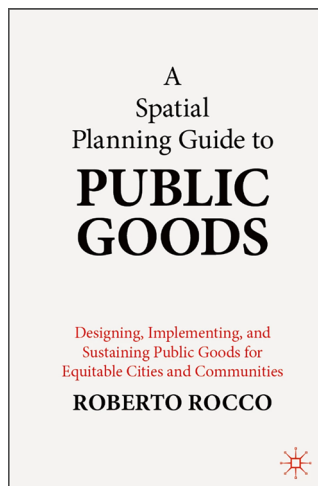


Rocco, Roberto (2026): A Spatial Planning Guide to Public Goods: Designing, Implementing, and Sustaining Public Goods for Equitable Cities and Communities

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“A Spatial Planning Guide to Public Goods: Designing, Implementing, and Sustaining Public Goods for Equitable Cities and Communities” is an ambitious and remarkably accessible introduction to the role of public goods in spatial planning. Roberto Rocco is Associate Professor of Spatial Planning and Strategy at Delft Technical University, and his long-standing interests in spatial justice, governance, the right to the city and the political economy of the built environment are clearly reflected in the book.

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The volume brings together perspectives that planners may encounter in rather different corners of their education and professional practice: economics and theories of public goods, political philosophy, citizenship and rights, governance, legal and institutional frameworks, spatial justice, environmental questions and urban development. It is clearly structured as a textbook and works particularly well as an introduction for readers encountering these debates for the first time. However, it can also be read as something of a refresher course for planners and planning scholars who do not routinely revisit the social-scientific foundations and normative premises of their field. Roberto Rocco thus well accomplishes his aim to “provide a comprehensive resource for spatial planners and urban designers, as well as students of those disciplines, equipping them with the knowledge and tools to critically advocate for and implement policies and projects that prioritize the common good and spatial justice” (p. ix).

Roberto Rocco positions the book as a bridge between theory and practice, combining a multidisciplinary literature review with case studies drawn from different international planning contexts. The book’s eleven chapters move from conceptual foundations towards increasingly concrete questions of rights, governance and urban development. Roberto Rocco begins with the familiar economic characteristics of public goods – non-excludability and non-rivalrous consumption – but quickly complicates this definition through discussions of commons, common-pool resources, club goods and degrees of publicness. Later chapters extend the discussion to rights, legal traditions, governance, environmental public goods, public art and urban development, using cases from different cities and planning cultures. The concluding chapter places contemporary pressures on pub-

lic goods within wider transformations such as austerity and privatisation.

Looking at planning through the lens of public goods is particularly interesting because planning has traditionally justified intervention through the language of the public interest. Despite sustained criticism, public interest has remained a key normative reference point for legitimising planning (Sheydayi/Dadashpoor 2022). Puustinen, Mäntysalo and Jarenko (2017) point to two key tensions (individual vs. community and regulation vs. non-regulation) that reveal the ambiguity of public interest as a rhetorical tool. Instead of abandoning the concept, they call for its contextualised use and for discursive precision in the continued debates that are necessary in planning. Roberto Rocco's turn to public goods can productively be read as one "other heading" under which some of the important questions can be addressed (Flathman 1966).¹ This would not mean replacing the concept of public interest but finding a more materially grounded way of asking what planning should secure for collective benefit. This shift is subtle but important. A commitment to equitable mobility becomes a question about transport networks, fares and accessibility; environmental justice becomes visible in exposure to environmental harms and access to green space; social inclusion acquires material form through housing, services and public space. Roberto Rocco's contribution is therefore not simply to add another concept to the planning vocabulary but to provide a *material vocabulary for thinking about the normative purpose of planning*.

At the same time, Roberto Rocco uses the concept of public goods very broadly. Although he starts from a relatively precise economic meaning, conventionally associated with non-rivalry and non-excludability, public goods soon travel into citizenship and rights, governance, spatial justice, environmental questions, public art and urban development. This creates a productive tension. If housing, mobility, culture, environmental quality and public space can all be approached as public goods, the concept risks losing analytical power. Yet this expansiveness is also one of the book's accomplishments. Whether something is called infrastructure, a commodity, a common resource, a right or a public good is not merely a matter of terminology: each designation entails different assumptions about access, responsibility, financing and governance.

This also suggests another way of reading the book. I came to think of public goods as *material expressions of an evolving social contract*. Here one would understand social contract in a broad sense as an evolving and contested set

of expectations concerning what members of society may reasonably expect from public institutions and from one another, and what obligations they assume in return. Much of this contract is made tangible through space, and Roberto Rocco's framework brings these issues into a spatial planning that does more than distribute land uses: it helps determine which societal values and needs acquire a durable material presence. And because these choices are neither fixed nor consensual, it follows that planning participates in the continuing renegotiation of the social contract. Roberto Rocco does indeed refer to this framing but only in passing (p. 213, 257) when talking about fairness and about the way in which citizens consent to be governed in exchange for the protection of their rights and welfare. Another potentially useful framing that Roberto Rocco mentions only briefly are the internal and necessary goods of a practice, drawing on MacIntyre (2007). Are public goods not material manifestations of a practice successfully oriented towards its internal goods, made possible through "corresponding professional virtues" (p. 477)?

A major strength of the book is the clarity with which Roberto Rocco handles demanding and potentially abstract subjects. The many examples translate principles such as equity, publicness, rights and justice into recognisable planning situations. The geographical and linguistic breadth is equally refreshing. Rather than relying mainly on Anglo-American cases, Roberto Rocco moves between contexts in Brazil, Chile, Colombia, Denmark, France, Germany, India, Ireland, Japan, Nigeria, the Netherlands, Singapore, South Korea, Spain, the United Kingdom and the United States.

The book is also unusually generous in acknowledging what it does not cover. Roberto Rocco runs through themes left out of the volume and directs readers to literature through which they can be explored further. As scholarly signposting this is excellent. Yet it also produces a slight sense of frustration: many of the omitted topics (e.g. feminist and intersectional approaches, climate justice and conflict resolution) appear highly relevant to the questions the book itself opens up. Also, Roberto Rocco's stance in favour of a "relational, pluriversal, adaptive and engaged type of urban governance that allows public goods provision to become a collective political project" (p. x) would certainly benefit from or maybe even truly need them. In the end, I was left wondering if I should count the omissions as missed opportunities or conversations that such a book should already have entered. As Roberto Rocco explicitly states (p. 295) that a governance catering for public goods would give equal legitimacy to diverse ontologies, I hopefully assume that his next textbook will follow that same principle.

¹ Cited in Puustinen/Mäntysalo/Jarenko (2017: 83).

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