

https://dspace.org/

Contested public spaces: a Lefebvrian analysis of Mary Fitzgerald Square

Nkooe, Ernestina Seanokeng

2016-03-01
http://hdl.handle.net/10539/19858

Downloaded from a DSpace repository. https://dspace.org/

ABSTRACT

Mary Fitzgerald Square is an iconic public space in Newtown, Johannesburg. In spite of its iconic status, prolific social history and commercial role in the city, there is very little that is known about it and its users. In 2009 and 2010 I undertook an ethnographic exploration of the public space using Henri Lefebvre's (1974/1991) conceptual *spatial triad*, the *Right to the City* and *Elements of Rhythmanalysis* frameworks. Through informal interviews, unstructured participant observation and exploration of archived newspaper articles, public space governance by-laws, published urban literature and research, I managed to situate this public space in urban geographical discourse as contested public space. By means of conceptual analysis, this research found Mary Fitzgerald Square to be an important public space that is dominated by neoliberal politics that create struggle for inhabitants to use it meaningfully in the context of everyday life. The proliferation of neoliberal relations of urban governance have led to a situation whereby the public space is subjected to private management practices that encourage its elitist uses and thus prioritizing its commercial exchange-value over its use-value. This process as the research uncovered, undermines the public space's use-value and consequently leads to a subliminal marginalization of ordinary inhabitants who require and desire it for their varied practices in the context of everyday life.

Urban management strategies like human surveillance, Public Open Space by-Laws, architecture and planning design, public-private partnerships, and the removal of the television monitor, discourage creative African youths, skateboarders, the urban poor and elderly in the city from appropriating Mary Fitzgerald Square. Inhabitants using Mary Fitzgerald Square manage to do so by overriding and transgressing existing spatial prohibitions by conducting their social practices in the contested space outside official policing times. Other inhabitants, through play and creative expression, have devised alternative means to challenge their marginalization in and uses of the public space in spite of existing by-laws, changing architecture, and visible human surveillance including law-enforcement that are conceived in an effort to deter their social uses of it. This research proposes a return to Mary Fitzgerald Square that warrants a critical discourse analysis of the public space in an effort to gain a better and deeper understanding of inhabitants' everyday life experiences and their political situation in the current city *through* the public space. This should enable a sound critique of the production of Mary Fitzgerald Square in the African metropolis where the abstract struggle between private interests and public need for the public space materializes.

Key words: *Mary Fitzgerald Square, Henri Lefebvre, Johannesburg, Geography, South Africa.*