

A participatory approach to public space design as informative for place-making

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Place-making is an empowering process that takes community involvement as point of departure. In South Africa, the planning and design of urban space was previously based on top-down, bureaucratic planning practices that excluded communities from decision-making about their neighbourhoods. Together with this, Apartheid policy enforced separate development based on racial grounds, which resulted in communities being relocated to characterless landscapes with limited open spaces. Open spaces are important in low-income high density residential environments as they are prominent public places that form the heart of communities' social lives. This article reports on the first phase of an on-going research project initiated by Urban and Regional planning at the North-West University, South Africa, that seeks to empower communities to transform local open spaces to vibrant public places. This particular study's aim was to explore how community involvement can inform the process of place-making. The research was conducted in Ikageng, Potchefstroom, South Africa where the community identified a lack of quality open spaces as a major concern. A qualitative participatory research approach was followed, which included on-site focus group discussions with participants living around an existing open space. Community participation informed place-making in at least two ways: by creating an understanding of the socio-spatial dimensions that underlie space and by formulating suggested intervention strategies to address the needs and desires of the community. Suggested interventions include (i) physical interventions (upgrade and beautification of the space), (ii) social interventions (ongoing community involvement) and (iii) economic interventions (creating employment opportunities).

Keywords: open spaces, place-making, public places, participatory approach

Contextualisation of the research

Space is no longer considered a neutral backdrop for people's lives as space becomes place when endowed with meaning and value (Cho *et al.*, 2011:393; Tuan, 1979). Place values are embedded in both the physical space and social environment in which relationships are constructed (Friedman, 2007). This suggests that place incorporates physical dimensions, social relations, symbolic meanings and subjective human experiences (Schofield & Szymanski, 2011). The making of places not only influences physical form of urban space, but also the way communities are created and interact with one another (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). Place-making is considered an empowering process during which people are actively involved in renovating, maintaining and representing the places in which they live (Heald, 2008:27; Jordaan, Puren, & Roos, 2008:91-117; Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). Place-making implies that places are not products of deliberate intervention such as spatial planning, but should involve active and ongoing participation of communities. Therefore places cannot be designed from the outside (e.g. by experts) (Friedman, 2007). Active involvement of communities is especially important when making decisions concerning their living environment (Holmes, 2011) as involving communities in

decision-making gives them a feeling of ownership and responsibility towards their environment (Eden, 1996:184) and ultimately improve their quality of life (Lipietz, 2008:135). Place-making is based on community involvement as a fundamental point of departure.

Involving people in decision-making was only recently introduced in South Africa as a result of the country's move to democracy in 1994 (Bank, 2011). Democracy is based on actively involving people in decision-making (Ababio, 2007:615; Mzimakwe, 2012:502; Mzimakwe & Reddy, 2008:671). As urban planning is regarded a tool to enhance democracy (Alexander, 2008:07), community involvement is important in urban planning (Watson, 2009:2272). Furthermore, it is believed that social and economic inequality, currently major challenges in the South Africa post-apartheid context, can be addressed through inclusive planning processes (Cash & Swatuk, 2011:55). Planning in South Africa seems to be an important tool to implement government's people-centred approach in human settlement making (South African Presidency, n.a.:2; CSIR Chapter 2, 2005:1) to restore the disruptive effects of the Apartheid regime, during which people experienced limited opportunities for participation (Siyongwana & Mayekiso, 2011:143). Against this background the use of participa-

tory methods and processes in the making (planning and design) of urban space is important. Urban spaces that are of particular importance in post-apartheid South Africa are public open spaces.

Open spaces are of value to a community, as these areas serve as social structuring devices, enhance aesthetic experiences, perform formal and informal recreation purposes and enhance “sense of place” within a community (Reuther & Dewar, 2006; Sinwell, 2011:359). Public open spaces are particularly important in low income residential environments where high residential densities and limited access to open spaces occur (Moor and Rowland, 2006). South Africa’s Apartheid legislation e.g. Group Areas Act (Act 41 of 1950) (Maharaj, 1997:142), which enforced separate development based on racial grounds, resulted in numerous communities being relocated to characterless urban spaces (Robinson, 2011:295) that were isolated, homogeneous and lacked quality open spaces (Dewar & Uytendogaardt, 1991). Research on community participation in the making or re-making (transformation) of open spaces to vibrant public places in a low income South African residential area may provide useful insight into the process of place-making for planners and designers in similar communities elsewhere.

This particular study forms part of an on-going trans-disciplinary research project by Urban and Regional Planning at the North-West University, Potchefstroom, South Africa, that seeks to transform existing open spaces to vibrant public places for communities. The research is based on participatory research approaches and methods that take active community engagement as a point of departure. Community engagement mirrors substantial development in academic scholarship over the last ten years by embracing a “scholarship of engagement” (Boyer, 1990; Shulman, 2004). This scholarship of engagement manifests as experiential education, service-learning, undergraduate research, community-based research, the scholarship of teaching and learning movement and a general emphasis on stronger relationships with local communities (Butin, 2006:473). This article reports on the first phase of this research project that aimed to use a participatory approach to open space planning and design in order to explore whether and how community involvement can inform the process of place-making. Sub-aims of the study included to explore a community’s conceptualisation of a specific open space as well as to develop cornerstones for place-making.

Research context

The research was conducted in Ikageng, Potchefstroom (Tlokwe Local Municipality), South Africa (see Figure 1). The Ikageng community was formerly subjected to forced removals by the Group Areas Act (Act no 41 of 1950) during the Apartheid regime. Although formally developed, Ikageng is today still facing stark socio-economic realities (such as employment, basic services and quality public

spaces) after the legacy of Apartheid. Ironically and appropriate for this study the word Ikageng, if translated from Northern Sotho to English, means “we built for ourselves” (Raper, 1989). The lack of open spaces and the poor quality of existing open spaces in Ikageng were recently identified by the local community as a focus for future intervention. The particular space the research is based upon is part of a road reserve that is approximately 1000m² in size and currently used as an open space.

Research design

Research approach

A qualitative research approach was appropriate for this research as it acknowledges that realities and meanings are context bound (Berg, 2007:19). A qualitative approach allows for a meaningful and holistic understanding of embedded experiences that occur spontaneously in their natural settings (Allwood, 2012:1420) where no extraneous influences occur. It is important to note that qualitative research, as in this case, works with small groups of participants or cases because it does not aim to be representative of a larger population (Rodriguez et al., 2011) as the focus is rather on obtaining in-depth understanding of concepts (in this case the process of place-making) than focusing on presenting evidence in quantifiable terms. While the particular open space and participants this research is based upon cannot be viewed as representative of open spaces and communities elsewhere, understanding how communities can inform the process of place-making may be useful in similar contexts.

As the research aimed to create a partnership between the community (research participants) and researchers, rather than an “us” and “them” situation, involvement of community members remained a central focus throughout the research. The participants were fully engaged throughout the whole process of research (Holmes, 2011).

Research methodology

As the overall research project this particular research is part of, eventually aims for empowerment of research participants, action research was chosen as an appropriate research methodology as this method implies a democratic, participatory process that uses collaborative ideas in order to provide solutions to concerns (Reason & Bradbury, 2006). Action research creates greater community cohesion, enhanced self-images, better political understanding and more empathetic relationships between practitioners (or researchers in this case) and clients (participants) (Gomm, 2004: 293).

Research participants

Participants involved in this research were invited to participate in this study due to living in close proximity to the research site and based on their frequent (daily) interaction

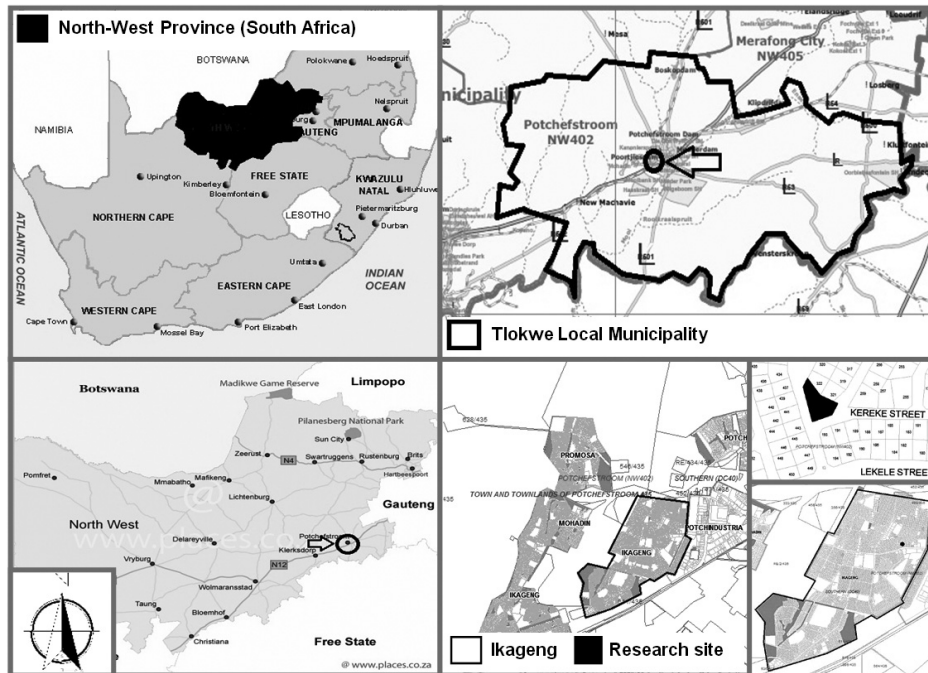


Fig. 1. Location of research site (Source: Own construction)

with the site (e.g. daily observation, walking past/through the site or using the site for other purposes such as playing and socialising). Participants included twenty members of the community between the ages of twenty-five and sixty, of whom fourteen are female and six are male. Very few of these participants (four) own the house they live in, as most (sixteen) live with family. All participants are long-term residents and most of them (sixteen) have been staying in the area for more than ten years, while four participants have been living in this area between three to five years.

Research process

Community access

Community access is considered an essential basis for research as it facilitates bonds, links and connections between researchers and participants in order to gain trust and communication within this relationship (Andrews *et al.*, 2012:578). Community entrance was gained through the Ward Committee that represents the community living in the specific residential ward that contains the research site. Ward Committees are political units defined as structures that aim to provide assistance towards a democratically elected councillor in order to create support in terms of his/her mandate according to the Municipal Structures Act (Act No. 117 of 1998). They are important links between communities and decision-makers, as ward committee members are agents of democracy (Theron & Muyonjo, 2002:493; Basheka & Mubangizi, 2012: 636) and closest to the people on the ground (Theron & Muyonjo, 2002: 493; Mzimakwe, 2010: 513). Ward committees are there-

fore official municipal entities that can help researchers gain entrance to communities for research purposes.

Data generation

Data for this research phase was gathered by means of two focus group discussions conducted on the research site. Focus groups refer to groups of people who interact within a certain community, sharing some common viewpoints, characteristics or interests (Grønkvær *et al.*, 2011:16). When brought together by a moderator, researcher or facilitator, the goal of a focus group is to gain certain knowledge in terms of a specific site or focussed issue (Rodriguez *et al.*, 2011). The main aim of the focus group discussions was to gain an understanding of how the community conceptualises the particular space earmarked for transformation as well as to develop solutions for future intervention. Discussions revolved around three open questions as basis for discussion: (i) *Tell us about this site and your neighbourhood?* (ii) *What do you think should happen with this site in future?* (iii) *How do you as a community see your future involvement in this site?* The focus group discussions were audio and video recorded for data analysis purposes.

Data analysis

Focus group discussions were transcribed verbatim and analysed through inductive qualitative content analysis (Chinn & Kramer, 1999: 125), a useful analytical method for discovering and documenting emotional, physical and social values associated with public open spaces (Neuman, 2011). The coding process was open, allowing themes and meanings to appear relatively freely from the texts under



Fig. 2. On-site focus group discussions (Source: Photograph taken by researcher)

the broader themes of ‘physical dimensions’, ‘social relations’ and ‘future interventions’.

Ethical aspects

Ethical clearance was obtained from the North-West University as a sub-project under an official National Research Foundation (NRF) project: Public participation methods (Ethical clearance code number: NWU-00009-11-S4).

Findings

Main themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data are summarised in the Table 1 below. Themes include the community’s conceptualisation of the open space in their neighbourhood in terms of physical dimensions, social relations and suggested future spatial and design interventions.

Theme 1: Physical dimensions (Sub-themes: maintenance and lack of safety)

Participants described the open space in terms of physical dimensions that revolve around maintenance and lack of safety. Low maintenance and lack of safety are expressed as major concerns that should be addressed. Participants consider maintenance and safety as interrelated issues. The dumping of bottles, a current problem on the site, results in pieces of broken glass that create an unsafe area for walking and playing. The low maintenance is also expressed as a future concern, especially with regard to the vegetation on the site such as the grass patches that cover the ground area of the site. One participant stated: “... not grass... who’s going to cut the grass?”. The grass cover is regarded a health issue for the community: “Our biggest concern here... on this site... it’s our health...” and “Its problematic because when it rains you cannot even open your front door or

windows because of mosquitoes and all that.” According to the participants, lack of safety is further exacerbated by the fact that the space is not suitable for children to play. This results in children playing in the streets surrounding the open space: “...the children are playing... in the street... their playing ball in the street... and the car can chase them... anytime...” and “... when the children have the... uh... their own space to play... there won’t be any accident...”. Maintenance and safety are physical characteristics of the site that are perceived by participants as challenges to be addressed.

Theme 2: Social Relations (Sub-themes: neighbourliness, territoriality, feelings of being disregarded)

Apart from negative perceptions with regard to the physical environment, social relations between community members living in the area are expressed as an asset. A strong feeling of neighbourliness exists as members of the community know each other, look out for one another and protect one another. One participant stated “...you’ll be surprised that eh...eh... most of us here... around... we know each other” while another confirmed “... the neighbourhood... is... is friendly... everybody is friendly... we know each other... we greet each... you know...? It’s like... there is nothing that would happen to your house if you’re not here... Cause I believe somebody... is at the back-up of it... we are looking after each other... here...”. This neighbourliness seems to create a strong “insider” bond among community members living around the open space. Strong social relations among community members also create certain volatile relations for example between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders’. Community members living close to the site revealed territorial behaviour with regards to the research site that culminates in con-

Table 1. Community’s conceptualisation of open space

Main themes	Sub-themes	Quotes from the participants
Physical dimensions	Low maintenance	“... this site was a dump site... they used to throw babies here... new-born babies...dogs...cats...everythingdogs...cats... everything...it smells...” “They (government) decided it to be a park which didn't really succeed because eventually it ended up like this and again, again they started to throw things here”
	Lack of safety	“... it is dangerous here... because there are broken glasses are here, they bring the bottles and everything, they throw everything here.” “Our biggest concern here... on this site... neh... it's our health...” and “Its problematic because when it rains neh, you cannot even open your front door or windows because of mosquitoes and all that.”
Social relations	Feeling of neighbourliness among the community	“The neighbourhood is friendly, everybody is friendly, they know each other.....they greet each other” “Most of us here, we know each other” “... they don't have problems here... eh... in this area... because... uhm...if one is not... uhm... present at his or her house... uhm... the other person is always willing to be on the look-out...uhm... for the other person's property...”
	Territoriality with regard to the open space	“..... if you're a stranger here... we can see that” “... sometimes is other guys... who stays outside our neighbourhood... they, they just come... and make their things... you know? But, last time, we grab them... they run away...” “We are actually fighting with the people who are throwing things here.”
	Feelings of disregard by local government	“... he said to the council... to let us... to clean here... they didn't answer us... never answer us...”
	Suggested intervention strategies	Physical intervention (upgrade and beautification) Social intervention (community involvement) Economic intervention (creation of employment)

Source: Author’s own composition, 2013)

flict with outsiders as one of the participants stated: “...if you're a stranger here... we can see that...” while another participant said: “... sometimes is other guys... who stays outside our neighbourhood... they, they just come... and make their things... you know? But, last time, we grab them... they run away...”. Another stated: “We are actually fighting with the people who are throwing things here.” Neighbourliness and territoriality are strong assets that hold together the community who live around this site and create a sense of ownership.

Participants also expressed volatile relations with regard to local government as they feel disregarded by government when concerns are raised about the site. As one participant commented: “... he (referring to another participant who send a letter to government) said to the council... to let us... clean here... they didn't answer us... never answer us...”. This is possibly why they expressed the need for someone (in this case the researchers) to act as a voice at local government on their behalf “maybe...if you can be our mouth-piece... especially...eh...with the council... because I think... this problem...they come from a long way...”

Theme 3: Intervention strategies (Sub-themes: physical intervention, social intervention and economic intervention)

Future ideas for the site were formulated as intervention strategies and included first and foremost the physical intervention such as the upgrade and beautification of the site as stated in the following quotes: “She'd like to have the, the place made beautiful...and smart...uhm... so that when you walk in... you want to be part of the area...” and “...to upgrade this... uhm... field... for a... for a near future... and for the people living here...” and “...to beautify this place...”. Upgrade and beautification for participants include physical elements such as that the site remains as a park, is developed into a child-friendly area (for example a play space), and incorporates security (for example fencing), paving, seating areas, trees and dustbins. One participant described her idea as: “...paving and then under the trees... there must be like chairs and tables... if I come from the shop...eh... I bought a cool drink... I can just sit there and drink it... and then next to that... that, that space...”

there's eh, eh, eh... dust bin... I can throw the bottle in...".

Social intervention relates to participants seeing their role in the physical upgrade and beautification as proactive and voluntarily involvement as stated for example: *"Maybe we can volunteer ourselves by uhm... paintings and... do the paintings... and paving... we can help... each other by doing that... anybody who knows that... we can do it... all of us...".* The participants expressed the idea of voluntary collaborative partnership and they came across as eager to help with the implementation of the physical upgrade and beautification: *"...if... eh... there are some people who come here... with them... with some materials who come and build something here... I can give them a hand... you know... as they can make it look like, I can give them a hand... anything they can do here... I'll give my best...".* Although participants did not mention involvement in the maintenance of the site it is implied by statements that refer to continuous long term involvement with the site: *"I am going to be very much involved and lifetime involvement because, I have three boys... one is ten... other one is four... so... if it's a park here... I... have to make sure that... it's safe for them (referring to children)..."*

A third sub-theme that emerged as an intervention strategy for the research site, included economic intervention as stated by the wish to create economic upliftment in the area. In order to provide employment opportunities, participants suggested that local skills should be used for implementation: *"People...that are not...uhm...going... unemployed...should be...uhm...called up on and uhm... work on this area uhm... with the help of council"* and *"... they must use our locals here, people who are not working... they must make use of them... to beautify this place..."*. While intervention strategies mainly revolves around physical intervention it is clear that physical intervention is suggested here as a means to achieve larger social and economic ends.

Discussion

The first phase of the research confirmed theoretical approaches to space as being more than a neutral backdrop for people's lives. Space is intertwined with people's daily lives and involves both physical form and social relations between people. In this study the physical environment induces feelings of dissatisfaction among the community due to the prevalence of low maintenance of the open space. This creates concerns with regard to the health and safety of the community. It is further suggested here that the physical environment affects relations between people. Existing relations between community members seemed to be strengthened by a joined sense of ownership and responsibility towards the open space. This particular space also contributes to the creation of volatile and hostile social relations. Dissatisfaction with the physical space and attempts to communicate this to government eventually resulted in community members feeling disregarded by local government as their needs were not acknowledged or addressed. The strong sense of ownership and responsibility that exists

among community members towards the open space resulted in territorial behaviour, especially by community members living directly around the open space and who interact with the space on a regular basis. Territorial behaviour in this case tends to create conflict between community members as 'insiders' and outsiders who attempt to vandalise the site. The research indicated that places do not only involve physical form, but also the way communities are created and interact with one another (Schneekloth & Shibley, 1995). Place consists of more than physical aspects (objects and activities) and extends towards the people using the space (Al-Bishawi & Ghadban, 2011:74). Social relationships are embedded in the physical environment, as suggested by Friedman (2007). People can therefore not be separated from the environment (e.g. open spaces) that is planned or designed. In this way physical space is endowed with meaning and becomes place as suggested by Tuan (1979).

This study further supports Friedman's view (2007) that because places are not mere physical products, they cannot be created from the outside (e.g. by planners and designers). Places are unique and context bound and intertwined with the community that uses them. Communities can provide valuable insight into the socio-spatial relations underlying the formation of place. This community disclosed valuable information to the researchers with regard to challenges (maintenance, volatile relations with outsiders and local government) and assets (neighbourliness, and territoriality) of the particular space. Following a participatory approach as point of departure when public places are planned, designed, transformed or upgraded proved in this instance to be informative for the process of place-making. Community participation informed place-making in this instance in at least two ways: (i) by creating an understanding of the socio-spatial dimensions that underlie space and by (ii) formulating suggested intervention strategies to address the needs and desires of the community. Suggested interventions were developed based on the community's future vision of how to transform this space into a vibrant public place. These interventions include *physical intervention* by upgrading and beautifying the space, *social intervention* by ongoing involvement of the community (e.g. with implementation of the spatial planning and design of the space) and *economic intervention* that relates to using the space in such a way as to create employment for people from the community.

Conclusion

This paper presents the first phase of an on-going research project that takes active community involvement as point of departure. It is suggested here that a participatory approach during which communities are actively involved in the place-making process from the start, provide a cornerstone for place-making. Important building blocks for future place-making initiatives are suggested and include: (i)

acknowledging the physical dimensions of the site and how it is perceived by members of the community, (ii) understanding the social relations that exist and that is constructed as a result of the open space, as well as (iii) future intervention strategies as a way to fulfil the needs and desires of local communities. The extent to which this place-making process empowers communities to transform local spaces to public places is something that has to be explored in follow-up phases of this research.

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