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PUBLIC SPACE AND THE POLITICS OF PROPINQUITY IN JOHANNESBURG

BIOGRAPHY

Dr Teresa Dirsuweit is a Senior Lecturer at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. She has published studies on the effects of trauma and the use of fear on urban political and cultural identities in the city. She is currently interested in the ways in which public life is articulated through public space, with a particular interest in the role of public space in building a caring society and deepening democracy. She is the co-ordinator of the Public Space Research Group in the School of Geography, Archaeology and Environmental Studies.

→ **Public space is essential to** urban public life. It is where different political identities can be formed and expressed, and where different urban identities can regard and potentially interact with one another. In this way public space promotes an ethic of care. The capacity to use public space in the practice of everyday life is an important facet of urban citizenship; public space reflects the relationship of the city to its inhabitants. In this essay the philosophy of the City of Johannesburg to urban public space is explored through an examination of three different vision documents. Public spaces in the city are either privately owned or managed through public-private partnerships. It is argued in this paper that as the city is revitalised in accordance with the principles of new urbanism, the management of these privately owned and publicly owned spaces is becoming similar. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's discussion of representations of space and representational space, these urban management practices and the effects of these practices on interaction and urban democracy are explored.

A few weeks ago I took a friend into the inner-city to show her the changes that had been taking place over the past few years. We entered Gandhi Square and as I showed her the memorial stature of Gandhi at the height of his legal career in South Africa, we noticed that a young middle-class man, clearly an office worker, was being chased off a circular bollard where he had sat for a brief rest before his bus arrived.

Later, my friend and I sat on a square ventilation shaft with a piece of marble on it. No sooner had we sat down than the same city security guard – or 'street ambassador' – called over what appeared to be her supervisor to tell us to move.

'*Why*?' I asked.

'*Because*', he said, '*there was an incident last week and the thing you are sitting on blew up.*'

'*Blew up*!' I said, genuinely astonished by the explanation, '*but it looks like a ventilation shaft for the parking below.*'

Noting my scepticism, the security man changed his tack. '*But criminals sit here and watch and so it's not safe.*'

As we continued with our discussion, my friend noticed that schoolchildren were being chased from the square. She asked our 'street ambassador' what was going on.

'*Oh, because they are supposed to be in school and the Department of Education told us that there can't be schoolchildren here because they have to go to school,*' he responded.

'*But this is a public space …*' I trailed off, realising that I was never going to win the point. '*Who can I speak to about this*?' The guard brightened, '*Oh, you can speak to the man who owns this space,*' and proceeded to give me the name of a businessman.

And so we left Gandhi Square, where people perched uncomfortably on bars waiting for their buses under Gandhi's lofty gaze, and went to have a latte at a trendy café around the corner.

Public space and the 'good' city

For urban specialists, public space has a special significance in the city. From the *agora* of ancient Greece and the political functioning of the Forum Romanum, public space has always been viewed as having some relationship with the public sphere; as being an expression of urban governance and the everyday politics of urban public life (Canniffe 2006; Harvey 2006). Public spaces are where a range of political identities can be expressed, as " … the myriad bolt-holes that are to be found in cities provide some possibility to the millions of dispossessed, dislocated and illegal people stripped of citizenship to acquire some political capital …" (Amin 2006:1012).

Public space reflects the relationship the city has to its inhabitants (*citidin*). The urban poor have limited access to paid-for urban leisure spaces, and frequently their residential spaces are inadequate. Traditionally, public spaces are also where the economically marginalised ensure some kind of a livelihood. In developing economies, this frequently takes the form of hawking in public areas, begging in the street, and so forth. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre's 'Right to the City' (1996), Don Mitchell (2003) argues that public spaces absorb those marginalised from the rights of the *citidin*.

Public spaces are also the site of interaction between different urban identities. It is where a range of urban identities may regard each other, resulting in what Fran Tonkiss (2003) refers to as side-by-side particularity; a state where difference is unexceptional and left unassimilated. Ash Amin (2006) drawing on Chantal Mouffe (2000), argues that public space is central to building urban environments where there is an ease with this unassimilated difference and a culture of agonistic disagreement. Amin (2006:1012) also draws our attention to the importance of public space to a sense of urban solidarity, "a certain kind of sociality which comes from particular forms of gathering in public space".

Zygmunt Bauman (1993) in his discussions of ethics outside the fixed moralities of modernity, speaks to this solidarity. Following the works of Emmanuel Levinas (2006), for Bauman ethical life lies in a sense of concern for the other. He argues that this concern depends on knowledge of the other and that solidarity with the other emerges when this knowledge is at its 'richest and most intimate'. For urban theorists this rich and intimate knowledge comes with propinquity – Nigel Thrift and Ash Amin (2002:47) use this term to imply a variegated and complex sense of community. In particular, following Henri Lefebvre (1991), they argue for a "community of the banal and mundane, but also the community of improvisation, intuition and play". In this situationist approach to the city, everyday life is the "sum total of relations which make the human – and every human being – a whole which brings into play the totality of the real, albeit in a certain manner which is always partial and incomplete: friendship, comradeship, love, the need to communicate, play, etc." (Thrift & Amin 2002:47) For geographers the 'good' (Amin 2006) city is one in which there is engagement and connection with urban others. The ethical city for these writers is neither a utopian "love thy neighbour" message (Amin 2006), nor is it constrained by a normative (and universalised) regime of ethical conduct (Bauman 1993). It is also not a promotion of an ethical relativism; rather it is a position which Bauman terms as *après-devoir* – an ethic based on an awareness and acceptance of ambivalence (Dirsuweit 2007). The public life which makes this ethic of care for others possible requires public space for its articulation.

Visioning spaces of justice in Johannesburg

There are three vision documents for the city of Johannesburg which deal with public space (Dirsuweit, forthcoming). In 2002, Joburg 2030, a document embracing profoundly the principles of neo-liberal urban planning, was launched. The central motif of this document is the image of Johannesburg as a world-class African city, and this slogan has persisted. Public space does not feature overtly in the document, and many have argued that this particular vision of the city is anti-poor and exclusionary. In response to these criticisms in 2005, the city of Johannesburg launched the *Human Development Strategy* to complement Joburg 2030. This Strategy tempers the neo-liberal pragmatism of Joburg 2030:

LEFT TO RIGHT

fig 1 Ghandi Square
Photograph by Clive Hassall

fig 2 Melrose Arch
Image courtesy of the Melrose Arch Development Company

fig 3 44 Stanley Ave
Photograph by Clive Mikhele Madisson

> A world-class African city *for all* – this is Joburg's commitment to the poor … (*Human Development Strategy* 2005:4, emphasis added)

> A human development perspective of the HDS recognises that people are the City's biggest asset and that they need to be supported and encouraged to realise their full potential to become fully-fledged urban residents. (*Human Development Strategy* 2005:2)

The emphasis of the *Human Development Strategy* is the promotion of cohesion and inclusion.

> Cities in pursuit of world-class status need to strike a fine balance between their conflicting imperatives. The sometimes uneasy relationship between economic growth and social responsibilities is reflected in social discord as the minority of city residents reaps the benefits of growth while many remain in conditions of poverty. A social inclusion agenda seeks to build social cohesion among all city residents, to build community trust in the City, and to create positive partnerships for social inclusion in the city. (*Human Development Strategy* 2005:10)

Public space is overtly engaged with in this vision document, and the creation and transformation of existing public spaces is seen as one of the pillars of encouraging 'the public to interact in its full diversity'. There is also an acknowledgement that public spaces are essential to the poor, who have limited access to private space.

In 2006, the *Growth and Development Strategy* replaced the *Human Development Strategy* and Joburg 2030. This vision document was intended to resolve the many conflicting terms between the preceding vision documents. Here public space is seen as a means to "proactively absorb" the poor,

> 'Proactive absorption' does not mean wanting to take in more poor people so that they end up in informal accommodation, stranded because they cannot pay for transport, unable to access services or social amenities, and forced to behave in irregular, perhaps even criminal, activities to get by. Such people are not 'absorbed into the city' - they live a half life on its periphery, never able to enjoy the real opportunities and benefits of urban life. (*Growth and Development Strategy* 2006:57)

There is, however, a small yet significant shift in the discursive basis of the treatment of the poor in public spaces. Where public spaces are seen as essential to the care of the urban poor in the *Human Development Strategy*, in the *Growth and Development Strategy*, public space is viewed as somewhere where the poor are to be *tolerated*:

> Making allowances for the poor in how the built environment and use of public space is regulated and managed … *(Growth and Development Strategy* 2006:58-59)

There is no doubt that urban governance structures in Johannesburg recognise the importance of public space in the promotion of a city which is more democratic, more accessible and more inclusive. Furthermore, these structures have a clear objective to "improve the opportunities for citizen interaction through attractive and accessible public space" (*Growth and Development Strategy* 2006:93). Nevertheless, the reality of public space in Johannesburg is that the way in which public spaces are constructed, revitalised and managed in the city limits the development of a community of improvisation, intuition and play. Indeed, Neil Smith (1996; 2001; 2006:11) would argue that the incident at Ghandi Square is unsurprising,

> Crime of course was a central mobilizing issue in Guiliani's remake of New York as a revanchist city where reactionary revenge against those who has 'stolen the city' was a central motif, and the general politics of revanchism in South Africa are parallel insofar as the state has asserted its right over that of the public in a thoroughly asymmetrical way.

To elucidate this point, I return to Lefebvre's ontology of urban space. For Lefebvre (1991:38), space is produced through the interweaving of spatial practice, representations of space and representational space. Representations of space encompass 'the space of scientists, planners, urbanists, technocratic subdividers and social engineers'. It is this spatial modality which is most concerned with the 'order' of the relation of spatial production, and Lefebvre argues that this order is associated with a Cartesian spatial engagement; fixing and ordering the functioning of public spaces and the activities within – or, to put it in the pragmatist discourse of urban management – it is about making cities work.

New urbanist renewal and representational space

For urban planners and architects in Johannesburg, representations of space have overwhelmingly followed the principles of new urbanism in design and the principles of privatisation in political and economic spatial governance. So, while there are different types of urban public space in the city – the publicness which emerges in the privately owned shopping mall and the publicness of the street and the square are ostensibly different – representations of space, the order of urban space in Johannesburg, follows a pattern. In the extraordinary case of Melrose Arch, for example, this pattern is articulated through the simulation of new urbanist developments in major cities in the world. In the case of South-West City Improvement District, older building stock is rapidly being revitalised in mixed-use precincts. Local government has committed itself to public-private partnership governance, and the inner city is now a patchwork of city improvement districts. In addition, as new urbanist private developments grow in and around the city, the city is increasingly becoming a privatised new urbanist archipelago. New urbanism, however, has been heavily criticised (Dirsuweit & Schattauer 2004; Dirsuweit forthcoming). Michael Dear (2000) for example, describes new urbanism as Howard's concept of the garden city recycled as the solution to urban problems such as insecurity, alienation, urban decay and inadequate transport infrastructure. For those concerned with urban justice, new urbanism is perturbing, as this planning style frequently results is homogenous and insular communities (Talen 1999). For Richard Sennett (2000:70) new urbanism is "world's apart from the everyday disorders of life; these kitschy, pseudo-communities that advertise themselves as antidotes to suburban sprawl provide little home for difference – differences of the kind that lead to conflicts of ethnicity, class or sexual preference."

To return to Lefebvre's ontology of space, the guard's disciplinary action within Gandhi Square points to a tension between representations of space and conflicting representational space. The modality – and these modalities are co-present and interweaved – of spatial practice refers to the way in which the city is produced through the workings of a particular society, "a society secretes that society's space" (Lefebvre 1991:38). This is the spatiality that gradually emerges through daily routine and networks through the city. In the case of Gandhi Square, the spatial practice of this bus terminus (especially since buses are less frequent than they should be) includes the daily routine of being taken from suburban centres to inner-city spaces of economic production. The modality of representational space is the space of 'inhabitants' and 'users'. "This is the dominated – and hence passively experienced – space which the imagination seeks to change and appropriate. It overlays physical space, making symbolic use of its objects" (Lefebvre 1991:39). Gandhi Square, for its users, is a space of resting, waiting, thinking, reading, and so forth. It is an interstitial space of pause before being moved out of the city to the suburban spaces of home, rest, and leisure. Clearly, in Gandhi Square the representational spatial modality and representations of space are at odds with one another, and thus the 'zero tolerance' disciplinary control.

Ironically, new urbanist planning in its current practice acknowledges the importance of the modality of representational space. It works with non-verbal symbols and signs and the everyday lived practice of urban inhabitants. For example, the marketing promises of Melrose Arch (see Dirsuweit & Schattauer 2004) speaks to the lived practice of urban life:

> **Melrose Arch is the first private development that offers accessible public space on wide streets with a number of 'third places' in which people can interact. It consists of offices, shops, restaurants, gym, hotel, squares with benches, open streets and while it is a managed environment it offers uninhibited but controlled access to everyone … Melrose Arch is a microcosm of publicness … (Marketing Concepts(b) [s.a], emphasis added)**

In the case study which I presented at the *Johannesburg and Megacity Phenomena* colloquium, the marketing promises of 44 Stanley Ave also offer a space which speaks to a particular urban imaginary:

> **The whole building has a playground appeal and as such attracts many playful, colourful and creative people to it … the focus is on urban renewal and the task is to provide an**

> **unparalleled lifestyle centre. The wonderfully eclectic mix of shops attest to this and it will only take one visit to be hooked. The stores are a blend of the curious and quirky, the adventurous and the sublime … (Our focus 2006)**

The form of representational meaning articulated in this space, however, is that of middle-class consumers and, at all costs, the image of a middle-class representational fantasy is maintained. In this way these environments are constructed suit the imaginaries of the urban middle classes and are secured to ensure that urban others do not disrupt this image. The same is true of Gandhi Square – this space is secured and the people who enter the space and the activities that take place within the space are selected and controlled. Although they speak to the imaginary of playful, cosmopolitan and interactive environments – these are highly mediated spaces where, in maintaining a constructed sense of 'order', extraordinary limitations are placed on who enters the space and what is enacted within the space. The opportunities for "a whole which brings into play the totality of the real" are circumscribed and limited. There is almost no capacity for these spaces to offer unexpected moments of spontaneous interaction – the kind of sociality which could result in a great sense of connection with urban others.

Furthermore, in speaking to representational space - these developments exclude through their symbolic orders. The case of 44 Stanley Ave for example, although the owner claimed that the space was

> **'… totally non-exclusive and I think that it embraces South Africans and it also embraces foreigners … that was the model that I worked on, when I say model, I mean my own model, that it was a non-exclusive, non-ageist, non-sexist, non-, non-, non- …' (Interview, Owner 2005),**

the owners and shopkeepers also acknowledged that the 'aesthetics' of 44 Stanley appeal to a very small portion of Johannesburg residents.

> *But if you look at the clientele that does come here, it is quite a specific set of people … I mean if you look at the people who work in the offices around here, they don't seem to have that much interaction with the space.*
>
> *No they don't.*
>
> *Why do you think that it is?*
>
> *Because, they don't … because it fits into a certain aesthetic. It fits into a group of people who appreciate an aesthetic … You get a lot of call centres (and I'm not judging here) and a certain ilk of people who work in these buildings … (Interview, Owner 2005)*

So although the owners and retailers in the space perceived the development as inclusive and made a number of efforts to develop equal relationships between themselves and their staff, in speaking to a particular spatial sensibility, the space became awkward for a range of users.

> *[44 Stanley is] so very white [laughs] … you know there's too much white people, but they're quite a nice bunch. (Interview, Worker 2005)*
>
> *[It attracts] the wealthy, of course you get the odd artsy student, but it is mainly middle-aged upper income. (Interview, Retailer 2005)*
>
> *I call them mueslis, you know, rich, white, healthy … (Interview, Retailer 2005)*
>
> *No I never eat here; I bring my sandwiches and eat them there on the other side. (Interview, Worker 2005)*
>
> *… it's just an exclusive white kind of set up. It's only the [hip] and happening black people who know about this place. And the black people who are working around here; because even the black people, they ask, "what do you do there, what is that place?" … for me, it's not my kind of set up, you know I love … my rowdy friends, you know the people around who would like scream or dance, you need to feel free – not every time you make a move someone will like [shows a glare] … The age gap just comes to me … For me it's just a bit too exclusive. (Interview, Worker, 2005)*

Although they are different spaces, Gandhi Square, Melrose Arch, and 44 Stanley Ave, speak to a middle-class representational space as part of a deliberate and planned representation of space. As a consequence, the spontaneity that makes public space an important component of a particular sociality that includes play, agonistic disagreement and the lived appropriation of space is lost. In this loss is the potential for a greater inclusivity and sense of solidarity and care for the other.

Conclusion

You may be reading this and, like me, you may be feeling a vague scepticism gnawing at you. Surely, if we let representational space become a dominant modality for urban, public, space in Johannesburg, it would simply become unmanaged, decayed and dangerous. Public spaces in Johannesburg, have for many years, been crime-filled and poorly looked after; places associated with fear rather than urban spontaneity. However, the imported New York style 'zero tolerance' approach that the city and its private partners seem to have embraced at great cost (Smith 2001) and with such vigour is exclusionary and disempowering. This micro-disciplinary style of governance is at odds with an enlarged sense of urban citizenship; the deepening of democracy and the building of a caring society (to use the words of Amos Masondo in his 2008 state of the city speech).

We need to think about what is meant by 'tolerance' – the term used in the *Growth and Development Strategy*. Does tolerance mean that as long as the representational desires of middle-class consumers remain undisturbed, urban others can be tolerated on the peripheries of public spaces, only to be chased away if they become worrisome? Does tolerance mean that spaces should be designed to suit the representational fantasies of the middle classes and be devoid of services for the urban poor? How do we proactively absorb the poor into public spaces through design, interaction, and engagement? How do we make urban public spaces about enhancing a sense of being part of a caring city and serving the representational needs of the urban poor? The only way to really find out is to ensure that public spaces are safe, but in a way which still makes way for representational appropriation, agonistic participation, spontaneous sociality, rest and play.

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