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## Original Article

# The transformation of public space in South Africa and the role of urban design

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**Abstract** Public spaces have changed significantly over the past 20 years in South Africa because of new urban conditions brought about by a range of political, economic and cultural changes. As urban design has the potential to play a key role in the transformation of public space, the article explores this role within the South African context as perceived by practising urban designers. Although it is pointed out that urban design has a significant role to play in terms of framing the vision for future spaces and improving their function, it also identifies a number of challenges related to opposing worldviews and contrasting ways of understanding space, as well as different claims for urban spaces from various groups. Given this duality between European and African visions of space, it requires a purposeful reconsideration of the meaning and nature of public space for various groups within the South African context.

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## Introduction

The past 20 years brought significant changes in the nature, type and use of public urban space within South African cities. These public spaces include soft open spaces such as parks and hard open spaces such as squares and streets. Some changes are the result of the privatisation of urban space, while other changes emanated from greater political commitment to upgrade open spaces or develop symbolic spaces to celebrate the new democracy. However, this process of change has not been a simple one. Many stakeholders are involved and many interests are at stake.

Urban design is considered to play a key role in urban space transformation. Madanipour (2006, p. 119) explains:

As political, economic and cultural changes have given a new significance to cities, urban space is being reshaped to accommodate the new urban conditions. In the broadest terms, urban design is the tool of this reshaping, hence its structural significance.

Bearing this in mind, it is important to understand the changing nature and function of urban spaces in South African cities and the implications thereof for urban design in terms of reshaping public space to accommodate the new urban conditions. In 1994, South Africa adopted a democratic system, bringing about many political, economic and cultural changes. There has been a huge increase in urbanisation and in 2011 more than 60 per cent of the population lived in cities, creating a greater demand for infrastructure development, affordable housing and job creation. Immigration from other African cities also contributed to the population increase and it is estimated that immigration will add 0.1–0.2 per cent to the urban population each year and that by 2030, 70 per cent of the country's population will be living in urban areas. Most of this growth will take place in larger metropolitan areas, with huge implications for urban planning and service delivery (National Development Plan, 2011).

In the midst of increased urbanisation, South Africa continues to struggle with high levels of inequality and will have to manage the risks and attempts by emerging powers to exploit the country's vulnerabilities. The rise of emerging economies further increases competition, placing more downward pressure on wages of low-skilled workers in the manufacturing sector. With extremely high levels of poverty (56 per cent head count) and unemployment (24.9 per cent) in South African cities, South Africa and its large cities face difficult choices to be more competitive (National Development Plan, 2011; Statistics SA, 2015a, b), but at the same time to address the needs of an increasing urban population.

Spatial transformation played a significant role in accommodating these new urban conditions. This relates to spatial changes at a larger city scale, for example, the development of new business and/or mixed-use nodes away from the traditional central business districts and the expansion of the urban periphery through informal settlements, low-cost subsidy housing and gated housing developments. It also refers to spatial transformation at the very local level in terms of public space. In 2003, a special edition of *Urban Design International* highlighted some concerns for urban design as a changing profession in South Africa after 10 years of democracy (Comri, 2003). In 2014, South Africa celebrated 20 years of democracy. Although some of the frustrations have been addressed and many examples of successful urban design projects have been implemented since then, a number of questions remain regarding the nature of public space in a more established democracy and the role of urban design in reshaping these spaces according to emerging needs and new urban conditions. This article focuses on the role and significance of urban design in the transformation of public space in South Africa. It commences by firstly describing the transformation of public space, followed by a discussion of what urban designers think they should do in terms of reshaping public space. Also, based on their views, the penultimate section highlights a number of challenges for urban design in South Africa.

The views of the urban designers have been obtained through in-depth semi-structured interviews with six qualified, registered and practising urban designers in two cities, Cape Town and Pretoria, representing both the public and private sector. All the Urban Designers are registered with the Urban Design Institute of South Africa and most with the South African Institute of Architects.

Those from the private sector have their own practices, while those from the public sector are employed by local authorities. The interviews were conducted in 2013 and 2014. The objectives of the interviews were to understand the transformation and nature of public space, as well as the key drivers behind their transformation in South Africa from the viewpoint of urban designers. It also sought to understand from urban designers how public spaces in South African cities should be designed and what the role of the urban designer currently is and should be in this process. As key actors in the transformation of space, the article therefore aims to give urban designers in the country a voice to highlight their experiences as everyday practitioners and then to relate these experiences to international trends in urban design. The specific position or status of the various urban designers is indicated with each extract.

## The Transformation of Public Space in South Africa

'As cities have changed, so have their public spaces' (Madanipour, 2010, p. 5). This is also true in South Africa. When considering the transformation of public space in South Africa, three broad trends can be identified, namely the deterioration, the privatisation and the celebration of public space.

### The deterioration of public spaces

Carmona (2010) identifies a number of trends or critiques related to public space, some of which relates to the broad tendencies of undermanagement. One of these refers to neglected space. Since the 1980s writers such as Tibbalds (2001) have commented on the deterioration of public space in England referring to littered spaces that are poorly managed and used by the homeless and beggars. Similar patterns are evident in Pretoria. The inner city witnessed the decline of many parks and open spaces, characterised by litter, graffiti, broken lights or park furniture and signs of unlawful behaviour such as urinating in the park, for example broken windows and litter in Arcadia Park (Figure 1). This is compared by an urban designer with earlier times when public spaces were perceived to be cared for.

I think the changes ... is actually ... the Africanization of the urban spaces. The urban



**Figure 1:** Broken windows and a deteriorated building in Arcadia Park.

spaces were kept clean ... because they were seen as a visual attribute or a setting for public buildings – government control. If there is less control, there should be more management. If there is not more management then you have .... an environment [that] ... looks like its uncared for [Private practice].

The transformation of space is clearly linked to the undermanagement of space. Loukaitou-Sideris (1996, p. 91) maintains that the neglect of many spaces such as plazas, car parks and public housing estates is due to poor management, 'where abandonment and deterioration have filled vacant space with trash and human waste'. This also occurred in South Africa.

I think the nature of open public spaces in South Africa in a whole has deteriorated, because of ... the lack of management. I think there is a lack of understanding of the new role the public urban spaces play in the new context [Private practice].

The deterioration of space may therefore also be linked to a lack of understanding of the new urban conditions in South Africa and the role that public space should play in this context, for example, the need for everyday survival in the city.

Survival in the city is actually creating a public space for survival tactics. In South Africa, it is survival as such, which means it's very flexible, actually unmanageable ... It is a vibrancy, it makes it a more African city ... [Private practice].

The transformation of public space is also linked to specific needs and a particular way of using space within the African context, which may be more flexible and less ordered to accommodate a variety

of activities. In a city of survival, different public spaces are then appropriated by different groups for various activities.

The other reason [for the transformation of public space] is that there is a difference between the hard open spaces and the soft open spaces. If it is a soft open space ... it becomes essential in a survival perspective, it become places to hide. So if you can hide then you can be invisible ... while you're in hard open spaces you want to be visible and you're using the movement of people to support your economic survival [Private practice].

Green open spaces with protective vegetation become sleeping areas for the homeless at night, for example, Burgers Park in Pretoria. This is one of the oldest inner city parks and is characterised by a variety of architectural features such as walkways, beautiful old Victorian structures, including a covered bandstand, kiosk (Figure 2) and pergola, as well as a variety of fountains and statues and a large playground for children. The architecture and design of various structures add a sense of history, while the current users reflect the present-day context in an African city. During the day, the park is extensively used, but at night it is appropriated by a different public, the homeless who make their beds under the dense overgrowth on the northern side (Figure 3). Hard open spaces on the other hand, become places of trading for informal traders, especially next to taxi ranks or within pedestrian walkways, for example, in former Church Street opposite the State Theatre (Figure 4). In this way, the facades of the formal buildings are to a large extent hidden behind a vibrant new make-shift facade from numerous informal stalls lining the walkway. This transforms



**Figure 2:** Kiosk in Burgers Park.



**Figure 3:** People sleeping under the trees at night in Burgers Park.



**Figure 4:** Informal traders selling goods in the pedestrianised part of the former Church Street.

the architecture of the street into a vibrant, multi-colour, mixed material collage of products and structures. Alternatively traders converge on busy sidewalks to sell their goods.

Neglected space can also include lost spaces. Trancik (1986, pp. 3–4) defines lost space as public spaces that are ‘in need of redesign, antispaces, making no positive contribution to the surrounds or users’, for example, the edges of freeways that lack maintenance and deteriorated parks. Specific examples of lost spaces particular to the South African city and also Pretoria and Cape Town are the so-called underdeveloped open spaces in former township areas. During the apartheid era, based on the infamous Group Areas Act, different race groups had to stay in separate areas. These areas were often underdeveloped and lacked many facilities and quality public spaces (Landman, 2014).

The deterioration and neglect of public spaces in turn gave rise to the transformation of public space in two ways. First, local authorities responded with many urban upgrading programmes focussed on public space, for example, The City of Cape Town through their ‘Dignified Places Programme’. This initiative focussed on the construction of new public spaces in the marginalised areas on the Cape Flats with the aim of improving the quality of the public environment, which is a central concern of urban design (Southworth, 2003). Yet, although the post-apartheid government started to address the state of public spaces in many former township areas, the extent of the un- or under-developed areas is so big that many of these areas remain as lost spaces (Landman, 2014). In other cases, even public spaces that have been provided in marginalised areas as part of urban upgrading initiatives have deteriorated [Interview with urban designer, public sector]. Second, in reaction to the deterioration and neglect of many public spaces, the private sector has responded through the privatisation of public space.

### The privatisation of public spaces

According to an urban designer in South Africa, *if spaces seem to be uncared for, then people will avoid it ...* [Private practice]. Therefore, in a response to the undermanagement of space, the private sector spearheaded the privatisation of public space through a focus on excessive management and control. Carmona (2010) points out that the recent debate in the United States and the United Kingdom on the overmanagement of public space has often been linked to discussions about the privatisation of public space and security issues. Emanating from the United States, there has been a growing perception that public spaces were dangerous places and as a result of the fear of crime people started to avoid them. These trends, combined with perceptions of changing and inner city decline, encouraged increasing privatisation (Giddings *et al*, 2011). Consequently, the last decades have seen unprecedented privatisation and the loss of public space with the proliferation of corporate and shopping plazas (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2012).

Carmona (2010) distinguishes between corporate and state privatisation, with the former referring to the privatisation of space for commercial interests and linked to the market value of these spaces. These spaces are characterised by micro-designed strategies that aim to exclude, such as

blank walls, impenetrable street frontage, sunken plazas, hidden entrances, and de-emphasised doorways and openings onto the street (Carmona, 2010, p. 135). The aim is to increase feelings of safety and comfortability inside and, as argued by Loukaitou-Sideris and Banerjee (1998, p. 280), to avoid unwanted and feared political, social and cultural intrusions linked to deteriorated spaces in the city through the creation of a 'hyper-real environment', where 'space is cut off, separated, enclosed, so that it can be easily controlled and "protected"'. An example of such a hyper-real environment is the Lynnwood Bridge Development in the East of Pretoria, which is designed around a series of semi-public open spaces and squares featuring shops, restaurants and a theatre at the one end (Figure 5). The 'public' open spaces are all raised from the ground and separated from the street through buildings and fences. The inner pseudo-public space is surrounded by glittering shop fronts and well-articulated facades, reflecting architecture of wealth. Apart from a number of gaps to the outside to offer views of the surrounding environment from a raised platform, all the spaces are internally focussed and completely cut-off from the street. The environment is patrolled by security guards.

The privatisation of space can also be linked to the establishment of gated communities where previously public or common space have been closed off for use by the general public and are only available for exclusive use by the residents or members of a 'club' (Webster and Glasze, 2006). Access is denied to the general public through strict control by security measures and guards (Figure 6). The common open space inside is usually designed by landscape architects or urban designers and privately managed by a Home-owners Association or Body Corporate. As a result the common spaces are well maintained and often linked to water features such as a lake or river, a golf course, a club house and sports facilities.



**Figure 5:** 'Pseudo-public-open space' within the Lynnwood Bridge Development.



**Figure 6:** Access control into a luxury gated community in the east of Pretoria.

In addition, there are also examples of state privatisation, where public-private spaces are managed by private companies and the power of management is transferred to private individuals. These spaces are often redeveloped through development and management mechanisms such as Business or City Improvement Districts (BIDs/CIDs) (Carmona, 2010, p. 136). One of the most active BIDs in the City of Tshwane is the one responsible for the management of Church Square and the pedestrianised part of the former Church Street linking to the square. CCTV cameras have been installed and the infrastructure upgraded, including new paving, lamp posts and signboards. The area is also excessively maintained and patrolled by the metropolitan police of Tshwane (the metropolitan municipality that includes Pretoria). Unfortunately, this has given rise to the removal of informal traders, making this part of the street much less vibrant (Landman, 2014) in comparison to the part referred to earlier in Figure 4.

### The celebration of public space

'Historically, urban spaces have carried symbolic value for citizens, in ceremonies and festivals as well as protests and conflicts. Particular places and landmarks have been used as symbols of collective identity or as markers for navigating the city' (Madanipour, 2006, p. 187). This meaning or symbolism can, however, change over time through specific events taking place there or through actual physical changes (Short, 1996). This has also been true for many well-known public spaces in South Africa.

Public space in South Africa has been designed up till now, because all the older

spaces like Church Square and other spaces ... comes from the Colonial Era ... and they were more for settings at state institutions and the other market places ... . [Private practice]

An example of such designed public space is the park in front of the Union Buildings, designed by Herbert Baker in the early twentieth century. The park celebrated the building and the unification of South Africa in 1910, providing a grand vista and forecourt for the formal, neo-classical building on the hill. Recently, the significance of the park has been further increased by the large statue of former President Nelson Mandela placed on the key central axis and staircase leading up from Church Street and the lower gardens to the upper gardens closer to the Union Buildings (Figure 7). This has not only strengthened the historical meaning, but also the use of the space as many tourists flock to the park on a daily basis to see the statue. In this way, the public space becomes an important landmark expressing a specific political or cultural position, as have often been the role of public spaces through history (Kostof, 1992).

In a similar fashion, the new urban conditions and political dispensation also offered the setting for new ways to celebrate democracy and unity and change old messages of oppression. Freedom Park has been erected as a symbol of the new democracy and recognition of the past.

On the hill overlooking the nation's capital, Freedom Park keeps watch on the maturing democracy. Here, the story of Africa – and the liberation of South Africa and its people – is told. It is a place of peace and growth. (Freedom Park Website: [www.freedompark.co.za/elements-of-the-park/elements-overview](http://www.freedompark.co.za/elements-of-the-park/elements-overview))



**Figure 7:** The Park in front of the Union Buildings with the recently added monumental statue of Nelson Mandela.

In this way the transition and the history of South Africa is celebrated through design and the modification of the physical landscape in an attempt to honour those who died during the struggle for freedom and to create a monument for human rights, dignity and freedom. The park includes a series of memorial sites expressing the common themes of humanity and freedom through distinctive African architecture, archives, landscaping and imagery such as various sculptures, the use of local stone in the buildings and large stones from all nine provinces in South Africa to explain the history of the country (Figure 8). A spiral pathway links each installation, while areas for remembrance, reflection and reconciliation offer a spiritual dimension (Freedom Park Website: [www.freedompark.co.za/elements-of-the-park/elements-overview](http://www.freedompark.co.za/elements-of-the-park/elements-overview)).

In another example, public space has been transformed to erase the message of oppression and symbolise the transition to democracy. Originally, serving as a market place in the centre of Pretoria, the square was reconceptualised during the height of the Apartheid Regime. Renamed Strijdom Square in the 1960s and featuring a large bronze statue of the South African Prime Minister between 1954 and 1958, J.G. Strijdom, renowned for his visions of racial segregation, the square was erected as a symbol of power and control. The public space represented for many apartheid's sacred precinct – a place aimed at building and developing an Afrikaner National identity (Hook, 2005). In 2007 the Metropolitan Council of Tshwane decided to establish a cultural market on the square aimed at tourists (Hlahla, 2013). Consequently, the public space has been reconceptualised and renamed as the Lilian Ngoyi Square, after one of South Africa's leading female anti-apartheid



**Figure 8:** An area for reflection at Freedom Park, framed by a natural stone wall and indigenous plants.

activists. She was the first woman to be elected to the executive committee of the African National Congress and one of the leading women who marched to the Union Buildings in 1956 in protest against the pass laws. In this way, the transformation of public space also serves to challenge history and commemorate historical figures that embody specific political and cultural meaning. Building is currently in progress, but the vision for the new square is clearly articulated in the image of a forward-looking gathering place through contemporary architectural features that simultaneously acknowledges the past through a reflection of a historical prominent woman on the facade. Considering these changes of different public spaces in South Africa, it raises questions about the role of urban design in the transformation of public space.

### The Role of Urban Design in the Transformation of Public Space

According to Madanipour (2006), one can understand the role of urban design in the transformation of space from three perspectives: namely that of the producer, engaged with building the city; the view of the regulator, concerned with managing the city; and finally through the eyes of the users, related to urban design's contribution to the use value of spaces within the city. This conceptualisation also offers a useful way to understand the role of urban design in the transformation of public space in South Africa.

#### Building the city

Urban design plays a role in the transformation of space by building the South African city in four ways. The first role relates to re-imagining the city. In contrast to the large role played by the state in the early twentieth century in terms of urban redevelopment, the latter part of the century saw the state withdrawing into a more regulatory role. Consequently urban development was to a large extent taken over by the private sector. Urban design offered a way to the private sector to imagine the future of the city in new ways (Madanipour, 2006). In a similar manner, urban designers in South Africa are engaged with a process to imagine the future and convince developers of the merit of certain types of developments.

In principle public space are built by people with money. So now, the model is, because

they want to make money, the mall ... with public space, all enclosed and there is parking and everyone drives to it ... Inside that thing [the mall], it has all the little pieces, but it doesn't connect to anything else. But how do you get a city built with such guys? ... You have ... to convince them that they can make money if they do it in a different way. [Private practice]

Given this, urban designers can play a significant role in reimagining the future in a different way. This would in turn set the stage for the introduction of a clear set of ideas about how space should be organised and what forms it should take. Therefore, after a period of time when urban design was considered as only dealing with appearances, it is now generally accepted that it deals with a much broader scope – namely, shaping the product through the organisation of space (Madanipour, 2006), which highlights a second role for urban design. Yet, in thinking through this role, it raises several issues in relation to shaping the product, namely how much intervention would be required and how to treat the transition of one space to the next? Urban designers in South Africa emphasised the need to be selective in terms of how much should be implemented:

So I think it's what is the minimum you can put down to have a maximum effect ... then you're actually spending the money on the right things. [Private practice]

This approach was also advocated by two of South Africa's leading urban designers/planners in the early 90s. They argued the importance of continuously taking the minimum actions necessary to create real opportunities for creative responses, which are maximised when the public spatial structure is made positively and offers a logic and constraint to which private decision makers can respond (Dewar and Uytendogaardt, 1995). It highlights the role of the urban designer in shaping the product and offers a mechanism to integrate different parts of the fragmented city, a need that was clearly articulated.

We cannot deal with the complexities of transition and this is where urban design skills become relevant. [Private practice]

In sprawling metropolitan areas, urban design has to find ways to unify separate districts by 'stitching' them together in different ways, for example, through open space systems, river networks, transit and roadway lines, and so on. (Loukaitou-Sideris,

2012, p. 478). Therefore, as pointed out by a South African urban designer from the public sector, it is important to establish a system of public spaces and that is why urban designers are so important, they are 'the glue'. If the urban designers are not invited to meetings, they do not know about the others' intentions and cannot make the links. It is not always an issue of drawing up plans, because that implies a need for money and permission, and so on. It is about becoming a champion for public spaces and the creation of a public realm strategy. The achievement of 'integrative actions', however, becomes difficult in practice because of the diversity of actors involved in the multiple activities that take place (Chapman, 2011, p. 515).

Third, bearing this in mind, urban design also has a role to play in guiding and co-ordinating development in such a way as to connect intentions to final outcomes and to offer a tangible visualisation of the outcome (Madanipour, 2006). This was acknowledged during the interviews.

Now [an urban design] decision should be based on what the outcome of it [should be and] not in terms of the gratification or how can you beautify the space. [Private practice]

Urban design has, therefore, become more than just a concern with aesthetic issues (Madanipour, 2006; Loukaitou-Sideris, 2012), but also a mechanism to bring certainty and structure to the market through the provision of a strong spatial structure to guide investment in public infrastructure and thus in turn offer a framework for managing resources. In this way, public sector improvements act as instruments of confidence building in the private sector by showing how things could happen and where investment can occur (Dewar and Uytendogaardt, 1991; Madanipour, 2006).

Fourth, urban design can also assist with building the city through the marketing of development, where good design provides a selling point through brand consciousness and a visual culture that pays attention to appearance and quality (Madanipour, 2006). This was clearly recognised in South Africa, where the urban designer explained the importance of marketing through design.

To play the game I play with one of my big clients that is a developer – the only language he understands is how I can save him money. And if I can demonstrate that I save him money and that I add value to his marketing and the marketability of his project, then he will tolerate me. [Private practice]

The extract highlights the economic value of urban design and the significance thereof to market a particular development through good design.

### Regulating the city

It was also noted that urban design in South Africa can play a role in regulating the city in three ways. The first two ways relate to the promotion of the city through a clear vision and the shaping of development through spatial frameworks to manifest this vision. Visions are significant to outline the envisaged future with degree of flexibility built in, because if they are too rigid it can reduce creativity and miss opportunities. In addition, visions should be embedded in concrete situations and based on reality with a focus on spatiality (Madanipour, 2006). Therefore, Punter (2007, p. 185) argues that while generic design principles have the potential to provide the basis for the assessment of design quality, this needs to be informed by the context and site analysis before they can be applied. The majority of interviews highlighted the need for a coherent longer-term vision and the application of principles to ensure the future quality of public spaces, not just to match the current grain, but to think about what it can be in a 100 years' time. Urban design therefore offers a way to add flesh to the bones of broad visions (Madanipour, 2006).

The changing context of city also had an impact on the nature of the economy where resources can easily move from one place to another. As a result, cities have to compete to attract investment (Madanipour, 2006). As highlighted in the introduction, this is also true for South African cities. These changes influenced the role of city authorities as elaborated earlier, changing their role from providers to enablers. Within this context, city authorities are expected to put in place the necessary frameworks to support private developers to provide the appropriate spaces. Consequently, 'urban design has found significance as means of promoting the city and guiding and regulating the production of its space' (Madanipour, 2006, p. 181). Policy frameworks become important mechanisms to enable this process through the creation of a strong shared knowledge base functioning as the foundation for integration (Chapman, 2011, p. 524). The City of Cape Town has been the first city in South Africa to develop a comprehensive urban design policy. An urban designer from the city is of the opinion that it will assist the process of debate about urban design



**Figure 9:** The beach front and public promenade in the Big Bay development, Bloubergstrand.

issues and will have an impact in practice, because *the moment you have a stamp on it, everyone has to listen, whether they do it becomes a debate.*

This highlights the role of public authorities as promoters and regulators of production as opposed to city producers. It also established a precedent for other cities to follow. The city of Tshwane is currently preparing urban design and streetscape guidelines, while the City of Ekurhuleni released a tender calling for the development of a comprehensive urban design policy.

Third, with the assistance of strong frameworks, urban design can play a significant role in the process of change management.

Urban design by nature to my mind is environmental change management. [Private practice]

In this way urban design can contribute to re-focus the vision to help secure public acceptance and to take into account the pressing needs of the day in relation to sustainable development (Madanipour, 2006; Gaffikin *et al*, 2013). Urban design has a role in helping urban areas to become more self-sufficient in meeting their resource needs and in improving the resilience to natural hazards (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2012, p. 480). At the same time, it is important that public spaces offer a safe space to users (Gehl, 2010). This is critical in South Africa, where ... *an open space without control is a liability – a cleanliness liability [and] ... a safety liability ...* [Private practice]. The alternative would be the privatisation of public space and the retreat from conventional open spaces.

### Living the city

Finally, there is also a role for urban design to play in improving the function and thus use value of

public space. As conditions improve economically, there is a demand for better-quality spaces (Madanipour, 2006). It was pointed out by one of the urban designers from private practice that it is important to create quality open space in South Africa, for example in the case of Big Bay Development, where the urban designers managed to convince the developer to focus on the creation of quality spaces, including the development of a promenade on the beach front. Initially the developer was very hesitant and tried to reduce the density of the housing. However, the market slowly bought into it and today it is a highly successful development with high-quality urban spaces. This includes the public space on the beachfront where a beautiful promenade is linked to well-articulated buildings and restaurants (Figure 9), as well as smaller internal courtyards that offer more intimate public spaces to access smaller shops, cafes and various housing units (Figure 10). According to the urban designer, it is not so much the architectural quality that is important, but the quality of the urban space that was created.



**Figure 10:** A more intimate and well-defined open space in the Big Bay development.



Figure 11: Pierre's Place, Cape Town.

However, in creating quality spaces, the role of urban design can be contested as it starts to create spaces for only certain groups or sections of the population through the construction of defensive architecture and spaces (Madanipour, 2006; Gaffikin *et al*, 2013) or through a focus on the development of privatised and secure spaces related to shopping malls (Mattson, 1999), as is the case in South Africa:

You design security into [it] ... and prove that you need the people to understand this is a controlled space and it's managed. Now there is nothing wrong with it ... I just say ... see it for what it is, I don't think that all public spaces should be like that. [Private practice, Pretoria]

It therefore raises the question of 'whose spaces' they have become (Madanipour, 2010) and to what extent urban design has been successful in including a diversity of users, including different ages, gender and income groups (Madanipour, 2006), especially in South Africa with its increased focus on urban integration. According to one of the urban designers, this is what would constitute more successful places.

At the bottom there is Pierre's Place. Go and walk there, there are trees and they have utilised 'public art'. And what is fantastic, go and look, the black motorbikes, the little ones ... I walked there one day. We all walked through the space ... the trees ... the space feels smaller, the buildings around, the activities ... I stood there and then a small boy came running along. The next moment he saw the motorbike, then he ran and sat on it ... brrmm, brrmm ... it is space animation for him. He used the space. And the guy that sit

and drink his coffee, there is his chair, he can sit there and look at the space. The guy that walks through it ... this is how all the elements work together to make this a public space. [Public sector]

This reiterates the significance of urban spaces to cater for different uses and people and therefore the fact that 'urban spaces are multi-purpose spaces, and the more they meet these diverse purposes, the more successful they tend to be' (Madanipour, 2006, p. 185). It also highlights the use of architectural features to cater for various users, including shaded seating, lighting, neat paving and various sculptures (Figure 11). In addition, it reflects the fact that public space and public culture should be traced to the influence of both human and non-human aspects of a public setting and that the human responses relate to the 'situated multiplicity' of human bodies and many uses and needs in a shared public space (Amin, 2008, p. 8). In this regard, urban design has a very significant role to play in enhancing the appearance and the use value of spaces in South African cities to contribute to opportunities for the establishment of an improved public culture.

## The Challenges for Urban Design in South Africa

However, in trying to fulfil the multiple roles of urban design in the country, the urban designers have voiced a number of challenges. These broadly relate to the visions for and the use of public space.

### Visions for public space

Attempts to reimagine the city, shape the product and promote the city have been hindered by the presence of different paradigms influencing the identity of public space within the city. One of the urban designers explained it as follows:

... public spaces is seen in my perspective as a people gatherer and a relief space and also it's a visual space ... While in the African context it is an active used space ... So because the African way of making spaces in places is to carve private areas out of the public spaces to move away, it is allocated to someone to use while in the Western

perspective [it] is if you have a farm and you cut it up and you sell pieces off ... You donate ... part of the space for public use or pleasure if you don't need it ... . [Private practice]

This highlights two opposing views of public space. Loyd (2003, p. 106) summarises this difference and points out that in an African settlement all space is public, except those defined *by ritual* as private space. In the European settlement all space would be private, except for those designated and regulated public areas and defined through legal process, walls and fences. These different and often competing world-views create a significant challenge for the design of urban spaces. Loyd (2003) calls for the ownership of public space through legible and enabling connections between culture and space. However, in a very diverse country with different cultures and opposing world-views about public space, it becomes increasingly difficult to design spaces that would be all-representing.

Second, representative public spaces are challenged by contrasting approaches to the modification of public space, that is, through a formalistic approach focussing on the aesthetic appearance or through a functionalistic approach accommodating specific activity.

They [urban designers] take a picture and try to emulate the picture ... – it is just a beautification. And that is quite an expensive beauty ... that is why a lot of cities are beautiful because they concentrate on the beautification. And that is actually a big tourist thing, ok? Now the stuff that actually happens you don't see ... that is where ... the real life is you know, where the brothels are, where the crowds are ... that is the real thing – it is the heart of the city ... a little dirty, messy ... it has allowed for all sorts of people. [Private practice]

This reiterates the tendency of urban designers to focus on aesthetics and sometimes copy the images of spaces in other contexts or to create entirely 'invented' spaces for entertainment or to attract tourists (Carmona, 2010). However, although the appearance of a place can provide aesthetic pleasure and contribute to the psychological well-being of society, 'a problem ... is excessive focus on appearance, which can become detached from its substance, to the extent that aestheticization of everyday life is associated with a consumer culture' (Madanipour, 2006, p. 187). Design can thus

be reduced to the packaging of the environment like other consumer items and, given the presence of different cultures, fails to address the diversity of taste (ibid.). As a result, excessive place-marketing and the establishment of landscapes of consumption to boost the city image and develop the economy has often given rise to the establishment of disconnected places and precincts, separated by walls, fences, escalators and gates (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2012). In this way the redesign of special precincts can serve to further the fragmentation of different parts of the city in the fragmented megapolopolis (Shane, 2011). An example of this is the development of the Melrose Arch precinct in Johannesburg. While the precinct itself has pride in the incorporation of New Urbanist principles and the creation of a walkable, mixed-use district with well-developed hard open pseudo-public spaces, the self-contained urban enclave is disconnected from its surrounding cityscape and only accessible by automobile. Thus, seen from a broader metropolitan perspective, upscale themed entertainment developments such as Melrose Arch have contributed to increased urban fragmentation (Murray, 2013).

Yet, as long as some groups have the ability to consume, the private sector will respond to their needs and the market will start to dictate the nature of the development. Given this, a third major challenge for urban design is to negotiate the lack of a common vision for public spaces in South African cities and facilitate the buy-in of different stakeholders to enable the development and implementation of a common vision based on a shared language and understanding of the nature of public space. Therefore, according to one of the urban designers from the public sector, it is also an issue of language and communication of character and boldness and the ability to develop an urban design framework in a hostile context and explain why this is important, for example to code the interfaces. The intention is not to take away people's creativity, but to fix the rights and create the envelope to ensure continuity and coherence in terms of the nature of the public space.

What happens is five or six big guys [developers] get together, there is a critical mass, there is space for urban design ... [but] out of this critical mass there is this thing of actually I am not interested in what the guy next to me is doing, because it is them and it is us, we compete with them and we want to make more money than them and so on. So that developer thing that does not want to work

together is also part of the culture. [Public sector]

The problem and also the challenge is thus how to collectively secure higher-quality and integrated outcomes from a multitude of disconnected developments that take place in complex built environments (Chapman, 2011, p. 513). This is also true in South Africa where each developer wants to maximise the potential of their own site instead of considering the holistic view and the integration of public space. The challenge therefore lies in enabling the participation of the developers.

We are busy writing an urban design policy for the city. It will be the first urban design policy in the country. We will get a lot of resistance from many people because remember it is a new thing and the developer now feels they are giving me another thing for which I have to jump and work. [Public sector]

The policy may therefore create tensions and result in a lack of buy-in from the private sector as there are inevitable tensions within and between public policy aims and private interests (Chapman, 2011, p. 514). It therefore requires a reconsideration of the use and users of public spaces in practice.

### Use of public space

The interviews also pointed towards a few challenges related to the use of space. First, there are contesting claims made by various groups in terms of the use of public space in South Africa. These claims vary, ranging from basic claims to ensure day-to-day survival to claims for secure and protected spaces, leading to a contestation of public space and its use.

Now of course you could try and put a fence around it to keep informal trade out or to keep the informality out of it – to keep the survivalists ... in place. But that is part of the problem. [Private practice]

Therefore, while many would want to eliminate informal activities in public spaces in South Africa, there is a desperate need to use public space for informal trading or even for the establishment of informal housing, as was highlighted by an urban designer from the public sector. In the USA, one of

the key challenges for urban design is how to deal with 'ethnoscapes' and the increasing occurrence of informality (Loukaitou-Sideris, 2012). This is even more so in African cities, where the mosaic of diverse realities expressed through the formal and informal are becoming more pertinent (Viana, 2009). The challenge for urban design is therefore to acknowledge that there are many claims for space in the city and many interests at stake which may lead to conflict (Gaffikin *et al*, 2013). This has also been acknowledged in South Africa in terms of the development and transformation of open space in the city.

So as soon as there is a vested interest and a commercial interested in the land ... there is a level of aggression ... In that context there is often fear ... And if you as an urban designer cannot recognise this, you have a problem ... Therefore you cannot just slap down space as if it is the same, here, there ... it is just not the same. [Private practice]

This highlights the importance of contextualising public space and of awareness of its relevance for diverse groups of people. Failing to acknowledge this tends to increase the privatisation of public space in South Africa. Unfortunately, while being convenient for one group, this tends to exclude another.

... the privatisation of public space is a completely different thing ... If you manage it, you allow the public to use it under certain conditions. If you privatise it you exclude all the unwanted ... The only people that you allow are the clients ... This is why a mall is in effect for both: to be a public space its accessible private space. And that is a bit of an issue ... A privatised mall can never be seen as public space, it is a convenience of course ... [Private practice]

The contestation of space raises questions about the extent of management and control of public or semi-public spaces, which in turn may affect their level of publicness (De Magalhaes, 2010; Varna and Tiesdell, 2010). As pointed out in the first section, one of the prime reasons for the decline of urban space in South Africa has been the lack of proper management of these spaces, leading to the privatisation of public spaces. The second challenge for urban design related to use is then how to facilitate the encouragement of a more positive sense of community ownership and maintenance as opposed to the

implementation of excessive measures of security and control, which may lead to the exclusion of unwanted people. This is one of the biggest crises with public space currently in South Africa. In the past, ownership was abdicated to the municipalities. However, as was indicated by an urban designer from the public sector, often municipalities cannot manage it and need *someone to look after it voluntarily while it still belongs to the public*. This is similar to international trends where the provision and management of public space have moved away from direct state involvement towards a larger role for other private and community-related stakeholders (De Magalhaes, 2010). One way to do this in South Africa is through lease arrangements where the City would impose certain conditions, for example, that they cannot erect a high solid wall and that the space needs to be permeable with exits and so on. But the space is still privatised to some degree as there is control of who may enter. Homeless people, for example, are prohibited from entering or sleeping there as this will restrict use by others. *So somewhere you push someone out* [Public sector].

A third challenge relates to the lack of a culture of urbanism in South Africa.

We [South Africans] are so used to their own private spaces. People go back home and they have a large garden at the back of the house and they enjoy the back garden. [Private practice]

Therefore, many people are biased towards their own homes, where *you create your own public space*. According to an urban designer, people sit in their own boxes, even those in shacks. It is still part of the South African psyche, *because with our suburban culture we have brought the farm to the city, just on a smaller scale*. In addition, many poor people aspire to the white middleclass model, generally resisting significant densification [Private practice]. Finally, the lack of a culture of urbanism may be linked to the fact that for most of Africa's history, the majority of people lived in small villages or towns.

The reality of cities is very new in Africa. The whole culture of what it means to stay in a city and the balance between private, semi-private, semi-public, public ... [people] are confronted with it in a way that they never really had to understand ... they do not understand it ... The culture of the city is very new in Africa. The people are in the

cities but there is not a culture of 'urban', there is not a culture of 'city'. This raises many questions around what gets built in the city ... we still all think we are on a farm, just closer to each other. [Private practice]

A major challenge for urban design is therefore how to negotiate a culture on non-urbanism in a context where South African cities are growing fast and need to reconsider spatial models that are able to deal with sprawl and fragmentation through densification.

## Conclusion

This article focused on the role and significance of urban design in the transformation of public space in South Africa and indicated that these changes can broadly be attributed to the deterioration, privatisation and celebration of public spaces. The deterioration of public space often relates to a lack of management and a need for survival, while the privatisation reflects a growing need for control. The celebration of public space is largely because of its symbolic representation and the need for the physical expression of meaning.

It was also established that there is a significant role for urban design to play in terms of the transformation of space: first by contributing to build the city in assisting the private sector to re-imagine the future, offering a clear set of ideas on how space should be organised or shaped; coordinating the implementation of spatial interventions and by adding economic value through the marketing of specific developments. These types of actions often give rise to the development of privatised spaces. Second, in regulating the city, it was pointed out that urban design can assist the public sector in guiding and regulating the production of public spaces in South Africa through the development of urban design policies that would include a strong vision and principles and assist with the process of change management. Such actions have the potential to address the deterioration of public spaces and create celebrated spaces for all. Third, it was highlighted that urban design has a role to play in improving the function of public spaces through a focus on the development of quality spaces that would accommodate a diversity of uses and users, which in turn may also facilitate the creation of celebrated spaces. This furthermore, indicates a number of similarities in the way that urban designers in South African tend to perceive their role in relation to the

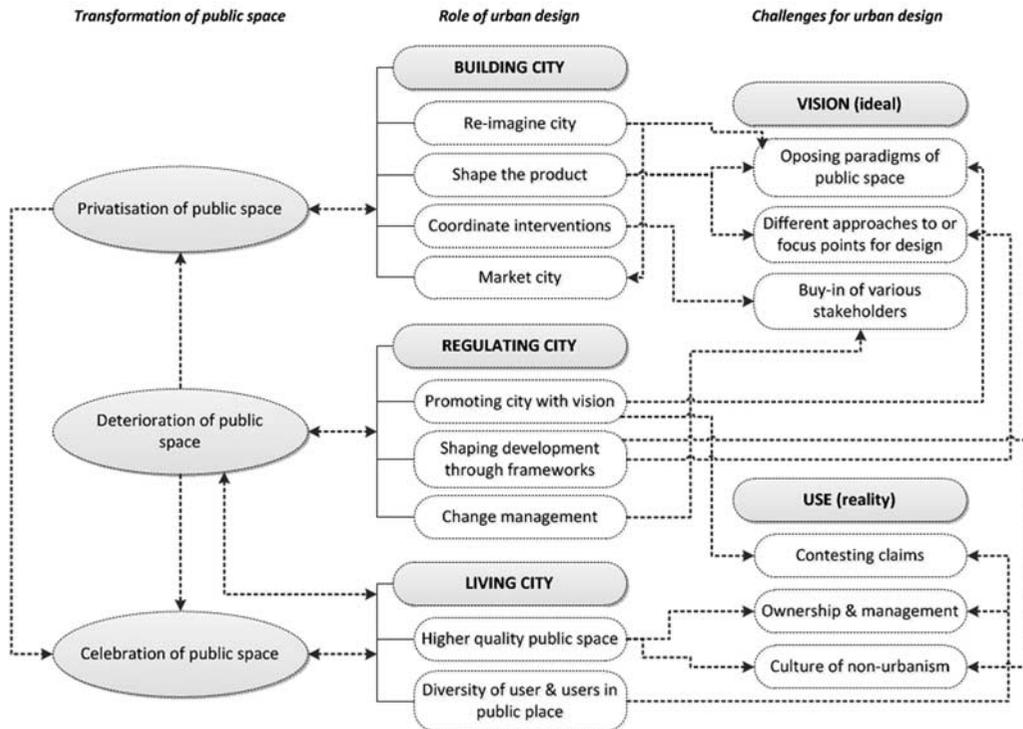


Figure 12: Multiple processes of transformation.

transformation of space compared with other countries such as the UK and the USA in particular.

However, these roles are not without challenges, which broadly relate to the visions for and use of public space in South Africa and in turn has implications for building, regulating and living the city (see Figure 12). Oposing paradigms of public space and different design approaches challenge future public and private visions of the city and thus also the reorganisation, promotion and marketing thereof. At the same time, failing to secure the buy-in of various stakeholders threatens the coordination of spatial interventions and sustainable change management. Achieving a common vision for the South African city, alongside attempts to create higher-quality space for a diversity of users, is however, also impaired by contesting claims for the use of public space by various groups and growing tensions related to private development and management of pseudo-public spaces for selective groups. It therefore raises questions about the value and relevance of the development of integrated and diverse public spaces in a context of opposing paradigms, different design approaches, conflicting claims and ultimately a culture of non-urbanism.

Yet, what became significantly clear is that public spaces in South African cities are changing and that this process of change has not been a simple one. Many stakeholders are involved and many interests are at stake. Therefore, while urban design has a significant role to play in this process of change, it would require a purposeful reconsideration of the meaning of public space in the African context and the meaning for different groups in South African cities to reconceptualise the nature and types of spaces that would be appropriate in cities with a dual foothold in both African and European culture. Ultimately it may therefore call for a reconceptualisation of public culture and daily use patterns and the settings required for these to re-envision the future of public space in these cities.

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