City Space Architecture

Public Space and Everyday Culture.
Photo-stories of Fractional Place-making in Urban South Africa

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Abstract
To understand the concept of public space within the African context, we need to unpack the terms 'public' and 'space'. Public space can't be seen in isolation from the action that takes place within the urban space, the everyday culture that influences public life. The opportunity lies in reviewing the idea of public space from a conventional meaning into one of understanding the fractions of space as co-produced, negotiated, and occupied places in constant change, driven by a continual process and not a desired end-product. In some instances, the fractional space is connected and creates a mesh or network of social infrastructure; in others, the spaces remain individual and active. The short essay offers a series of photo stories to reveal the concept of *fractional urban space*. The images illustrate a switch in foreground concepts versus the background realities and actions in urban spaces experienced in fragile neighbourhoods in Cape Town, South Africa. Four spatial frames are interpreted. *Firstly,* fractional space is described. *Secondly*, a space of practice remarks on a strategic, and transformative project as a lesson for incremental area-based development. *Thirdly,* a space of exchange, reveals the social function and production of space within an extraordinary and overlapping micro-space of the city. *Fourthly,* a space of learning, reframes a critical pedagogy of engaged teaching and learning beyond the academy, co-designed and situated in a 'real' public space project. The images offer reflections of fractional urban space in context.

Keywords: transformative, practice, everyday culture, learning

Foreground/background Public Space in an African city: An Introduction

A community member from Gugulethu in Cape Town narrated her concept of everyday culture as ordinary, daily public life acted out in popular and personal neighbourhood places; such as the hairdresser, the spaza shop, informal and backend streets, front yards, the home-based shop, the jazz bar, the braai-stand on the corner selling chicken feet, the food-stand at the taxi rank, the yard next to the church, the entrance to the early childhood development centre, the forgotten walkway, the informal kick about and so on, as a never-ending list of complex and adaptive urban *public spaces.* These are places that are used by local residents, combined with emotions, politics and stories of relationships and experiences in and with urban space. Such public spaces are sometimes invisible, mostly audible. Timeframes are linked to the rhythm of the day, the night; patterns of the month, and the seasons, encouraging a social practice in urban space that is experiential and potentially transformative. Everyday culture extends to local knowledge co-production, opening the possibility where public space claims a visible platform for encouraging dialogue, and debate. The use and function of public space is guided by everyday cultural practice and determined through local agency. Yet, why is the physical place in which everyday culture occurs considered under the western canon of "public space"? Are the urban spaces maintained and operated by the local municipality? Do these spaces link to a regulated zoning scheme that is registered, recorded, and budgeted in integrated development plans? What is considered public and by whom? The answers to many of these questions are uncertain or sometimes distorted and unrecorded. Public space in the local context of urban South Africa is often misunderstood and presented in an official, narrow language and represented in conventional methods. The result on the ground is often a myriad of neglected official and zoned public open spaces and ignored vibrant 'other' spaces that are not quite public, nor private.

The short essay offers a series of photo stories to reveal everyday public space experienced in fragile neighbourhoods in Cape Town, South Africa. The images illustrate a switch in foreground concepts versus the background realities of public spaces. Four spatial frames are interpreted. *Firstly*, to understand public space in the Cape Town context, I describe the idea of an alternative terminology, one I refer to as *fractional urban space. Secondly*, I remark on a space of practice, where a strategic, and transformative public space project illustrates a lesson for incremental area-based development. Spaces of practice are interpreted at the neighbourhood scale to understand area-based development, including conditions of safety and improved quality of life. Such spaces take into consideration the sense of the whole (neighbourhood and community) and the individual parts (public space). *Thirdly,* a space of exchange reveals the social function and production of space (Lefebvre and Nicholson-Smith, 1991) within a micro-setting. Spaces of exchange include some of the smallest spaces in the city that have a social presence and economic potential such as spaza shops, *Lastly,* a co-produced and situated 'real' public space project is presented as a space of learning. The iThemba Walkway project helps to reframe a critical pedagogy of engaged learning in urban design teaching practice. The images offer reflections of fractional urban space in context and further add to the debate around spaces that are public in the African urban context.

Revealing the multiple facets of fractional urban space and everyday culture
Cities are demanding, laden with questions of rights, desires, needs and aspirations. Change manifests itself most evidently through space (Ewing, 2021), amplified by current urban transformation, global crisis and environment impact of climate change. How are we adapting within urban space to cope with such extremes? Simone and Abouhani (2005) argue, "All cities are places of multiple intensities and layers. These layers and intensities pass through, settle, consolidate, and disperse across the diverse spaces to which their various intersections themselves give rise" (p. 9). The intersection of such places, activities, and people provides a new stage for social engagement, economy, and education.

To understand the concept of public space within the African context, we need to unpack the terms both 'public' and 'space'. Publicness is often blurred in places that change according to the needs and demands of the community, the household, and the individual at different timeframes. Certain public spaces also function as many places at once, such as a street acting as an access way, but also a memory space for funerals, a place for initiation rituals, or a place for protest. Consequently, public space cannot be seen in isolation from the social and economic action that takes place within the urban space, the everyday culture that influences public life. This determines how we map, measure, evaluate, design and maintain what is commonly termed 'public space' in resource scarce neighbourhoods.

Figure 1. A small public space acting as a water point and gathering space in Lotus Park Informal Settlement in Gugulethu. Photo by Kathryn Ewing (2019).

The opportunity lies in reviewing the idea of public space from a conventional meaning to co-produced, negotiated, and occupied urban spaces in constant transformation. The essay offers an alternative concept to public space built on previous research on *fractional urban space* (Ewing, 2021, Ewing and Krause, 2021, Ewing, 2022). Fractional urban spaces are defined as "never quite complete and are involved in the making of micro-parts of the whole, crossing scales, spatial dimensions, and their presence amplified over time. They act independently or if connected, form a mesh of active space reliant on the level of interactions and relationships between the physical and social realm" (Ewing, 2021). Fractional urban spaces act as places for transformative practice, engaged learning and community exchange, encouraging everyday culture to flourish.

Figure 1 reveals a small public space acting as a water point and gathering space in Lotus Park Informal Settlement in Gugulethu. We can view such an urban space as an insurgent space that encourages a quiet encroachment (Bayat, 2013) through everyday culture, the social practice of washing. The image illustrates the smallest fractional space, a grey space (Yiftachel, 2009), or interstitial space, which is undefined, neglected and located outside of the formal public space concept and register. The size is difficult to measure as boundaries are constantly moving, but it is considered a micro-scale public space. The type of public space reveals a symbolic element of civic engagement and citizenship (UN-Habitat, 2015) being neither completely public nor partially private space. Nevertheless, it is an active community hub with a public washing line connected to the interface of private dwellings, signalling a level of local safety through a secret system of surveillance, trust and occupation. The water flows constantly, sometimes due to a broken tap, or sometimes a forgotten activity as a community member runs between numerous chores. The dirty, unsafe water pools and remains soaked with detergent, grease, and food leftovers. It is not zoned as a public space. Nobody consciously maintains the space as the ownership is understood at the broader community level of 'ownership' or rather the informal occupation of land. However, the water point possesses the potential to be transformed into an inclusive and safe space, worthy of public investment. There are many water points scattered across informal settlements throughout Cape Town. Such spaces could be urban landmarks and anchors in future upgrading interventions (UN-Habitat, 2015), but all too often they remain a fraction of left-over and informal, occupied space as seen in Frame 1.

A space of practice

Strategic area-based development and informal settlement upgrading, including incremental public space intervention projects, are viewed as a process towards developing safe and resilient neighbourhoods. It is important to identify the nature and typology of design intervention and implementation; whilst not forgetting the need for flexible urban design frameworks and trade-offs for long term transformation, service delivery and land recognition.

Figure 2 shows an urban space upgrade project in Monwabisi Park Informal Settlement, in Lower A-Section. The project presents a precinct scale intervention within an informal context. The space has been incrementally upgraded over the past 12 years, facilitated by an implementing agent, Violence Prevention through Urban Upgrading (VPUU) NPC (Ewing and Krause, 2021).

Figure 2. An urban space upgrade project in Monwabisi Park Informal Settlement.
Photo by Kathryn Ewing (2021).

Public space in the informal setting in Khayelitsha is referred to as "emthonjeni", a multi-functional, multi-layered gathering space. The image was taken on a Thursday afternoon showing how young people can freely inhabit the precinct through in a series of informal kick-about spaces and permanent public buildings. Goal posts are temporary and are moved depending on how many children join or the age of the children and the direction of play. Formal, time-allocated and facilitated social programmes are interspersed with everyday informal activities and games. The precinct consists of an activated neighbourhood centre with a toy library and live-in caretaker, a pre-school classroom, community gardens and a series of recreational public spaces of different sizes, textures and uses, complimented by solar lights to enable use of the space at night. The public space and buildings are connected to a 'smart network' providing

public Wi-Fi to the users and local residents (Ewing and Krause, 2021) creating a new form of fractional space or a mesh network.

The project acts as a positive case study illustrating an incremental, yet strategic intervention that serves as a safe and activated space within the Monwabisi Park neighbourhood. At a broader neighbourhood scale, this precinct forms one of the two precincts situated within the informal settlement. The precincts are connected by a series of walkways and a ranging scale of emthonjenis' as part of an informal settlement upgrading programme aligned to Sustainable Development Goal 11, to make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable.

A space of exchange

Fractional urban space is essential to the livelihoods and productivity of informal traders and entrepreneurs operating in their backyards, at the edge of streets and in-between left-over spaces in the city. The smallest of interventions, such as a small canopy over an opening to the spaza shop, whether formally provided or informally constructed, add value and complexity to urban life. Simone (2014) advocates for *people as infrastructure*, where "…this infrastructure is capable of facilitating the intersections of socialites so the expanded spaces of economic and cultural operation become available to residents of limited means" (p407). Social infrastructure allows for the spatial redistribution of resources through micro-economies in public spaces. Spaces of exchange occur within, between and around spaza shops, shebeens, hair salons/barber shops, community gardens and early childhood development centres.

Figure 3 shows the Wonke Wonke Spaza Shop illustrating an alternative form of social infrastructure and a space of exchange. It is located midway along the Harare Safe Walkway between the railway station and the Harare Urban Park and Library, further extending to Monwabisi Park Informal Settlement in Khayelitsha. Reimagining forgotten and underused urban spaces, such as spaza shops, offer potential for not only economic exchange, but social and cultural exchange. Spaza shops become collective gathering points not only to sell basis goods but to issue public voucher systems, act as soup kitchens, sell data and provide Wi-Fi hotspots, as well as becoming safety points for local neighbourhood watch patrols and spatial (often colourful) landmarks between public transport stops in low-income neighbourhoods. Small gestures, like the step ladder placed on a concrete platform at Wonke Wonke allow children to access the counter. Flexibility is key to the success of positive urban space, allowing for unexpected uses whilst anticipating events to occur. These are self-made, operated and maintained public spaces.

A space of learning

At the University of Cape Town Master of Urban Design (MUD) Programme there is an intention to teach socially responsive urban design to students who can represent and design for spatial equity and the urban everyday using incremental and informal strategies rather than big master plan approaches, inherited from the apartheid and modernist era. Urban design frameworks, precinct plans, and design proposals are rooted in social and environmental justice, towards building affordable, inclusive, and safe cities.

Figure 3 (top). Wonke Wonke Spaza Shop illustrating an alternative form of social infrastructure and a space of exchange. Photo by Kathryn Ewing (2019).

The intention of the academic MUD Programme is to "engage outwards" (Myers, 2006) beyond academia. Change-orientated urban design-research studios are deeply grounded in the lived experience and everyday reality, giving an evidence-based understanding of how cities work and develop over time. Nevertheless, the concept largely remains in the background of teaching as co-design remains a complex pedagogy during and in the post covid-19 landscape. Administration is convoluted, and fieldwork is not promoted or facilitated by institutional and financial academic frameworks. In addition, entry into established communities is sometimes unrealistic and requires mutual respect and trust which takes time to develop and evolve. All of which pose critical challenges to creating deliberate spaces of learning for students and teachers, communities, and stakeholders.

Figure 4. Spatial occupation and activation of iThemba Walkway in Gugulethu.
Photo by Kathryn Ewing (2022).

In 2020, through a series of participatory workshops (urban talks) and site walk-abouts (urban walks), urban studio – Gugulethu Hope (or Studio Hope) exposed informal networks in Gugulethu that inspired the redesign of public spaces into vibrant places as youth platforms (transformative space) for expression and care. The studio transitioned in 2021 into a virtual space with community representatives taking photographs from the ground and transferring these to the students. On-going whats app stories and zoom conversations facilitated a different form of virtual engaged scholarship (digital walks and talks). Further studio and urban design research in 2022 enabled a deep engagement with the context through a series of walkways and waterways as key public space elements in the context of Gugulethu. A learning outcome from the combination

of these three studios and on-going research is a 'real' public space upgrading project, known as iThemba Walkway (Walkway of Hope).

Figure 4 highlights the spatial occupation and activation of iThemba Walkway in Gugulethu as a space of deliberate and engaged learning triggered by a co-design workshop on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The community group focused on four SDGs (5, 11, 13 and 16). The intentional activation of the walkway not only contributed to the use of the space, but ignited a conversation around memories and belonging, gender-based violence and safe and inclusive space, partnerships and peace. Constant dialogues between multiple partners and citizens discuss a phased approach to the upgrading project, building on the concept of small change, in terms of financial inputs (minimal resources), ecological justice (waste recycling) and spatial transformation (public space/street upgrading). Community residents and partners maintain the existing space through quarterly clean-up campaigns aligned to public holidays. iThemba Walkway has emerged into an on-going implementation project, coordinated by a local citizen, Xolile Ndzoyi, who acts as a conduit between community voices, diverse stakeholders, and students. Combined with lessons from the walkway project, research and urban studios continue to review, rethink and reframe concepts of public space in the African context.

Conclusion

The four frames offer an open dialogue on public space in an African context. Spaces of practice (Monwabisi Park), spaces of exchange (Harare) and spaces of learning (Gugulethu) all exhibit different variations and typologies of fractional urban space. Public space and place-making in the African context requires a detailed understanding of everyday culture active in urban space.

Although this is not reviewed in depth, the essay reveals the problems of mainstream perspectives related to public space in Africa, largely inherited from the colonial and post-colonial, modernist past, and western concepts. By reframing public space as fractional urban space encourages place-making to be a strategic, situated, incremental and negotiated design process. At the core of this urban design approach is an expanded socio-spatial practice interested in the co-production of places (visually, practically, theoretically) in relation to the changing scale of urban form and territory in the city.

Calderia (2017) speaks of the idea of urban space as spaces in the making, continuously expanding, operating with a sense of temporality and agency. How do we understand this ever changing and dynamic urban form and emerging fractional space in a semi-formal/informal context? Urban design and the making of public space demand an interdisciplinary and co-designed and co-produced approach to public space, guided by diverse inputs, stakeholders, and participants, allowing for urban transformation. Areas for further research are:

· Reframing the concept and language of public space through ongoing visual and verbal narratives focused on different typologies of fractional urban space in the South African context. This includes interdisciplinary mapping, interpretation, and representation of fractional spaces in the city.

· Compilation of appropriate and relevant African public space implementation projects or case studies in one digital and open-source library for students,

> community, teachers, non-profit and civic organisations, municipalities, researchers, and academics.
> · Critical reflection and documentation including the co-production of knowledge and sharing of learning outcomes aligned to engaged learning and teaching practice.

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