, are produced, designed, and utilized to be the common ground for society with diverse backgrounds. Over time, these areas become the nexus of the practices of democracy, sharing, communicating, producing and sometimes this results in conflict and power struggles. Public open spaces are the stage for cultural practices and can thus be defined as sites of collective memory. Therefore, the issue of conserving historic public open spaces is crucial not only for sustaining the continuity of their physical aspects but also for remembering the narratives and common values shared by the members of a society that emerge as the outcome of collective thinking, various actors and successive events.

Despite their unique characteristics and significance to society, historic public open spaces are among the most vulnerable elements of cities, threatened by rapid transformation and demolition due to the global economy, politics and urbanization. Although conservation policies exist in response to these threats, they often primarily focus on the preservation of physical aspects, with an emphasis on historic buildings. This has resulted in a loss of authenticity, integrity, heritage values and cultural significance of these areas. At this point, it is essential to shift the focus from building-oriented approaches to society-oriented perspectives for the conservation of historic public open spaces that reflect urban and shared history, constitute collective memory and at the same time are under the risk of disappearance in the near future.

This mini-conference invites scholars, designers, planners, researchers, public authorities, and practitioners to rethink the meaning of historic public open space as heritage, explore its value and role in society, and discuss possible methods and approaches for their conservation. The event aims to re-evaluate current conservation practices for historic public open spaces in the Netherlands, question existing heritage law and legislation, and encourage participants to delve into the issue by focusing on society-oriented, participatory, and inclusive approaches. Ultimately, this mini-conference seeks to envision productive strategies for revealing and sustaining the cultural significance of historic public open spaces and utilizing these outcomes to establish a framework for new interventions that will guide the decision-making processes of academics, specialists, practitioners, and policymakers.

This half-day event will begin with presentations from experts in public space or heritage studies, followed by a collective reflection phase designed to enrich the ideas generated through discussions among presenters and participants. This participatory session will provide an open and inclusive platform for dialogue on the conservation of historic public open spaces, building on the academic, policy-oriented, and practice-based perspectives presented earlier in the day. We highly value inclusive and productive discussions and therefore believe that "it is not about the outcome but the process itself".

We want to rethink the meaning, value, and conservation of historic public open spaces. We welcome scholars, specialists, practitioners, policymakers and designers from a broad range of heritage, history, design and governance.

Join us for this afternoon event with lunch, lectures, debates, and collective reflections.

The meeting is free of charge, but we kindly ask you to register for catering before 14 April 2026.