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Monakali, Maryam Nwabisa

2018

https://hdl.handle.net/10539/25722

Monakali, Maryam Nwabisa (2018) Environmental psychology: the relationship between public open space and human behaviour, University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, <http://hdl.handle.net/10539/25722>

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AUTHOR: Maryam Nwabisa Monakali

RESEARCH TITLE: Environmental Psychology: The Relationship Between Public Open Space And Human Behaviour

DEGREE: Master in Urban Design

SUPERVISOR: Ludwig Hansen

YEAR: 2018

ABSTRACT

Public open space plays a critical role in our societies, as it is the stage upon which life is unfolded, an intricate system of interaction, conflicts, agreements and interchanges that reflect a society's culture (Carr, 1992). Environmental psychology looks to improve the quality of the life experienced in the built environment. Through the identification of human responses to the built environment, strategic design tools can be developed to design public open spaces that are a support aid to users and their daily activities (Stokols, 1978). The vision of urbanism has the ability to produce a powerful impact and influence on the development of a city, however, the motive behind the design of public open space does not always reflect the needs of the people (Ding & Guaralda, 2013). This has resulted in the design of public open spaces that are detached from the users, failed spaces that don't contribute to unifying socio-spatial relations in the context of Johannesburg (Dudley, 2010).

This report investigates the relationship between human behaviour and the response that the utilisation of certain design strategies can stimulate in improving the quality of the life experienced in public open spaces. The investigation is conducted with the aim of answering the research question: **How can urban design play a transformative role in the socio-spatial relations of public open space in the Johannesburg context, as to improve people's perceptions and experiences in public spaces?**

This report is twofold as it seeks to understand how the relationship between public open space and human behaviour is shaped. Thus followed by developing a understanding of how urban design can play a contributing role in shaping the quality of life experienced in physical space, as to contribute to improving people's orientation, experience and interaction in public open spaces.

Three main concepts are discussed as to develop an understanding of public open spaces and how they influence and shape the quality of life that people can experience. The meaning of public open spaces and what it is, is deconstructed, as to understand the contributing factors that shape and create this space for individuals. Culture, identity and place are identified as critical concepts that contribute to creating public open spaces, as this contribution can be seen as a non-verbal expression of human feelings. These two concepts, public open space, and culture and identify, are culminated in the third concepts of environmental psychology. Environmental psychology addresses the issue of placelessness and loss of public life, and how to better understand the role that urban elements play in the relationship between people and public open space (Gehl & Svarre, 2013). The objective to bring about an improvement in socio-spatial relations and the wellbeing of people is achieved through designing environments that are human focused. These are spaces of good quality that function well for the user. These three concepts were used to inform what design tools can be used to achieve quality public open spaces.

Design principles were then extracted from the data collected above. These design principles were used as the evaluation criteria in the analysis of the project site. The analysis of the site was done through direct observation methods, as to study and map out the physical elements of space that contribute to creating quality public life. The case study area starts at Beyers Naude Square, through to the Legislature



foyer, and ends at the Ernest Oppenheimer Park. The analysis of the project site revealed that the site spatially lacks the competence to be a well-functioning quality public space. This revealed that the site does not positively contribute to creating improved socio-spatial relations, thus not contributing to improving people's orientation, experience and interaction in this public open space.

The next chapter sought to address the spatial elements that have created a poor space, through design recommendations. These recommendations are informed by the design principles used in the analysis of the site. Various spatial interventions have been proposed to improve the quality of public life that individuals experience, interact with and orientate themselves in public space.

In conclusion, I have come to the finding that the application of the right urban design tools plays a critical role in transforming public open spaces in Johannesburg, as to create pedestrian focused and orientated environments that positively influence and impact their psychological responses to the built environment. Thus, urban design is a field of study that should engage beyond the physical realm of public open spaces in Johannesburg, but also the psychological dimensions of spaces and the effects that design tools can have on an individual, as to create spaces that people positively respond to through their perceptions and experiences.

