

# City Squares in Cape Town's Townships – Public Space as an Instrument of Urban Transformation: The Origins, Objectives and Implementation of the City of Cape Town's Dignified Places Programme

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## **Abstract**

*The huge inequities and fragmentation of South Africa's post apartheid cities prevail in spite of progressive legislation and huge expenditure on public housing and reconstruction programs. The poor of Cape Town continue to be housed in dormitory townships isolated from the opportunities and resources of this polarised and spatially segregated city.*

*This paper presents the case of the City of Cape Town's Dignified Places Programme, which is an attempt to demonstrate the principles of equity, integration and sustainable development. The focus of this programme is the design and construction of new public spaces in the poorest parts of the city as a means to improve accessibility, quality and dignity. A parallel objective was to place the quality of the urban environment squarely on the agenda of local government.*

The urban and policy contexts of the programme will be briefly sketched, illustrating the issues and challenges faced in transforming the degraded and neglected parts of the city. Reference will be made to the theory and principles that have informed and guided the programme design and implementation and also to similar programmes internationally that have inspired the programme.

The design principles and objectives will be highlighted in the presentation of a few of the 20 projects that have been implemented over the past 5 years. A short commentary on the key successes, lessons and challenges that have emerged in the process concludes the paper.



Barbara Southworth (B.Arch; UND, MCPUD; UCT) is an architect and urban designer and currently the head of Urban Design at the City of Cape Town. She is a graduate of the University of Natal where she completed her degree in architecture in 1991 and then went on to read for her masters in Urban Design 7 City Planning at the University of Cape Town, graduating in 1997. She has worked as an architect and urban designer in the private sector in the Britain and South Africa. She has held the post of head of the Urban Design Branch of the City of Cape Town for the past 6 years. She also teaches as a contract lecturer and studio master in the Urban Design, Planning and Landscape masters programmes at the University of Cape Town.

As part of a team of four she won First Prize for the international Housing Generator Competition run by the Netherlands Institute of Architecture (NIA) in 1999. For her role in initiating and coordinating the Dignified Places Programme, she was awarded the 2003 Ralph Erskine Prize, in recognition of architects whose work has benefited the underprivileged of the world. The City of Cape Town's Urban Design Branch, under her leadership, won joint first prize for the Africa region in the Union of International Architect's 2004 Celebration of Cities Competition.



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## **Introduction**

The huge inequities and fragmentation of South Africa's post apartheid cities prevail in spite of progressive legislation and huge expenditure on public housing and reconstruction programs. The poor of Cape Town continue to be housed in dormitory townships isolated from the opportunities and resources of this polarised and spatially segregated city.

This paper presents the case of Cape Town's Dignified Places Programme, which is an attempt to demonstrate the principles of equity, integration and sustainable development. The focus of this programme is the design and construction of new public spaces in the poorest parts of the city as a means to improve accessibility, quality and dignity. A parallel objective was to place the quality of the urban environment squarely on the agenda of local government.

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## **The urban context**

Cape Town is an inequitable, fragmented and unsustainable city. 'It is a place of great contrasts. On one hand, it is known internationally for its magnificent natural setting, it is attracting increasing numbers of wealthy new residents from around the world, and it has been acknowledged as a centre of design and one of the current global tourism mecca's. At the same time, 90 000 households live in shacks – many of these in settlements without adequate water supply, sanitation or electricity - poverty, gangsterism, tuberculosis and HIV are rife and 250 000 people are unemployed. Income groups tend to be strongly separated into different areas, which still largely aligns with the racial segregation of Apartheid' (Southworth, 2003, p. 120).

The pre-1930's parts of the city are well structured around rail corridors, well served by public transport and facilities and located in climatically moderate areas around the Table Mountain Range. The newer parts of the city – especially the majority of low-income neighbourhoods – are located on a climatically hostile plain, known as the "Cape Flats", far from urban opportunities. The middle class and wealthy sectors of the population live in the historic core or in expansive suburbs in the attractive parts of the urban periphery, on the coast or in the winelands.



'The poor live in derelict council housing estates, informal settlements or state subsidized dormitory housing projects. In the process of delivering on its promise of housing for all citizens the state has provided 1.46 million subsidised houses to the poor since 1993 (PCAS, 2003, p. 25). These are provided through a once off capital subsidy and delivered at scale in the form of large housing projects. Because of the huge backlog and limited budgets these are located on the cheapest urban land – typically on the urban periphery, far from established public transport routes and urban opportunities.

Cape Town, now a city of just over 3 million people, experienced a period of extremely rapid growth in population and size after 1940. Apartheid ideologies and the Modern Movement were the dominant planning ideologies of this period and resulted in large areas of Cape Town being made up of fragmented, inward focused "neighbourhoods" (Southworth, 2003, p. 120). Freeways and a heavy rail network, intentionally placed as barriers between communities, reinforce barriers between communities.

Little or no attention is given to the public environment. There are increasing tendencies for the newer middle and high-income areas to develop as gated communities further fragmenting the city and privatising places of high amenity value.

Urban public spaces have never been considered a part of Cape Town's menu of public city building elements. Traditional parks are increasingly also being eliminated. 'The fragmented and unsustainable nature of these conventional public parks has resulted in the belief that these are extravagant and a "nice to have". Open space is regarded as unaffordable to provide and maintain, and cannot compete for popular and political support in the face of demands for basic services. As a result, vast areas of the city are developed without this essential resource. Children play in the dust and mud of the streets, teenagers play football on the grassed banks of freeway interchanges, old people wait in blazing sun or rain for their pensions and community events and ceremonies have no place or home. Places that are of enormous civic and community importance, such as markets, station forecourts and community centres are typically dusty (or in winter, muddy), windswept, uncomfortable and degraded places. In short, the public realm has been neglected and the resulting abandoned space between the institutions, businesses and residences of the city lacks the sense of dignity associated with well performing cities. Norberg-Schulz (1980) has written extensively of people's fundamental need for a sense of place, belonging and orientation. Large parts of Cape Town do not provide for these needs and the program sought to address this.

The economic significance of public space is similarly neglected. Planning and design of neighbourhoods for poor communities has not accommodated either private or public locations for commercial activities or markets. Survivalist trading occurs in unregulated conditions that create major public health, safety and access problems' (Southworth, 2003, p. 121).

At the level of broader city structure and form, development is still strongly driven by the myth that all residents will be car owners - in spite of the fact that the bulk of the city's population is poor and never likely to afford to own or maintain a car. Current city growth is predominantly suburban, low density, car based (except in informal settlements) and dominated by a focus on engineering services and individual households. The result is a low-density sprawling city which is inconvenient,



inefficient and lacking – especially in the townships on the Cape Flats – any sense of place or identity. People are forced to move long distances to reach scattered facilities and thresholds are mostly too low to support the development of viable economic activity or a viable public transport system in the poor parts of the city. Cape Town has the most extensive rail network of all South African cities but 40 years of disinvestment by the Apartheid government has left it unsafe and unreliable. In spite of poor levels of service 50% of the daily commuting is via public transport. The bulk of public transport users are the poor. Trains from Khayelitsha, a township of 500 000 people on the edge of the city, operate at 140% capacity in peak periods.

Further exacerbating these problems, from an institutional point of view, are the challenges of addressing historic fragmentation in public decision-making, implementation and management. In this context, public space has historically fallen between the cracks and consequently has not had an institutional home or budget.

In summary, Cape Town is increasingly being dominated by poor quality environments totally lacking meaningful investment in the public environment.

### **The philosophical roots of the program**

The dignified places programme has theoretical roots in the normative approach of the planning and urban design programmes at the University of Cape Town - developed over the last 25 years by Uytenbogaardt & Dewar. Uytenbogaardt, a student in the USA of David Crane, Louis Kahn, Romaldo Giurgola and Ed Bacon brought back to South Africa a strong belief in the importance of public institutions, the public good and the concept of the "capital web". The approach highlights the role of spatial planning and urban design in addressing human need and ecological imperatives in settlement design.

'The approach promotes performance driven planning and design, defining a core set of needs as the basis on which planning and design policies and actions can be evaluated. The first is a concern for balance, promoting dynamic balance in cities - between settlement and its ecological base, as well as with respect to social and spatial dynamics. A second is the need to promote freedom for people to choose how to inhabit or interpret places, within certain constraints that exist, or are defined, to establish necessary order. This relates to a minimalist approach to design where design provides the minimum necessary constraint necessary, in a particular context, to achieve positive settlement form, rather than comprehensive control of all areas and all aspects of settlement.

Equitable access to the resources and opportunities of the city is posited as a third essential feature of positive settlements, while enabling and promoting intensity, diversity and necessary complexity is a fourth. Here the focus is achieving balance in the degree of the concentration or distribution of public resources.

Given our Apartheid history, one of the most challenging performance dimensions is integration. The integration of communities and activities to promote choice and flexibility through overlap as opposed to fragmentation and separation is viewed as a fundamental precondition for positive cities.

The sixth basic urban quality proposed as a measure of positive settlements is 'community'. This is defined as the extent to which a settlement promotes a sense of



place or identity that facilitates positive social interaction through positive place making and the celebration of important civic institutions.

Before the transformation to a democracy in 1994, this approach was fundamentally opposed to the prevailing planning orthodoxy of programmatically driven planning and policies of segregation. Now, at the level of citizen rights, these performance dimensions are completely in line with rights enshrined in the Bill of Rights of the Constitution of South Africa. These are the right of all to equality, human dignity, freedom, assembly and, to a healthy and sustainable environment' (Southworth, 2003, p. 123).

### **Ground breaking urban design driven projects in Cape Town**

In spite of the limited focus on public space within Cape Town over the last 40 years, certain milestone projects have been implemented. These projects have established a local precedent - both institutionally and in the minds of the public - that has been essential to the current public space program. The first of these was the Cape Town Central City Pedestrian Network initiative. This project, undertaken by Cape Town City Council in the mid 1980's took on the prevailing car focused, engineering driven attitudes to city space. The main project to be implemented under this program was the pedestrianisation of St George's Mall, a street linking the historic core of the central city to the newer Foreshore area. Hard fought and highly controversial at the time, it established a belief in the potential of urban design to transform city spaces into attractive and safe people spaces without any loss of economic benefit to the businesses affected.

The development of a degenerated harbour area into the Victoria and Alfred Waterfront was further ground breaking project that assisted in setting the context for the current program. While it is an essentially commercial precinct, dominated by a shopping centre, up-market hotels and tourist activities, its focus on creating a safe, well-landscaped pedestrian environment has demonstrated the value of creating people spaces.

### **Origins of the Dignified Places Programme**

The idea for the dignified places program developed during the preparation of the City of Cape Town Draft "Municipal Spatial Development Framework" in 1999. The Framework's focus was to determine a realistic and implementable way to address inequity and disintegration in Cape Town.

The framework posited an approach to achieving equity and integration that was based on a concept for establishing of equitable access, to public transport as well as to the resources and opportunities of the city, urban and 'green'. This concept suggested a hierarchical system of public transport interchanges, supported by investment in public spaces and community facilities. These centres could also then become the focus of high-density infill housing and commercial activities that may respond to the opportunities created by such public investment.

The creation of high quality public space was at the heart of achieving the framework's aims. Urban public spaces - streets, squares, and promenades - are the most important form of social infrastructure in urban settlements. "They act as "urban living rooms", especially for people living in overcrowded conditions; they connect communities and inform people's "mental maps" of the city. Public spaces are particularly important in the lives of poorer people, whose housing is often too small for the households needs. Here, public space effectively extends the house or



shack, providing space for social and economic activities. These spaces also accommodate the informal events that are central to the process of urban living. They are places of informal theatre, of courtship, of economic production and so on." (City of Cape Town, 1999).

The framework proposed two public space and places programmes, intended to reclaim the city for people "point-by-point". One of these was a citywide system of liveable public spaces and market squares, associated with public transportation interchanges as well as local markets and clusters of social facilities. This pilot programme aimed to demonstrate the impact that these projects could have on degraded and poor quality environments in the poorest parts of the city. One of the anticipated advantages of public space projects was the relatively low cost, enabling rapid implementation and immediate impact.

Barcelona's public space programme was an important precedent for this approach. Here, in 1979, the new democratic city government chose a public space strategy to show the citizens of Barcelona immediate and very visible improvements to demonstrate the commitment of the new political leaders to openness and democracy (Gehl and Gemzøe, 2002). This strategy moved away from lengthy planning processes to an "active city policy in which the public sector initiated renewal by designing dozens of new public spaces, parks and squares" (Gehl and Gemzøe, p28).

### **Aims and approach**

The over-arching aim of Cape Town's programme is to promote a sense of dignity in the public realm targeting the poorest and most disadvantaged parts of the city. The objective is to provide each local area with a place where individual circumstances of poverty are not starkly visible, where people can meet and gather or just sit in a place which is as attractive and comfortable as any other well made, positive place in the city.

The programme seeks to address those issues of inequity, fragmentation and environmental degradation that are within the scope of urban design intervention to influence and to demonstrate how strategic, concerted interventions can make a difference in their own right and can catalyse a process of broader renewal and transformation.

Five principles have consistently guided the planning, design and implementation of the programme. These are equity, place-making, integration, minimalism and generation.

### **Principle 1: Equity - strategic location**

The programme began with extremely limited resources, of both professional capacity and project funding, and so, by necessity individual projects are catalytic rather than comprehensive. The identification and selection of structurally and symbolically significant locations is essential to the success of such a catalytic approach. The notion of Crane's 'capital web', developed into the minimalist philosophy promoted by Dewar & Uytenbogaardt (1991) is the basis of this approach.

Structurally significant places are those where a public space intervention has the potential to integrate the city, promote accessibility, or establish a new and positive sense of place. These are the collective places where people spend a lot of time. In



the poorer parts of Cape Town, these are at stations and public transport interchanges, major pedestrian movement routes, at places of social and commercial gathering, and at community facilities such as libraries, clinics and community centres. Places that have a symbolic significance include sites of political struggle and special memory. The program to date has prioritised projects at such structurally and symbolically significant locations.

### **Principle 2: Place making**

The establishment of a sense of permanence is an important consideration in the design of the projects. Many of the projects are located in informal settlements and subsidy housing projects. Here, the impact of poverty and decades of struggle and uncertainty about the right to be a resident of the city is evident in the sense of impermanence and informality of the built environment. Even areas where substantial and clearly permanent investment has been made by the local authority in roads, engineering services and community facilities, the lack of permanence or substance in the places where people spend their time – the streets and shared spaces – is profound. It was an explicit aim of the program to begin to establish first points, then a system, of robust public spaces that communicated a sense of permanence. In a sense, it is an experiment in urban “acupuncture” again reminiscent of David Crane’s “capital web” (1960).

Related to the creation of a sense of permanence is the aim that each project has a visible and immediate impact and a sense of completeness. Also important, was for the project to have sufficient substance to create a strong sense of place. For this reason, fewer and more substantial projects are favoured over a widespread distribution of many small projects. Earlier city initiatives to improve the quality of the public environment had taken the latter approach and these have had a negligible impact on the perceptions and experience of these places.

Spatial definition is important and challenging in a context where the small scale and pavilion form of the existing built fabric is not sufficient to achieve any sense of enclosure or containment. Projects worked with the few buildings of any substance – usually community buildings. The design challenge is to achieve strong spatial definition without relying on building facades to achieve this in the initial stages. Here, level changes, low walls and structured tree planting are important design tools. Where budgets permit, “public fronts” as “space defining elements” are constructed to suggest and encourage a range of unspecified future uses.

### **Principle 3: Integration**

The projects aimed to demonstrate the benefits of sectoral, spatial and institutional integration. Clustering of the collective elements of the city improves accessibility, convenience and efficient management. The budgets of as many relevant sectors as possible were consolidated to achieve integrated projects. Combined projects achieved far more than the sum of independent initiatives would have managed. For example, individual projects planned to provide support to informal traders, build a taxi rank and landscape a space were pulled into one project of a significant scale and impact. This consolidation was also pursued where projects could reinforce existing public investment in appropriate locations.

Social integration is also an important focus. All projects are initiated, designed and implemented in consultation with communities and local councillors.

### **Principle 4: Minimalism – freedom & flexibility**



Projects were not intended to be complete but rather armatures that could be interpreted inhabited and added to by the communities that used them. As argued by Crane (1964: 91), "to make public designs is to *leave and make* creative opportunities for the private sphere". The projects, therefore, focus on the most public components and those elements necessary for adequate definition, enclosure and identity such as paving, seating, trees, low walls and colonnades. Public colonnades are common to a number of projects, varying in detail and form, providing robust public fronts to informal or tenuous private activities. Private response is then able to consolidate over time while the integrity of the space is established up front. One precedent for this idea of the colonnades is the Portico of Bologna extended by Dotti in a deliberate act that invited and received a development response (Habraken, 1982). A second important precedent is the state provided network of verandah's and shops that defined the main streets of Jaipur (Sachdev and Tillotson, 2002: 51).

The need for flexibility in the uncertain and dynamic context of the Cape Town was another important design consideration. All of the best city spaces accommodate a range of activities at different times – from theatre, to celebration, to market and parking area and so on. The capacity of the spaces to be the container of as many aspects of community life as possible is a consistent design requirement. To achieve this, simplicity in the overall design as well as careful placement of elements such as trees, walls and lighting is essential.

#### **Principle 5: Generation – activity, catalysis and incrementalism**

The projects aimed to promote active edges through the design of both the spaces themselves and their relationship with surrounding land uses and activities. The spaces encourage active engagement with formal and informal activities, and public and private buildings that edge it. Where there are no existing activities the possibility for these are enabled through the design. Some projects included the removal of security walls or fencing surrounding public buildings, often after difficult negotiations with the operators of these institutions. Walls exacerbate the sterility and hostility of the public environment around them as well as reducing the potential of surveillance.

Crane's (1964) and later, Dewar & Uytendogaardt's (1991), notion of "generative works", was an explicit principle informing design. At the level of the location and nature of the projects, Crane's durable statement on the need to use "capital design" as "an artful system of shaping and deploying public works in time and space for maximum encouragement and creative control of private development" (1964: 91) still pertains. The aim was to ensure that, in location and design, the projects provided a range of opportunities to the many "informal" street traders that operate in places of high pedestrian occupation. The principle adopted was to design the public components so that they created a range of trading opportunities of varying levels of formality depending on the project location and levels of trading activity. The range encompasses simple "market squares" accommodating periodic trading without any dedicated trading facilities and more formalized spaces fronted by public "colonnades" accommodating container or shack shops. In exceptional circumstances motivated by design and location, rows of small shops were built.

An ongoing process of consolidation over time was also an important strategy. A process of implementing a series of projects in an area was adopted. Each project needed to be complete in its own right while contributing to a broader system of interlinked places. This process was necessitated by the limited funding available to



the program but also allowed for a measure of corrective action to be taken as lessons were learned over time.

### **Successes and Challenges**

Response from ordinary people and city councillors has been encouraging and confirms the starting premise that the creation of these “dignified places” is a relevant and meaningful part of transforming Cape Town. The unexpected, but positive, uses that occur in some of the projects may be considered an indicator of success and emphasis value of designing flexibility into public spaces.

At a political level, the program is receiving increasing support from our Mayor and City Manager as a tangible and visible means of communicating commitment to improving the quality of peoples lives in neglected parts of the city.

The creation of dignified places features in six of the nine strategies of Cape Town's new strategic plan, a high-level policy and budget strategy for transforming the city. The programme is now an integral part of the transport, housing, informal settlement upgrade, urban restructuring and economic development strategies.

‘Dignified urban spaces’ are also prioritised in The Transformation and Restructuring of Public Transport project; a joint initiative of the city and provincial governments inspired by Bogota's Transmilleneo project. Five new dignified place projects are being implemented as part of the first phase of public and non-motorised transport improvements along Klipfontein Road linking Khayelitsha to central Cape Town.

One of the greatest ongoing challenges in the implementation of the program is the culture of city development. Public spaces cut across functional boundaries and to implement these requires cutting across planning and operational silos that do not typically integrate. This integration is perceived as additional and unnecessary work and often resisted. Ongoing management and maintenance problems are a symptom of this continued institutional fragmentation. Creative solutions such as community based management contracts are being explored.

In spite of these and related resource challenges, the programme has succeeded in making the quality of the public environment – the streets and squares of the city – an urgent priority in the minds of citizens, politicians and the city leadership.

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