

The nature and use of public open space in the City of Tshwane

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Public space is important in cities. It is the common ground where people interact formally or informally to bind the community (Carr, Francis, Rivlin and Stone, 1992). It is also a place where one can meet strangers and engage with politics, commerce and sport. Therefore it is “a space for peaceful coexistence and impersonal encounters” (Walzer, 1989, cited in Madanipour, 1996).

Public open spaces also provide opportunities for recreation and relaxation (Gehl, 2011) and contribute to the greening of cities. This can enhance the quality of life of people and provide opportunities for more sustainable living. Given this, public spaces should be accessible to all, with physical and visual access from buildings and streets (Tibbalds, 2001). In essence, a public space can be summarised as “... space that allows all the people to have access to it and the activities within it, which is controlled by a public agency, and which is provided and managed by public interest” (Madanipour, 1996).

In theory, the City of Tshwane shares this view. The Integrated Development Plan (City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, 2011) promotes the enhancement of the quality of people’s lives, social cohesion and the need for open space. Along the same lines, the Tshwane Open Space Framework reiterates the importance of public spaces as key structuring elements in the city, and their ability to foster proper development. The Tshwane Vision Strategy 2055 (City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality, 2013) is premised on creating more sustainable communities and providing a better quality of life for residents. One of the ways to achieve this is through the development of a quality

public realm with public space designed as civic art. However, many questions remain about public space in the city, with people often claiming that it is unsafe or dirty. In addition, the Tshwane Open Space Framework recognises challenges related to safety and maintenance in many parks. It therefore raises questions about the nature and use of open spaces in the city.

The Department of Town and Regional Planning at the University of Pretoria embarked on a multi-year project to investigate the spatial transformation of public space in South Africa, with a special focus on the City of Tshwane. The broader project is partly funded by the National Research Foundation (NRF) and aims to determine the changes in space over the last 15 years, the drivers of change, as well as the urban planning and design implications of these changes. The large project consists of many smaller projects.

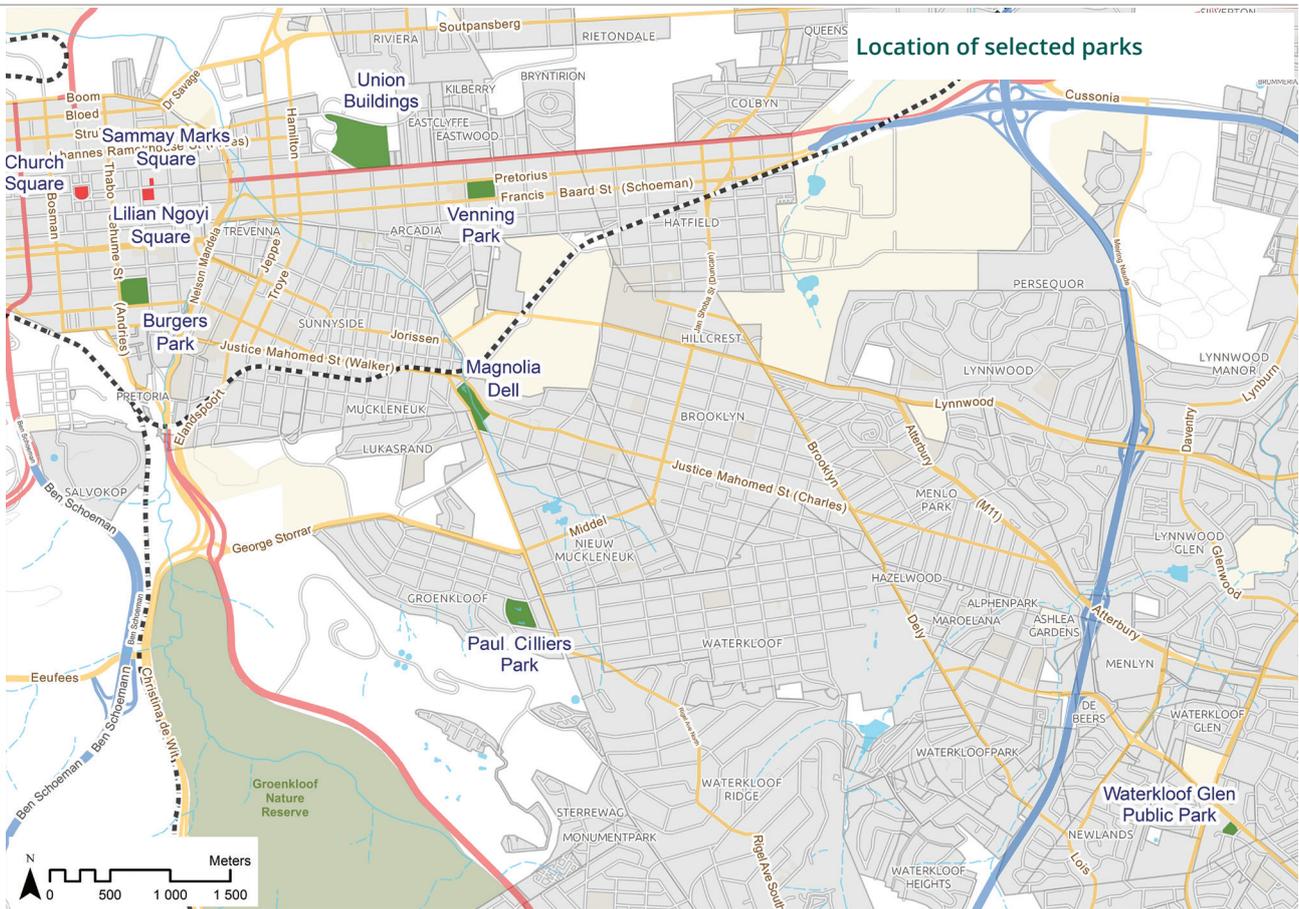
One of these smaller projects involved multiple case studies in different types of public spaces in the city of Tshwane. Nine honours students of the Department of Town and Regional Planning studied 18 parks or squares in detail to determine the nature of the spaces or their physical characteristics through spatial analysis. They also described the use or function of

these spaces through participant observation and interviews, and identified the perceptions of users towards spaces through interviews.

This article only focuses on nine of these spaces, including three inner city squares (Church Square, Lilian Ngoyi Square and Sammy Marks Square), three inner city parks (the park in front of the Union Building, Burgers Park and Venning Park) and three suburban parks (Magnolia Dell, Paul Cilliers Park and Waterkloof Glen Park).

The nine parks vary in size and nature. The park in front of the Union Building is very large in comparison to the other spaces. The squares are generally much smaller than the parks. Their physical characteristics also vary. Lilian Ngoyi Square and Sammy Marks Square are predominantly hard, open spaces with little vegetation, while Church Square offers a good balance. All six parks are predominantly soft, open spaces with large green areas, but some are formally designed, often incorporating a symmetrical design with classical structures (such as the park in front of the Union Building and Venning Park).

Most of the other parks have a more organic nature with flowing pathways or grass curvings between different types of vegetation, for example



→ Figure 1: The location of the nine selected parks.

Magnolia Dell, Paul Cilliers Park and Waterkloof Glen Park. Church Square, the park in front of the Union Building and Venning Park include formal walkways.

The nature and primary function of the open spaces tend to influence the presence and type of building structures. The park in front of the Union Building offers the forecourt to the majestic Union Building on the hill. The formal terraces include many smaller structures and statues. Venning Park and Magnolia Dell include formal restaurants, kiosks and/or coffee shops, which cater for a variety of activities. Some of the parks offer restrooms. In the case of Magnolia Dell, these facilities were permanently locked. All the parks also included different types of water features, ranging from

two dams in Paul Cilliers Park and a large pool in Venning Park, to small streams in Magnolia Dell and Waterkloof Glen Park. Different types of lighting and areas for seating were present in all six parks. However, the amount of seating varied. For example, in Sammy Marks Square, the seating was extremely limited.

The types of visitors and times of use vary. On weekdays, many of the inner city parks, for example the park in front of the Union Building, tend to be used by office and municipal workers who have lunch there. This also relates to the surrounding land uses and close proximity of office buildings. During the afternoons, most of the parks are frequented by children who use the playgrounds, for example

Magnolia Dell and Venning Park. All the parks are utilised more extensively over weekends. Homeless people also occupy some of the more secluded areas in Venning Park, Burgers Park and Magnolia Dell. Informal traders are a common sight in the parks and on the peripheries of all the parks, with the exception of Paul Cilliers Park.

Photographers often use the parks to take photographs, especially at the park in front of the Union Building, Church Square and Burgers Park. Others enjoy taking photographs of the natural landscape and flowers, for example in Paul Cilliers Park.

Additional activities include just relaxing on the grass, having picnics or exercising. Yet, legitimate users tend to

keep to certain areas, while homeless people and those consuming too much alcohol tend to hide in more secluded areas. In Paul Cilliers Park, other activities include test flying toys and helicopters, while Sunday events at Waterkloof Glen Park include church services. There are also informal markets and art exhibitions at Magnolia Dell on Sundays and tea/children's parties and stork teas at Paul Cilliers Park.

From the discussion, it is evident that most of the selected parks are still used, but that the use patterns are influenced by a variety of socio-spatial factors.

Interviews with the users confirmed that users are discouraged by crime, feelings of insecurity, people abusing alcohol, the



→ *The park in front of the Union Building with the Union Building in the background and the prominent statue of former President Nelson Mandela.*



→ *The small stream running through Magnolia Dell.*

presence of drug users and homeless people in some of the spaces, excessive noise and the nature of the built environment. People also complained about

broken lights in parks, litter, too little shade, too few benches and a general lack of management. In spite of these concerns, people highlighted the

fact that it was pleasant to visit most of these spaces due to opportunities for relaxation, connection to nature, watching people and social interaction.

Interviewees also commented on their enjoyment of a peaceful and tranquil atmosphere.



→ People relaxing in Burgers Park.

Conclusion

The findings indicate that public spaces in the city offer places where people can interact socially and that, over time, these activities may contribute to binding the community. In addition, the findings also confirmed that Tshwane spaces are shared by strangers who are often not relatives or friends, and in this way, they can become spaces of peaceful co-existence. However, these noble ideals are threatened by a number of challenges, such as a lack of proper management, maintenance, adequate and accessible ablution facilities, as well as problems related to safety and security.

Fears are often related to the presence of illegal activities, such as alcohol abuse or drug dealing, and the presence of homeless people, as well as the nature of the built environment. Addressing the nature of the built

environment may be easier, but the presence of homeless people raises a sensitive issue. Who should be able to use a public space in the City of Tshwane? Perhaps this warrants further consideration in the future, so that solutions may be developed to simultaneously make these spaces safer to use and to provide homeless people with proper places to stay.

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