

Chapter 2. Urban Framework

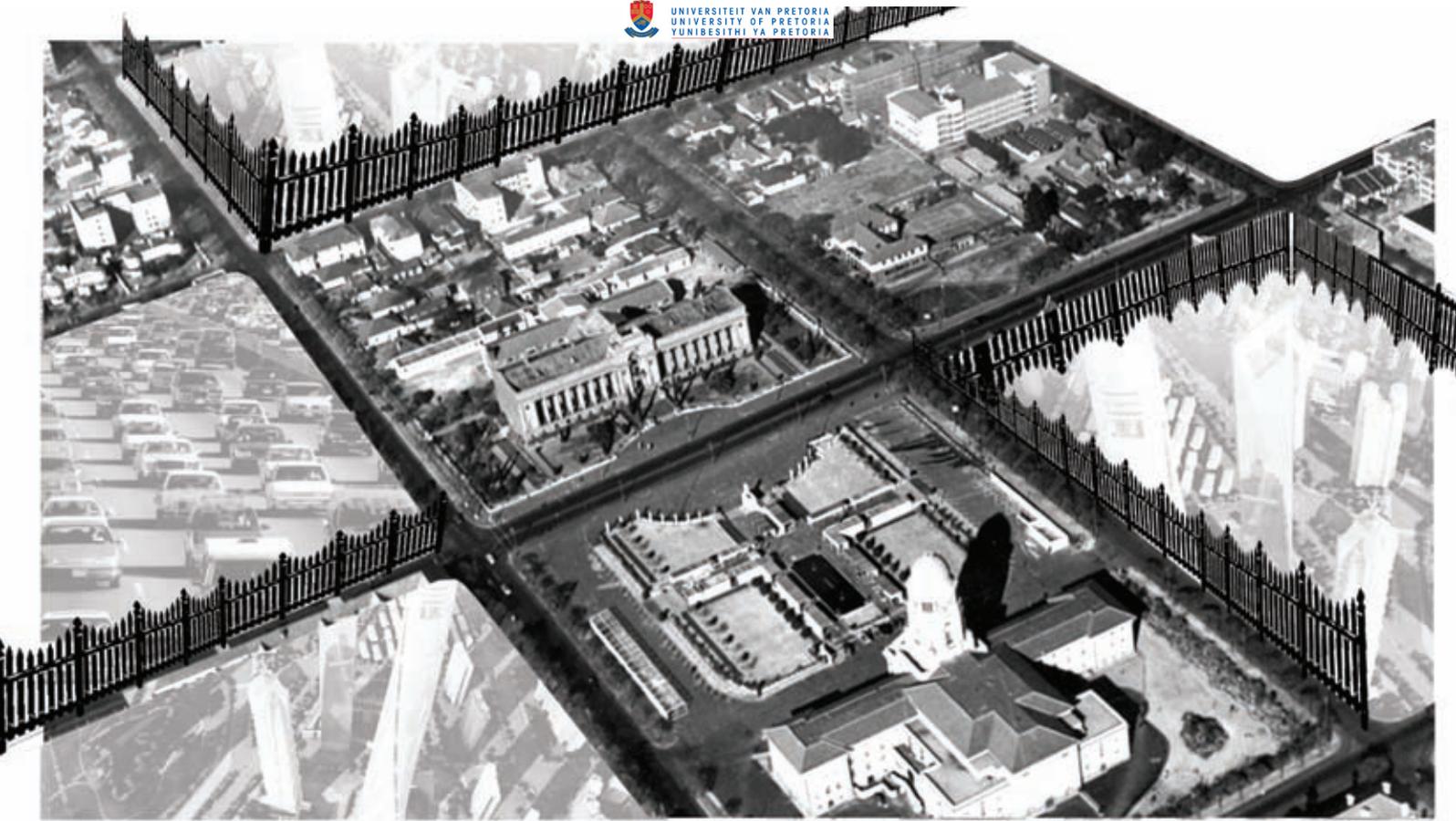


Figure 6: Inevitable undesired urban environment resulting from prescriptive frameworks

1. Introduction

This chapter will firstly discuss the urban framework within which the project is located, secondly the analysis of the project site and finally the mandate and requirements of the client.

2. Urban Framework

At the start of the creation of this urban framework a question was raised concerning the effectiveness and suitability of the creation of a large-scale prescriptive urban intervention. A number of such frameworks has been developed for Pretoria in the recent past, none of which has been implemented. Additionally, the intentions stated in these frameworks cannot be seen in current works and constructions in the city.

The decision was therefore made to re-evaluate the theoretical background to the question of the urban framework, in order to adjust the approach to current thinking in this regard. To this end a brief survey was done with regard to the history and development of urban design as well as a number of recently published theories, which then informed the approach and underlying philosophy of the 'BCe1' theory, which was developed as part of this study (including the following projects: Infratecture, Rejoin, and Historic recovery_Urban recovery).

i. A brief tale of urban awakening

The term 'urban design' was coined in the 1950s. The field emerged as a response to the inadequacies and limitations of the 'philosophies and design paradigms' of architecture and city planning during the Modern era. At this stage in history a strong 'division' had developed between the theories of architecture and planning. Elements that are now ascribed to the

field of urban design had previously been an overlap between these professions (Cooper, et al., 2009).

In response to the failure of the Modern Movement to affect social change and the 'inhuman' urban environments it created, a new paradigm of diversity became the focus of urban design. Jane Jacobs was one of the first writers to celebrate the 'real' city. A wave of theory concerning the expression of complexity in the urban environment followed, e.g. 'Collage city' by C Rowe and 'Complexity and contradiction' by Denise Scott Brown and Robert Venturi. Works such as 'The image of the city' by Kevin Lynch provided a new way of working with the city, and was the first step towards the attempted recreation of diversity in urban environments (Powell, 2000).

As a progression to this way of thinking, Leon Krier started a move towards the recreation of the 'European city'. What attracted designers to the idea of the 'European city' were the symbolic richness, true variety and meaningful articulation of the urban environment (Powell, 2000). The intrinsic use of classical architecture and traditional urban forms was conservative and inevitably led to the failure of this approach to create new / contemporary urban spaces.

More recently there has been a tendency to recall the role of architecture, both as generator and defining element, within the urban environment. The contemporary approaches to urban issues critically consider the three-dimensional space of the city, and accept the need for picturesque composition as one element of the overall composition of the city, a 'holistic interaction of aesthetics, politics and finance' (Powell, 2000). At the same time there is an increasing despair concerning the lack of ability of urban theory to date to construct or contribute to the true complexity of the city. Urban design often seems unable to create the richness, variety and diversity of that which is now considered to be the ideal urban environment.

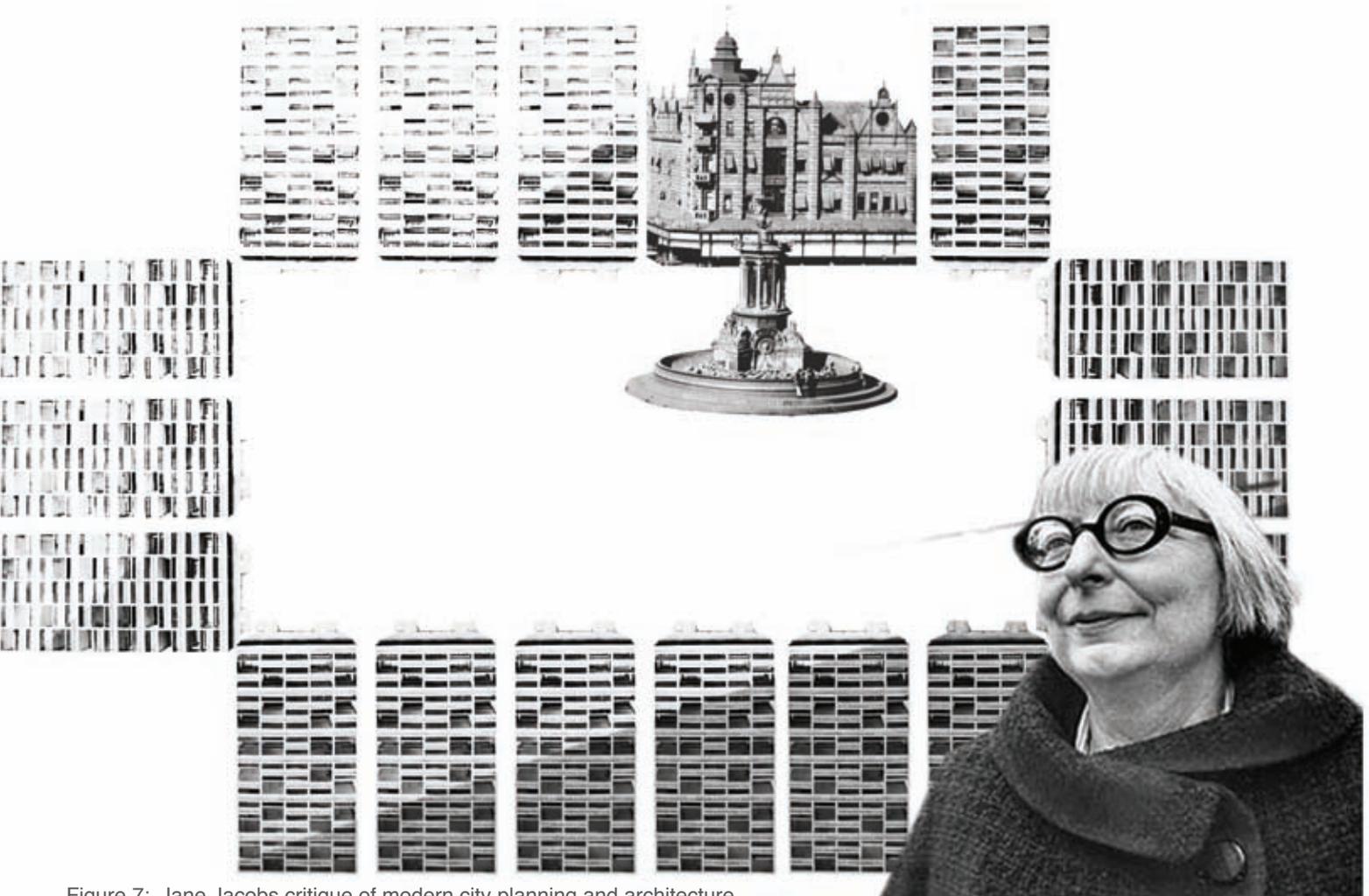


Figure 7: Jane Jacobs critique of modern city planning and architecture

ii. Theoretically urban

The following urban theories form the base of the proposed framework:

Contextualism

Contextualism deals with evolving ideas with regard to building in the city. One of the most important ideas is that the relationship between urban solids (building masses) and voids (the streets and squares), plays a crucial role in defining the character of the city. Nowhere was this more evident than in the traditional city model i.e. European cities which are characterised by well defined, figural public spaces including streets and squares. Contextual theory draws a contrast between the traditional city and modern theories of urbanism (the modern city) arguing that the modern city is compositionally the reverse of the traditional city. "Composed of isolated buildings set in a park-like landscape, the city-in-the-park (modern city) presents an experience which emphasises the building volumes and not the space which the buildings define or imply". (Nesbitt, K.1996:296) The modern city consumes traditional urbanism and its inherent values in the name of progress. Therefore from this standpoint one can argue for a return to traditional city ideas, but this alone will not solve current 'real world' problems. The overall intention of Contextualism is to offer a middle-ground position between an "unrealistically frozen past with no future development permitted, and urban renewal with total loss of the urban fabric". (Nesbitt, 1996, p. 295)

Landscape Urbanism Theory

The theory of Landscape Urbanism refers to the urban environment as 'SCAPE', a term coined by Rem Koolhaas which encompasses all the layers of complexity into one concept of urban structure (Waldheim, 2006, p. 40). More specifically the urban landscape

can be referred to as different layers of veins (systems), physical structures and systems, invisible actions and systems and natural elements which serve different purposes but work together as a whole (Durack, 2004, p.3). Ruth Durack states in her essay 'Shrinking Smart the Promises of Landscape Urbanism' that Landscape Urbanism is "...a call to turn the traditional practice of urban design inside out, starting with open spaces and natural systems to structure urban form, instead of buildings and infrastructural systems." (Durack, 2004, p. 3)

Looking at un-activated open space as non-contributory to the urban fabric and labelling spaces as 'urban scars' Landscape Urbanism seeks to utilize these spaces as places of potential which just need 'irrigation' to transform the urban fabric and create peace rather than escape. (Spellman, 2003, p.7) Landscape Urbanism calls for the design of projects rather than objects, requiring the participation of all elements it encompasses, programming horizontal and vertical surfaces instead of creating formal instructive plans (Waldheim, 2006, p.26). Upon the programmed horizontal, public interaction takes place as liquid flow, the liquid takes on the shape of the 'container'. Because the public realm does not have it's own 'form', it takes on the temporal flow of past, present and future transformation (Branzi, 2006, p.20).

Beyond delirious

In his article on the establishment of an urban framework for an area in Belgium, Rem Koolhaas claims that there is a 'rediscovery' of the city, but that there is a simultaneous despair, shared by architects and urban planners, of being able to work with or create the essential elements of the city. In their approach to the creation of the framework they therefore decided, instead of attempting to build a city, to invert their approach and firstly establish which elements they needed to preserve, where they would not build.

The framework thus became a controlled system of void and landscape spaces in which the surrounding urban fabric remained beyond control or guidance. The aim of the approach is that the city becomes defined by its 'empty' spaces (Koolhaas in Nesbitt, 1996, pp.332 – 335).

Designing sustainable cities

“... is diversity equivalent to ‘mixing’ – mixing of uses, mixing of cultures, mixing of economies? Here again our experience of recently planned ‘mixed-use’ development suggests not. There seems to be more structure to diverse urban areas than would be implied by a mere mixing of uses or forms” (Cooper, et al., 2009).

This statement supports the approach that that which is essential to ‘vibrant’ urban environments cannot be forced through the logic of an urban framework. Diversity is generated by a combination of various factors including the functional distribution of elements in space and their correlating perceptual experiences. It is therefore not solely by the creation of spatial properties that a diverse urban environment is created, “... but also upon correlations between a full range of other aspects of perceptual experience” (Cooper, et al., 2009).

The Master Plan is dead (Wolf Prix)

Tschumi and Cheng (2003) state that in developing countries, public authorities do not have the capacity to fund large scale public projects. Thus private sector investors opportunistically develop the city for financial gain.

They theorise that it is up to individual architectural interventions to address the issues around public space.

iii. A problem in four parts

When attempting to identify a problem statement in the context of urban complexity, it is crucial to understand that no urban issue stands in isolation. It would, however, be impossible to consider and unravel, in one attempt, the complete complexity of all things urban. The identification of a problem statement therefore becomes a matter of prioritising that which one can change or at the very least attempt to affect in initial effort.

For the purpose of the construction of the ‘BCe1’ theory the following issues have been identified:

- Lack of capital city identity
- Ill-defined space
- The city currently contains an overwhelming mix of information that doesn’t contribute to the reading of space – it is non-informative, unstructured
- Most of the built fabric is privatised with abrupt thresholds. There is little or no active interaction with space

iv. BCe1

[The BCe1 framework is a theory that has been developed by Group Johan for the purpose of this study (including the works - Infratecture, Rejoin, and Historic recovery_Urban recovery), and is based on the theories discussed above.]

Within the current approach to the creation of urban frameworks, there is a lack of understanding and a disregard for the functioning of space on a human scale. Local complexity and experience of space are not interrogated. The proposed interventions therefore do not address these issues and are unable to contribute towards a constructive urban vision.

We acknowledge that it is not possible to build urban complexity with one spatial intervention. Therefore

we want to invert our approach in order rather to determine those fixed elements that will essentially contribute to form the base upon which urban diversity can grow. These elements may include spaces of social, cultural, political or economic importance.

Diversity cannot be created in undefined space, nor can it be created by a piece of architecture in isolation. It is the relationship between the space and the architecture as well as the relationship between various elements of architecture or places with social, cultural, economic, or political significance that create tension and fields of possibility within which experiential space can develop. Our framework is about the relationship, the coexistence, and the threshold. It is not about generating a prescriptive guideline for intervention at city or block level. The approach is that various architectures and physical interventions can still contribute to the creation of the experiential field.

Experiential space is multi-faceted; it includes elements such as enclosure, hierarchy, threshold, definition, meaning and symbol. Experiential space is sensory (perceptual) and may involve elements such as sound, colour, and texture. It is rich in social, cultural and economic meaning and evokes emotional involvement and response.

Different combinations of perceptual / sensory elements, program and definitions of space will read as different space experiences and will lead to different uses of space. All of these elements will contribute to the legibility



Figure 8: Urban status quo

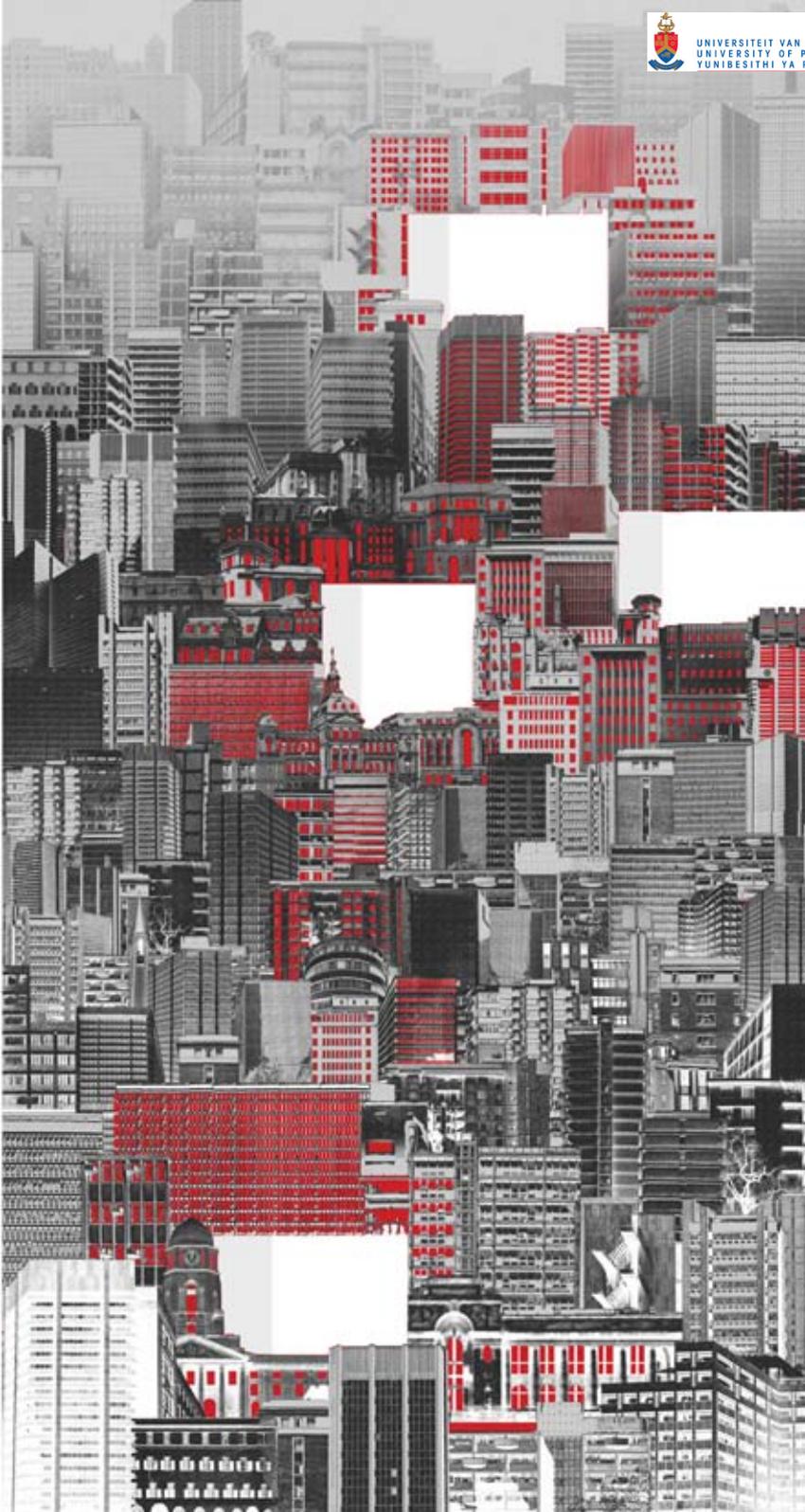
of spaces and ultimately to the intelligibility of the city.

The experiential field is directly influenced by the urban fabric within which it is contained, and may extend into all public spaces in this urban fabric, including public buildings. Although a number of elements has an influence on the perception of the experiential field, the most important element is the threshold. The threshold stands in contrast to the boundary.

The boundary merely defines and separates the private and public realms. The threshold defines public space, contributes to the formation, richness and understanding of the experiential field and forms a transition space linking the private and public realms. The threshold acts as a join or stitch, underlining the importance of communication and interaction between the private and public realms. The term 'join' denotes a physical space connecting two parts of a system but also indicates an action. The threshold is a meeting space providing the potential for social interaction, activity and movement.

The threshold is not a fixed space with a fixed character. It consists of a number of combinations of various elements, all contributing to the sensory richness of the experiential field. If two or three elements change in a certain combination, it becomes an indication of a certain type of spatial experience. For example: the reading of a red light district would manifest through elements such as neon signs, closed doors and little overt social interaction whereas an entertainment area would become legible

Figure 9: Development of the threshold



through a combination of open doors, more muted signage, tables on the street with overt interaction, certain smells and conversational sound.

The aim of the framework is to exploit the city as a field of possibility within which tension and dialogue between points of significance can develop into an experiential field. The city currently contains a number of well-used points of significance, but the experiential fields between these points are often inadequately developed. Through the potential development of additional points of significance as well as the treatment of threshold spaces within the tensions between these points, the experiential field will be further developed.



Figure 10: Developed experiential field - BCe1 Framework

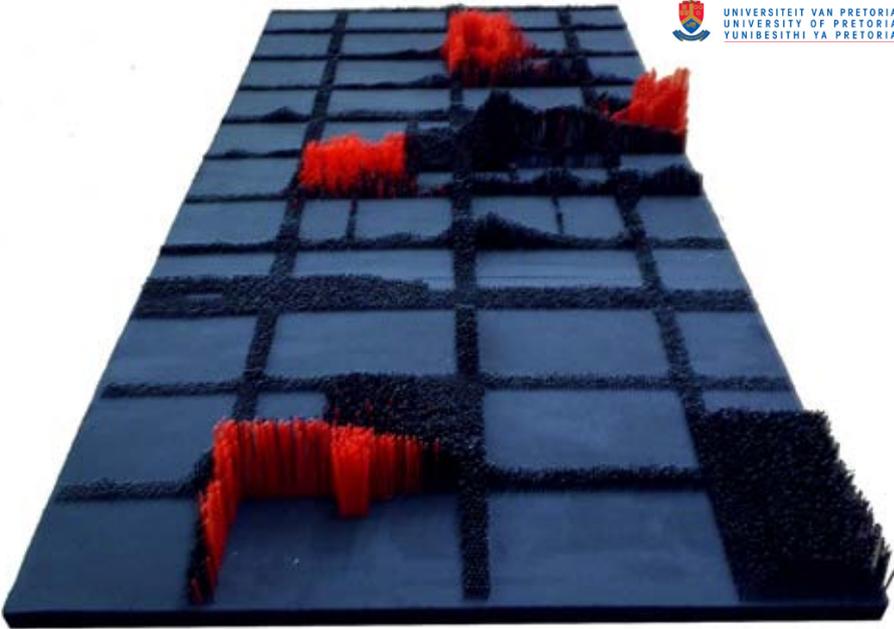


Figure 12: BCe1 Framework model: experiential field (south to north)

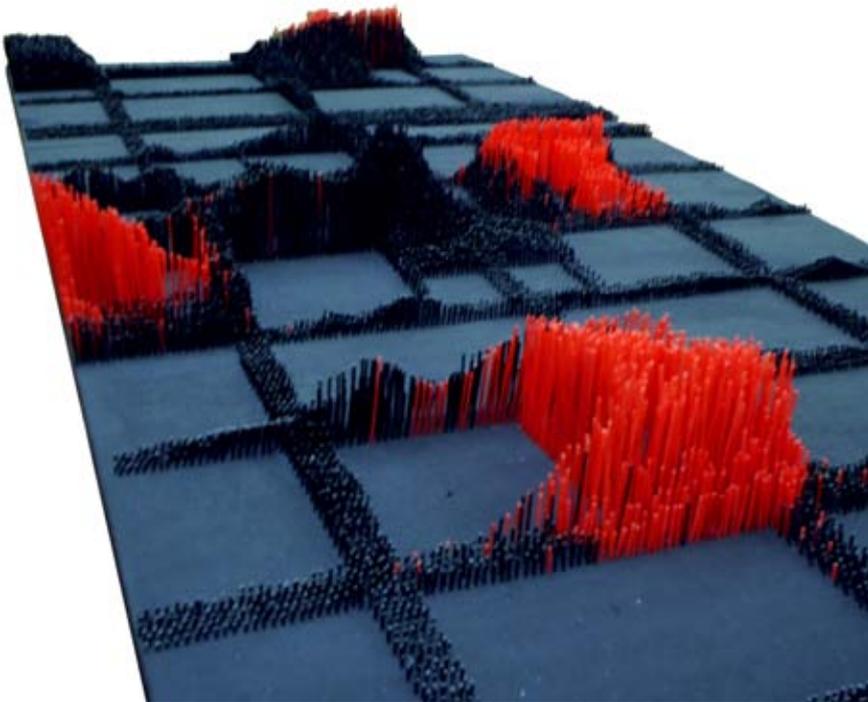


Figure 11: BCe1 Framework model: experiential field (northeast to southwest)

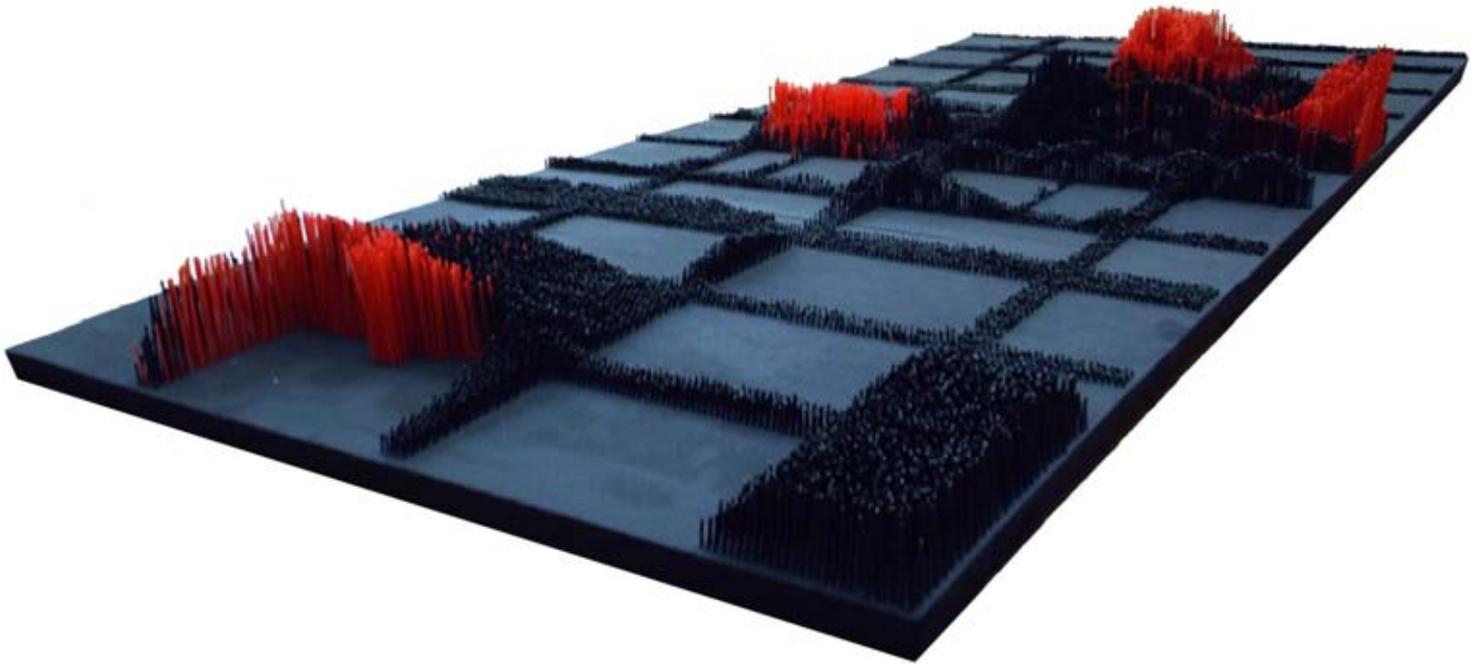


Figure 13: BCe1 Framework model: experiential field (southeast to northwest)