

# URBAN SPACE, MEMORY AND THE PUBLIC REALM

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

The brief and title of this paper initially suggested that space and memory be examined from the point of view of memorialisation i.e. fixing memory in space through objectification and examined relative to its potential to enable healing and reconciliation.

This paper argues that it is not memorialisation through objectification in space per se that can contribute to healing and reconciliation in society but rather the role of the public realm in cities as a means of holding collective value that can unlock the means of not only healing and reconciliation but also promote active engagement in a context marked by highly stratified relations.

Memorials in the form of statues, plaques, obelisks and triumphal arches certainly reflect the past through honouring those who have given their lives to greater causes, for example, the struggle against apartheid in our country. These are valuable items in the cultural landscape and powerful tools in mapping one's past, but in most cases, and in Cape Town specifically, reflect a particular history, a single colonial narrative. We have to acknowledge and find a means to make visible the other stories and lives too. Makeka (2003: 11) argues that the "lack of a tangible engagement with memory in the public realm by inserting new artefacts (which engage in the dialogue of perspective and meaning) is an injustice to the collective. It also denies the potential for memory to be a tool for healing." Our contention is that while it is true that "a tangible engagement with memory in the public realm" is limited or absent, we believe that it is not only through the layering or replacement of artefacts over time alone that the public realm can successfully acknowledge different perspectives and have collective value.

This paper examines the role of the public realm and that of planners and designers in influencing the public realm to facilitate integration and active engagement against the background of our painful past. It explores spatial reconstruction, strategies of reclamation and restitution as means to facilitate social deconstruction. Through the means of case studies / projects we demonstrate how this can potentially be achieved.

## **2. THE PUBLIC REALM – A POSITION**

The public realm is the only space in the city that provides opportunities for public interaction. It comprises the spaces outside of the private, semi-private and nowadays

privatised domains. It represents the spaces and places of everyday activity for all citizens. It provides platforms for interaction, debate, contestation, dialogue and celebrations. It is a “negotiated” domain. In its making and functioning it requires people to work together towards a common goal even if this is an arrangement by which each agrees to allow the other to disagree. As an element of the public realm, public space for example, is seen as “the common ground where people carry out the functional and ritual activities that bind a community” or ‘space we share with strangers...space for peaceful coexistence and impersonal encounter’ (Madanipour, 2003: 218).

The public realm is comprised of, amongst other elements, public facilities, public spaces and institutions that provide venues to address critical issues such as health and healing, education and social development, collectively. It is also the venue for people to congregate and interact outside of the confines of their private domains. It is important for recreation and relaxation especially given the nature of the majority of the lower income areas where internal / private space is at a premium. Public spaces ‘represent the primary, and arguably the most important, form of social infrastructure’ (Dewar and Todeschini 2004: 69). Furthermore, public facilities, spaces and institutions are also key components of the broader economic environment as they provide the thresholds and backdrop for trade especially for the urban poor. Their investment and location as structuring elements to the city is therefore critical when attempting to address urban reconstruction objectives.

The spaces and places in cities that constitute the public realm function as the containers of collective urban life and it is for this reason that they should be seen as venues for reconciliation and active engagement. While they reflect the past and create memories themselves they also have a role in the present and the future. Cities can contribute significantly to personal development, self-actualisation and what Lefebvre calls the process of ‘displacement’ (Lefebvre in Nicholson-Smith 1991: 225) - reflecting the moment at which the individual recognises himself as part of a greater whole. If urban environments are not able to facilitate self-development / actualisation and the process of ‘displacement’ then they do not fulfil their basic function.

### **3. A RECONCEPTUALISED FRAMEWORK**

The framework addresses spatial dis-functionality of our city at two scales - the scale of the city and the local area scale. As a result of relocation and displacement, people have been alienated from the urban opportunities offered at the city scale as well as the significant public spaces and places such as the Grand Parade and City Hall.

At the same time the quality and form of the planned environments that people have been relocated to are not conducive to promoting and sustaining positive relations within communities. This does not include informally settled areas where social relations and support networks are in place most of the time.

We contend in this paper that city reconstruction, together with focussed spatial interventions at the local scale, engaging people, their memories, stories and narratives can go a long way to dealing with the more subtler forms of damage done to communities. The public realm provides the most important opportunity to address dis-functionality at both scales.

#### **3.1 Strategies focusing on the public realm**

There are a number of spatial strategies that in conjunction with a-spatial programmes focussed on dialogue and active engagement, can facilitate reconciliation and social deconstruction. The strategies can be divided into the following three key groups.

- Those that are focussed on spatial reconstruction;
- Those that emphasise and re-assert the public realm through reclamation; and
- Those that are focussed on the restitution process in the post-apartheid city.

In section 4, the paper makes reference to projects typical of these categories to illustrate the scale and nature of each of the possible actions.

#### **3.2 Social deconstruction**

Murray (2003) argues that “notions of memory are inextricably linked to notions of race, ethnicity and identity and that these are socially constructed. Social construction takes place in the specific sense that presupposes that while categories of race are not natural or biological, and while notions of race, ethnicity and identity are not given, at the same time

they take on a social reality and determinacy in certain settings – or sites – which causes them to have real social effects that are revealed through memories of and associations with place.” This issue is often unacknowledged in debates about the “nature and form of memory in relation to place” (Murray 2003:13).

Speaking of current day Cape Town, Makeka (2003: 11) argues that the “current cultural monologue in the public realm promotes an ongoing selective and distorted memory”. Cape Town as the oldest city in the country has been shaped more than any other by a colonial history. Century City, the Waterfront, our wine estates are examples of the manner in which a particular historical perspective has white washed a society in the name of good business. The majority of the population remain alienated from large parts of the city, which are unaffordable and have little meaning for them culturally. We need to acknowledge the difference between real and constructed notions of race, ethnicity and identity and engage memory to help create representative city spaces. A democratic nation requires qualitative urban spaces that integrate and allow both commonalities and differences to be expressed.

There are a number of spaces in Cape Town, which with limited intervention could become truly representative and be invested with the power to allow ‘social deconstruction’ and different narratives of the past and aspirations for the future to be vocalised / represented. The Grand Parade is an example of such a space. Its location within the Cape Town central business district (CBD) transport interchange ensures that a large number of people pass through and use the space on a daily basis. It has played a critical role in the past for a broad cross section of different political and cultural groupings wishing to grieve, to contest and at the same time, to celebrate.

Woodstock, Salt River Main Road and Albert Road are another important set of spaces that continue to play a key role in the life of both the local community and other external groups. The routes have historical significance due to their function as the main connection between the Cape Town CBD and the hinterland over the last centuries. They continue to play a key role for small commercial operators as major public transport carriers and are also often the site of public protests due to the visibility they offer.



Insert 2: Grand Parade pre 1994 (Jody Paterson)



Insert 3: Grand Parade pre 1994 (Jody Paterson)



Insert 4: Woodstock/Salt River Main Road (NM & Associates, 2003)

These spaces are important in the history of Cape Town and its people and while they may not operate optimally in the eyes of authorities, they are invested with layers of meaning that should not be erased. Buildings such as the City Hall and Somerset Hospital have a similar function in that they have always served a varied set of public interest groups and therefore hold meaning to a large cross section of Cape Town. These spaces and buildings will remain alive in peoples' minds for as long as the old stories are retold and there is space with collective value for the stories to be retold over time.



Insert 5: Somerset Hospital (NM & Associates, 2003)



Insert 6: City Hall (Jody Paterson September, 2005)

These spaces and buildings are the places of the new multi-cultural urban order where the potential conflicts of difference begin to be played out. Sandercock (2003: 87) maintains that “in multi-cultural societies, composed of many different cultures each of which has different values and practices, and not all of which are entirely comprehensible or acceptable to each other, conflicts are inevitable”. They begin to form appropriate social infrastructure in a new integrated democratic society that can begin to not only contribute to the process of integration but also allow conflict to exist.

### **3.3 The role of planners and designers in re-asserting the public realm**

Modernist and Apartheid era planning was explicitly anti-urban, its object being to tame and to ‘bring order’. While there has been a considerable shift in the minds of those involved in the built environment since 1994 there is still a reluctance to acknowledge that “Plans and designs are never neutral tools of spatial ordering” (Bridge and Watson, 1997:16).

It is prudent in post apartheid cities, and Cape Town in particular, to guard against powerful anti-city practices by focussing on the following.

- The need to return to a visionary / imaginary approach to city making including an emphasis on the public realm and public spaces and places in particular, as collective and representative imaginings.
- The need to create space in the minds and hearts of planners and designers to not only understand intellectually i.e. to be conscious of the power / knowledge relations at play but internalise the concept or imaginings of cities through a genuine understanding of the role of collective spaces in city-making, and in particular in playing a reconciliatory role in urban society.
- The need for people who practise in the built environment and in particular planners and designers to be mindful of the memories and stories of the people whose lives and struggles were and are still silenced, today.

There are three key essential reasons why professionals of the built environment must be charged with including memory as a key layer in spatial planning and design. The first is to ensure that they become conscious of the narratives and memories of ordinary fellow citizens whose pasts are as important as theirs and their forefathers. The second is the spatial disciplines’ responsibility to begin to acknowledge and consciously internalise the pain associated with some collective memories of our society by recognising how the ‘other’ lived

and is living now. The third is to understand how planning and design processes related to the formation of collective space can assist communities to reclaim space in the city.

#### **4. GIVING MEANING TO THE RE-CONCEPTUALISED FRAMEWORK**

The following sections describe a number of projects through which we have indirectly engaged with memories and processes that begin to facilitate integration and living engagement.

##### **4.1 Reconstruction – the case of Philippi Transport Interchange, Cape Town**

In Cape Town as in other South African cities, where a large proportion of the urban poor reside in dormitory style township developments and informally settled areas on the periphery, it is necessary to have a strategy to deal with firstly, the extreme social and economic polarisation of the city but also the extreme under-resourced nature of these areas.

Transport interchanges have recently been the focus of strategic infra-structural investment as they are considered to be important from an urban restructuring perspective. Transport interchanges offer increased levels of mobility and present opportunities to link people to opportunities in historically well serviced areas but are also the “arenas of departure and arrival” (Barac, 2005). Barac questions how professionals engage with the act of design in post apartheid South Africa. He suggests that these sites represent “a movement from town to township” in the way that they facilitate a dialogue between rural and urban identities, tradition and modernity and the past and future aspirations. These sites allow agglomerations of people to collect and collide dynamically through the day, exchanging goods and ideas and visions for the future.

We look here to a project completed in 2003, which demonstrates how a professional team were able to facilitate reconstruction by a process that required them to maintain their critical distance and acknowledge the diversity that makes up the city. Philippi Transport Interchange was a response to a number of interrelated needs the most important being transport and trading. On site discussions and mapping of all the trading to understand the intimate relationships between various roleplayers allowed the designers to create a space that responded to both the material and nonmaterial needs of the users. The design did not rely on

relocation and / or mass reorganisation but chose to reinforce the fluidity of the site and support existing relationships where possible. The designers created an infra-structural backdrop that was able to absorb existing dynamics and accommodate a new set of tensions. This included access to water points, ablutions, shelter, secure storage areas and resting / recreational spaces.



Insert 7: Aerial view of Philippi Transport Interchange (City of Cape Town, 2001)



Insert 8: Waster collection point at Philippi Transport Interchange (Du Toit and Perrin, 2001)

These spaces are conceived as a means to liberate not constrain and as such present opportunities for collective levels of expression, aspirations and memories to be shared. It is through the economic bartering and social exchanges among a number of different people and diverse cultural groupings, including visitors to the city, that we see the potential for healing and reconciliation.

Spaces designed in the spirit described above are seen as places where people of different backgrounds come together and seek common ground through ordinary levels of day to day interaction.

## 4.2 The reclamation of lost space

The Cape Flats is a bleak landscape. Wind swept and featureless, it provides little respite for residents (most of whom were relocated from central locations in Cape Town or who have recently migrated from the rural areas), from the daily struggles for survival.

Environments such as these are particularly alienating due to the absence of any meaningful public space. The public arena is formless and unable to support any of the basic functions of interactive city life. As a result residents struggle to locate themselves culturally and are unable to engage positively with their pasts and / or futures. This in turn has a negative impact on the social relationships that are so critical to the survival of the urban poor in our current context.

Spatial intervention in areas such as these enables communities to lay claim to lost space and in so doing begin a process by which they contribute to the making of the city. This in turn enables communities to access their past and the threads that tie them to a larger world. It requires a process that engages, at an intimate level, communities that have over the last decades been torn apart by policies placing people in extremely alienating environments far from relatives and divorced from anything familiar.

We turn now to two environments within the greater Cape Flats that are home to communities relocated from the inner city between the 1950's and the 1970's under the Group Areas Act, Act 77 of 1957. These neighbourhoods are comprised typically of three / four storey walk-up housing with no private or semi private outdoor spaces for residents. The lack of clearly defined boundaries between the private, semi-private and public realm has in many cases led to the territorialisation of the areas by gangs. Power struggles between community groupings for control of land in the area are thus common and extreme and make it very difficult to get consensus even within a small group of people.

The Blode Street Public Space Upgrade in Lavender Hill and the Dr. Abdurahman Boulevard Upgrade as part of the Kewtown Precinct Plan both involved the upgrade and reconfiguration of road reserves and open space into defined public space. Both projects evolved through a larger needs assessment process with the community's participation. Final designs were workshopped with representative groups to ensure the residents understood the nature of the intervention.

Although the design was, in the designers' eyes, compromised by decisions made by politicians and officials with respect to reductions in allocated budgets and the community, the processes engaged were of most value. Individuals were required to engage with each other on common ground and confront issues as a community relative to the project. The threat of losing budgets kept them coming back to engage even after group dynamics brought individuals to blows. Broad consensus was reached in both cases after a long period and the projects finally contracted on site. The interventions on site are small public space improvements and involve the definition of spaces for communal recreation and provide relief in contexts where there are limited possibilities for people to congregate and socialise outside of their small private domains. The planting provides relief in extremely desolate landscapes exposed to harsh winds and seating provides a means to define play courts.



Insert 9: Kewtown Urban Renewal Programme, Dr Abdurahman Ave (Du Toit and Perrin, 2004)



Insert 10: Lavender Hill (NM & Associates, 2005)

### **4.3 Restitution – the cases of Protea Village and District Six**

The restitution of land rights is a significant strategy when dealing with reconciliation. However it must be acknowledged that land alone cannot make someone forget the pain and loss associated with forced relocation and displacement. Title to the land must be regarded as an important component of the reconciliation act but it is the process associated with restitution and the manner in which the new environment is able to empower those returning, that has the most potential to heal.

We have been involved in two land claims projects neither of which has been finalised to date. The first is Protea Village, which is a small group of 86 claimants who resided until the late sixties in a rural setting below Kirstenbosch as tenants of the Bishops Court Estate. The second is the large group of claimants who used to live in District Six but who now reside in different locations scattered across the Cape Metropolitan Area.



Insert 11: District Six - Old



Insert 12: District Six (NM & Associates, 2004)

In the Protea Village case it was through the dialogue between returning claimants and surrounding residents that the past was being articulated. Anger, greed and intolerance / indifference to others' pasts were brought into the open and also committed to paper. Tensions such as those that developed between the needs of the environment and the needs of those returning made the process even more complex raising the question around the role of the "public good" or "public realm" as spaces for all, the hurt and the privileged (existing residents of Bishops Court).

A series of intense workshops with the larger group and representative working group allowed claimants to interrogate the nature of the contexts they presently lived in and to re-engage with their memories of Protea Village. This was necessary to arrive at a single vision for the manner in which the claimants wished to resettle on the land. The vision then informed a set of guidelines that are expected to guide the nature and form of the new development. A spatial framework enabled particular parts of the site with significance to the community (both new and old) to be protected to allow their continued use in a manner that allows for introspection and engagement over time through events and programmes.

The District Six Land Claim has not had to deal with the prejudice of surrounding residents due to the size of the site and the mostly non-residential nature of its edges. However the site's location within the inner city, where land values are high and the market historically uncontested, makes the City and Land Claims Commission's job particularly challenging especially given the lack of resources available both from the state and those returning.

The District Six Museum which has been a key role player in the resettlement claim process, enabled old residents to engage with their past and empowered them to lay claim to land but also the memories associated to District Six, the place. Programmes, exhibits and events run by the Museum allowed the wider public to experience the pain of the broken lives and in this manner contributed greatly to reconciliation at a broader level.

The claimants' needs have obviously changed over the years and do not reflect the needs back at the time of removal, but there is also a need to remember an environment that was unique and memorialise an environment and community that is so much part of a large number of Cape Town citizens' past. The challenge here is not to romanticise the past but to also acknowledge that not all aspects of the environment worked positively. A further challenge is also to create an environment that is responsive to more contemporary needs of those returning within a broader context of extreme polarisation and increasing levels of poverty within the city.

The approach to dealing with heritage and memory in this case has been to design an environment that is shaped by planning and design guidelines that ensure that the positive qualities of the old fabric can be recreated, where possible. For example, the guidelines provide for the residential interfaces to offer passive surveillance over streets and public spaces to ensure that the elderly and the youth feel safe in their environment. The proposed design will ensure that the new community has the potential to function as supportively as it did in the past, to more vulnerable sectors of the returning community.

The design will ensure that key institutions remain the focus of the landscape and that the residential fabric can in its flexibility allow for integration of land uses, income groups and cultures as it did in the past. The institutions and spaces associated with these (which include the public access ways) will need to accommodate a full range of activities and allow people to use the public realm freely and safely as a venue to express and engage collectively.

It is in these spaces that the “latent” (le Grange, 2003) memories are expected to be expressed. It is also in these spaces as opposed to buildings and objects that we can more positively memorialise and integrate the past through dialogue, debates, celebrations and so on. Engaging claimants and other citizens in this way slowly allows for the deconstruction of (socially constructed) class, racial, ethnic and identity barriers in our city.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

This paper questions whether memorialisaton through the construction of “memorials” in the conventional sense alone is an adequate means to addressing the need for reconciliation in our present society given the levels of poverty, inequality and high degrees of exclusion common to our cities today. It also argues that it is not space itself that heals, but the processes and strategies that are engaged to allow commonalities to be explored and consensus-based ideas, interactions and tensions to shape and activate the public realm that hold the potential for active engagement to happen over time.

The paper focuses on the public realm – the container of collective urban life and space.

It proposes that we look to the creation of a city that can over time allow a “multiplicity of communities” to exist and call for a city that engages all in an ongoing dialogue about the past in an effort to move forward. A city, offering not only improved infrastructure and housing, but qualitative civic spaces in which individuals and communities can engage with each other on a day to day basis, will go a long way to achieving the levels of tolerance, trust and understanding necessary to support a truly democratic city.

The paper challenges planners and designers to operate within a reconceptualised framework that assists a conscious effort to influence the public realm’s role in achieving reconciliation in view of social redress. It also reviews certain case studies that begin to provide clues and lessons for planners, designers and operators in the built environment on how to engage with the making of a collectively meaningful public realm.

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