

CHAPTER

# 3

# THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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### 3.1. INTRODUCTION

The relationship between people and their environment has been investigated extensively in the past by researchers from different fields including anthropology, sociology, psychology and many more. Moran (in *People and nature: an introduction to human ecological relations*, 2006) reminds us of the different interactions between humans and their environment; hunter gatherers, the farmer, urban-industrial revolution and contemporary human-dominated ecosystems. According to Murphy (2005:25), landscape architecture theory is based on the premise that quality of life for individuals and society benefits from the creation of harmonious and mutually supportive relationships between people and the environment. Whereas the author concurs with this hypothesis, he intends to investigate and explore possibilities of elevating this spirit of ‘support’ that brings meaning to the landscape as well as the users’ being. Thompson (1999: 6) argues that the main sources of positive values in landscape architecture are to be found in three areas – the aesthetic, ecological and the social. While the author agrees with Thompson, the author believes that if people are separated from beauty and ecology they will not appreciate them and contribute to the conservation and sustainability thereof. It all begins and end (Figure 17) with people because they are the ones who use the spaces designers create therefore they will affect them one way or the other. If design and planning was to start with the social aspects (community) and from there on look at ways of encouraging people to live with and respect the beauty in nature, it would result in successful design.

In this chapter, the author will firstly present a brief overview of community design, a theory presented in a book called *Community by design: new urbanism for suburbs and small communities* by Kenneth A. Hall Jr and Gerald A. Porterfield, 2001. Mr Hall specializes in community planning while Mr Porterfield a renowned speaker on land development issues. They are both landscape architects and members of the American Society of Landscape Architects (ASLA). The author will also explore the theory in creating a sense of community and how the landscape can connect the community to a place. The author will then introduce, define and discuss place theory as well as elaborate on the use of the space in connecting people with one another, the community and the environment in a way that enhances their relationship.

Figure 17: The interaction between the community and the landscape architect at Moroka Park, Soweto (Young, 2008).



## 3.2. COMMUNITY DESIGN THEORY

According to Hall and Porterfield (2001: 3), community design is the art of making sustainable living places that both thrive and adapt to people's needs for shelter, livelihood, commerce, recreation and social order. In landscape architecture, community design can create designed open spaces that better respond to daily life and culture of the users. Open space, the seemingly void zone between vertical elements, can be perceived as positive, productive, planned, and functionally supportive or, conversely, as negative, wasted, unstructured and deleterious (Hall & Porterfield, 2001: 19). In designing for communities, open space must be viewed as the most important component and a starting point for a successful public space. These include ecologically important green spaces usually preserved as well as programmed activity areas like parks. A successful public space should contribute to the well being and health of the people as well as accommodate cultural and community activities in a safer environment. It should also contribute to strengthening of the identity of place and the relationship and connection to other public spaces and nodes in the larger community. According to Hall and Porterfield (2001: 19), if the viewer can perceive open space as a part of a larger composition, one that heightens the relationship of the other elements in that composition, then that space has been successfully designed. To address this theory, the author intends to develop the catalyst project as part of a larger productive landscape which also links to other community facilities.

### 3.2.1. Sense of Community

According to Stewart and Strathern (in Muller, 2009: 34), community refers to sets of people who may identify themselves with a place in terms of notions of commonality, shared values or solidarity in particular contexts. These values could be informed by the spirit of *botho* which is itself a community value. Other values include among others service, charity, respect, togetherness, and hospitality. According to McMillan (1996: 323), some community stories represent the values (courage, wisdom, compassion and integrity) and traditions. These stories can also contribute to the creation of meaningful open places. The author will therefore take this definition as a starting point in exploring deeper meaning in creating and improving a sense of community in open space design. One of the most important goals of landscape design should be to improve the quality of life of people in the surrounding community. This can happen if the sense of community is enhanced. Beatley and Manning (in Newman & Jennings, 2008: 50) define a sense of community as a sense of ownership, commitment, and a feeling of belonging to a larger whole. These can be expanded as meaning that members of the community feel that they own the public space and therefore are responsible for taking care of it and monitoring what happens in their area. By committing oneself to a community you are therefore trusted with protecting as well as championing for a better life of the whole.

According to Prezza et al (2001: 30), many studies demonstrate that sense of community is related to active participation in community life. This could include sports and recreation, farming, weddings and parties, security initiatives (e.g.

nightwatch), church and many events open to the public. All these require some sort of public open space for cultural expression and socialisation. Taking the above mentioned community elements into consideration in the design of open spaces for socialisation can result in places that are not only understood by people but mean something to them as a society and their interaction with one another.

### 3.2.2. Place Making

Place making is used to refer to the creation of environments with a unique sense of place while they express the unique nature of their natural and cultural setting (Behrens & Watson, 1996:10-11). This includes response to biological, physical and historical context not in a pastiche way but reflecting application in modern forms. The designer needs to explore and understand human characteristics of a particular place. According to Behrens and Watson (1996:11), different places offer different life experiences, and these experiences mould peoples' perceptions, values and self identity.

According to Stewart and Strathern (in Muller, 2009: 34), a place is a socially meaningful and identifiable space to which a historical dimension is attributed. In the proposed design for this study, the author will work with the existing historical fabric that can be easily identified with and encourage interaction of the community (Figure 18). Sense of place, as explored in the publications of Trancik (1986), Behrens and Watson (1996) as well as Newman and Jennings (2008), is considered an integral part of place making in the design of the environment. If in abstract, physical terms, space is a bound or purposeful void with the potential of physically linking things, it only becomes place when it is given a contextual meaning derived from cultural or regional content (Trancik, 1986: 112). According to Coetzee and Roux (1998: 17) in culture one finds the values, norms, beliefs, and meanings which make life within a specific community possible and meaningful... one would consider meaningful systems like religion, traditions, customs, political practices, economic behaviour, and so on, as subsystems of culture. The author believes that these are very important aspects of culture inherent to the specific environments.

*Figure 18: Parks are for people: a great meeting place for the community at Thokoza Park, Soweto (Young, 2008).*



### 3.2.3. Open Spaces as Community Places

The importance of public open spaces throughout the course of history is indisputable (Hall & Porterfield, 2001: 227). Historically different cultures, although using these spaces differently in some aspects which also dependent on whether it is a rural or urban setting, have shown appreciation for these spaces. According to Hall and Porterfield (2001: 227), they were the social heart of their communities and as such were usually the site of the more significant buildings e.g. churches, guild halls, civic halls and prominent dwellings. From a Tswana perspective, the open spaces were the dominant element while buildings became mere rooms for storage of goods. These were, and still remain in some areas especially in Botswana, great places contributing to a shared sense of community. This notion of community life in the open public spaces is also shared by *Project for Public Spaces* (PPS)'s place making approach which starts from the premise that successful public spaces are lively places where the many functions of community life take place, and where people feel ownership and connectedness — true common ground (<http://www.pps.org/parks/approach/>). The project in the study area should benefit the community by creating and promoting great people spaces (Figure 18). The design will among other elements create open spaces for seating and gathering. The design project should attempt to meet this 'criteria' provide public spaces for social events that promotes the spirit of togetherness especially around community facilities like churches and halls.

Figure 19: The Benefits of Place (PPS, 2003)



### 3.3. NORMATIVE POSITION

The current obsession in landscape architecture and other professions of the built environment with sustainability cannot bear any significant fruits if they continue to fail in integrating the ecological process with the cultural aspects of the community. The creation of meaningful places that contribute to the revival of a shared sense of community could, in agreement with Newman and Jennings (2008: 144), provide insights on pathways to sustainability that are both acceptable to the people and compatible with their values, traditions, institutions, and ecological realities. For sustainable strategies to work, designers need to understand people's values and needs as well as the appropriate manner in which any solution brought in ought to work in response to their everyday life, the tangible and intangible aspects and the aspect of history and time; past, present and how it should affect their future. According to Stewart and Strathern (in Muller, 2009: 34), landscape refers to the perceived settings that frame people's senses of place and community. This project aims to highlight these settings.

The author agrees with the statement by Prezza *et al* (2001: 33) who claim that on the whole, there are not many in-depth studies on the relations between sense of community and urban planning, architectural and social characteristics of the community. Designs in the landscape e.g. parks, have also shown very little (if any) interest or exploration on the potential of the spaces in adding to a sense of community instead of being typical fields, play equipment, braai areas and pathways for jogging sometimes with no meaning or relevance to the community and place.

#### 3.3.1. Meaningful landscape design

In creating meaningful landscapes, designers attempt to highlight some ideas and values that are significant to the users and site. Usually this is done through the design of form and spaces they create or the way in which the user will experience that space. The meaning becomes clearer as people begin using the spaces, contemplating and engaging with them. The role of meaning in landscape design has been explored in Simon Swaffield's (editor) *Theory in Landscape Architecture*, 2002. According to Swaffield (2002: 5), there are two contrasting positions in Landscape Architecture; on one hand, the discipline should explore fundamental relationships among culture, technology, and nature through meaningful design, on the other hand there is the view that the essence of the discipline lies in creating healthy, functional, and pleasurable places for communities and to which significance and meaning will accrue over time. The author concurs that, designers should explore meaning, usually from site's history, of designs if it is to be understood and appreciated by the user but can also at the same time allow for new layer/s of meaning to the current users.

Whereas it is not easy to accommodate all cultures in urban landscapes, rural and semi-rural landscapes afford us the opportunity to explore this as they usually have the same traditional values and history. "Folk cultures produce places that are almost immediately communicative, and communicative over long periods.

Because their connections between form and intention are understood within the culture and evolve only slowly over time, it is possible for the makers, the people, and the meaning of place to remain in contact (Treib in Swaffield 2002:99).” It is therefore feasible to investigate this further in the chosen area of study, Mamelodi, as it has that rural character. In arguing that landscapes can be designed by creating comfortable and functional spaces, Treib (in Swaffield 2002:101) states that it would seem that a designer could create a landscape of pleasure that in itself would become significant. This would shift the aim from trying to create a meaningful place from the onset but design spaces for activities that encourage and provide pleasurable and sometimes repetitive experiences that would add a new meaning on the landscape that the users readily associate with.

The author submits that while history of place brings meaning to landscape design, it can also emerge from new use and customs which change over time. This in turn also makes meaning dynamic. In this project therefore, the spaces should not concentrate on attempting to blatantly add meaning into the design but more on creating spaces that allow significance to accrue over time while functioning well and being pleasurable spaces today at both masterplan and sketch plan area.

### 3.4. CONCLUSION

The relationship between people and the environment, expressed in landscape design in natural and cultural process and activities can lead to a *systems aesthetic* that contributes to the enhancement of a unique *sense of place*. The created spaces add to enriched and meaningful places that form a society’s identity and add to a shared sense of community. This cyclic connection between people in communities as well as people and the environment in which they live therefore should be explored and be part of the normative position if the designed landscape is to appeal and contribute to local people’s health and well being. Community design could result in spaces where local people can interact and be inspired by the culture and history of their community celebrated and enhance in the created places. The proposal for the study area should therefore result in a great place that can nurture the spirit of the community. The landscape intervention should respect the spirit of a place, reflects people’s identity and allow for the expression of their cultural values and practices so it can inspire meaningful, healthy and productive connections in the community.