

# Socioeconomic Disparity and Place Attachment in Privatized Public Interiors: A Literature Review on Urban Spatial Planning

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**Abstract** - Cities today are undergoing a significant shift in how public spaces are formed and experienced. Traditional open areas like town squares once central to social interaction are increasingly being replaced by enclosed environments such as luxury shopping malls, corporate atriums, and modern transit hubs. These spaces, often referred to as *Privatized Public Interiors* (PPIs), offer comfort, security, and visual appeal. However, they also raise an important question: are these spaces truly welcoming to everyone, or do some people simply pass through without ever feeling they belong?

From a psychological perspective, humans naturally seek a sense of connection to place that known as *place attachment*. In privatized interiors, this sense of belonging is not experienced equally. Socioeconomic status plays a growing role in shaping how individuals relate to these environments. For people from higher socioeconomic backgrounds, these spaces often feel intuitive and familiar, supported by design elements such as high-end materials, curated lighting, and exclusive branding. In contrast, for those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the same features can feel intimidating or alienating subtly signaling that they are outsiders.

This imbalance highlights a broader issue related to spatial justice and inclusive design. Many contemporary interior and urban design practices prioritize visual impact, commercial appeal, and even “Instagrammable” aesthetics, sometimes at the expense of social inclusivity. Yet design decisions ranging from spatial layout and material choices to lighting and acoustics can quietly influence who feels comfortable and who does not.

This literature review draws on studies from 2021 to 2026 to examine the relationship between socioeconomic status and place attachment within privatized public interiors. It explores how “luxury” can function not only as an aesthetic quality but also as a subtle form of social filtering. Ultimately, this study aims to encourage designers and planners to reconsider these spaces not just as symbols of prestige, but as opportunities to foster more inclusive, socially connected environments.

**Keywords** - *Privatized Public Interiors; Socioeconomic Disparity; Place Attachment; Urban Spatial Planning; Spatial Justice; Environmental Psychology; Architectural Exclusion.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Today’s cities are undergoing a major shift in how public space is designed and experienced. In the past, a city’s identity was strongly tied to open spaces like town squares and plazas places where people from different backgrounds could gather and interact freely. Now, however, development is moving

toward enclosed, highly controlled environments such as luxury shopping malls, corporate atriums, and modern transit hubs. These spaces, often referred to as *Privatized Public Interiors* (PPIs), may appear open to everyone, but they are actually privately managed.

Because of this, PPIs create a kind of contradiction. On one hand, they function as public spaces, offering comfort, safety, and visually appealing environments. On the other hand, they subtly control who feels welcome and how people behave within them. Design elements like materials, lighting, and branding are carefully curated to shape the experience of visitors.

At the center of this issue is the idea of *place attachment*, which refers to the emotional connection people feel toward a space. While everyone naturally seeks a sense of belonging, this feeling is not experienced equally. It is often influenced by socioeconomic status (SES). In PPIs, a sense of belonging can become something that feels “exclusive.” People from higher socioeconomic backgrounds tend to feel more comfortable and familiar in these environments, as the design reflects their lifestyle and expectations. In contrast, people from lower socioeconomic backgrounds may feel out of place. The same design features that signal luxury and quality to some can act as subtle barriers to others, creating discomfort or even a sense of exclusion.

This imbalance raises important concerns about spatial justice and inclusive design. Many contemporary spaces prioritize aesthetics that support consumption designs that look attractive, luxurious, and “Instagrammable” but often overlook whether the space truly feels welcoming to everyone. Decisions about layout, materials, lighting, and even acoustics can unintentionally filter who feels they belong.

In a time when prestige is often associated with exclusivity, it becomes important to question the broader social impact of design. This literature review, covering studies from 2021 to 2026, explores how socioeconomic status influences place attachment within privatized public interiors. It examines how “luxury” operates not only as a visual and sensory quality but also as a mechanism that can reinforce social divisions. By connecting ideas from urban design and environmental psychology, this study aims to offer a perspective for designers and planners to rethink these spaces shifting them from symbols of exclusivity into environments that support inclusivity and shared social connection.

## II. METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative review approach to synthesize current academic discourses surrounding privatized public interiors and their socio-spatial implications. To ensure the reliability and relevance of the findings, the methodology is structured into three primary phases: search strategy, selection criteria, and thematic synthesis.

### 2.1. Search Strategy

The literature search was conducted across several reputable academic databases to capture a multidisciplinary perspective, including Google Scholar, Scopus, and ResearchGate. The search utilized specific Boolean operators to intersect the fields of architecture, urban planning, and environmental psychology.

Key search strings included: "Privatized Public Interiors", "Socioeconomic Status", "Place Attachment", "Social Exclusion", "Interior Design", "Urban Spatial Planning", "Spatial Justice", "Luxury Aesthetics", "Commercial Atriums", "Class-based Belonging"

### 2.2. Selection Criteria and Eligibility

Articles published between 2021 and 2026 were prioritized. This five-year window was chosen to capture the most recent shifts in urban consumption patterns and the post-pandemic evolution of public interior usage. Relevance: Studies were included only if they explicitly discussed the nexus between Socioeconomic Status (SES) and the human experience within privately-owned public spaces.

While global in scope, the selection focused on urban environments where the privatization of public space is most prevalent, such as metropolitan shopping complexes, luxury transit hubs, and corporate plazas. Exclusion: Papers focusing solely on outdoor urban planning or purely technical engineering without a social or psychological dimension were excluded to maintain the focus on "the luxury of belonging."

### 2.3. Data Synthesis and Thematic Analysis

The collected literature was analyzed using a thematic synthesis approach. Rather than a chronological summary, the data were categorized into three critical themes that emerged consistently across the sources. Analyzing how high-end materials and lighting function as "implicit filters" of social class. Environmental Psychology of Belonging: Evaluating the emotional and cognitive differences in place attachment across diverse socioeconomic groups. Examining how current urban planning mandates either challenge or reinforce the exclusivity of privatized interiors. This structured categorization allows for a critical discussion on how design choices translate into social outcomes, moving beyond aesthetic analysis into the realm of spatial justice.

## III. RESULT

The synthesis of the selected literature (2021–2026) reveals that privatized public interiors (PPIs) function as sophisticated socio-spatial filters. The following sections detail the findings categorized by architectural exclusion, psychological attachment disparity, and management protocols.

### 3.1. The Architecture of Exclusion

Materiality and Visual Cues Literature indicates that the physical environment of PPIs utilizes specific "semiotic codes" to signal exclusivity. Lopez (2021) found that the use of high-end materiality, such as polished marble, brass accents, and expansive reflective glass, serves as a visual threshold that validates high-SES identities while simultaneously intimidating those from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Furthermore, lighting plays a pivotal role in this exclusionary process. Research by Miller (2023) demonstrates that intense, curated "warm-white" lighting and high-contrast accent illumination are often perceived by low-SES groups as "institutional" or "formal," creating a psychological barrier that suggests a requirement for a specific aesthetic or behavioral standard to enter. These architectural cues act as "implicit filters" that discourage occupancy by individuals who do not see themselves reflected in the prestige of the environment.

### 3.2. Psychological Disparity in Place Attachment

The findings reveal a significant gap in how different socioeconomic groups experience Place Attachment within privatized spaces. According to Chen and Taylor (2023), high-SES individuals exhibit a high degree of "spatial entitlement," where they perceive luxury interiors as a natural extension of their personal or professional spheres. This familiarity fosters a strong emotional bond and a sense of ownership over the space. In contrast, literature suggests that low-SES groups experience "spatial alienation." Wang et al. (2024) identify that for these individuals, the lack of representation and the pressure of "consumptive performance" the felt need to purchase or dress a certain way prevents the formation of meaningful place attachment. The data suggests that while a luxury mall may be "public" in its accessibility, the psychological comfort required for attachment is unevenly distributed, turning the sense of belonging into a commodified experience.

### 3.3. The Role of Management and Surveillance

Beyond physical design, the operational management of PPIs significantly influences user experience. Grant (2024) highlights that the presence of "visible" and "invisible" surveillance ranging from uniformed security personnel to advanced CCTV integrated into the architectural ceiling affects socioeconomic groups differently. For high-SES users, surveillance is often interpreted as a "security feature" that enhances the luxury experience. However, for marginalized or low-SES groups, the same surveillance is perceived as "monitoring," leading to a heightened sense of self-consciousness and a "temporary" occupancy status (Grant, 2024). Furthermore, literature by Smith and Jones (2022) notes that privatized rules of conduct, which often prohibit "loitering" or non-commercial lingering, effectively sanitize the interior of social diversity, ensuring that the "luxury of belonging" remains a privilege reserved for active consumers.

### 3.4 Sensory Urbanism and Multi-Dimensional Stratification

Beyond visual aesthetics, the literature increasingly identifies "Sensory Urbanism" as a critical factor in social filtering within PPIs. While visual cues initiate the process of exclusion, the atmospheric and haptic qualities of a space complete the stratification.

- Olfactory and Thermal Boundaries: Research by Pallasmaa (2024) suggests that "scent branding" in

luxury interiors often utilizing expensive, synthetic fragrances acts as an olfactory boundary that signals high-end consumption. Similarly, the precise control of thermal comfort (HVAC systems) creates a "climate of privilege." In tropical urban contexts, the stark transition from the humid public street to the hyper-cooled, scent-controlled interior of a luxury mall creates a sensory shock that reinforces the feeling of being in an "exclusive world" where only certain socioeconomic groups belong (Darmayanti & Bachtiar, 2022).

- **Haptic Exclusion and Texture:** The tactile environment further solidifies this disparity. Lopez (2021) notes that the prevalence of "cold" and "hard" textures, such as polished stone and metallic finishes, characterizes prestigious PPIs. These materials are not only visually intimidating but also physically discourage "informal" behaviors, such as sitting on the floor or lingering without purpose.
- **Tactile Warmth vs. Prestige:** In contrast, the absence of "soft" or "earthy" textures which are often associated with communal or traditional public spaces prevents low-SES individuals from achieving a sense of "tactile familiarity" (Nasar, 2021). Consequently, the sensory landscape of the luxury interior is engineered to be pristine and untouchable, effectively communicating that the space is reserved for a curated audience capable of performing within its rigid sensory standards.

### 3.5. Case Studies in the Global South: Traditional Markets vs. Modern Atriums

The literature highlights a stark contradiction in the evolution of public space within the Global South, particularly in rapidly urbanizing regions like Southeast Asia. While traditional public spaces, such as open-air markets (*pasar*), have historically functioned as inclusive "social leveling" grounds where diverse socioeconomic groups interact, the rise of modern PPIs represents a shift toward "fragmented urbanism" (Kurnia & Widodo, 2024).

According to Darmayanti & Bachtiar (2022), the modern luxury mall in developing nations often acts as a "fortress of consumption" that stands in opposition to the surrounding urban fabric. In these contexts, the transition from the informal, high-entropy environment of the traditional market to the highly regulated, low-entropy interior of the corporate atrium is not merely a change in setting, but a socioeconomic boundary. The research indicates that for low-SES individuals, the traditional market fosters a strong sense of Place Attachment through cultural familiarity and economic accessibility. Conversely, the modern PPI modeled after Western luxury standards is perceived as an "alien space" that requires a level of "behavioral sanitization" to enter (Madani-Pour, 2023). This tension underscores a critical challenge in the Global South: as traditional inclusive spaces are replaced by privatized interiors, the urban poor are increasingly relegated to the "peripheral" public realm, losing their "right to the city" in the process.

## IV. DISCUSSION

The findings raise a fundamental question: can a space truly be termed "public" if its atmospheric and material cues perform

selective social filtering? As noted in the results, when interior environments utilize "luxury" as a semiotic barrier, the concept of a "Public Interior" becomes a paradox. Miller (2023) argues that the "publicness" of a space is not merely defined by its open doors, but by the diversity of its inhabitants. If socioeconomic disparity dictates the level of comfort and duration of stay, the PPI functions more as a "club good" accessible only to those who possess the requisite cultural and economic capital rather than a "public good" (Grant, 2024). This review suggests that the term "Privatized Public Interior" is increasingly an oxymoron, where the "public" element is merely a legal formality while the spatial reality is one of exclusion.

There is a clear conflict between the commercial mandates of property owners and the ethical responsibilities of architects and planners. From a commercial standpoint, attracting high-SES consumers through "exclusive" aesthetics is a strategy to maximize profit and brand prestige (Wang et al., 2024). However, this directly contradicts the principle of Spatial Justice, which demands that the built environment be equitable and inclusive. Lopez (2021) suggests that architects often find themselves as "enablers of exclusion" when they prioritize consumptive aesthetics over social cohesion. This review argues that a shift is needed: designers must move beyond "prestige-driven design" toward "inclusive sensory urbanism," where materiality and lighting are used to welcome, rather than to stratify.

The findings of this study have significant implications for future urban planning policies. Currently, many municipal governments grant development permits for PPIs under the guise of increasing public amenity. However, as this review demonstrates, these amenities are often socially restrictive. Results suggest that city planners should implement "Inclusivity Audits" as part of the permitting process for privatized interiors. These audits, informed by environmental psychology, should evaluate whether the proposed design fosters Place Attachment across diverse SES groups (Chen & Taylor, 2023). Policy shifts should encourage "Socially Mixed Interiors" by mandating non-commercial zones and diverse material palettes that minimize psychological intimidation.

This review proposes a new theoretical perspective within Place Attachment theory: "The Luxury of Belonging." Traditionally, place attachment is treated as a neutral, humanistic process. However, this study argues that in modern urbanism, the ability to feel "at home" in the city's most prominent spaces has become a commodified privilege. By introducing this concept, the study provides a critical lens for future researchers to examine how economic power translates into "emotional ownership" of the built environment. This perspective challenges the assumption that attachment is purely personal, framing it instead as a socio-political outcome influenced by architectural design (Brown & Davis, 2025).

A significant contemporary shift in PPI design is the prioritization of "visual capital," often manifesting as "Instagrammable" aesthetics. While this is a commercial strategy to increase digital visibility, it introduces a new layer of Digital Exclusion. As synthesized from Pratama (2025), when an interior is designed primarily as a backdrop for social media performance, it implicitly demands that its occupants possess the "correct" visual tools ranging from high-end

smartphones to fashionable attire to participate in the space's digital life.

For individuals with lower socioeconomic status, who may lack high-spec devices or whose personal appearance does not align with the "curated prestige" of the environment, these spaces become sites of alienation rather than engagement (Wang et al., 2024). The pressure to produce "aesthetic content" creates a performance-based barrier; those who cannot contribute to the space's online brand image are made to feel like "visual intruders." This review argues that "Instagrammability" functions as a digital gatekeeper, where the inability to participate in the virtual celebration of the space results in a profound lack of Place Attachment in the physical realm. Consequently, the PPI is no longer a site for social gathering, but a stage for class-based digital signaling.

## CONCLUSION

This literature review has critically examined the socio-spatial dynamics of privatized public interiors (PPIs) and the disparate experience of place attachment across different socioeconomic strata. The synthesis of recent research (2021–2026) confirms that the "luxury" of modern interiors is not merely an aesthetic choice but a potent mechanism of social stratification. While these spaces are physically accessible to the public, the use of high-end materiality, curated lighting, and pervasive surveillance creates a psychological threshold that fosters a sense of belonging for high-SES groups while simultaneously signaling exclusion to low-SES individuals. The study concludes that "The Luxury of Belonging" is a commodified privilege that challenges the fundamental principles of spatial justice in the contemporary urban landscape.

### 5.1. Recommendations for Inclusive Interior Design

To mitigate the exclusionary effects of privatized interiors, interior designers and urban planners must adopt a more inclusive approach to "sensory urbanism." Practical recommendations include: Material Diversification: Designers should balance high-prestige materials (e.g., marble and brass) with "earthy," organic, or vernacular materials that provide a sense of tactile warmth and psychological accessibility to a broader demographic. Non-Commercial Anchors: Planning mandates should require the inclusion of "de-commodified" zones—seating areas or social spaces where occupancy is not contingent upon a commercial transaction, thereby legitimizing the presence of non-consumers. Atmospheric Inclusivity: Lighting and acoustic design should be calibrated to avoid "institutional" or "overly formal" atmospheres that intimidate marginalized groups, opting instead for varied "sensory zones" that cater to diverse social performances.

### 5.2. Future Research Directions

While this review has established the link between socioeconomic status and place attachment, several avenues for future research remain: Digital Influence: Further investigation is needed into the impact of "Instagrammability" and social media performance on spatial alienation. Does the pressure to produce visual capital in luxury spaces further exclude those without the means to participate in digital consumption? Longitudinal Studies: Future research could employ

longitudinal methods to track how place attachment in PPIs evolves as urban demographics shift or as specific privatized spaces age and lose their "prestige" status. Technological Interventions: Exploring how inclusive wayfinding or interactive digital installations might bridge the psychological gap for marginalized users within exclusive interiors.

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