

## Fleeting public place and lasting communities. Dog walking in Johannesburg's Killarney Park

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### Abstract

South Africa's history of purposefully segregated public space as a stage on which the anti-cohesion ideals of various colonial governments played out is well known. What is less known is the rich history of public space resistance which accompanies this, particularly that of the People's Parks. These collectively driven public places which emerged as pop-ups in public space captured the imagination of communities seeking to activate new norms departing from state-enforced segregation. Reading current public space through the lens of the People's Parks thus presents an opportunity to uncover and better understand the existence and impact of fleeting places in public space, with lasting impacts in terms of building engaging communities. Drawing on immersive participant observation in Johannesburg's Killarney Park, this paper focuses on a community of local residents and their dogs. Brought together first by their pets but later by strong in-group social bonds, this group demonstrates the potential for communities to grow from and in public space entirely organically, not reliant on infrastructure or physical planning and design interventions. Instead, an often invisible and seemingly intangible place is created with very real dimensions for those who co-create it once a day in coming together. This paper explores the space that is Killarney Park, and the place that is the dog walkers' circle, in an effort to better understand these dynamics and suggest possibilities for further research on public space in Africa.

**Keywords:** public space; Johannesburg; animal geography; dog; city; community

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Of the numerous avenues of public space research currently gripping urban scholars' imaginations, the connection between space, place, and community stands out as warranting further attention from an African perspective. Drawing on Johannesburg (South Africa) in particular, it is clear that a history of deliberately exclusionary social fragmentation has left a somewhat indelible mark on the city to date (City of Johannesburg Department of Development Planning, 2016). Public space particularly was historically a heavily policed site where segregation was enforced. Intertwined with this history is a narrative of struggle and resistance, taking shape in what is known as People's Parks. These parks constitute a series of collectively-created and locally-initiated community parks which emerged in Johannesburg (usually Soweto) around 1985 and were always demolished by the state (Goldblatt, 1986 as seen in Stevenson, 2007; Jochelson, 1990; Sack, 1989; Steyn, 2002, 2013). These temporary, moving places within public space open up interesting analytic inroads for the conversation on community-building, placemaking, and public space in Johannesburg and cities like it. A significant body of existing research already looks at public space design, and particular places and spaces which bring people together (Aelbrecht and Stevens, 2019; Afacan and Afacan, 2011; Carmona, 2010, 2019; Gaffikin et al., 2010; Madanipour, 1999). However, less research specifically looks at fleeting and often invisible places in public space in Africa, and the communities which grow from them (though there is a wealth of global literature on public space, communities, and chance encounters) (Malefakis, 2019). Rooted in that background this paper reflects on Johannesburg's Killarney Park, asking: Can fleeting public places contribute to the community-building potential of public space? Written in the early stages of research on public space, place, and temporariness, this paper provides early conjecture rather than fully fledged arguments, seeking to open further discussion on temporal public space in Africa. Drawing on documentary analysis, observational research, and interviews, I focus on a group of dog owners and walkers living in the neighbourhood. I have observed them to regularly use the park, often simultaneously, in a process which appears to collectively produce a temporary place, and a loose community which transcends it. I begin by historicizing public space in the South African context, weaving in the examples of placemaking demonstrated in the People's Parks. Then I move on to explain Killarney Park and the rhythmically fleeting place created by its dog-walking community.

### **A note on methods and positionality**

The fieldwork generating this study's data results from immersive participant observational work in Killarney Park. This includes a previous study (Rawhani, 2021) spanning the 2018-2020 period, further targeted observational study in 2022. The latter drew on 37 visits to the park, and 8 interviews with interviewees who differed in length of time residing in the neighbourhood (ranging from 6 months to 20 years), dog ownership (some owned dogs, others were dog walkers, and others joined friends who owned a dog), and park usage patterns in general (AKR1, 2022; AKR2, 2022; du Plessis, 18 February 2022a; Lubinsky, 2022; Meise, 2022; Naidoo, 2022; Ross, 2022; Verhoogt, 2022). These individual virtual interviews were semi-structured, involving 11 questions, and lasting 10-15 minutes on average. Interview transcripts and fieldwork notes were coded through a content analysis approach on ATLAS.ti to locate commonly occurring themes. Earlier fieldwork was used to provide a point of departure, but not re-

processed beyond that. It was necessary to conduct the interviews virtually as interviewing individuals in the park would not have allowed for a private setting, and may have biased the answers I received. Unfortunately, it was impossible to avoid bias entirely as I, the interviewer, am also a member of the circle of dog walkers. This directly informed my decision to conduct interviews virtually despite ordinarily interacting with fellow dog walkers and owners in person. I drew on experiential and learned knowledge resulting from previous participant observation research in Killarney Park, demonstrating that it was not possible to have private conversations in a park of that size and social context (here referring to a small densely populated neighbourhood where many people know each other and approach each other) (Rawhani, 2021). Previous attempts at private or confidential conversations in the Park were not successful, and prevented me from guaranteeing anonymity or confidentiality. Regardless of my efforts to avoid bias in the interview process, it is possible that interviewees may have limited the candid quality of their responses as a result of knowing me, and that my analysis of their answers was impacted likewise.

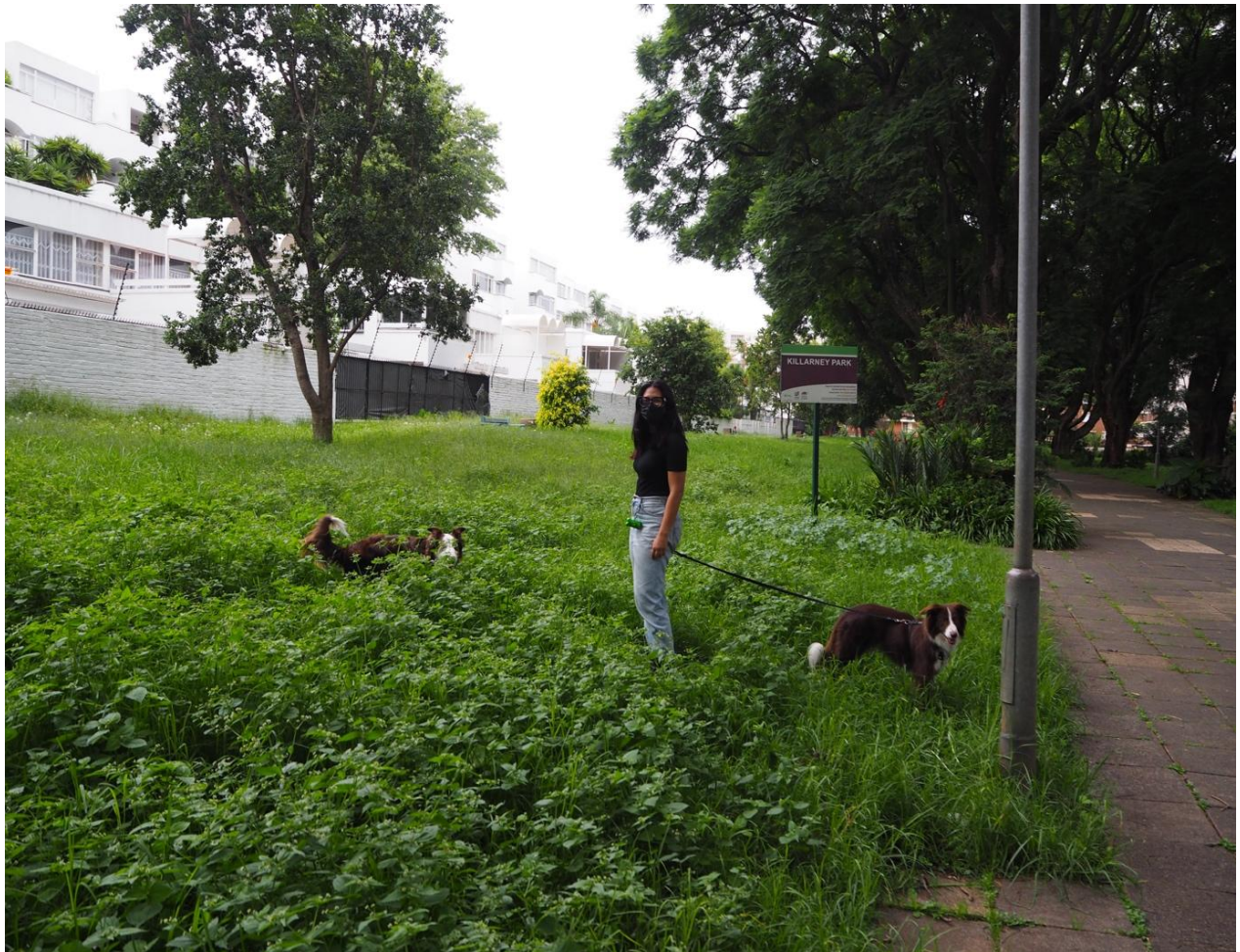


Figure 1. The Author and her Dogs in Killarney Park (du Plessis, 23 February 2022b)

### **Core concepts: Space, Place, and Fleeting Rhythmic Emergences**

Without seeking to contribute to the space vs place debate, I conceive of space and place as interrelated but different. Not every space is a place, though some portions of public space (in itself a place at times), become specific places, or sub-places. Space is the location where the creation of society takes place, per Aristotle and Plato, but it is a creation inherently influenced by freedom and restriction, inequalities, and social capital (Wang, 2018). Indescribable as any one specific object, space is a set of relationships which may originate as conceptions in mental space before they are enacted and begin to create place (Lefebvre, 1991; Patricios, 1973). Space is a geographic coordinate, often demarcated, zoned, and imagined to potentially serve a particular purpose if it becomes activated as a place (Tuan, 2002). On the other hand, per Tuan, place:

“[...] has a history and meaning. Place incarnates the experiences and aspirations of a people. Place is not only a fact to be explained in the broader frame of space, but it is also a reality to be clarified and understood from the perspectives of the people who have given it meaning (1979: abstract).

Thus, place represents that space where, at the individual and social levels meaning and attachment have emerged (Cresswell, 2014). Finally, in examining Killarney Park as an example of public space in Johannesburg, through the lens of temporary place such as the People's Parks, I uncover what I call rhythmically fleeting place. While my work on this concept is at an early stage a tight definition may be premature. However, here I provide a working description, emerging from my fieldwork observations and analysis, which delineates key characteristics. Temporary or rhythmically fleeting place refers to places which appear and disappear rhythmically, leaving little discernible physical trace in space, but a lasting social impact through the memory of the recurring place. Rhythmically fleeting place is temporary, emerging and disappearing in accordance with the lived pattern of the everyday unique to those who use and invent such places. Its existence, though very real, may be invisible and undetectable when it is not in use. This sets it apart from installed infrastructure like a playground which demarcates the place where space occupies a play purpose and social functionality, for example. It is not transient, neither can its impact be erased through the erasure of the physicality of the space which it occupies, as its placeness and associated memories and attachments ensure its impactful legacy. It is originally spontaneous, but later planned even if informal. Finally, it appears it might be associated with in-group and out-group politics. In this way it shapes and is shaped by relationships, and identities, solidifying identities at the margins of power and inclusion, and possibly mainstreaming new behaviours and practices (potentially positive *or* anti-social).

### **A History of Public Space in South Africa**

During 1948-1994 controlling public space as part of systematizing segregation became central to the Apartheid regime (Houssay-Holzschuch and Teppo, 2009). Numerous laws and statutes such as the Reservation of Separate Amenities Act 49 of 1953 served to entrench this (for a comprehensive list see Strauss, 2019). Beyond legal statute and policy frameworks, photographic archives of public space in South Africa confirm the infiltration of these exclusionary principles into public space by 'othering' a segment of

the population (here, Black people) and spreading fear of encountering them. In one poignant photograph from the era two Black men walk toward a residential settlement and pass a sign which reads “CAUTION BEWARE OF NATIVES” (Ejor, 1956). This is further visible in signs reserving taxi stops, lawns bathrooms, seating areas, and sometimes entire public spaces, for different racial groups (with White people receiving preferential treatment) (Almasy, 1950; Campbell, 1986a, 1986b; Cook, 1988; Gubb, 1982, 1988; Hewison, 1971; Keystone staff, 1976; Thomas, 1982). These Acts engineered into apartheid and pre-apartheid society the notion of unequal and inherently exclusionary access to the public, through planning and subsequently controlling space and place to separate people.

An example of this can be found in Johannesburg’s first state-owned and created public park, Joubert park. This was intended to ‘civilise’ working class white labourers in the city and separate them from Black labourers (Bruwer, 2006; Mavuso, 2017) through its “the conspicuous display of wholesome leisure” (Cane, 2019: 147). Unfortunately for the city’s segregationist government, urban public space constantly presented the organic opportunity for mixing. This was exacerbated by political in-fighting over the question of segregation. Ultimately these political divisions lead to the regime encouraging exclusion by progressively creating an idea of strangers as dangerous: intimacy was to be feared (Posel, 2011).

### **Temporary, fleeting places of inclusion**

This summary of the exclusive nature of public space in South Africa focuses on physical, formalised spaces and places. These were planned, funded, and created through the management of the state. However, this must not erase the rich history of Black public urban life. Indeed, the introductory words of the 2003 book *Emerging Johannesburg* sums up spontaneous, planned but informal, powerful spaces of resistance, beautifully, stating that “there was one official Johannesburg, all others were hidden” (Tomlinson et al., 2003: ix).

One such example of these spaces is captured in the case of the People’s Parks. Here I do not delve into these in great depth as this is currently the subject of archival research undertaken by Cane, Twalo, and Murray as part of the African Critical Enquiry Programme. In summary, the People’s Parks are best understood as “spontaneous public art... [appearing] in the form of small ‘parks’ or gardens on patches of wasteland, heavily decorated with found materials” (Sack, 1989: 6). Also known to some as Peace Parks, these places emerged variously through the efforts of several individuals and groups. These included the Soweto-based NEAC (National Environmental Awareness Campaign), its once chairperson Japhta Lekgheto, yard committees, the (then) political resistance parties including the African National Congress and the United Democratic Front, as well as local students, families and individuals who came together to make these parks a reality (Jochelson, 1990; Steyn, 2002). It is clear that the emergence of these parks was first spontaneous, then part of a planned pattern even though they were inherently informal from the perspective of the state. The parks in question were not built or even imagined by the state. Instead, they were linked to greening initiatives which sought to improve the quality of life in South Africa’s Black townships (Learn and Teach Magazine, 1989). Photographs in the People’s Park Archive capture these fleeting moments and places in public space. They show people gathered in parks bearing

slogans such as “True love promised land”, “We are the world”, “Unity is strength”, “Love and peace”, and even “Protect our environment. Apartheid makes our townships dirty. Cleanliness is Godliness” (Sack, n.d.). In this way it appears that the parks were intimately associated with identity, in-group and out-group politics for people at the socioeconomic margins of society, and the creation and mainstreaming of new norms surrounding aesthetics, self-worth (being worthy of beautiful spaces), cleanliness, and values contributing to the common good.

While the parks in question were sadly always demolished, their temporary quality does not negate their impact. They stand out as evidence of the power of localised community building through collective public space interventions. Further, they exemplify the organic creation of place in open public space to meet the needs of the community living there. Without doubt, these parks demonstrate the association of meaning and attachment (place) with geographic coordinators in space. The endurance of their legend and memory proves that their fleeting quality does not detract from their placeness. While many iconic public spaces live on and can be visited today so that their planned, physical dimensions can be experienced and studied, these now disappeared fleeting people’s parks offer a new approach to public space research. Recently, Jonathan Cane, Sinethemba Twalo and Noeleen Murray have suggested that these parks present “a generative entry point for interrogating ... fugacious or fleeting moments of conviviality” (Cane et al., 2022). Drawing on the People’s Parks’ short-lived quality alongside their enduring impact, questions organically arise about such fleeting places. This inspires research on places, in public space, which are not entirely permanent, physical, easily tangible, demarcated, state-planned and created, expertly designed, and formalised- yet by no means transient. Instead it invites us to read public space and opportunities for community building by looking for places which are organically and collectively created. This includes those places imagined and lived outside of the imagination of the state and its army of experts, lawmakers, and policies. Such places are temporary, fleeting, perhaps even invisible at times, yet capable of building and sustaining a community. This encourages us to ask: How can fleeting public places help to build lasting communities? Here, Killarney park’s community of dog-walkers provides an interesting example, which extends the discussion to more-than-human conceptualisations of public space too.

### **Rhythmically fleeting place: The invisible making and remaking of communities in public space**

Killarney was once the Hollywood of Johannesburg after well-known film producer Isidore Schlesinger purchased 43 hectares where the neighbourhood is currently situated. Schlesinger’s vision was for Killarney to be a park neighbourhood, choosing to designate most of its stands as public space rather than allow for too many buildings. Today, only the central Park remains, and the neighbourhood is far more built up (Gorelik, 2016).



Figure 2 (left). A park heritage plaque marks the 2013 centenary of the neighbourhood (du Plessis, 23 February 2022c).

Figure 3 (right). Killarney Park within the neighbourhood of Killarney (author's sketch, 13 October 2021)

Killarney Park covers an entire street bloc between two rows of apartment buildings on either side. A straight path stretches directly from one entrance to the other, with several benches and bins alongside it. Tall jacaranda trees surrounded by flower beds line the path, showering the park in fragrant purple blossoms every spring, and providing welcome summer shade. In a corner, small food gardens pop up where kale, tomatoes, and potatoes can be harvested.



Figure 4. Killarney Park's Central Pathway (du Plessis, 23 February 2022d)

Figure 5. Killarney Park's Food Garden (du Plessis, 23 February 2022e)

When the park first opens (between 6:00 and 7:00am) joggers, dog walkers and people rushing to their jobs in the area silently pass through. Bins are cleaned at least on a weekly basis when the city collects refuse. Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo intermittently mows the lawn. Following the lunchtime rush when people come for a walk, a hot drink, or simply to socialize, nannies flock to the jungle gym, often bringing

their own children as well as the children they are paid to watch. The nearby water fountain decorated with images of indigenous birds invites children to enjoy a refreshing drink.



Figure 6. Killarney Park's Jungle Gym (du Plessis, 23 February 2022f)

Figure 7. Killarney Park's Water Fountain (du Plessis, 23 February 2022g)

Later, teenagers pass through on their way home from school. Finally, as the workday winds to a close, dog walkers return, as do parents who bring children, enjoying the space and greenery before the park closes again as it gets dark (the street lights in the park have not worked for several years).



Figure 8. Killarney Park Bench (du Plessis, 23 February 2022h)



When I first studied Killarney Park, in 2018, the gathering of dogs and their owners or walkers did not strike me as remarkable. This was perhaps in part due to the increase in the number of dogs I observed in the park during fieldwork post-COVID 19. My interest was originally drawn to points of interaction in physically tangible places such as the jungle gym or food garden. More recently I revisited Killarney Park both literally and intellectually. I came to reanalyse previous data and fieldwork notes, with the history of People's Parks acting as a lens. Adopting this framework, I was immediately struck by the significance of what I now call the dog walkers' circle.

Daily, on weekdays, between 16:30 and 18:30, five to eleven dogs of various sizes and ages can be seen playing together in the park. Around the dogs, variously sitting and standing, their owners (often two people per dog) and walkers stand. Half engaged in conversation, half ensuring their pets do not stray too close to the park's central path (or worse, out of the gate and into the road), the owners gravitate toward one another based on no rule other than group membership (AKR2, 2022: 2; Meise, 2022; Naidoo, 2022; Ross, 2022). No particular meeting place is set, and unlike other Johannesburg parks there is no subdivision which indicates dogs should be relegated to a specific zone in the park. Often, whichever two dog owners arrive first will indirectly decide on the dog walker's circle meeting point for the day, simply based on where their dogs begin to play and attract the next dogs to arrive (du Plessis, 18 February 2022a; Meise, 2022). Usually, however, everyone gathers around a bench (Figure 8) close to the centre of the park. They take care to keep the dogs away from the children's play area, as well as other amenities such as the fountain and bathrooms, out of courtesy to park users who may not be comfortable around animals (AKR2, 2022; Lubinsky, 2022; Meise, 2022; Naidoo, 2022; Ross, 2022).

Should anyone arrive in the park outside of these hours, they may well see one or two dogs being walked (especially between 6:00 and 8:00 in the mornings), but there is no sign, physical or otherwise, that a particular place emerges in the park, with a community of its own, on a regular basis. No footpaths have been trodden into the grass there. No litter, and certainly no demarcation of the visible sort (save for the odd occasion when somebody may forget a tennis ball) give away the significance of this location. Further, there are 10 benches in the park identical to that shown in Figure 8 in terms of style, proximity to a bin, and being located away from the path and entrances. Additionally, a further 16 benches are dotted around the park which are likewise similar but do not attract any particular community or grouping, with the exception of 3 benches directly overlooking the children's play area where parents congregate. All signs seem to point towards this as a mere location, a physical context within which something might be created, but no tangible place is ordinarily visible, i.e. there is no hint of memory, attachment, relationships, or social significance beyond a plastic seat. Interviews, however, reveal a rich community of diverse interests. Here the common thread of loving dogs and caring for them brings people together once a day, in what they perceive to be a very real community and place (AKR1, 2022; Lubinsky, 2022; Meise, 2022; Naidoo, 2022; Ross, 2022). A generally unspoken agreement exists to meet around 17:00 on weekdays, and interestingly it is one which is spoken only to new dog owners in the neighbourhood, actively inviting them to bring their dog and join in (Lubinsky, 2022; Ross, 2022; Verhoogt, 2022). Certainly, the dogs are causal in this interaction. However, beyond that, human socialization and interaction occurs which leads to bonding, friendships, and community-building at a level which transcends the

dog walkers' circle itself. Examples include joining one another for braais (South African colloquialism for barbeque), dinners, pub quizzes, and joining one another's fantasy football leagues (AKR2, 2022; du Plessis, 18 February 2022a; Lubinsky, 2022; Naidoo, 2022; Ross, 2022; Verhoogt, 2022). The group emerged spontaneously at first, and then repeatedly, regularly, rhythmically, though not formally in the traditional sense or in any manner leaving a permanent physical place imprint in space. During a period when several individuals adopted animals recently and found themselves using a space without a clear animal-friendly place, the dog walkers' circle appears to create and reinforce a shared group identity.

Interesting in-group and out-group dynamics persist as a result of this shared and co-shaped identity. One interviewee indicates that group members hold one another accountable to picking up after their dogs, whereas a few individuals who opt not to join the group are frequently seen leaving dog faeces behind (Naidoo, 2022). This is one clear example of mainstreaming behaviours and norms. Others indicate that members of the dog walkers' circle try to ensure good behaviour on the part of all of the dogs, so as not to provoke the irritation of other park users (AKR2, 2022: 2; Lubinsky, 2022; Ross, 2022). This is a clear demonstration of solidifying in-group identity associated with specific ideals.

Interestingly, 7 of the 8 interviewees highlight a tense coexistence between those who use the park to walk their dogs, making an effort to ensure they do not infringe on others' space, and other park users who dislike dogs or are afraid of them. I witnessed these tensions flare up even when I perceived no threat to be posed and the animals were leashed and far away from other park users. Perhaps this perception is shaped by my own bias as a dog owner. Despite the unmarked amorphous spatial quality of the place that is the dog walkers' circle, numerous interviewees indicated a preference for some demarcation. This might allow for dogs to be walked in a particular area, with some suggesting a short fence be erected around the children's playground so that concerned parents have less to worry about (AKR1, 2022, 2022; du Plessis, 18 February 2022a; Lubinsky, 2022; Meise, 2022; Naidoo, 2022; Ross, 2022). One core theme emerged time and again across all of the interviews conducted: Figure 8's seemingly insignificant park bench and its surrounds transcend space and occupy a very specific place conceived of and practiced into everyday rhythmic reality by its co-creators. Knowledge exchange, co-caring for their animals, in-group vs out-group dynamics, intergroup asymmetries and politics, and other significant interactions create meaning and attachment associated with this space, elevating it to the significance of a place which fluctuates between physical and mental.

### **Leaving the park**

The brief nature of this case study and the early phase of this research in general precludes in-depth analysis. It does, however, propose two important questions for researchers, city government, and other stakeholders who help to manage and co-create public space and place. First, without abandoning design and planning, how can rhythmically fleeting co-created place and the communities it builds be better understood, researched, and supported? Second, with pet ownership on the rise in South Africa, how can local parks departments better equip public space for multiple

users and include more-than-human conceptualisations of rights and access (Gaunet et al., 2014; Haynes, 2021)?

These questions, and the study itself, draw attention to the need to better study, understand, and discuss temporary public space in the South African context, as well as others where similar places exist. This paper indicates that these spaces are temporary, and while fleeting they are rhythmic. These places may lack physically permanent features. However, they create and are created by deep, rich relationships that are connected with solidifying group identities and mainstreaming new norms among the creator-participants of such place. These emergent understandings of a distinct framing of public space and place in Africa lead me to argue for a comparatively novel and little-explored reading of such places. Building on this, I propose that reading public space through the history of the People's Parks allows researchers to better uncover and understand rhythmically fleeting public places and the significance it holds to the communities which it creates.

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