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Jarateng: Making social-ends meet by embracing public living

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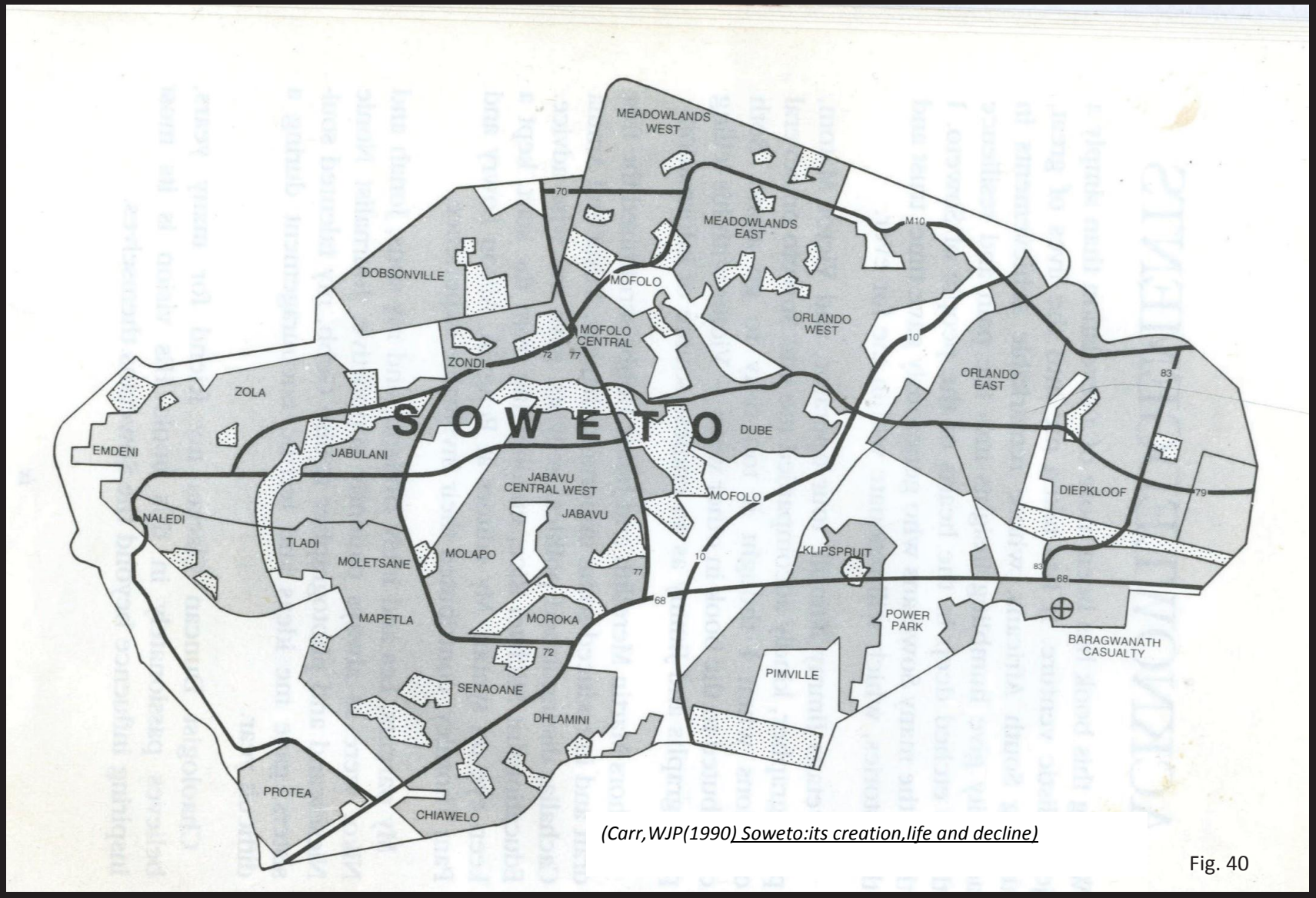
2. SOWETO: an African village



(Carr,WJP(1990) Soweto:its creation,life and decline)

Fig. 40

“We were living under the harsh yoke of apartheid so we had to find ways to make sense of our lives. And we did, we lived life with a vengeance. We had parties, weddings, baptisms, traditional and religious ceremonies. There were rituals to mark births and deaths, childhood and adulthood” - Ruth Bhengu (2004:44)

“As we ran we saw how Soweto relies on its kerb. They might be useless ground elsewhere but in the crowded township they are the seat for business empires with unbounded potential” - Tim Butcher (2004:65)

Soweto: an African community

Soweto is an African community because it is rich in diverse cultures from around South Africa and some parts of Africa. Soweto owes its rich status to the fact that it is made up of a mixture of different cultures. In the beginnings of Soweto black people were drawn towards Johannesburg in search of riches and opportunities for wealth and a better life. They left their rural homes and their home countries to come to Johannesburg. The apartheid government was forced to deal with the influx of black people coming into the city and they put measures in place to control the everyday movements of black people in the city. Thus the apartheid government began to drive black people out of the suburbs and the city, and segregated them to live in their own separate area. This area called Soweto started out small and then began to expand as the black population grew rapidly. Soweto developed as a poor area lacking in basic services and amenities, characterized by small confined houses and yards. But a combination of unity, pride, and sense of community, the people of Soweto were able to perceive their spaces differently through the given circumstances and make it their own.

Apartheid created Soweto but the residents of Soweto made Soweto. Apartheid created the physical place but Sowetans created the social space.

Apartheid Township

In creating Soweto, the apartheid government did not realize that they were actually creating a tight-knit African community driven by unity. In striving to overcome adversity and trying to make ends meet amidst very poor and depressing conditions, Sowetans were able to make social ends meet. It is the social aspects of Soweto and Sowetans that made this "Apartheid Township" the Soweto that we know today. Philip Bonner states, "In the struggle to make ends meet, the people of Soweto began to develop or modify social institutions and networks of mutual sharing and support. In particular areas, this helped to create an extremely powerful community spirit" (1998:45).

Between 1928 and 1929 a special committee was formed which was responsible for handling solely the administration on African affairs (1990:21). The removal of Africans from white-designated areas in Johannesburg was regarded as priority for this committee, and so the council pushed forward with the proclamation of many suburbs according to the Urban Areas Act (Carr, 1990:21). By 1929 the need for large-scale housing was clear (Carr, 1990:21). The Non-European Affairs Department (NEAD) estimated that housing would have to be provided for 45000 people (Carr, 1990:21). The council decided to negotiate to purchase of about 3000 acres of the farm Klipsruit on which a properly planned and modern township would be built, which was then called Orlando Township (Carr, 1990:21).

Stands measuring 3500 square feet were planned for in the proposed new township, and a serious attempt was made to break away from the conventional rectangular block layout (Carr, 1990:21). To try and achieve this, the streets were staggered and inclined at intervals to break up the monotony (Carr, 1990:21). The overall scheme resulted in squares and open spaces, with neighbourhood areas grouped around them (Carr, 1990:21). In addition ample space was made for trading sites, schools, churches, football fields and public halls, as well as for a post office, police station and clinic (Carr, 1990:21).

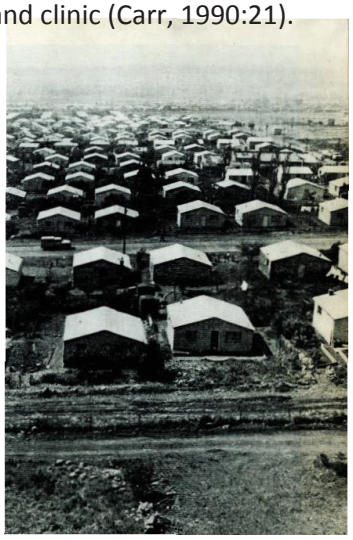




Fig. 41

Early housing development in Soweto

(Carr, (1990) Soweto: its creation, life and decline)

Over the decade of 1936 to 1946 the African population had increased by 72% compared to other population groups with an increase of only 17% according to an analysis made at that time (Carr, 1990:41). In 1944 about 45000 Africans moved to Johannesburg to work in the city and so an acute housing shortage arose (Carr, 1990:41). In an attempt to confront this problem, the council created the Jabavu emergency camp which had plots measuring 2500 square feet and had services to go with it; water, electric street lighting and latrines (Carr,1990:43). By 1946 it was clear that the township of Orlando would not be large enough to house the increasing number of Africans needing to be housed (Carr, 1990:47). "It was recognized that Johannesburg`s African population was not only increasing all the time but that it was an integral part of the city`s commercial and industrial life" (Carr, 1990:47). Thus the city identified vacant land to the West of Orlando which would then be called Orlando West, and new townships began to be planned from there and thus Soweto began to expand (Carr, 1990:47).

Becoming Soweto: from the physical space to the social space

"Incidentally, the name Soweto was officially endorsed by the municipal authorities only in 1963 after a special committee had sat for a long time, considering various names, including apartheid Townships and Verwoerdstad" (Gorodnov, 1998:58). From the onset the Apartheid government purposed Soweto to house the bulk of the labour force which was needed by Johannesburg (1998:58). Africans used to live in areas surrounding the city, so the authorities felt it would be more expedient to concentrate black workers in one district that could be easily controlled (1998:58).

"The site for the new complex had to meet certain requirements: it had to be as far away from the city as possible and there should be total control by the Johannesburg City Council. The fact that Soweto sprang out to the southwest of Johannesburg and not anywhere else was not accidental. In the first place, there already were several locations such as Pimville and Orlando. It was assumed that these scattered townships would merge into a single large complex and, at the same time, that there would be qualitative changes in them compatible with the requirements of apartheid. Secondly, southwest of Johannesburg was bounded by industrial districts and, consequently, no new suburbs for whites would be built there" (Gorodnov, 1998:58).

Transport would also be provided in the form of two railroads and an automobile highway which would run across the southwest area, so that the inhabitants could be able to get to work (1998:59). Each house built would be a standard single-story three-roomed house with a kitchen and a floor space of 43 square meters on a single lot (1998:61).Valentin Gorodnov states, "subsequently, these standard houses amounted to 98 per cent of the dwellings built in Soweto" (Gorodnov, 1998:61). A delegation from the inhabitants inspected the houses and was unhappy, so they protested that the yards were too small among other issues (Gorodnov, 1998:61).

"During the initial years of the Soweto project most of the building was in the townships of Meadowlands and Diepkloof situated on either side of Orlando which had expanded by that time. Unlike the other townships, Meadowlands and Diepkloof were at first formally not part of Soweto because they were administered not by the Johannesburg City Council but by the Bantu Resettlement Board. Spread over 1800 hectares, these two townships were built specially for Africans evicted from Sophiatown and other western areas of Johannesburg and also from Alexandra township" (Gorodnov, 1998:62).

Social patterns

Degrading the African population psychologically was a central objective of the plans of the Apartheid government (1998:63). "They were not merely resettled from old to new townships-they ceased to feel themselves masters of their own homes in both the literal and figurative senses" (Gorodnov, 1998:63). There were several ways in which the Apartheid government tried to achieve this objective:

The first was segregating the African population from the rest of the developing Johannesburg. This was done using buffer zones. These buffer zones were formed by an industrial district, mines and wastelands which separated the white neighbourhoods of Johannesburg and the black locations (1998:59). The following is a description by Father Trevor Huddleston: "No one of either race may linger on that strip of land, for in that way it might become a meeting place" (Gorodnov, 1998:60). Little did Father Trevor Huddleston know that Sowetans would create their own meeting places or

spaces through their social structures.

The second is the control of life in the townships. “The white masters control all aspects of life in the locations. They determine who may or may not live in them, what houses people may occupy, who may teach children in the schools – in fact everything up to where the inhabitants may or may not brew their traditional beer” (Gorodnov, 1998:65). The following is a statement by the white authorities: Manager of the Non-European Affairs: “We are going to do you good, whether you like it or not; for we alone know what is good for you!” (Gorodnov, 1998:65).

The third-which is connected to control of life and which became a central part of the Soweto lifestyle-is Leisure time. “Apart from church services or a football match there is practically nowhere to spend leisure time. The shabeens play a dual role in the life of the Sowetans: on the one hand they are a source of evil (of alcoholism and its social and spiritual consequence) but, on the other, they give township inhabitants their fairly rare opportunity for social life, for meeting each other” (Gorodnov, 1998:85). Meeting one another was very important to the inhabitants of Soweto while at the same time it was a threat to the apartheid government.

“Their (Apartheid government) main objective was most likely to keep the blacks in a state of constant tension and even fear, to deny them the possibility of having their own, even if not the best, places where they could gather and have some semblance of social life” (Gorodnov, 1998:86).

Not only did leisure time encourage people to socialize but it was an essential instrument that would break down tribalism in the multi-cultural townships of Soweto. This would see Soweto to be a melting-pot of cultural and social mixes.

There were ways in which the oppressed inhabitants countered the attempts of the apartheid government to degrade them. These were mostly on a social level:

The first was the cultural mixes. This happened in what is called the Marabi era which dated back to the 1920s. “Marabi was the name given to the exuberant new urban culture created by the slum-dwellers in the 1920s” (Bonner, et al, 1998:14). Marabi was destined to influence the cultural world of Sowetans, and its most distinct feature was its racial mix. The driving force was the sharing and borrowing of the slum-dwellers of each other’s cultures. “In the slums Africans, Indians, coloureds, Chinese and whites of many diverse origins lived side by side and borrowed many elements from one another`s social lives and cultures” (Bonner, et al, 1998:14).

This mixing and sharing of each other’s cultures resulted in a slum yard dialect called flaaitaal, which combined elements of Afrikaans, English and African languages – known today a tsotsi taal - while Marabi developed into a music style blending African, Afrikaans, coloured and black American musical forms into a melodic mix. Sowetans began to take on this social attitude of sharing and mixing in the townships.

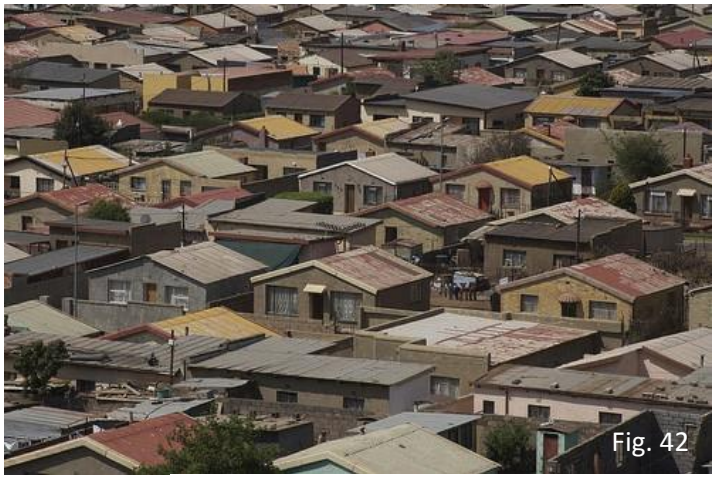
Besides overcoming adversity, Soweto would not be Soweto without diversity. Chasing gold, work and a better life in Johannesburg lead to a diversity of cultures in Soweto. This was a combination of migrant workers from other provinces and African countries. This created a single African community.

By learning to live together as different cultures, Sowetans developed Ubuntu. Ubuntu is the spirit of living together while respecting one another and helping one another. It is about respect for your neighbours and gave an urban identity to inhabitants living in Soweto.

In trying to make ends meet through sharing and caring for one another, Sowetans were able to make social ends meet. “In the struggle to make ends meet, the people of Soweto began to develop or modify social institutions and networks of mutual sharing and support. In particular areas, this helped to create an extremely powerful community spirit” (Bonner, et al, 1998:45).

Much of the social interaction took place outside the confined spaces of the matchbox houses. “The confined space of Soweto`s houses contributed considerably to this sense of camaraderie, as much of the social life and social interaction took place when friends, couples, families abandoned their cramped matchboxes and took to the streets. By co-operating and sharing in neighbourhood groups, Sowetans were able to soften some of the harshness of life and develop a civic culture which would

help block government strategies of control and division" (Bonner, et al, 1998:45).

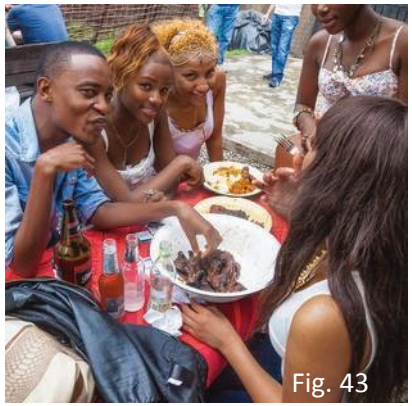


Typical match-box houses *(http://www.anotherworldishappening.wordpress.com)*

Music and film played a big role in the social life of Sowetans. Before any cinema was ever built in Soweto, people used to gather at that one special house which had a television to watch their favourite shows or a soccer match. At times the owner of that house would charge a certain fee if one wanted to watch a movie or favourite series. Niq Mhlongo states that for him what stands out in Soweto is the life that happens on a social level (2010:11). "Watching movies was one of the most exiting social activities in Soweto. People used to watch predominantly Chinese movies and this happened mostly on Saturdays. The movies were screened during the day and at night" (Mhlongo, 2010:11).

Niq Mhlongo states, "In my street, the few families that were considered `rich` were the ones that owned a television set. There were only two houses out of about twenty that had a TV set. I used to pay ten cents to watch the A team TV series starring Mr T at the Mthombeni family house at the corner of our street" (Mhlongo, 2010:11).

Mhlongo states that before shisanyamas (braais/barbecue places) became popular, braais used to happen inside the yards of the residents` matchbox houses on the occasion of stokvel social gatherings. These gatherings involved a lot of music and dancing. "Our house in Chiawelo hosted those interesting stokvel gigs on a monthly basis, and my brother`s friends would come and drink beer and listen to the jazz music of Miles Davis or John Coltrane, or the Soul Brothers on his Tempest Hi-Fi" (Mhlongo, 2010:11).



Shisanyamas (braai) in the yard



(http://www.afar.com)

A melting pot of African cultures

Soweto is a melting pot of diverse African cultures. These cultures can be traces as far up northwards from countries like Zimbabwe. From these countries the cultures then moved to the provinces where particular languages and cultures would be predominant. In Kwazulu Natal the predominant culture and language is Zulu, in The Eastern Cape the predominant culture and language is Xhosa, in the North West province the predominant culture is Setswana etc. All the diverse cultures in South Africa converge to Gauteng and are mostly concentrated in Johannesburg. Soweto is where these cultures are mostly embraced and are mixed creating a new urban culture with a set of unwritten rules and invisible spaces around social spaces. The mixing and borrowing of the different cultures condensed in the Soweto townships gives the social yard its character. The social township yard is one which allows visitors in and projects itself outward socially onto the street space and into the community.

"Soweto is also the center of South African culture, and has developed its own sub-culture. Come on a weekend, and you`ll concur that the township is a trendsetter in language, fashion, music, dance and general social discourse." (Mhlongo, 2010:15)

Embracing public living



Fig. 45

As much as Soweto is now integrated into the framework of the city of Johannesburg as far as segregations and the oppressions of the past are concerned, it is an area which operates according to its own distinct traditions and rules carried through over the years. Jodi Bieber states that Soweto operates in a completely different way to the suburbs of Johannesburg (2010:9). This statement is true, and you will notice it whether you live, or spend a day in Soweto. Things just operate in a weird yet normal way. It is an organized chaos, an ordered disorder. The most distinct difference between Soweto and the suburbs of Johannesburg is the fact that Sowetans embrace public living and also how they embrace it. Bieber (2010:9) expresses that children play on the pavements, soccer matches are being refereed in the streets, and adults are chatting or gossiping or flirting with neighbours, friends or lovers. Bieber goes on to state that music systems can be found on the stoeps of two homes next to each other pelting out different sounds (2010:9). This happens without one neighbour disturbing the other. This shows the complex matrix of social overflows in the physical place by the social space. After having grown up and lived in Soweto for 14 years, these scenes are all true and familiar. The levels of social interaction run high from the yards to the pavements overflowing into the streets.


Fig. 46

Children utilizing the street as a soccer pitch *(http://www.jeanetteverster.com)*


Fig. 47

Socializing in the street

(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)



Fig. 48

A public display of social activities.

(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)



Fig. 49

(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)

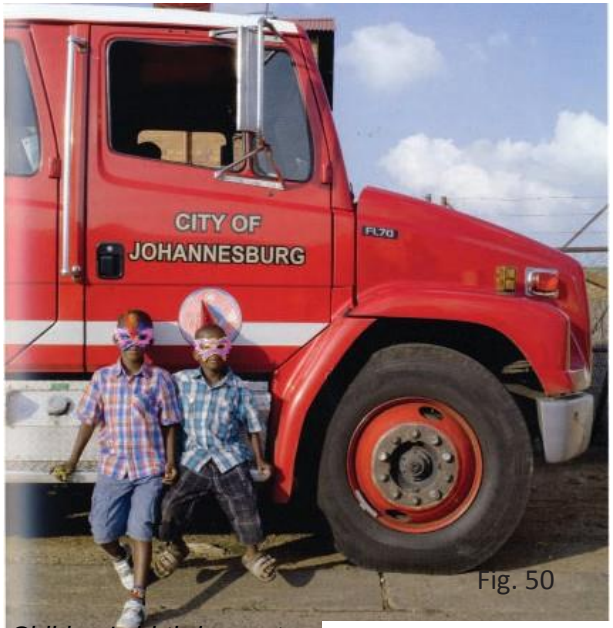


Fig. 50

Children's birthday party *(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)*



Fig. 51

Large open spaces are an opportunities for large social gatherings such as music festivals

(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)

The social interactions or activities exist as spaces, but not spaces in the physical sense. These social spaces happen in a physical space or context. The social spaces are seen for their context and geometric spaces and can therefore be [mis]interpreted as physical spaces. These spaces can best be described as mental spaces, emotional spaces, spiritual spaces etc. This means that these spaces can occur in any physical context. The geometric space can remain the same but the social space disappears and can reappear at any given time and place and its scale can vary.

The way in which these spaces happen in the context of the townships in Soweto is unique. They are unique for the fact that they are embraced and how they are embraced. Bieber states that one of the beautiful features of Soweto, which differs from the Johannesburg suburbs, is that when there is a wedding, funeral, or the birthday party of a one year old, it is okay to place a tent in the middle of the street as all your neighbours would be invited and everyone will be fed (2010:8). The physical environment is transformed by the social spaces which soon disappear and reappear when there is another ceremony or celebration.

In her written piece called "Loose space", Caroline Chen describes that "loose space" is what results when residents liberate designed public space such as parks, plazas and parking lots from the limits of the original, intended program and piggyback new and unforeseen functions of their own choosing on the space (2010:22). The social activities in the Soweto townships are not new or unique to Soweto but the residents have certainly liberated the limits of the confines and original intended program of the physical yard by turning it into a rich, meaningful social yard. The physical yard is a loose space where the physical space does not predetermine the variety of social activities which happen in the yard including the street space. The barriers of the physical yard are disregarded as the social yard space flows beyond these barriers.

Bieber states that Sowetans are incredibly friendly and it takes only a greeting – which is customary and almost compulsory - to get invited into someone`s house. Their back doors generally stand wide open when someone is at home. Social spaces are always open and vary in scale and hierarchy. Even if the physical environment of the Town

ship of Soweto has not improved entirely, the residents of Soweto take pride in their physical environment. The yards are neat and the houses and walls are decorated and painted to make a statement. These gestures give identity to the individual house, the street and the community.



Fig. 52

(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)



Fig. 53

Identity

(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)



Front yards *(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)* Fig. 54

Soweto as a live theatre



Identity also reflects in the way people dress in Soweto Fig. 55

(Bieber, (2010) Soweto)

The social experience in Soweto is a live theatre which the residents are a part of and are the audience and performers all at the same time.


Fig. 56


Fig. 57

(http://entertainment.howzit.msn.com)


Fig. 58

Street performances are common in the township

(http://www.the-xworld.com)

Enclaves

The manner in which public living is embraced and the levels of social interaction which exists in the townships of Soweto, this township can be seen as a sort of an enclave but with penetrable boundaries. The sense in which Soweto is an enclave is that Soweto operates on its own set of rules. “A trend that is developing strongly in Soweto is that of wanting to be self-sufficient in the township and not having to go and find it in the suburbs” (Bieber, 2010:8). This is one of the characteristics of an enclave.

The Mai-Mai market



Fig. 59

(https:www.joburg.org.za)


Fig. 60


Fig. 61


Fig. 62

(http:www.joburg.org.za)

David Varady states that according to Peter Marcuse, “an enclave is an area of spatial concentration in which members of a particular population group, self-defined by ethnicity or religion or otherwise, congregate as a means of protecting and enhancing their economic, social, political and/or cultural development” (2005:17). Varady further indicates that according to Ceri Peach, “the central theory in the study of the spatial patterns of ethnic residential segregation is that there is a direct relationship between the social process of assimilation and the spatial pattern of dispersal” (2005:31). The social spaces are established resulting in the physical spaces being ‘broken’. That means that the social spaces reach over beyond the physical barriers and these barriers become virtually invisible because there are no barriers in a single social space. Social assimilation requires spatial diffusion. Varady states that assimilation leads to the dissolution of socio-economic and spatial markers of identity over time (2005:31). Varady further states that social assimilation leads to the melting pot of dissolution. (2005:31)

Thresholds and spatial analysis

Liveable urban spaces foster a sense of belonging by the design of the threshold experience and by a sense of visual enclosure (Lennard et al, 1987). As Camillo Sitte emphasized - "The essential thing of both room and square is the quality of enclosed space". A public urban space gains much of its sense of "place" from its enclosed character (Lennard at el, 1987:17). This quality of visual enclosure focuses attention on the people and events within the space (Lennard at el 1987:17). In order to maintain this sense of enclosure, streets or passages providing access are small, or angled in such a way that there is no direct view out of the space (Lennard at el, 1987:17).
There is a clear sense of enclosure when one approaches the Mai Mai market. The market has a physical boundary surrounding it in the form of a wall. Furthermore it is surrounded by buildings, vegetation and has an overhead highway above it. Before entering the market space one can start to feel the sense of the Zulu culture through the spoken language. In the Mai-Mai market one crosses a threshold which is the obvious separation between the inside and the outside. As one continues walking through the long entrance there is nothing yet that strikes you about the dull entrance. This dull entrance is effective as it does heighten ones anticipation of what lies ahead. Once one crosses the threshold the space dramatically opens up to a vibrant cultural space. Just as one thinks that they have crossed the threshold into this space, there is another threshold that one needs to cross, that being the cultural or ethnic threshold, particularly the Zulu cultural threshold.

The threshold is due to the fact that the Market is a predominantly Zulu speaking community. Therefore the Zulu culture dominates throughout the market and the experience of the visitor. There are narrow internal streets which enable circulation around the market area. The dwellings are small hostel type buildings each about the size of a small bedroom, with people ranging from families with children to bachelors living in these tight spaces. The dwellings open up directly onto the internal street creating a more direct relation between the visitors and the residence and among the residence themselves. The market is divided into zones, much like a city. There are zones for living and working, and heavier production zones where there are mechanics fixing cars and carpenters building coffins. There is also a crèche which can also function as a community hall or a space where important meetings are held.

Similar social patterns in the Latino culture in America

The social patterns between the urban Soweto culture and the urban Latino culture are very similar. Much like Soweto "one will know when one has arrived at a Latino neighbourhood because of the large numbers of people outdoors. Streets are an integral part of the community fabric because they bring people together by allowing for mobility and social exchange" (James Rojas, 2010:36).

The yard and more especially the street space are perceived as spaces which can support human social activities by integrating the physical space into the social space and not letting the physical space limit the potential of the social space. Rojas indicated that Latinos blur the line between commercial and residential activities. This is similar to Sowetans with a number of spaza shops and shabeens among other commercial activities which happen in the yard.

Latino homes

Rojas indicates that Latino homes create a new language that uses syntax from both Latin America and US forms (2010:40). Rogers further states that the front porch becomes one of the main focal points of Latino homes. "In Latino homes the front porch has gained a new importance with residents enlarging and expanding them for their heavy use" (Rojas, 2010:40). Similarly to the residents of Soweto, residents sit on the porch to escape the summer heat or just be outside with family, friends, and neighbours as Rojas indicates (2010:40. The driveway can serve as a party or work space (2010:40).

Rojas states that waist-high fences are ubiquitous throughout the residential landscape of Latino neighbourhoods. The fences function as a place to keep things out or in, hang wet laundry, sell items, or beyond that just to chat with a neighbour according to Rojas (2010:40). Fences are a useful threshold between the household and the

public domain. That is only a physical function but interestingly enough, socially, as Rojas states, the boundaries bring people together, and the fences in Latino neighbourhoods redefine boundaries between public and private spaces by blurring those boundaries. Rojas goes on to say that here the fences break down the social and physical barriers by creating a place where people can congregate (2010:38).

"Latinos bring the party, workspace, and conversation to the front yard, creating activity in the public space. The Latino front yards reflect the Latino cultural values applied to the American suburb form. The Latino household extends graciously to the street" (James Rojas, 2010:41).

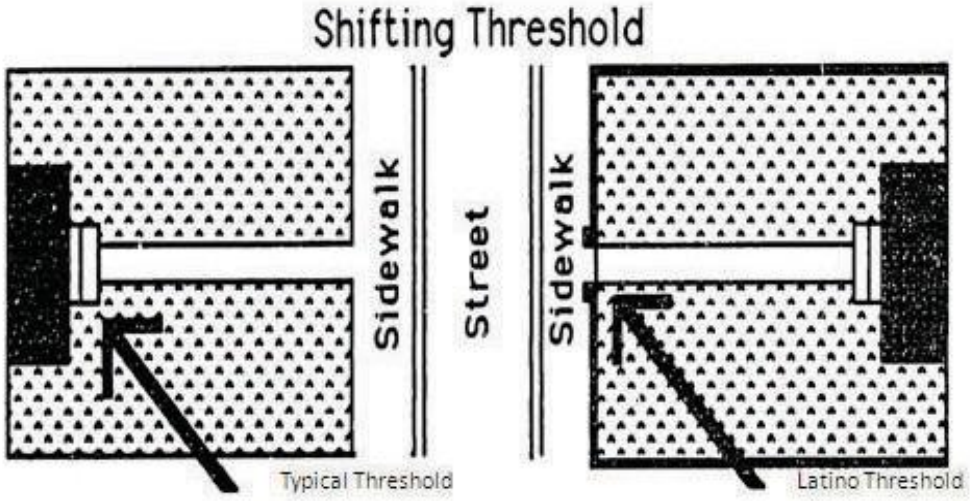
Public life

Latinos bring new innovative uses of the suburban built environment to meet their open space needs for socialization and celebration. The Latinos have a full social calendar of activities ranging from birthday parties to quinceaneras, celebration of a girl`s fifteenth birthday, that are expressed publicly in parks, front yards, and driveways. (Rojas, 2010:41)

Recreational and open space

Rojas states (2010:42) that many Latinos live in dense, park-poor Los Angeles neighbourhoods. The lack of recreational facilities in Latino neighbourhoods causes children and teenagers to play on the streets or vacant lots as well as look for other opportunity sites for exercise.

"Little is understood about Latinos as this group includes people of different races, ethnicities, and religions that identify, through birth, ancestry, or social imagination, with Latin American countries of origin" (Rojas, 2010:42)



(http//www:buildipedia.com)

Fig. 63



Fig. 64

Front yards are important social spaces in the Latino culture

(http//www:buildipedia.com)

Conclusion

The Residents of Soweto overcame adversity and the harsh effect of oppression through the social spaces which they created themselves. Soweto as a whole is a festive place where anything is possible. The streets are always filled with people and activities which make Soweto as unique as it is. Soweto also has complex social networks which are fully and clearly understood by its residents, and it is these networks which aid in bringing this large community together through a shared and common ground.



(Authors own)