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The public realm: part of a balanced city

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INTRODUCTION : PUBLIC REALM USE IN PROMOTING SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY IN JOHANNESBURG.

This project deals with the public realm and its application to the station in Johannesburg. It is intended as an example of an additional approach to public space in the city, and to the role the public realm can play in the city.

Currently, public space in the city (other than streets and roads) is viewed as ground with little or no economic use. Its current use is recreation, either passive or active. Examples that support this view are Joubert Park, the Library Gardens and the green strip along End Street up to Pulinger Kop.

The advent of informal flea markets in the city is the first indication of the additional role that public space can play in the city. This additional role is that of a place of economic opportunity for the informal sector. This role enables the informal sector to become financially independent. A consequence of this is the reduction in the severity of urban poverty.

It was found that one way of dealing with public space that has a recreation use is by locating it on the periphery of the city where land values are low. Such as in the case of the End Street strip. However the location of public space with an intended economic function is dependent on a higher rate of pedestrian flow. Areas of high flow are found in the city and not on the periphery. Flow is the number of pedestrians that use a particular route in the city over a given time.

If many people move along the route, then flow is regarded as high and economic advantage can be taken of the route as can social advantage. In Johannesburg today routes of high flow are flanked by private realm, formal sector development. Public realm provision for the informal economic sector is minimal. This is a major problem and frustration for informal hawkers seeking opportunity in the city.

An opportunity for a public space with intended economic use, at a location of high pedestrian flow is seen in the SATS air rights proposals. The decking of the tracks for public use at a point of high flow could be one of the neccessary interventions for the city. This intervention could be the place of opportunity as outlined earlier. Additional advantages of this action are,

1) providing a gateway into the city for people using public transport
2) not interfering with the existing fabric of the city, merely adding to it
3) mantaining the inverted parabolic shape in the section through the city.

The informal market could well become a destination in its own right but it should not be regarded as this only. It is a place that is 'en route' to somewhere else. The opportunity offered is only opportunity gleaned from the flow to that somewhere else. The economic relationship is a symbiotic one where hawkers benefit from the flows of pedestrians and the pedestrians benefit through the provision of neccessary goods.

These routes form networks of mutual support and it is these that are fundamental to the success of the intended use of the space. The form of the space is a secondary concern that is dependent on the network of mutual support and other historical or aesthetic influences.

The city can be regarded as a product of a network of mutually supportive and reinforcing relationships. These relationships are the consequence of either economic, social or religious determinants. It is these relationships that affect the form and character of the city. The frequency and intensity of use along binding strands of relationships gives rise to the vitality and pace of the city.

At the level of the formal economy these relationships are firmly entrenched through the systems of communication. At a district level, concerns that have strong, mutually beneficial relationships are located close to one another. For instance, acceptance houses, insurance houses, and public offices are all clustered around the Stock Exchange and are within easy access of one another in the financial district. This network is concretised in the systems of communication such as roads and telecommunications and related new technologies.

Roads and telecommunications are essential publicly provided components in the country's economy. The formal private sector clips into this system for the advantages of being 'in touch' with their business partners.

The informal economy relies on the publicly provided communication system for both it's business venue and for being 'in touch'. Places such as roads and squares are used for this purpose. Areas of highest concentration of pedestrian flow prove to be the best locations for informal hawking.

Formal economies are traditionally more powerful than informal economies. Because of this formal business can usually dictate its own terms, and get local or central government backing to enforce them.

Off street related shop trade has tried to limit the number of hawkers in the street. The police see that roads and pavements are not blocked so that the efficient running of the cities formal economy isn't hindered.

The formal economy is assisted in its endeavours by the public bodies and agencies. The formal economy is thus enabled by,

a) the public communications systems, and

b) local government legislation.

The informal sector is hindered by the same state bodies and agencies in its endeavours to exist and operate smoothly. This has bearing on the venues where informal trade would normally take place. These venues become empty, lifeless and unloved places, devoid of any positive meaning or character. The informal economy is thus disabled through local and central government legislation.

Enablement for the formal sector and disablement for the informal sector result in a city that is unequal in its access to opportunity. For this reason the city is regarded as unbalanced.

A state of imbalance in the mutual support network thus exists, and it is this together with a look at the components of the mutual support network that this work seeks to address. Mutually supportive networks in the economy can have social and physical consequences. In the markets and streets one meets ones friends and new friends are made. With time, simple stalls give way to shops and routes give way to shop flanked malls, entrenching the mutual support network. The social, economic and formal factors interelating create an environment that is full, rich and stimulating for its users.

Private economic informal activity such as hawking takes place not in shops but in public space. The hawkers are usually people starting out in business. Their profits are marginal and overheads such as shop rentals can not be met by their financial situation. This is their initial foothold in the economy and their first step towards financial independence. It is a vital first stepping stone in the career of the entrepreneur, and for many a stepping stone out of poverty. Hawkers usually locate themselves in parts of the city where the flow of pedestrian traffic is high such as at interchanges of transport mode, or along pedestrian routes from pubic transport termini to places of work. From this it can be seen that the public realm has a contribution to make in combating poverty and broadening the base of the economy.

However, for a variety of reasons, informal trade in Johannesburg is discouraged and the network intended for mutual support is exploited to meet the needs of the formal economy almost exclusively.

Such action has serious consequences for the character of life in the public realm of the city. What could once speak of activity and life is reduced to a dull and unsafe environment.

Part of the theory explores the formal and informal economies as parts of a national economy. The national economy is dependent on both sectors in its fight against poverty. For this reason it is essential that both sectors of the economy operate at maximum efficiency to support as many people as possible and to provide the neccessary first step in the economy. The public realm could assist with this.

To do this,

a) the view that the formal sector has of the informal sector needs to change, as does the legislation that supports their current view,

b) the network of mutual support and reinforcement needs to be extended to the informal sector so as to create opportunities for advancement on as many levels as possible,

c) specific places in the city, supportive of this economic function of the public realm need to be designed into the city. This will represent the first step in dealing with the issue of the unbalanced city.

The aim of this work is to create a public realm for Johannesburg that is commensurate with its private realm. To achieve this aim the goals of this project are,

a) to increase the extent of public life in Johannesburg through design,

b) to provide meaningful spaces for public life,

c) to provide linkages for these spaces so that,

i) life as a series of experiences can occur,

ii) a structure for public life is set up.

d) to set up hierarchies of structure and space so that these specific to the scale of public life occur, for instance large spaces for mass meetings and intimate spaces for small meetings.

The project in this work is just an indicator of what should happen to achieve these goals.

The specific area that will be dealt with is that of Park Station, a major transport interchange with many related routes of concentrated flow whose potential as a structure enabling of economic and social opportunities in aesthetically pleasing spaces has not been maximised. The view that this work submits is that the potentials aren't realised because the mechanism of the mutual support network, as a planning or design principle, is prevented from happening on all levels of the city. Because of this public spaces are found to be virtually irrelevant to the notion of city in the case of Johannesburg. For other cities public space is regarded as an integral part of the economy, as a place of exchange. With this as a prevailing view the load of the economy falls onto the shoulders of the formal sector alone. The potential contribution of the public realm is not realised. The load of the economy is on the shoulders of the formal sector in the private realm of the city. The public realm contributes little to assist in the carrying of that load, a situation of imbalance thus exists. Were the economy resting on the shoulders of both the public and private realms of the city it could then be possible for a situation of balance to exist. With a reviewed attitude to public space in the city it could then be possible for people to take advantage of economic opportunity and in the process help deal with the problem of urban poverty.

Two things are dealt with,

1. the principle of the network of mutual support and its constituent parts.
2. the application of this principle to the city, showing how different conditions relating to its application are possible causes of imbalance.

The theory deals with formal and informal economies and the interrelation of the two. A balance is sought in equal access to the benefits of the environment.

The theory looks at participation in the environment as a means of achieving a balance of power in the control of the environment.

The theory looks at the void and solid parts of the physical environment with a view to balanced contributions from each part.

Ecological theory informs us of the delicate balance of life. Of how things when assembled in the correct relation to one another create an environment in which life is possible. It is a life supporting environment based on balance that this project seeks to explore.

A look back at the structure reveals a large appendix section. The material refered to in this part has been weeded out from the original text and regrouped seperately so that the continuity of the idea of the network of mutual support is not confused. The information is however relevant to urban design and as such to the project, even though the subject matter is peripheral to the main thrust of the argument.

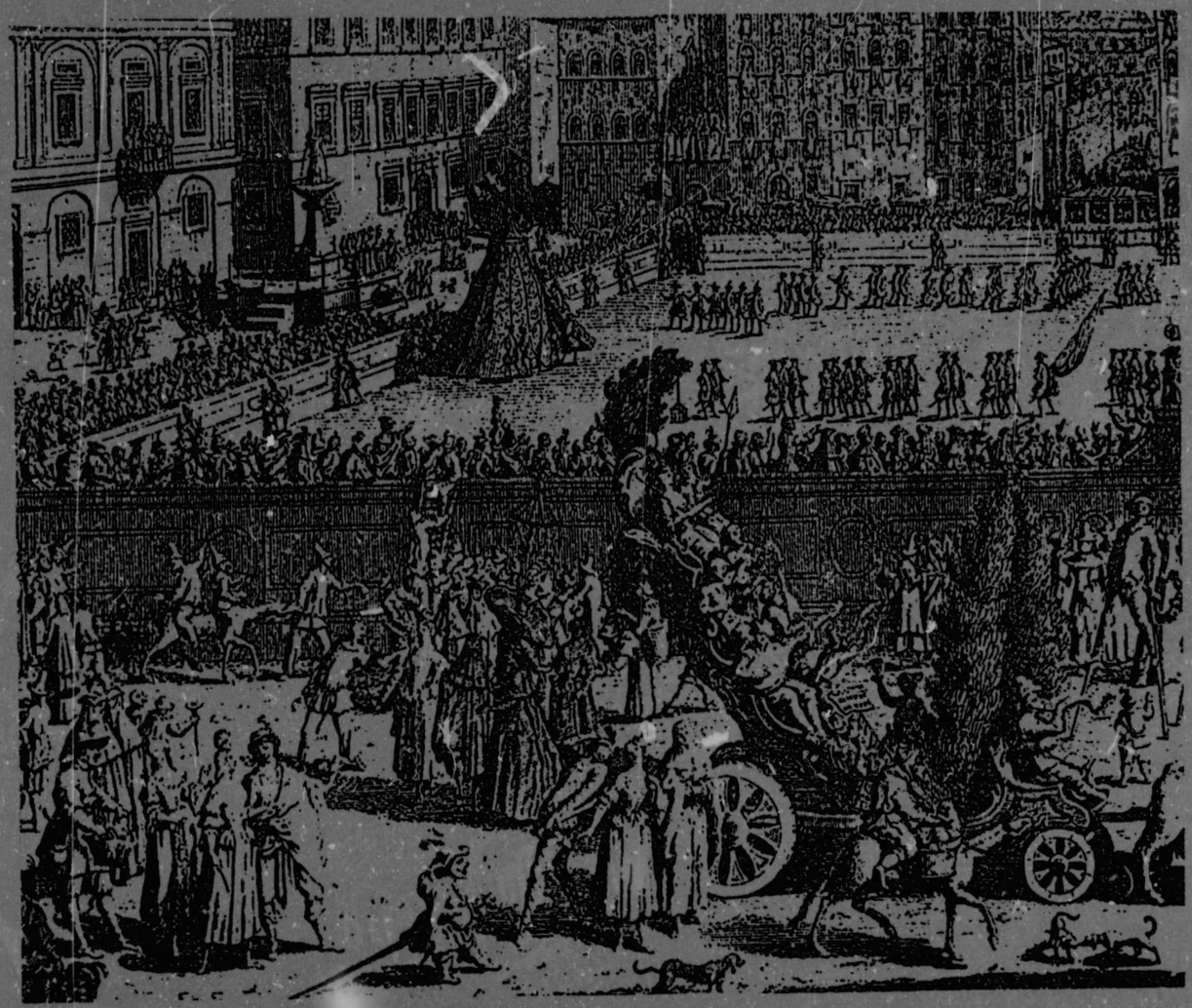
Before embarking on the theory itself it is perhaps advisable that some definitions of word meanings and usage are conveyed. These should make the negotiation of what is about to come somewhat easier.

The words, their meanings and their sources follow :

URBAN " Of, in, consisting of, comprising of a city."
Fowler & Fowler (1986 : 1181)

DESIGN " contrive, plan, intend, purpose."
Fowler & Fowler (1986 : 259)

URBANISM " urban character,"
Fowler & Fowler (1986 : 1181)



A Definition of Public Life

i - a " state of functional activity and continual change ..... concerning the people as a whole ..... done by or for the people ..... shared by the people ..... open to general observation."

Fowler & Fowler (1970 : 657)

A Definition of the Interface Between Public and Private Life

i - the " surface forming the common boundary between " public and private life.

ii - the " place where interaction occurs between " public and private life.

A Definition of Private Life

i - a " state of functional activity and continual change ..... kept removed from public knowledge or observation ..... that is confidential."

Fowler & Fowler (1970 : 644)

A Fete in Venice in the 18th. Century

The walls of the building in the top of the picture represent the interface between the public and private parts of the city. They also define the public space of the city. Private life occurs behind walls and public life occurs outside of the walls. The public life seen above is subdivided into two categories, the display for the paying public and the display, in the street, for the non-paying public.

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