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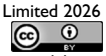
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# Organizational governance and bridging activity places: What makes a park a travel destination across neighborhoods?

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## Abstract

Research on urban inequality and mobility has focused on individual-level activity spaces (i.e., the set of places where a person carries out her routine activities), showing that such spaces can alleviate neighborhood-level segregation. We know less about why specific places in an activity space become travel destinations across distant neighborhoods, thus mixing different people and counter-acting neighborhood-level segregation. In this article, we address this gap by developing the concept of *activity place*—a bounded location in an activity space—and by investigating the factors influencing a place's ability to become a travel destination across distances, thus bridging neighborhoods. We conceive activity places as constructed by organizations and focus on a hitherto under-studied factor—that is, the governance of the organizations managing an activity place. Findings from the analysis of smartphone visitor data on a sample of 3080 parks in the largest 120 USA cities suggest that organizational governance does influence a place's attractiveness across distances, over and above the place's physical characteristics. Notably, public-private governance positively affects a place's attractiveness to distant visitors, and such effect is amplified by the diversity of programmed events. We discuss the implications and limitations of our findings for the organization of bridging activity places and urban parks.

## Keywords

segregation, organizations, activity spaces, place, urban mobility, urban parks, urban inequality, mobile mobile phone data

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**摘要**

关于城市不平等与流动性的研究一直聚焦于个体层面的活动空间（即个体开展日常活动的场所集合）。研究发现，此类空间可以缓解街区层面的隔离。但学界尚不清楚，活动空间中的特定场所为什么会成为远距离街区居民的出行目的地，进而促成不同人群交汇，并缓解街区层面的隔离。针对上述研究缺口，本文提出“活动场所”（activity place）概念，即活动空间内具有边界的点位，并考察影响场所成为跨距离出行目的地的相关因素，进而促成不同街区之间的联结。我们将活动场所视为由各类组织建构而成，并重点关注一个迄今为止研究不足的因素——管理活动场所的各类组织的治理。本文以美国规模最大的 120 座城市中的 3080 个公园为样本，对相关智能手机访客数据开展分析，结果表明，除了场所的物理特征外，组织治理确实会影响场所的跨距离吸引力。值得注意的是，公私治理可积极影响场所对远距离游客的吸引力，且这种影响会因为策划活动的多样性而增强。本文探讨了对于具有街区联结功能的活动场所与城市公园的组织建构，我们的研究结果所带来的启示与局限。

**关键词**

隔离、组织、活动空间、场所、城市流动性、城市公园、城市不平等、手机数据

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## Introduction

Segregation, that is, the extent to which social interaction between groups is clustered in space—is a key dimension of urban inequality. Traditionally, research has captured segregation at the neighborhood level, showing that residential neighborhoods matter for important outcomes such as crime (e.g., Shaw and McKay, 1942) and collective efficacy (e.g., Sampson 2012). Urban mobility research extended this focus to include “activity spaces” that is, the set of places that people encounter as part of their routine activities (Cagney et al., 2020: 624) such as workplaces, schools, grocery shops, churches, and parks, which are not necessarily located in one’s neighborhood. Activity spaces are important to understand urban inequality because they tend to be less segregated than residential neighborhoods (Ellis et al., 2004; Wong and Show, 2011), exposing people to more diverse others and thus counteracting neighborhood effects, at least temporarily (cf., Furnari, 2014). While the importance of activity spaces for reducing segregation has been established, their internal heterogeneity has been less studied.

Specifically, research has focused on *individual-level* activity spaces intended as the whole set of places that a person visits during a period (home, workplace, shops, leisure spots), devoting less attention to why specific places in an activity space may attract people from distant neighborhoods, thus providing opportunities for social integration. Yet, a *place-level* analysis can add key insights to an individual-level focus, showing what makes a place attractive to people in different neighborhoods, counterbalancing neighborhood-level segregation. Imagine, for instance, that the leisure places attracting people across neighborhoods are found to have different characteristics than those appealing to the residents in the immediate neighborhood. Based on that finding, urban planners and policy makers could intervene on those characteristics depending

on the desired balance between extra-local and local attractiveness. That is, the capacity of a place to become a travel destination across neighborhoods and thus bridge social worlds is a key, yet hitherto under-explored, variable of interest in research on urban inequality and mobility.

To capture the differential capacity of places to attract different urban mobility patterns and thus differently shape the experience of urban inequality, in this paper we shift the focus from activity spaces to *activity places*, defined here as the bounded locations where people carry out some of their routine activities (such as work, leisure, childcare, education, etc.). As places, activity places are recognized and legible (e.g., Lynch, 1960). That is, people recognize an activity place as a "go to place" for doing a type of activity (e.g., shopping, working, playing) in their everyday life, often denoting such places with shorthand names or monikers (cf., Molotch et al., 2000). Here we are interested in understanding the factors explaining the capacity of activity places to attract different social groups across neighborhoods in a city, thus temporarily reducing neighborhood-level segregation.

It is here that attention to the "missing organizational dimension" of activity places is especially useful (cf., Brandtner, 2026; McQuarrie and Marwell, 2009). In urban mobility research, activity places are often described as being available "out there" for people to choose from and travel to. Differently, we argue that many activity places are in fact purposefully constructed and run by organizations. An important organizational dimension that might affect a place's attractiveness is the governance of the organization(s) running the place, intended as the processes and structures by which an organization sets its goals and strategies and allocates its resources (Rhodes, 2007). Organizational governance is important because it shapes the allocation of resources, attention, and strategies to the same kind of activity place, influencing its capacity to attract people across neighborhoods, thus potentially becoming a "social mixer" of sorts. For example, not every grocery store competes hyper-locally with other stores located in the neighborhood. Depending on the strategies and resources of the organization running the grocery store, a store may also advertise and appeal to people across a city's neighborhoods, inducing them to travel longer distances to the store due to its convenience, product range, or other features. Yet, while the organizational governance of an activity place is important to understand the place's ability to become a travel destination, such an explanatory factor has remained largely understudied in activity space research. Thus, we ask: *How is the organizational governance of an activity place associated with its ability to attract visitors across neighborhoods?*

We address this question by studying the organizational governance characteristics of a sample of 3080 urban parks in the 120 US largest cities, exploring how such characteristics relate to the visitors' travels from different distances (within the neighborhood where the park is located, from elsewhere inside the city, outside the city). To measure visitors' travels, we draw on a smartphone-based mobility dataset covering the visits to the parks in our sample over an 8-year period (2017–2024). Drawing on research on the governance of the commons (e.g., Ostrom et al,. 1974), we distinguish public-led and public-private parks. The former are managed by a public agency (e.g., a park district or department), the latter by a conservancy or a corporation in collaboration with a public agency. We also collected data on park programming, measuring the diversity of events (art, music, recreation, and sports, etc.) organized in the park.

Our findings show that public-private parks draw visitors from farther away,

attracting more visitors from outside the city relative to the park's neighborhood and city. Public-private parks draw fewer neighborhood visitors, fewer city visitors, and more outside-city visitors, tilting the mix of visitors toward non-locals. We also find that the diversity of events programmed at public-private parks increases the visitors' average travelled distance, raising the share of visitors from outside the city vis-à-vis the city. That programming and governance appear to be working in tandem, increasing the appeal of parks to people located farther away. Finally, our findings confirm that the distance travelled by park visitors is associated with visitors' diversity (in terms of income, race, education, and age). That is, parks drawing visitors from farther away also draw visitors from more diverse socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds.

This article makes two contributions to research on organizations, urban mobility, and inequality. First, we show that the so-far-neglected organizational dimension of activity places matters to explain a place's capacity to attract different types of people and thus counteract, at least temporarily, enduring patterns of segregation at the neighborhood level. In short, activity places that are organized differently mix people differently. While most of the literature focuses on the "demand side" of the places included in an activity space, looking at the users' socio-economic composition, we foreground the "supply side" of specific activity places, empirically showing that the organizations that run and maintain a place matter for how socially integrative that place can be. Second, while research has focused on the individual- and neighborhood-level outcomes of activity spaces considered as a whole set of places (e.g., Järv et al., 2015), we highlight instead the capacity of some places to bridge multiple neighborhoods, attracting people from different distances. By doing so, we respond to the call to go beyond the neighborhood as the chief level of analysis, studying patterns of mobility across neighborhoods in their broader socio-ecological context (Browning and Soller, 2014).

## Theoretical background

### *From activity spaces to activity places: Travel destinations and urban inequality*

The concept of activity spaces has been used to counterbalance the focus on residential neighborhoods as a level of analysis (Cagney et al., 2020). Taken together, research on activity spaces centers on movements rather than residence and proximity, highlighting the importance of studying the variety of places where people spend time during their daily activities.

Activity spaces matter for understanding urban inequality. While acknowledging residential segregation, activity space scholars examine segregation in places of work, schooling, recreation, and other activities. For example, Ellis and colleagues found that workplaces are on average less racially segregated than residences (Ellis et al., 2004). Jones and Pebley (2014) showed that different types of activity spaces feature higher heterogeneity in ethnic composition compared with residential areas. That does not mean that neighborhood effects are less important or disappear. In fact, research has shown how activity spaces are influenced by neighborhood characteristics but are independently consequential for key outcomes such as youth development (Browning and Soller, 2014). In sum, activity space research shows that mobility matters for urban inequality: patterns of movement across workplaces, schools, and leisure places shape exposure to social difference beyond residences, typically increasing social mixing.

Because scholars have focused on comparing the composition of people's residential

neighborhoods and their whole activity spaces, less attention has been devoted to understanding why some places in an activity space attract people in the first instance and, specifically, why they attract people to travel long distances, thus bridging distant and likely different neighborhoods. As discussed above, the capacity of an activity place to bridge different neighborhoods is an important dimension for studies of urban inequality because distance tends to imply diversity, thus counterbalancing the enduring structural patterns of segregation. Said differently, understanding why some places become travel destinations is an important goal to further unpack the relationship between urban mobility and inequality.

In pursuing this goal, our point of departure is to examine the organizations running activity places. We echo scholars who have called for studying the "missing organizational dimension" of urban phenomena (Marwell and McQuarrie, 2009), highlighting that organizations matter to explain urban contexts. From this perspective, organizations are not just passive sites for social interaction (e.g., Putnam, 2000) or amenities for neighborhood residents (e.g., Small and McDermott, 2006). They are also agents allocating resources, attention, and energy to different neighborhoods and places in a city (cf., Marwell, 2004), playing a, sometimes unintentional, role in the (re)production of patterns of segregation or integration.

Drawing on these insights, we conceive organizations as actively involved in the management of activity places. The organizations running an activity place—whether it is a grocery store, a church or a park—often inscribe their goals, values or strategies into the activities that are on offer in the place, resourcing and communicating such activities differently, shaping the touch and feel of the place, ultimately making it more or less attractive to different types of people. That is, places are run with "active and self-conscious interest" (Molotch, 1967: 337) that might shape a place's capacity to attract different people across distances.

## Governing activity places

When it comes to activity places that benefit from being openly accessible to everyone, such as public parks and other public places, organizational governance cuts across the boundaries of private, public and non-profit sectors, often involving different types of public-private partnerships (e.g., Cornelius and Wallace, 2010). Scholars have developed different typologies of such cross-sector organizational partnerships (e.g., Waddock, 1991). Here we draw on the early research on the governance of the commons (Ostrom et al., 1961; Ostrom et al., 1974), which classifies governance forms depending on whether the production of a public good involves formalized coordination between public and private organizations. Building on the intuition that "the *production* of [public] goods and services needs to be distinguished from their *provision* at public expense" (Ostrom et al., 1961: 834; original emphasis), scholars of commons' governance first theorize that local governments could either provide and produce public goods both by themselves or rely on private (or non-profit) partner organizations for producing a public good (while still maintaining the responsibility for its provision). From this perspective, public-private governance can be defined as any organizational arrangement by which public organizations (such as city agencies or departments) work together with private organizations (either nonprofit or for-profit) to produce a public good (e.g., building and operating a park). "Working together" here is intended as any type of formal coordination, such as enacting a contract or other formal arrangement, including the formation of a joint organization such as a public-private corporation responsible for producing the public good.

The organizational governance of an activity place is likely consequential for its capacity to bridge different neighborhoods and thus temporarily alleviate segregation patterns. Specifically, public-led and public-private forms of governance are likely to differ on two important dimensions. First, places managed through public-private partnerships tend to benefit from more resources (such as money, social capital, expertise, attention) than those managed uniquely through public organizations. In fact, historically the growth of public-private partnerships has been prompted by resource scarcity in the public sector (Clemens and Guthrie, 2010; Krinsky and Simonet, 2017). Second, public-private forms of governance tend to involve people working in different sectors in decision-making, who are likely to have different ideas on how to organize the place and what activities to put on offer. Thus, the diversity of their ideas may in turn shape the diversity of activities on offer (e.g., such as more diverse programming in a park), or the different physical and symbolic features of the place. For these two reasons, activity places organized through forms of public-private governance may appeal to different people living in different neighborhoods. While in-depth case studies and theoretical work have linked organizational governance and activity places of various kinds, such a link has not been established empirically in a systematic fashion yet.

## Data and methods

### *Research setting: Urban parks as activity places*

We focus on urban parks as activity places for two reasons. First, urban mobility research has focused on workplaces (Ellis et al., 2004; Wong and Show, 2011), with relatively less attention to "leisure places" or "third places" between work and home, such as parks and other recreation spaces, which matter for exposing people to different others (e.g., Williams and Hipp, 2019). Second, the organizational governance of urban parks has witnessed substantial changes over the last decades, with the rise of public-private partnerships (e.g., Loughran, 2014), offering an opportunity to study how different organizational governance forms possibly influence the attractiveness of the same kind of activity place.

### *Data sources*

We study the organizational governance and visitor patterns of 3080 urban parks located in the United States. To arrive at this sample of parks, we started with a publicly accessible repository of all 150,310 US urban parks listed by the Trust for Public Land (TPL). We then limited our population to 4713 parks with at least 20 acres in the 120 largest cities because 20 acres is an established threshold to consider a park larger than a "neighborhood park," which is usually intended for use only for the immediate neighborhood. Our rationale for selecting multiple parks in as many of the same cities as feasible was to be able to look at park-level variation within relatively similar urban contexts. Later in the data collection process, we further required that the included parks have a park website providing organizational and programming information, and we removed several parks on which mobility data was not available to privacy requirements (e.g., overlapping with a school) or because geospatial information was unavailable, which led us to our final sample. See appendix for sample selection analysis (Online Appendix Section A1).

Our independent variables focused on two key dimensions: the organizational governance and event programming of a park. To capture governance, we conducted detailed research on each park individually.

For programming, we drew from two sources: the official website of each park to identify events offered by the organizations running the park (*internal* events); external websites listing events taking place in the park offered by third parties or community-based groups dedicated to the park or operating around it (*external* events). In the Online Appendix (Section A3), we provide details about our data collection procedures.

To examine mobility patterns, we used a proprietary dataset from data provider Placer.ai that estimates the number of visitors to each park based on anonymous mobility data collected by smartphone users who consented to their devices being tracked via mobile applications (see Section A in the Online Appendix for details). Smartphone data are common for analyzing urban mobility, providing reliable and granular data (Bergemann and Brandtner, 2025). To preserve anonymity, the data provider aggregated the smartphone data by park, covering our full sample of parks and enabling systematic comparisons across diverse urban contexts. The unique value of the mobility data is that it does not just provide data about park *access*—based on the neighborhood location of visitors—but also about actual park *use*. We collapsed the weekly mobility data by year to match the granularity of our independent variables. Integrating the mobility data with primary data on organizational governance and events, as well as with secondary data on park-level features and other organizational dimensions (see below), we examined how different types of governance, together with event programming, relate to people's travels to parks.

## Dependent variables

*Continuous home travel distance.* Our first dependent variable is the average distance that visitors traveled from their homes to each park. As a robustness check, we also calculated the distance traveled by visitors to their workplace, which showed similar patterns. Visitors' homes and workplaces were estimated (at the Census Building Group-level) by the data provider based on mobility patterns (i.e., where the phone is located during the day vs overnight).

We start from cumulative counts of visitors within 13 distance thresholds (0–0.3, 0–0.5, … 0–250 miles) and calculate the visitor counts for each distance band (e.g., visitors in 0.3–0.5 miles = count up to 0.5 minus count up to 0.3). Since the data provider only estimates the number of visitors in bins, that is, buckets by distance, we had to approximate a continuous measure using a simple midpoint method since we do not know the true distribution of distances in each bin (King, 2022). We estimate a continuous distance measure by assigning a midpoint to each exclusive band (0.15, 0.40, …, 175 miles) and computing a visitor-weighted average:

$$\text{Avg. home distance} = \frac{\sum m_b * n_b}{\sum n_b}$$

where $n_b$ is the number of visitors in band $b$ and $m_b$ is that band's midpoint. In the regressions, we use the log of this measure to correct for skewness.

*Categorical home travel distance.* Our second dependent variable is based on three distance categories: whether visitors travel from their homes within the neighborhood where the park is located, from elsewhere inside the city, or outside the city. To arrive at these categories, we convert cumulative visitor counts by distance into exclusive bins via differencing adjacent thresholds. We identified the distance categories based on established thresholds in the literature on parks. For example, the first threshold (1 mile) identifies parks that are located within a 20-minute walking distance from a

visitor's home, based on evidence that it takes an average person 10 minutes to walk half a mile (LaPlante and Kaiser, 2007), whereas the second threshold (within 30 miles) identifies parks that are located within short or long car distance. Consequently, we aggregate the exclusive bins into three ordered categories—neighborhood ($\leq$1 mi), city (>1–30 mi), outside ($\geq$ 30 mi)—and compute category shares by dividing each category's count by the total number of visitors. These three shares sum to 1 and describe the composition of visitor origins *without* relying on midpoints, which can distort the continuous measure if the distribution of visitors within the bin is not linear (see King, 2022).

*Visitor diversity.* We estimated Herfindahl–Hirschman indices of the diversity of each park's visitors in the given year in four dimensions: race, age, income, and education. For race, by park–year, we sum the total number of visitors estimated to belong to seven race categories (White, Black, Asian, Multiple races, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Other) and convert each category to a share of the total visitors, and compute a Herfindahl–Hirschman Index (HHI) as the sum of squared shares. We did the same for income brackets, age categories, and education level. We report inverted diversity indices (1-HHI) for each category. The data for these calculations are the data provider's estimates of demographic information of park visitors based on their home location. Specifically, to guarantee anonymity, the data provider does not collect information about visitor individual-level demographic characteristics but rather estimates such characteristics based on the demographic composition of each visitor's home (see section A in the Online Appendix for more details).

## Independent variables

We collected data about park governance and events using an LLM-assisted workflow (see Section A3 in Online Appendix for details). The large language model (LLM) did not independently search the web or infer governance arrangements based on its model training data. Rather, we fed the text retrieved via pre-specified web searches (SerperAPI) into the LLM and asked the model to classify the text. Thus, for each park, the model was provided with pre-specified web search results and used few-shot prompting (i.e., our definitions and a small set of coded examples) to decide whether governance and event categories were present. The output consisted of a yes/no classification, accompanied by a brief descriptive justification and the exact source link, enabling transparent manual verification. To assess reliability, we conducted both inter-rater and intra-rater reliability checks on all the LLM classifications. For the events data, the third author independently evaluated a 10% random subsample and compared his classifications with the LLM outputs (88% inter-rater reliability agreement). For intra-rater reliability, we re-ran the full LLM workflow on the same 10% subsample and compared the results to the model's initial classifications, confirming stable performance (84% agreement).

For the governance data, we conducted an even more extensive manual validation. Governance information is comparatively harder to identify than event listings because it might be buried within long administrative or organizational documents, or on social media platforms (e.g., Friends-of-Park organizations existing only on Facebook pages). We thus *manually reviewed every LLM classification of the governance variable*, ensuring that all classifications were accurate, grounded in verifiable documentation, and free from automatic inference.

Variables were constructed as follows (more details in Section A3 in the Online Appendix).

*Governance variables.* We constructed two binary variables capturing public-led and public-private governance. The first variable (public-led) was measured by coding whether a park was managed by a public agency (a park district or a department of parks and recreation). The second (public-private) by coding whether the park was managed by a private non-profit conservancy or corporation in collaboration with a public agency.[1] In addition, we also coded whether the park was supported by a Friends of the Park volunteer group. These categories were derived from the literature on the collaborative governance of commons (e.g., Ansell and Gash, 2008; Ostrom et al., 1974) and urban parks (Boamah et al., 2020; Carmona et al., 2008; Krinsky and Simonet, 2017). The categories are non-mutually exclusive to assess the additive effects of involving private or volunteer-driven organizations in public governance, thus capturing the cross-sectoral nature of governance in public activity spaces.

*Event variables.* We distinguished between *internal* events (organized by the park and reported on the park's official website) and *external* events (organized by outside groups or community organizations but held within the park, typically reported outside of the park's official website). For each source, we coded five categories: art, music, recreation and sports, ethnic and minority events, and protests and demonstrations. These categories are not mutually exclusive, and a park could have multiple event types and both internal and external events. For each category, we calculated event diversity as the count of different types of events organized in the park. In the models presented below, we not only used the diversity of *internal* events as our independent variable but also tested the effect of external events' diversity in an alternative specification, as reported below.

*Control variables.* We control for the total number of unique yearly visitors since our diversity measures are sensitive to the denominator. We further rely on a set of control variables that we received from the TPL. Park size is considered because larger parks may be more visible than smaller ones. The city in which the park is located accounts for the fact that parks and recreation departments could differ in their policies and resources by location. Finally, the park's longitude and latitude allowed us to consider its distance from the nearest Central Business District, since remote parks require greater travel from the city center. The distance was computed using the haversine formula.

In robustness analyses (see Section A5 in Online Appendix), we include the designation of the park's primary purpose to account for the fact that some parks (e.g., featuring historical sites, museums, event spaces, sports facilities) may draw visitors from further away by design. We also control for hotel density within one mile of the park, and for walk score measures (walk, bike, and transit scores), to account for differences in tourism intensity and accessibility that could independently influence travel distance. We also draw on additional data about the demographic composition of the neighborhood (available from Winkler et al.'s (2024) analysis of American Community Survey data in the immediate catchment area of TPL parks). These additional control variables tended to decrease our number of observations without

substantively changing our results, which is why we only reported them in Tables R1 and R2 in the Online Appendix.

### Estimation

We estimate random-effects (REs) regression models for (1) the log of mean home travel distance and (2) the share of travel distances from neighborhood, city, and outside the city. Standard errors are clustered at the city level, which is appropriate because each park contributes multiple years. The random intercept by park helps identify effects from within-park changes and between-park variation. We estimate each park $i$'s visitors' average travel distance, or share of travelers from a particular distance category, in year t as a function of a series of covariates through the following function:

$$Y_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_g \text{Governance}_i + \beta_P P_i + \beta_N N_i + \beta_V V_{it} + \delta_t + \alpha_i + \varepsilon_{it}$$

where Governance indicates whether the park is led by private entity (such as a conservancy or a corporation), $P$ is a vector of time-invariant park features (e.g., park size and distance to the nearest city center, and event diversity), $N$ is a vector of time-invariant neighborhood features at the park location (such as neighborhood racial diversity and neighborhood population), and $V$ is a vector of park-visitor features in year $t$ (e.g., unique visitors and, where noted, visitor income, race, and diversity indices). Furthermore, the models include year fixed effects $\delta$ to account for potential shocks such as the COVID-19 pandemic, a park random intercept to account for baseline differences among parks $\alpha$, and the idiosyncratic error $\varepsilon$. In specifications with interactions, we further estimate a coefficient for $\text{Governance}_i \times \text{Events}_i$ to estimate how the effect of programming differs depending on the park's governance. All continuous predictors are standardized ($z$-scores), so coefficients can be compared and interpreted as per-standard deviation changes.

## Results

### Travel distance

The following models show the correlates of average travel distance to a park. Parks draw mostly from nearby areas: on average, 22% of visitors come from the neighborhood ($\leqslant$1 mi), 45% from nearby neighborhoods within the same city (1–7 mi), 26% from further away in the city (7–30 mi), and 7% from outside the city ($\geqslant$ 30 mi). The average home distance is about 12.4 miles, with a long right tail. Table 1 shows further descriptive statistics.

### Governance and place attractiveness

We find that public-private parks draw visitors from farther away. In the random effects models reported in Table 2, public-private governance is associated with roughly 29% longer average home distance ($\beta = 0.286$, $p < 0.001$; Model 2.1). Compared to exclusively public-led parks, this effect is primarily driven by the capacity to attract more visitors from outside the city, relative to the neighborhood and city where the park is located. Public-private parks draw fewer neighborhood visitors ($-6.2$ percentage points, $p < 0.001$), more city visitors ($+$ 4.6 pp, $p < 0.001$) and slightly more outside-city visitors ($+$ 1.6 pp, $p < 0.05$; see Models 3.2–4 in Table 3). In short, they shift the mix toward non-local users. Given the predominance of publicly governed parks in our sample, we tested and confirmed the robustness of our results to the presence of public-led parks (see Table R4 in Online Appendix).

As Tables 2 and 3 show further, a "Friends of the Park" group is modestly associated with shorter trips ($\beta = -0.054$, $p < 0.01$,

**Table 1.** Descriptive statistics ($N$ = 3080 parks with 24,599 park-years).

| Variables | $N$ | Mean | SD | Min | Max |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Average home travel distance | 24,599 | 12.49 | 9.50 | 0.15 | 175.00 |
| Share visitors from neighborhood | | 0.21 | 0.16 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Share visitors from within city | | 0.72 | 0.15 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Share visitors from outside city | | 0.07 | 0.08 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Unique annual visitors | | 377 K | 1972 K | 13.92 | 93,500 K* |
| Park size (acres) | | 445.05 | 6090.95 | 20.01 | 245,706* |
| Distance to nearest city | | 6.21 | 6.46 | 0.07 | 284.45 |
| Governance: public-private | | 0.13 | 0.34 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Governance: public-led | | 0.97 | 0.16 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Friends of park | | 0.32 | 0.47 | 0.00 | 1.00 |
| Event diversity | | 1.48 | 1.44 | 0.00 | 5.00 |
| Age diversity | | 0.93 | 0.01 | 0.58 | 0.94 |
| Income diversity | | 0.91 | 0.03 | 0.62 | 0.93 |
| Educational diversity | | 0.76 | 0.02 | 0.23 | 0.80 |
| Racial diversity | | 0.49 | 0.12 | 0.00 | 0.75 |
| Neighborhood population | 19,129 | 6.61 K | 15.83 K | 0.00 | 372.03 K |
| Playground area (square meters) | | 761.51 | 9229.25 | 0.00 | 421.306 T |
| Water area (square meters) | | 31.08 K | 355.26 K | 0.00 | 11,300 K* |
| City budget: total expenditures | 21,313 | 219 M | 377 M | 7.83 M | 1760 M |
| City budget: share private expenditures | | 0.07 | 0.11 | 0.00 | 0.53 |
| City budget: share programming-related | | 0.23 | 0.14 | 0.00 | 0.71 |
| Hotels within 1 mile | | 2.37 | 6.95 | 0.00 | 124.00 |
| Walkability score | | 36.61 | 26.91 | 0.00 | 100.00 |

*Some outlier parks in our sample feature abnormally large size, water features (reservoirs, lakes, etc.) and visitor numbers. The robustness analysis in the Online Appendix shows that our results are not sensitive to these outliers.

Model 2.1). This suggests that community-led efforts to improve parks attract nearby visitors without necessarily making the park a destination—possibly in the interest of these groups. There are no significant interaction effects between event diversity and public-led governance, including also the presence of a "Friends of the Parks" group (see Section A4 in the Online Appendix). Bigger parks, greater distance to the nearest city center, and more visitors are each linked to longer travel distances, and a higher outside-city share.

## *Programming*

Event diversity, on average, has no statistically significant main effect on the distance from which a park attracts visitors ($\beta = -0.01$, $p > 0.05$; Model 2.1). However, in public-private parks, event diversity raises average travel distance (interaction $\beta = 0.062$, $p < 0.01$; Model 2.2). Figure 1 summarizes the key findings of the article, showing that the predicted average travel distance from visitors' home is higher for public-private parks and increases with event diversity (panel d). Further, panels a–c in the figure show that the pattern holds across distance categories (immediate neighborhood around the park, elsewhere in the city, outside the city). That is, parks with public-private governance draw fewer neighborhood and within-city visitors and more outside-city visitors as the diversity of events

**Table 2.** Predictors of home travel distance (average miles, logged), with park random effects, year and state fixed effects, and clustered SE at the park level.

| Variables | (2.1) | (2.2) | (2.3) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Gov: public-private | 0.286*** | 0.186*** | 0.286*** |
| | (0.030) | (0.039) | (0.030) |
| Gov: public-led | −0.086 | −0.095$^{+}$ | −0.061 |
| | (0.058) | (0.057) | (0.063) |
| Friends of park | −0.054** | −0.054** | −0.054** |
| | (0.021) | (0.021) | (0.021) |
| Event diversity | −0.005 | −0.013$^{+}$ | 0.025 |
| | (0.007) | (0.007) | (0.056) |
| Gov: public-private × event diversity | | 0.062** | |
| | | (0.019) | |
| Gov: public-led × event diversity | | | −0.031 |
| | | | (0.057) |
| Unique visitors | 0.046** | 0.044* | 0.045** |
| | (0.017) | (0.017) | (0.017) |
| Park size | 0.047*** | 0.047*** | 0.047*** |
| | (0.006) | (0.006) | (0.006) |
| Distance to nearest city | 0.013 | 0.013 | 0.013 |
| | (0.011) | (0.011) | (0.011) |
| Constant | 2.681*** | 2.698*** | 2.657*** |
| | (0.099) | (0.098) | (0.102) |
| *N* | 24,599 | 24,599 | 24,599 |
| *df* | 50 | 51 | 51 |
| $R^2$ (within) | 0.022 | 0.022 | 0.022 |
| $R^2$ (between) | 0.136 | 0.139 | 0.136 |
| $R^2$ (overall) | 0.111 | 0.113 | 0.111 |

Standard errors in parentheses; $^{+}p < 0.1$. $*p < 0.05$, $**p < 0.01$. $***p < 0.001$.

increases, whereas the relationship is flat or slightly reversed for publicly governed parks.

In the models reported in Table 3, internal events at public-private parks tend to increase the share of out-of-city visitors at the expense of within-city visitors (Models 3.3 and 3.4). Together, these results show that governance and programming work in tandem: public-private governance is linked to a broader catchment area, and programming at such parks may attract people from farther away. In an alternative specification, we also included the diversity of *external* events (organized by third parties or community groups) and found that only *internal* events (organized by the park official organizations) were statistically significantly associated with travel distance. These results are robust when adding neighborhood context, including racial diversity and total population at the park location, and when considering the primary designation (i.e., purpose) of the park as identified by the TPL; the public-private reach effect remains positive and statistically strong. Robustness checks show that the effect on travel distance is not driven by the park's designation (see Table R1 in Online Appendix). We note, however, that the type of park does affect the visitor composition; for example, parks designated as a "historic or cultural area" have a significantly higher travel distance and share of out-of-town visitors.

**Table 3.** Predictors of home travel distance (average miles from home and shares by distance category), with park random effects, year and state fixed effects, and clustered SE at the park level.

| Variables | (3.1) Avg. home travel distance | (3.2) Visitors share neighborhood | (3.3) Visitors share city | (3.4) Visitors share outside city |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Gov: public-private | 0.186*** | −0.062*** | 0.046*** | 0.016* |
| | (0.039) | (0.010) | (0.009) | (0.006) |
| Event diversity | −0.013 $^{+}$ | −0.004* | 0.006*** | −0.002* |
| | (0.007) | (0.002) | (0.002) | (0.001) |
| Gov: public-private × event diversity | 0.062** | 0.006 | −0.016*** | 0.010*** |
| | (0.019) | (0.005) | (0.004) | (0.003) |
| Gov: public-led | −0.095 $^{+}$ | 0.008 | 0.009 | −0.017 $^{+}$ |
| | (0.057) | (0.015) | (0.014) | (0.010) |
| Friends of park | −0.054** | 0.019** | −0.014** | −0.005 $^{+}$ |
| | (0.021) | (0.006) | (0.005) | (0.003) |
| Unique visitors | 0.044* | −0.005* | −0.000 | 0.006* |
| | (0.017) | (0.002) | (0.001) | (0.002) |
| Park size | 0.047*** | −0.007*** | 0.000 | 0.007*** |
| | (0.006) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
| Distance to nearest city | 0.013 | −0.005* | 0.006** | −0.000 |
| | (0.011) | (0.002) | (0.002) | (0.001) |
| Constant | 20.698*** | 0.139*** | 0.727*** | 0.134*** |
| | (0.098) | (0.020) | (0.022) | (0.020) |
| *N* | 24,599 | 24,599 | 24,599 | 24,599 |
| *df* | 51 | 51 | 51 | 51 |
| $R^2$ (within) | 0.022 | 0.028 | 0.012 | 0.010 |
| $R^2$ (between) | 0.139 | 0.097 | 0.078 | 0.107 |
| $R^2$ (overall) | 0.113 | 0.083 | 0.060 | 0.081 |

Standard errors in parentheses; $^{+}p < 0.1$. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$. $^{***}p < 0.001$.

## *Visitor diversity*

Table 4 confirms that parks attracting more distant visitors tend to have more diverse visitor pools: the diversity indices for income, race, education, and age are all positively associated with distance ($p < 0.001$). Looking at composition, a higher outside-city share goes with higher income and educational diversity (but also a lower share of non-white visitors), while a higher neighborhood share goes with lower diversity, especially in terms of income and racial diversity (though the share of non-white visitors tends to be higher). These are park-year correlations reported net of basic controls (park size, overall use, and year and state FE). Taken together, the patterns suggest that parks drawing visitors from farther away also draw visitors from more varied socioeconomic and demographic backgrounds.

Robustness analyses (see Section A5 in the Online Appendix) shown in Table R2 indicate that these associations are also supported when considering other features of the parks, including their governance form; the association between travel distance and the diversity of visitors does not, however, differ by whether the park features public-led or public-private governance. Furthermore, we tested whether other factors in the wider spatial and governance context of parks in Table R3 mediate the main effect of governance. We found that more private funding in the city's park budget is associated with, on average, longer travel distances (Model

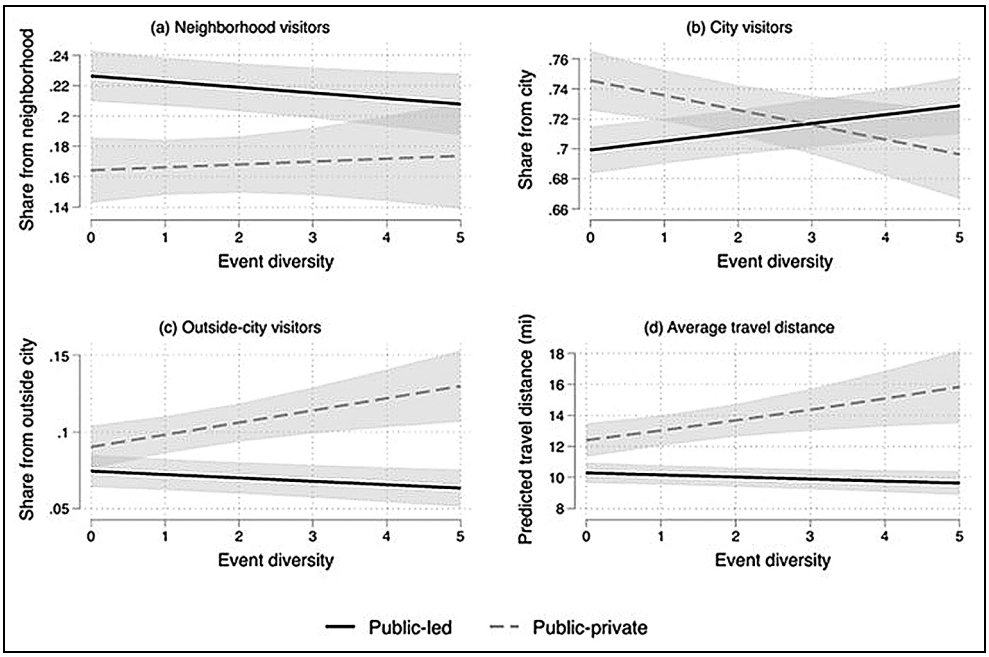


**Figure 1.** Predicted average travel distance (*d*) and share of visitors from neighborhood (a), elsewhere inside the city (b) and outside the city (c) by organizational governance and event diversity. Random-effect models with park-level clustering. Shaded areas are 95% confidence intervals.

R3.3); however, there are no associations between the city's overall budget and funding structure for parks documented by TPL on the average home travel distance, suggesting that it is indeed park-level indicators that drive whether a park becomes a destination. A park's average home travel distance increases with the number of hotels within a mile of the park and decreases with the walkability score, which indicates whether a park is accessible on foot (Models R3.5 and R3.6). This means that the presence of tourists and accessibility influence travel distance without, again, altering the main effect of our governance variables.

## Discussion

We asked how the organizational governance of an activity place is associated with the place's ability to attract visitors across neighborhoods. Conceiving parks as activity places, we investigated the association between a park's organizational governance and its visitors, particularly their travelled distance and diversity.

Our main finding is that the governance of the organizations running an activity place influences the place's attractiveness to distant visitors travelling longer distances to visit the place. Empirically, we show that parks run by public-private organizations draw visitors from farther away, attracting more visitors from outside the city relative to the neighborhood and the city where the park is located, with results robust to park size and other park attributes, neighborhood and state contexts, and the year of the visit. In short, the presence of a public-private governance structure tips the mix of visitors

**Table 4.** Socio-economic correlates of park visitors of home travel distance (average miles from home and shares by distance category), with park random effects, year and state fixed effects, and clustered SE at the park level.

| Variables | (4.1) Avg. home travel distance | (4.2) Visitors share neighborhood | (4.3) Visitors share city | (4.4) Visitors share outside city |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Age diversity | 0.034*** | −0.008* | 0.008* | 0.000 |
| | (0.010) | (0.003) | (0.003) | (0.001) |
| Income diversity | 0.130*** | −0.030*** | 0.021*** | 0.009*** |
| | (0.016) | (0.004) | (0.005) | (0.002) |
| Educational diversity | 0.091*** | −0.011* | 0.005 | 0.007*** |
| | (0.013) | (0.005) | (0.004) | (0.002) |
| Racial diversity | 0.048*** | −0.009** | 0.007* | 0.001 |
| | (0.012) | (0.003) | (0.003) | (0.002) |
| Avg. household income | 0.007 | 0.003 | −0.001 | −0.002 |
| | (0.020) | (0.005) | (0.006) | (0.003) |
| Education college $^{+}$ | −0.009 | 0.012* | −0.002 | −0.009*** |
| | (0.017) | (0.005) | (0.005) | (0.003) |
| Visitor share non-white | −10.200*** | 0.201*** | −0.043 $^{+}$ | −0.156*** |
| | (0.104) | (0.027) | (0.025) | (0.016) |
| Unique visitors | 0.040** | −0.004* | −0.002* | 0.006** |
| | (0.015) | (0.002) | (0.001) | (0.002) |
| Park size | 0.042*** | −0.007*** | 0.001 | 0.006*** |
| | (0.005) | (0.001) | (0.001) | (0.001) |
| Constant | 3.359*** | 0.026 | 0.761*** | 0.213*** |
| | (0.103) | (0.023) | (0.023) | (0.020) |
| *N* | 24,599 | 24,599 | 24,599 | 24,599 |
| *df* | 52 | 52 | 52 | 52 |
| $R^2$ (within) | 0.118 | 0.081 | 0.031 | 0.047 |
| $R^2$ (between) | 0.265 | 0.165 | 0.122 | 0.145 |
| $R^2$ (overall) | 0.232 | 0.149 | 0.097 | 0.121 |

Standard errors in parentheses; $^{+}p < 0.1$. $^{*}p < 0.05$, $^{**}p < 0.01$. $^{***}p < 0.001$.

toward non-locals. The programming of events amplifies this pattern, with events organized at public-private parks further increasing the parks' reach. That is, programming and governance appear to be working in tandem, increasing the appeal of parks to people located farther away.

All in all, we advance an organizational perspective on activity places and urban inequality, calling for more attention to the organizations running activity places and the types of activities and events that such organizations offer, eventually attracting different types of visitors. Below, we discuss how these findings contribute to research on organizations, urban inequality, and mobility.

## *Organizing socially integrative places to reduce spatial inequality*

Our first contribution is showing that the organizational governance of an activity place influences the place's attractiveness to distant visitors and thus its ability to create opportunities for social integration across distant, different neighborhoods. In doing so, we focus on *spatial* inequality (or segregation), which has long been acknowledged

as a foundational dimension of urban inequality (Simmel, 1908) For example, Garrido (2024) has recently argued that spatial inequality (segregation vs integration) affects how different social groups perceive and experience the same resource differences (i.e., how inequality feels on the ground). That is, socially integrative places that is, places where different social groups are co-present and thus more at risk of interacting—are likely to lower *social* inequality (i.e., the perceived link between resource asymmetries and social categories such as Black/White, Male/Female). In fact, a long tradition of work has shown the importance of socially integrative places for lowering social inequality and building cross-group social capital (e.g., Klinenberg, 2018; Jacobs, 1961).

We extend this line of work in two ways. First, we look beyond the physical and design characteristics of a place, showing how socially integrative places *can be organized*, thus highlighting the so-far-neglected organizational dimension of such places. Specifically, drawing on calls to consider the organizational aspects of urban phenomena (e.g., Brandtner, 2026; McQuarrie and Marwell, 2009), we argue that organizations contribute not just resources but also ideas and activities, for example shaping the events being programmed in an activity place, potentially attracting people from a wider spatial reach. Second, we explore a different source of social diversity than urban density (Jacobs, 1961), highlighting that diversity can also derive from contact with distant (rather than proximate) others. That is, mobility from afar affects the chances of social mixing in an activity place, thus influencing how social inequality may feel on the ground. Future research may further explore how and to what extent locals and non-locals interact in meaningful ways in a bridging activity place. For example, future urban mobility research could productively build on and extend the insights from rich ethnographies of social interaction in public places (e.g., Anderson, 2011; Low et al., 2005) in ways that our data does not allow us to do due to their limitations in capturing actual social interaction.

Of course, the presence of one or more socially integrative places does not necessarily change structural patterns of urban inequality, whether linked with social groups' identities (social inequality) or material resources, such as parks or other amenities (material inequality). Thus, the relationship between bridging activity places and inequality (of various kinds) is not straightforward and may unfold in different ways. On one hand, social and material inequality may drive segregated interaction. For example, scholars have long argued that mobility can be "compelled" by the resource differences between neighborhoods, inducing disadvantaged groups to travel longer distances to access coveted resources (e.g., Stouffer, 1940). Recently, Browning and colleagues found that young, segregated Blacks in Chicago travel to more racially heterogeneous neighborhoods in large part to seek resources inaccessible in their residential neighborhoods (Browning et al., 2022). On the other hand, research has also shown the opposite pattern where residents of disadvantaged neighborhoods are less mobile and thus less likely to travel to distant activity places (e.g., Lee et al., 2018). This is an area where future research is needed to investigate how social and material dimensions of urban inequality interact and induce different mobility patterns. Still, while organizing socially integrative places is not enough to change enduring patterns of material and social inequality, it is useful to know which kind of activity places might facilitate social mixing and how such places can be organized.

### *The organizations behind activity places: Who runs activity places and for whom?*

Extant research on activity spaces has mostly foregrounded the socio-economic composition of a whole individual-level activity space, privileging a "demand side" view focused on the individuals who move through the places constituting an activity space. Differently, we foreground a "supply side" view of activity spaces, emphasizing the need to unpack the heterogeneity of places in the space (i.e., what we called "activity places"), empirically showing that the organizations that run such places matter for how inclusive they can be. We show empirically that the supply of activities in an activity place and the ways in which such a place is governed matter to explain its ability to attract different people from distant neighborhoods, thus counteracting neighborhood-level segregation.

By doing so, we contribute to highlighting the organizational dimension that has so far been neglected in urban mobility research. This contribution is important because it points to an additional lever for making activity places more diverse and less segregated: organizational governance. Organizational governance shapes the strategies, resources, programming and target audiences of activity places, thus influencing the reach of such places in terms of visitors' distance and diversity. Given the cross-sectional nature of our governance data, we cannot isolate the mechanisms behind the positive effects of public-private governance on visitors' travelled distance. A plausible mechanism consistent with our findings points to the increased resources and higher board-level diversity of public-private activity places, which might influence the reach of their communication campaigns and their ability to organize diverse events, thus appealing to different and distant audiences. Such interpretation is supported by the statistically significant interaction effect between event diversity and public-private governance; and corroborated by the finding that this effect only holds for the events organized by park organizations (rather than the events organized by community groups), highlighting the role of organizational agency in programming parks for diverse audiences.

However, given the lack of time-variant governance variables, we cannot rule out possible alternative mechanisms. In fact, we acknowledge that the relationship between organizational governance and visitor travelled distance is complex and nuanced based on previous research. For example, city administrations may be interested in attracting outside visitors to revitalize underfunded or fiscally neglected parks, thus selectively engaging in public-private partnerships when municipal fiscal budgets are under strain (e.g., Bel and Fageda, 2009; Harnik and Martin, 2015) Or private nonprofit organizations may target specific parks—especially those located centrally or close to tourist destinations—to increase the economic value of the surrounding area (e.g., Willse, 2023). Or some public agencies may be better able to create and maintain public-private partnerships due to their large size, experience, and an established "partnership capacity" (e.g., Lazzarini et al., 2020; Moore, 1995).

Although we cannot fully tease out these important alternative mechanisms with our data, we showed empirical evidence (see Table R3 in section A5 in the Online Appendix) that our findings are robust to the inclusion of control variables capturing at least some of these alternative explanations, such as the city administration's fiscal budget and funding structure, the distance to a city's downtown and the density of hotels around the park (as proxies of the economic value of the area).[2] Based on these robustness analyses, we suggest that it is unlikely that the alternative mechanisms outlined above are

driving our findings. Our findings' robustness notwithstanding, more research is needed to understand the complex relationship between the organizational governance of an activity place and its visitor patterns, unpacking the temporality of the relationship and the variety of mechanisms possibly underlying it.

Another crucial area for future research concerns the possible drawbacks of public-private partnerships. What are the, perhaps less visible, social costs of public-private partnerships? While research has started to unpack the implications of such partnerships for the workforce (Krinsky and Simonet, 2023), key questions remain about their effects on the dynamic balance between local and non-local visitors, that is, visitors from the immediate neighborhood versus other neighborhoods or even outside the city (e.g., Kim and Wu, 2022). Is there a crowding-out effect so that a public-private activity place attracting non-locals will start distancing locals? Do locals tend to use less activity places once non-locals crowd them? How does the increase in use by some types of visitors (e.g., Whiter, more affluent) influence park use by others? And what are the strategies that the organizations running activity places can adopt to attract diverse visitors while avoiding crowding out effects and the possible tensions among different users? More research is needed to understand how public-private governance may undermine the function of parks as neighborhood amenities (Small and McDermott, 2006), possibly as an unintended consequence of expanding their reach and benefits.

## *From proximity to distance: How do activity places bridge neighborhoods?*

The concept of activity space has been mostly used to measure independent variables (e.g., the number of times that people visit places outside their neighborhoods) to be linked with outcomes that are measured at the individual—or neighborhood-level (see Cagney et al., 2020 for review), thus only partially succeeding in its intent of moving beyond the neighborhood as a level of analysis. In contrast, our paper shows the value of flipping this logic and moving activity spaces to the other side of the equation—that is, as a phenomenon to be explained and theorized in its heterogeneity of forms and outcomes. Said differently, if the literature has established that activity spaces are important, we need to better understand the variety of places that compose an activity space, where such places come from, and how they operate in practice.

Our paper takes a small step further in this direction by identifying the characteristics of activity places that attract visitors across distances, thus connecting distant, likely different neighborhoods. Our focus on distance rather than proximity, attraction rather than access, shifts attention to study activity spaces in the broader context of the community (i.e., the city) rather than in isolation. In a city, multiple activity places of the same kind are present and may well compete with each other to attract visitors. By doing so, we respond to the call of studying the broader ecological communities in which activity places are embedded (Browning and Soller, 2014: 16). In fact, we show that places bridging multiple neighborhoods are associated with more diversity in terms of race, income, age, and education.

As any other study, our paper has some limitations and boundary conditions. First, we focus specifically on parks, that is, a type of activity place that is openly accessible to everyone. Our choice has been driven by theoretical considerations: compared to churches or workplaces, where access is mostly predicated on an identity or category (e.g., being an employee or a religious person), open accessibility makes parks a strategic research site to study people's choices to

travel to a destination. Still, of course, our analysis is limited to public, openly accessible activity places and future research could productively study the role of organizations managing other types of more private and restricted activity places. Second, our analysis was limited by data restrictions regarding the actual social interactions taking place in the parks. While we do have data on the distance travelled by visitors and know the number and type of visitors in an activity place, we do not have direct information about whether the different social groups visiting the parks do indeed interact during their visits. Future research may integrate qualitative and quantitative approaches to activity spaces, for example triangulating diaries of visits or observations with fine-grained GPS data. Finally, the fact that the mobility data provider estimates visitors' demographic characteristics based on the demographic composition of their homes, while a common limitation of mobility data to ensure privacy, implies an ecological fallacy and thus possible errors in the estimates.

These limitations and boundary conditions notwithstanding, we hope this paper will encourage others to explore further the organization of activity places that attract people from distant social worlds and the relationship between these places and forms of urban inequality. If we care about urban inequality, activity places that bridge multiple neighborhoods are important. In these urban "interstitial spaces", people of different social strata might temporarily "break free" from their neighborhood's norms and constraints, mixing more freely, even if only temporarily (Furnari, 2014). This perspective has important implications for how to organize and use activity places to counteract urban inequality. While a common recipe has been to improve access for marginalized groups, increasing their proximity to more privileged areas or amenities (e.g., König, 2024), our paper complements this view with an additional pathway: attracting distant others can reduce segregation too.

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## Supplemental material

Supplemental material for this article is available online.

## Notes

1. Some parks (40) were managed by conservancies or corporations and not by a public agency. To account for these exceptions, in the analysis we included a control for whether the primary governance form of parks is public-led, which was not significant.
2. In addition to state-level fixed effects, our findings are also robust to the inclusion of city-level fixed effects, showing that the results are not driven by between-city differences.

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