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The public realm: part of a balanced city

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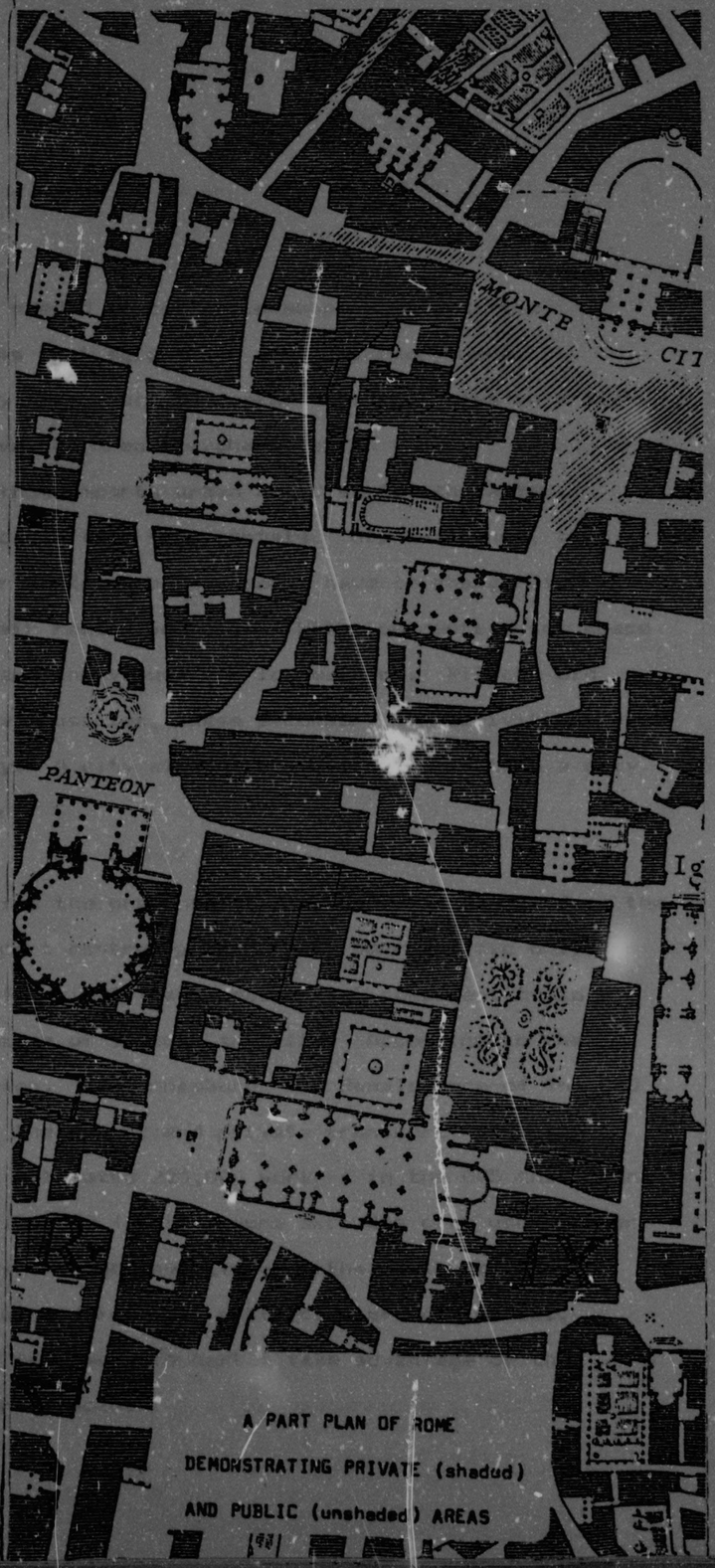


A PART PLAN OF ROME
DEMONSTRATING PRIVATE (shaded)
AND PUBLIC (unshaded) AREAS

THE NATURE OF CITIES 1. PATTERNS IN THE CITY - COMPONENTS OF A NETWORK OF MUTUAL SUPPORT

The city is a framework for activity. The framework is the base on which the city functions. The framework is a public realm communication system that permits the functioning of the private and public sectors of the city. This network offers each realm mutual support. Activity along the public communications system helps give the city its character. Urbanism is the character of life in cities. Ideas and input are needed to ensure that the desired urbanism results from the interaction of activity on the framework. To understand urbanism we need to study,

a) the nature of cities

Jane Jacobs deals with city nature in her book 'The Death and Life of Great American Cities'. Based on observation of the " mysterious and perverse behaviour of cities " she comes up with a principle. The principle is this : Cities need " a most intricate and close grained diversity of uses that give each other constant mutual support, both economically and socially."

Jacobs (1984 : 23 & 24)

She offers four conditions for generating diversity,

1. mixed primary uses

Each primary use has its own network of related use that circles it. If several networks of use are overlayed in the city then a far more interesting and diverse city results.

2. small blocks

Small blocks allow for more roads. More roads mean greater choice in choosing routes. They also mean, through increased streets, greater lengths of shopfront. The increased number of shops means that opportunities in retail related to routes can be exploited.

3. aged buildings

Aged buildings are needed in cities to support some of the secondary activities that aglomerate around primary uses. It is the secondary uses, such as restaurants and cafes in artists districts, that give the area its character. The secondary use that imparts urban and district character is not a use that can afford high rentals. Old buildings, that have paid off their mortgage bonds, don't have to charge high rentals to meet their remaining costs. With low rentals for space being asked these are the venues for low earners. Without old buildings, or heavy subsidies, these secondary use activities have no home in the city. A city without old buildings is then a city devoid of character.

4. concentration

Concentration implies the presence of many people. Routes from the major public transport centres produce peak hour traffic only. The introduction of a significant residential component could help in the generation of 24 hour activity. According to the municipal publication, ' Johannesburg, The Renaissance of The CBD ' The modal split in the public and private transport ratio is 70 : 30 . With an estimated 220,000 workers in the CBD this means that a minimum of 154,000 (this figure excludes city users other than workers) move through the city from the train stations or taxi ranks. The related informal activities of Hoek Street, Faraday Market and the Westgate Market take advantage of the concentration at these points.

THE NATURE OF THE CITY 2. PATTERNS THAT RESULT IN A LIFE STYLE

Watson says further that the "city is a creation of human abilities to achieve a lifestyle... and... the lifestyle is dynamic : change is an integral component making the city capable not only of growth but also of decay , collapse and ending ", once places of desire become undesirable then the patterns related to that desirability decay as does the framework of mutual support. The city is a sensitive organism needing particular treatment so that its benefits are augmented and its burdens diminished . The urban designer is called upon to intervene in the natural processes or cycles within city behaviour to steer change in the direction of desired growth. Dosthuizen (1977 : 150)

THE NATURE OF THE CITY 3. INTERPRETATIONS OF URBAN LIFE STYLE

There are several views of the city , one is of the city as a draw card for rural immigrants, promising opportunity and a new way of life . There is also a view of the city as "the focus of the problems that afflict our modern society ". James Watson , lists the problems as follows :

- * diminishing quality of life ,
- * inconvenience within the city centre ,
- * lack of security ,
- * anomie and impersonal relationships destroying the sense of community ,
- * frustration and disorientation .

These all relate back to the networks of mutual support in the following ways.

As to the diminishing quality of life, this can be the result of the decay of the support structure. Once the reason for the pattern is gone then the pattern dies as do all the related activities that fed off the pattern. An example of a death like this could be at the area surrounding the old market that thrived off related uses such as cold storage. Once the market moved these buildings became obsolete, their function was no longer required and the area decayed. Related to this is lack of security and the destruction of relationships that make for community. With no eyes on surveillance areas become dangerous. If primary uses are uprooted, as was the case with the old market, related uses forming communities had to move as well, or die.

Frustration, inconvience and disorientation result from an inadequate public realm. Concentrated flows in narrow streets lead to problems especially when people don't know where they are going to. Through the public realm the city must reveal itself. It should be the place of orientation not disorientation. It should be immediately coherent. Street widths should relate to flow. Conflicts arise whenever growing flows need increased space and increased space means encroachment onto private land.

Watson goes on to say, "....we will have to take constructive action to improve the condition of urbanism in respect of the deficiencies that have been outlined on the basis of needs of people ....". For the city centre this means that we must satisfy a whole range of social interactions and not merely provide work opportunities in the business, commercial, retail and industrial sectors.

Oosthuizen (1977 : 151)

The urban designer's main concern then is , " ...people and their behaviour..." , their needs and aspirations . An understanding of the social sciences , history and economics should lead to an understanding of what Watson refers to as , " ...the nature of the social structure..." , and with this understanding we should find ourselves better equipped to design buildings , enclosure and "infrastructure characteristic of cities " .

Oosthuizen (1977 : 149)

The social structure that Watson refers to is the product of patterns of mutual support as a result of urbanisation, community building and governing social organisations. This product is a function of where people locate themselves within the urban fabric and their reasons for doing this. For instance urbanising people locate on the periphery of existing fabric out of the way of urbanised people, where rentals are cheap and where they have access to the opportunities of the city. The pattern of their existance is then related to the routes that they take between their place of work and their place of residence.

Communities tend to focus their existance around the issues that are specific to themselves. Churches and community centres play the role of the place of focus. In the Moslem community people locate themselves within 15 minutes walk of the mosque. The patterns of community building are related to the routes between places of focus in the community and places of residence. The routes are usually through the public realm of the city, to the community focus which is public specific to the community while the residences are strictly private realm.

The governing and administering of social organisations can have an effect on the patterns of ones life. For instance the application of the policy of apartheid has meant that racially segregated areas of residence are enforced. People have no choice in locating where they choose in the city. The implication of this is that routes between places of work and residence are travelled but maybe not willingly. The willingness to travel a route will speak of the routes relevance to existance. The pattern refered is then related to journeys from places of residence to places of work.

The reason for travelling these routes is that they are beneficial to the traveller. The benefits at either end of the routes support the traveller. For instance, labour is exchanged for money, money is exchanged for goods neccessary for survival. This means that relationships of mutual support exist. In various parts of the city these routes converge. These parts of the city constitute destinations of desire, these can be market places, work places or religious places. In each case they are places of focus for communities.

In order for this to happen we need to establish a social contract that allows us to live together. This is the first part of a solution to urban problems. "Planning of necessity implies an imposed order , it will only be accepted if it relates to the realities of human needs ." For this to happen participation and personal responsibility of all communities involved is essential .

Oosthuizen (1977 : 151)

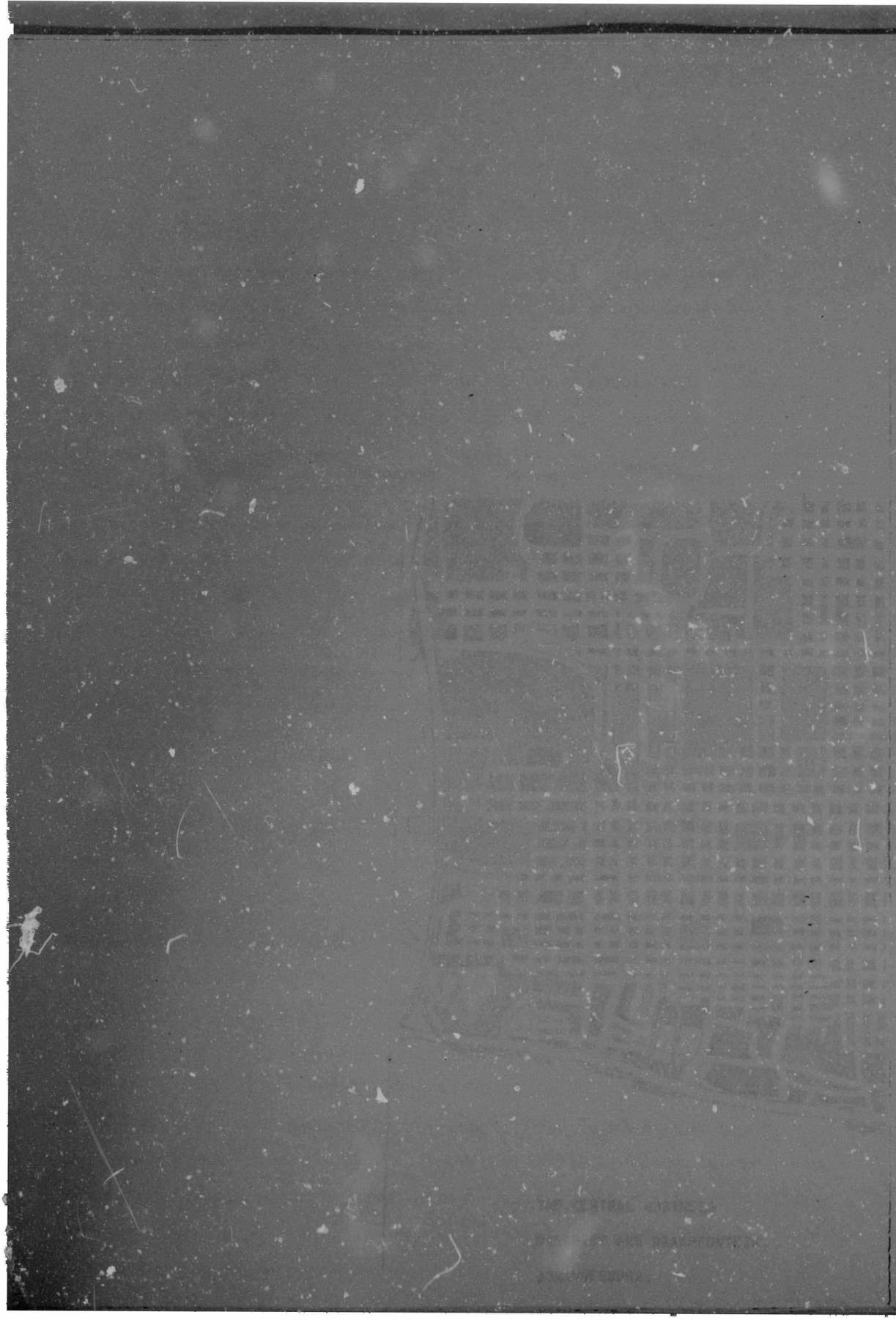
THE NATURE OF TODAY'S CITY

Of today's city Watson has the following two comments to make . Firstly , "the absence of common interest has induced indifference , the absorption of social functions by Municipal and State bodies has encouraged the unbridled growth of selfish individualism and the reduction of obligations and duties between people." As cities increased in size in the period of industrialisation, so third parties became responsible for the urban environment and the relationship between man and his environment was dismantled.

Oosthuizen (1977 : 152)

Secondly , "Civic Pride has decayed and the reliance of the populace upon only the activities of commerce and industry has bred an imbalance that has lead to the fall of cities since even before the times of Greece ." This imbalance in what the environment has to offer limits choice and lifecyle possibilities and the city's ability to support more than one type of person is limited

Oosthuizen (1977 : 152)



It is up to the urban designer to get involved with communities, and to help them discover their needs, and realise their aspirations. Watson feels that the solution involves a series of " imperatives requiring collaborative action by the private and public sectors to create a total environment for a society composed of a variety of communities, all interdependent who will identify themselves with [illegible] live and work, to make the city a reality beyond that of a human settlement. There is no one single factor that can operate independantly of the others and it will therefore require not only the priorities be set, but that a vision be communicated to those who in the end will form the society that is to be the city."

Oosthuizen (1977 : 153)

For our purposes let us look at the Johannesburg CBD, a place viewed in the 1970's as a place in decay with dissipation of function and concentration as causes for decay. The view in the 1980's of the CBD is of a place that is changing its character with certain uses entrenching themselves and becoming very strong through selected mutual support. A look at the constituent functions that form part of the CBD also form part of the next portion.



THE CENTRAL BUSINESS DISTRICT AND BRAAMFONTEIN, JOHANNESBURG.

THE COMPONENTS OF CITIES LINKED BY THE NETWORK OF MUTUAL SUPPORT WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO THE CBD

John R. Short in 'Urban Data Sources' views the CBD in the following way " The CBD is not a homogeneous area," it " can be considered as consisting of two inter-related parts - the core and the frame. The CBD core is the area of intensive land use with multi storey dwellings housing offices, retail shops, consumer services, theatres and banks. It has the highest concentration of pedestrian flow and an absence of permanent residential population. The CBD frame is an area of semi intensive land use fringing the CBD core where land use is dominated by warehouses, car sales and services, transport terminals, light manufacturing and some institutional uses."

Short (1980 : 127)

The Johannesburg CBD seems to fit with this description almost exactly, except that theatres in Johannesburg seem to be locating themselves in the frame rather than in the core. The example of the Market Theatre supports this view.

The public communication system, and through this the operation of the networks of mutual support, is one side of the story. The other side of the story deals with CBD components or the functions that are linked through the networks of mutual support. These refer essentially to private realm parts that are linked through the public realm. Distinctions aren't as clear when dealing with the CBD's government and cultural functions. The components that make up the CBD's function are given as : office, retail, industrial, warehousing, wholesaling, government and municipal, cultural and entertainment and residential. A look at each of these functions follows.

THE OFFICE FUNCTION.

James Watson speaks of business as the"...dominant institution of our times", as such it is one of the major functions of the Johannesburg C.B.D. The business function is essential to the national economy, in that it generates jobs and money. It is the view of economists such as Dr. Penny that the economy comes first , then the city .It is my view that cities are a by product of economies ,but economies can only grow once the city exists as a structure enabling of economic growth. The city is the structure that brings people together for social and economic activity.The C.B.D. is then vital to the national economy.

In the 1970's the C.B.D. was seen as losing office space to the nodal points in the suburbs.This along with decentralising retail space was seen as one of the major causes of decline in the C.B.D. Reasons for decentralising office space from the C.B.D. to the suburban nodal points are given as;

- inconvenience and traffic congestion
- lack of parking
- the burden of high rates on C.B.D. land imposed by the council, the advantages of proximity being ignored.

New developments within the the suburban fabric at nodal points had the advantages of,

- being close to the residential areas
- often comprising modern open plan offices with flexible walling systems
- excellent accessibility

adequate parking, which lures office space development away from the C.B.D. These are however car dependant and parking and traffic problems could result. This situation was seen to stabilize in the 1980's at around a ratio of 20 : 80. With the CBD having the lion's share of office space.

THE RETAIL FUNCTION

Decentralised shopping centres have weakened the C.B.D.function of retail to a point, but the C.B.D's function as a comparative shopping area remains. Retail is an important ingredient in the C.B.D. mix and should be underpinned, mantained and bolstered.

Watson feels that " society has a real need of a universal place on which to focus its essential social interaction", and that the social function of commerce should be harnessed to achieve this end.

Oosthuizen (1977 : 157)

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