

CHAPTER

1

INTRODUCTION

1.1. SIGNIFICANCE OF RIVERS IN AFRICAN COMMUNITIES

Some African communities believe in the concept of *botho* or humanity of which the essence is well developed by Denbow and Phenyoo (2006: 38) who argue that, “the well-being of an individual is not a personal affair but is a function of his or her relationship with other people, ancestral spirits, and even nature. In addition, the health and survival of the community can also, in consequence, be affected by the social behaviour of a single individual.” This relationship between people as well as between people and their environment forms a strong sense of place associated with natural features like rivers and hills. The sense of place can be defined as the feeling that people have for a special place (Farina, 2010: 150). This feeling in turn gives the landscape meaning and purpose in peoples’ lives.

In traditional rural settlements, rivers were (in some cases, still are) meaningful places connecting and inspiring communities. Rivers not only formed boundaries but were also the social veins activating life in the form of farming opportunities and a healthy environment for social interaction. These linear environments were important public spaces for expression of a shared common culture and socialisation between community members. The river was also considered to be a spiritual place where one can come closer to and communicate with the spiritual world. The river water was considered holy and used by some churches for cleansing as well as baptism. In Tswana culture, the river is also sometimes a place for rainmaking ceremonies. For people staying along the river, it became the extension of the *lapa* being used to host family functions like weddings usually with an open invitation to the community. This open space allows children to play freely under a watchful eye of elders while also providing ample space for parking and erection of shade structures. On a typical day one can hear and see birds and livestock coming down to drink water and find shade under larger trees while herd boys play soccer on the green veld grass. In many African traditional communities, fetching water from the river was done by women helped by young girls (Figure 1). The river was a place where they can be free and share their secrets away from men, while sometimes it was a place where new love was found as men went to water their livestock. In this sense it allowed individuals to perform certain duties like rituals and religious activities which contributed to the formation of their individual identity, which is based on their place in the society, while forming a shared identity for the community.

In time, settlements often grew and extended over these rivers. In some areas, the in-between spaces along rivers were later neglected, then polluted, while new developments faced away from them. Currently these spaces are characterised by pollution (land, water and air), overgrown vegetation and crime among other negative features. It is therefore evident that there is need for research and experimentation in appropriate planning, design and management of these spaces to improve the current situation. It is submitted that any landscape design of such spaces should start and end with an understanding of the significance that the environment holds for the people, as well as the potential for a sustainable relationship that ensures a deeper meaning in ecological and cultural systems that contribute to a sense of place and community in the future.



Figure 1: People using Pienaar’s River as a source of water and a place to relax, Mamelodi (Author, 2011)

1.2. STUDY AREA

The study calls for a green open space that has the potential to become a place for a shared sense of community in Tshwane. The area of study, Mamelodi (Figure 2), is a township within the greater City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality (CoTMM). Because of its rural quality, it still has large green open spaces along the Pienaar’s River. Unfortunately these are neglected and do not contribute to the image or the spirit of this otherwise vibrant township.

1.3. PROBLEM IDENTIFICATION

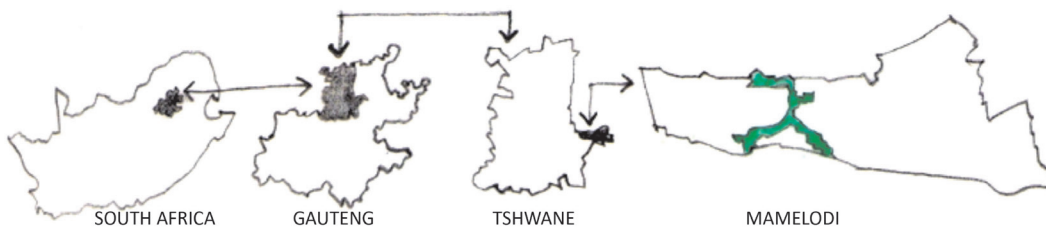


Figure 2: South Africa: location of study area, Mamelodi (Author, 2011)

1.3.1. Real-world problem

Today the landscape along rivers in Mamelodi fragment communities and have become culturally insignificant, lost spaces. This contributes to the disintegration of the community as people refrain from crossing these spaces and do not interact with people from the other side of the river, or use the abandoned spaces. These spaces have become hazardous in terms of safety and health as well as becoming hosts to undesirable behaviour in the community (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Children playing in rubbish dumped adjacent to Pienaar's River, Mamelodi (Author, 2011)



1.3.2. Problem statement

The current state of the Pienaar's River (also known as Moretele River in Mamelodi) is not contributing to a safer, cleaner and productive environment for the community of Mamelodi. The question is; how can a landscape intervention bring meaning to these spaces and ignite a spirit of community that would become a catalyst for community development and socialisation?

1.3.3. Specific problem for the thesis

Do green public open spaces along rivers in Tshwane hold any significance to the communities residing along the river?

1.3.4. Research question

This study attempts to answer the question:

- How can river landscapes be designed to attract, connect, activate people's lives and improve a sense of community in Mamelodi?

Sub-questions

- Why are designed green public open spaces important to form and integrate a sense of community?
- How can designed green public open spaces facilitate and act as catalysts for community socialisation and development?
- How can green public open spaces benefit from river ecology and contribute to a harmonious relationship between nature and the township inhabitants?
- What is the potential role of urban rivers in Tshwane townships, with reference to Mamelodi?

1.4. HYPOTHESIS

When a landscape intervention respects the spirit of a place, reflects people's identity, values and allows for the expression of their cultural practices, it can add to a shared sense of community. This river still has the potential to be a meaningful community space. The reclaiming of the river's edge in Mamelodi as a functional urban space, can inspire a healthy and productive human environment.

1.5. AIMS OF THE STUDY

To design an appropriate landscape proposal that can improve a sense of community and the relationship between people and the environment, the project aims to:

- Explore the Greenways concept and its significance applied at a regional scale;
- Investigate sustainable strategies for the rehabilitation of the river system;
- Explore sustainable strategies for the economical development of the community;
- Investigate connectivity to surrounding areas and significant places in the township through a designed circulation network;
- Present the river system as a meaningful place for recreation, interaction, socialisation and contemplation by designing and activating social spaces that can cater for cultural events and everyday life interactions that can bring people together.

1.6. CLIENT

The City of Tshwane (CoT) is the owner of the study area and the Open Space Planning Section under the Agricultural and Environmental Management Division is identified as the client.

1.7. LIMITATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS

The project will limit itself to the study of the environment along Pienaar's River in Mamelodi and the immediate adjoining community in terms of the design problem definition and objectives. The study assumes that:

- Interventions along the Pienaar's River will be approved by CoT.
- The increased population will lead to urbanisation of the area as shown in Mamelodi / Nellmapius Masterplan, Tsososloso. Programme, by GAPP Architects and Urban Designers (2010) and the landscape intervention will contribute to the image and value of the area.

1.8. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study will respond to quantitative available information (e.g. statistics) and follow a qualitative research strategy in introducing and discussing the project site in Mamelodi.

The author will consider four key components suggested by Groat (Groat & Wang, 2002:176-7):

1. An emphasis on natural setting which entails the observation and interaction with objects of inquiry at the area of study, (The author gets information through interviewing community members living along the river about their opinions and taking photographs of the current conditions of the site)
2. A focus on interpretation and meaning to make sense of the available information and initiate the process of analysis (The author then produces analytic diagrams to communicate the conditions and characteristics of the site.)
3. A focus on how the respondents make sense of their own circumstances (Patterns and activities existing on site are also mapped while paying attention to how people use the spaces.)
4. The use of multiple tactics including photographs, sketches and a physical inventory of the site (Finally the author combines and integrates the above mentioned methods to understand the site and inform design.)

To propose a site specific intervention, the author will first introduce the site in context and the regional planning frameworks that will inform the design. Frameworks are developed and informed by both contextual analysis and the theoretical research to respond to the identified design problem in the study area. The proposed regional and local frameworks assist in developing design guidelines to steer the design process. The author uses the precedents and case studies to compile a list of design principles to be followed in the sketch plan design. The sketch plan area attempts to prove the hypothesis of a meaningful, healthy and productive human environment. The technical detailing of this area ends with a brief study of the materials selected and sustainability rating of the project.