

Mindscape: exploring living space in the urban environment by means of photographic interviews

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The paper lays emphasis on the importance of contextual understanding and interpretation for design purposes. It argues for the incorporation of concrete, living and changing realities in the analysis and design of the urban environment. In an attempt to reach a greater understanding of the real and the imaginary, photographic interviews are used to explore local perceptions on housing and open space in Mamelodi, Pretoria. Photographic interviews help the researcher translate often abstracted and generalised themes into concrete realities connected to social identities. In the narrative construction of identity the reasoned plot of a certain identity is based on the selective adaptation of reality. A similar unconscious visual selectiveness gives meaning to the use of photography in qualitative research. Photographs allow addition of something that is only insinuated in the image, this is made possible because of the way in which the spectator views the photographs. The technique of including photographs in an interview opens different perspectives regarding something that might not be familiar to the researcher; it also provokes more subjective responses and it allows a narrative addition by the viewer that reflects an interpretation of the physical environment and its symbolic connotation. The subjective and pluralistic perception of the space and its uses express the fundamental relationships between space and the socio-cultural process. When considered in design, this can lead to a greater morphological inclusiveness. Ultimately this can result in public space that does not homogenise and still allows for diversity and choice.

Keywords: visual anthropology, qualitative research, urban studies, urban open space, participation

Paisaje mental: explorando en persona y lugar el espacio del ambiente urbano por medio de foto-entrevistas.

Este texto resalta la importancia del entendimiento y la interpretación local y contextual para el diseño. Promueve la incorporación de realidades concretas y cambiantes en el análisis y diseño del ambiente urbano. Para lograr una comprensión mas profunda del entorno existente e imaginario, la técnica de foto-entrevista se usa para explorar percepciones locales sobre la vivienda y el espacio publico en Mamelodi, Pretoria, Sudafrica. Esta técnica ayuda al investigador a traducir temas frecuentemente generalizados o abstractos en realidades concretas conectadas a la identidad social. En la construcción narrativa de la identidad, el argumento de una identidad específica se funde con una adaptación selectiva de la realidad. De la misma forma, la elección visual y auto consciente da significado al uso de la fotografía en la investigación cualitativa. La imagen impresa permite el análisis de elementos que no son presentes en la misma fotografía. Esto se hace posible en la manera en que el espectador observa la fotografía. La foto-entrevista abre diferentes perspectivas en temas que pueden ser desconocidos por el entrevistador; también provoca respuestas mas subjetivas y permite al entrevistado aportar a la narrativa su interpretación del ambiente físico y su connotación simbólica. La percepción subjetiva y multi-dimensional del espacio y sus usos, promueve las relaciones fundamentales entre el medio físico y el proceso socio-cultural. Cuando consideramos estos temas en el proceso de diseño, el resultado puede ser mas variado en lo morfológico, trascendiendo en un espacio publico heterogéneo, diverso, y variado.

Palabras claves: antropología visual, investigación cualitativa, estudios urbanos, espacio público, participación

The socio-political environment in South Africa has encouraged a greater degree of public consultation and dialogue in government planning. Internationally community participation has taken two main forms in the design process: firstly it is used for data collection – gaining local understanding to inform professional recommendations; secondly it is seen as an empowering process – a transformative process where locals act for themselves to change conditions to their advantage (Juarez & Brown, 2008: 193). With remaining widespread social economic and class disparities worldwide and few utopian projects left, participation in empowerment as proclaimed and practised by Nabeel Hamdi¹ and the like has become a compelling argument for community engagement in design. “... in today’s turbulent... environment, the challenge is to find the right balance between the creativity of emergence and the stability of design” (Hamdi 2004: xviii).

There has been a renewed interest of designers in concrete realities of every day life that deals with the functional, social and personal needs of users. In post-modern urban criticism the *morphology* – physical and tangible form of the city – obtained precedence. This is mainly due to designers abstracting space² and its function to enable a spatial dialogue that informs the design of physical form. This dialogue views the city as a spatial physical structure and is more preoccupied with the nature of space than with its uses (Kallus: 2001). Movements like New Urbanism have exaggerated the role physical form plays in the social realm of the city. Physical form can influence and even restrict social interactions and activities³, yet it is rarely enough to motivate new social activities or a sense of community per se when the designer is not aware of the social dynamics and symbolic connotations of a specific area. This points to the importance of non-environmental considerations in view of spatial analysis and design (Talen: 1999). Consequently, added emphasis has been placed on the *physiology* of the city – the system that is temporal, moving and changing. This concrete and subjective reading of space focuses on intermitted and incremental phenomena, giving attention to urban details – specific, particular situations and distinct places.⁴

This renewed interest of designers combined with the interest of government due to the socio-political environment, both encourage the act of participation to be employed more frequently in planning and design projects. However, the difficulties faced in community participation remain. It is rarely applied with honest motives; the process often goes hand-in-hand with a lack of ability and the right support structures while in the community itself many contradictory and conflicting ideas may surface (Van Huysteen, Schoonraad, Boden, in Lodi, 2000). The challenge is to “assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of various participatory processes for assisting community residents to articulate issues” (Juarez & Brown, 2008: 191).⁵

The modernist inclination towards mass production, still kindled by the mass media, proclaims that most individuals are more or less similar; thus social, mental and physical needs and perceptions can be easily grasped and homogenised to facilitate a global and fast changing world. This argument continues to influence the way in which the urban environment is created. Post-structuralist social science has asserted for several decades that “[...] no culture can ever be understood unless special attention is paid to this range of individual manifestations” (Van Velsen, 1967:29). Accordingly, individual identity has grown to hold an ever more prominent standing in contemporary society. While equality in modernist terms refers to similar treatment across difference, postmodern thinking promotes equality that lies in knowledge and understanding of specific difference and addressing that difference appropriately. Thus this increased emphasis on the understanding of difference has encouraged a search for more fitting solutions for present-day society. There has consequently been a marked attempt to move away from anonymous standardisation (Goh, 2001: 1597).

In urban design it is, however, equally important that the urban question is related to the specific and the universal, or in metaphoric terms, linked to the citizen and the community, i.e. the individual and the collective. This argument becomes a different problematic in the design process, mainly concerned with complexities of data collection due to the ever changing nature of collective identity in a global society.

... while individual identity may hold a relatively privileged status in the (post) modern world, collective identity as such tends to be highly context dependent and variable, with each specific instantiation of collective identity being rather transitory and fragile (Simon, 2004: 64).

Multiculturalism, ethnic and cultural revival, immigration and emigration are realities of most cities worldwide. Formerly ideas, values and world view would be more similar and constant for

a given population in a certain context, as the social and environmental milieu which influenced them were slow to change. Yet, the effects of globalisation, including international design offices, changing built environments and user groups have complicated design for context.⁶ The collective identity between designers and the community they design for are often not alike even should the designers be from the same city or region as the community (which is for the most part not the case).⁷

Research upholds that ideas, values and world view do influence how cities are used and perceived.⁸ This furthermore stresses the necessity for awareness of the perceptions of the residents when designing for a specific area. Although flexible and adaptable designs materialise well within global circumstances,⁹ the underlying hypothesis of this article is that the physical environment can be an element of liberation if it coincides with real practices of the people in the execution of their liberty.¹⁰ With this proposition the effect of the physical environment on human behaviour is not overestimated. It rather aims to emphasise the importance of local and contextual understanding and interpretation for design purposes and specifically focuses on concrete aspects of the living and changing system. In this paper a case study will be used to demonstrate how qualitative methods for data collection effectively deal with the phenomenon of fleeting and changing identities. It is precisely in qualitative research that the role of physical form can be distinguished from the non-environmental factors that also play a part in the perception and use of urban space. The continuing importance of transient aspects of city life as design informant is argued through this example.

Methodology: qualitative methods applied to urban space

Since qualitative research has the function of understanding the social world from the perspective of the social actor the investigator has to involve himself personally with his subjects of the investigation.

As a result, our data intent[s] to discover the user's vocabulary, forms of seeing things, feeling of what is important and what is not, etc. Science is substituted for access to the sense of 'comprehension' as the most important concern of sociology (Schwartz in Esquivel 1999: 52).¹¹

This approach is also concerned with getting to know the context to scrutinise the complexity of behaviour of people and can hence assimilate itself more easily within the system of meaning applied by a particular group of society that is being studied. Pujados (1992) who has worked with the method of *life stories*, explains it as a search for the detailed and specific which is the key to identifying a type of empiricism, that without separating itself from generalisation and the construction of abstract categories, insists on a humanist approach to the social reality, that reestablishes the leading role of the individual subject.

In this line of thinking, Esquivel insists that the application of a qualitative perspective is not only a question of technique but it personifies the adoption of an alternative epistemological paradigm.

Qualitative investigation is an indispensable approach to understand certain dimensions of reality such as human subjectivity, identities, gender relations, social interactions and shared systems of meaning among others. It seems to be a necessary approach when the point of view of the actors is the perspective of reality that is longed to be known, i.e. interpretation of a lived experience (Esquivel, 1999: 65).¹²

The dimensions that Lefebvre (in Merrifield 2000: 174) uses for discourse on urban space, namely physical, social and mental (or symbolic), are used for purposes of spatial analysis.¹³

These three dimensions of space can also to some extent be associated with the abstract and concrete aspects of reading the city. Lefebvre's dimensions explore the *mindscape*, the physical *matterscape* and the *powerscape*, which each can be abstracted. These mental (abstract) and physical (concrete) realities that are portrayed differently by different urban actors and parts of the social environment, can be converted into concrete experience and understanding through the use of qualitative methods.

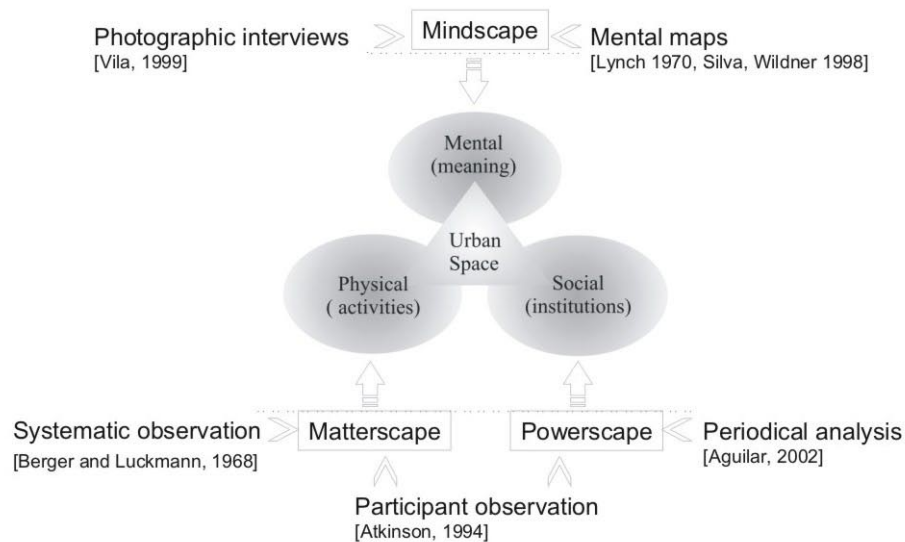


Figure 1
Lefebvre's dimensions of spaces with corresponding qualitative methods for data gathering and analysis (author, 2009).

Qualitative methods were selected by the author according to Lefebvre's dimensions that would be appropriate in capturing and exploring each dimension of the urban environment (see Figure 1). To discover the mindscape, mental maps (as explored by Lynch 1970, Silva 1992 and Wildner 1998) were employed. To explore the physical matterscape the methods of systematic observation (Berger and Luckmann, 1968) and participant observation (Atkinson, 1994) were used. The powerscape was investigated through periodical analysis (Aguilar, 1998; 2002) and in-depth interviews, while participant observation also shed light on the latter theme. The aim is to capture the abstract and the concrete realities that influence the formation of the urban environment and decode the mental perceptions to distinguish between environmental and non-environmental factors of influence. Although the author's case study encompassed all the methods stated above, this paper will reflect only the use of photographic interviews as a means to understand and translate the mindscape of city users as part of the concrete reality of urban space. The aim is thus to gain concrete meaning from that which is most often abstracted in the design process by means of specific examples and their application.

The use of photographic interviews to explore symbolic space

Only through continuous research exercises and looking at a register of city dwellers' participation by means of their symbolical constructions, can we ascertain how city dwellers use their city and also how they imagine the city to be segmented to reveal itself to its inhabitants and visitors (Silva, 1992: 19).

Photographic interviews (among other methods) can be used to explore perceptions on space and place as an attempt to reach a greater understanding of the real and the imaginary. Photographic interviews explore the symbolic aspects of space which are abstract ideas in the mind of the

designer that are converted into the concrete lived reality of the user. Symbolic space can include the following:

An image and its meaning, associated with local perceptions.

Ideas containing world view, values and priorities.

Physical manifestation that is hard to pin down (Lefebvre in Merrifield 2000: 174).

Vila (1997) demonstrates through his fieldwork on the northern border of Mexico, how the photo interview is used as a meaningful ethnographic method. In the eighties social psychology started discussing the narrative construction of identity, how the reasoned plot of a certain identity would be based on the selective adaptation of reality, which is a constitutive part of all identity construction. These arguments gave new meaning to the photographs in visual anthropology.

In daily life we narrate episodes of our lives in such a way that they become intelligible to ourselves and others.¹⁴ To narrate therefore is:

To relate these events and actions, organize them into a plot or reasoning and attribute them to a specific person [...]. On this basis we believe that the narrative certainly constructs the identity of a person when constructing the reasoning or plot of the story. Thus what produces the identity of the person is the identity of the interpretation and not vice versa (Vila 1997: 128).

The reasoned plot attains a type of order of the multiple realities that surround us, a process that forms a constitutive part of our relation with what is real that consists of a “*continuing movement of coming and going between telling and living, between narrating and being*” (Vila 1997: 128).¹⁵ This process allows adjustments in stories that are told so that these fit into the identities that they believe to own. They even allow the actors to modify or manipulate reality so that it is adjusted to the stories that they tell in relation to their identity. In the same way the degree to which visual perceptions are in some way highly selective constructions, is frequently unconscious. Here the methodology of visual anthropology allows one to examine the narrative construction of identity. This is the central paradox of the photograph, the basis of its utility as a tool of investigation.

The gaze is not neutral... to the contrary it is ‘filled with meaning’. Always with relation to a specific type of civilization, to a culture, to a package of beliefs, to a reasoned plot, the way in which we see images (the ‘conduct’ of the gaze) has significance, it creates meaning (Vila, 1997: 130).¹⁶

Each individual reads the reality that appears in a photograph through a specific gaze, which is linked to his or her peculiar understanding or comprehension of reality that surrounds them. This again is linked to one’s narrative identity, which one constructs to make one aware of one’s identity and that of ‘others’.¹⁷ “In reality we only see what we want to see and in the way we want to perceive it” (Vila, 1997: 131).¹⁸ We select aspects of reality that surround us in accordance with the specific identity that we want to construct.

Different from cinema or video, photographs allow adhesion by means of the spectator, of something that is only insinuated in the shot. The spectator has to add the reasoned plot that completes the photo as a ‘story’. “For this reason we can sustain that the peculiar characteristic of the in-depth interview with photographs is that the photographs, per definition, always require the interviewee to project his/ her specific narrative identity in the demonstrated scene, so much so that the scene only acquires meaning inside the narrative of the interviewee” (Vila 1997: 136)¹⁹.

Language is capable of constructing enormous ‘buildings’ of symbolic representation that seem to dominate the daily reality like presences from another world. The interviewer has to be conscious of the fact that the interviewee selects his/ her words also according to the audience and therefore the responses are somewhat premeditated. Yet photographic interviews provoke

more spontaneous responses from the interviewee that are more impulsive and less thought-out. The process of interpretation is quite natural: “The speaker always selects his words keeping in mind the interpretation of the hearer. [...] the hearer always interprets keeping in mind the subjective meaning of the speaker” (Schutz 1993: 157) (Berger and Luckmann 1968).²⁰ Subjective interpretation is done by the interviewer with reference to a specific person. We are guided by the knowledge we have of the interpreted person, keeping in mind that the knowledge from the perspective of the other is always specific to a point of view.

The technique of including photographs in an interview has the following advantages in qualitative research: The photos stimulate the memory of the interviewee; the description and interpretation of images open different perspectives about something that might not be familiar to the researcher; it gives a dynamic nature to the discourse; it provokes more emotional reactions and it allows a narrative addition by the viewer that reflects an interpretation of the real and the imaginary (Wildner 1998: 163).

User perceptions on living space in Mamelodi

The range of qualitative methods stated above was used by the author to do research regarding urban open space in Mamelodi in 2002. Mamelodi is a township area that was founded during the apartheid years in South Africa (1945) to relocate Africans to the periphery of the city from the central business district (CBD) area to make space for the growth of the “white city core”.

When Mamelodi was designed it was also designed along ethnic lines. A section called Malani is predominantly Tsonga and Venda speaking, they are usually mixed like that. Go to Section 17 - the same thing, if you go to B3, B1, B2 they are the same. Go to S&S it's predominantly Nguni speaking and Zulu, Ndebele, and Swazi. Go to Section 14 it's predominantly Pedi speaking and 16 is a bit of Pedi and Zulu and Ndebele. But all those things during the past 36 years have changed; people have learned to identify around one lingo which is the mixture of what I just mentioned (Interview with Franz, 50 yrs old, government spokesperson).

There were houses in Mamelodi but most of the people were not able to get a house, because they were from the farms or from other places. So they did not qualify to get houses in Mamelodi, that was the problem, and the reason why they were hiring backyard shacks from other people (Interview with Maria, 58, pensioner, who has lived in Mamelodi all her life).

Today Mamelodi is situated north-east of Pretoria Municipality. It is approximately 20 kilometres from the CBD. It is situated at the foot of the *Magalies* Mountains and lies within a valley with its central axis in an east-west direction. The Integrated Development Plan of 1999 indicated a population of 270 000 people which represent approximately 25% of the total population of Pretoria that lives in 6% of the land surface of the municipality. The majority of the residents are from African origin.

The average income is R150²¹ per person per year and only 45% of the population is economically active. It is one of the poorest areas in Pretoria. The Tshwane metropolitan municipality was formed at the time of the research to distribute funds of the Pretoria municipality. The aim is to help the undeveloped peripheral areas to gain better infrastructure from the municipal budget.

Twenty five in-depth interviews were conducted of which eight were done with the help of photographs. Houses were chosen as a theme for the photographs because social housing is a prominent reality in Mamelodi and a house is an expression of personal identity within the built environment. Ten photographs were selected of houses with different characteristics (see Figures 2 to 11). The photographs were chosen to provoke reaction from the interviewees and also give a variety of realistic housing options to ascertain the revelation of different spatial consideration. Of the in-depth interviews conducted with residents of Mamelodi, four were with women and four with men. The age range of the interviewees was between 19 and 58

years. Interviews were conducted individually. Interviewees did not know the origin of the photographs or location of the houses on the photographs. Interviewees were asked to arrange the houses in order of preference. The most preferred and least preferred options were then used as a point of departure for an in-depth interview. The photographs were used throughout the interview as a frame of reference for a discussion of housing and housing preference.



Figure 2

Photo 1 Large contemporary house situated in Mamelodi Ext 5 (author, 2002).



Figure 3

Photo 2 Double storey, contemporary house situated in *Kaapse Hoop, Mpumalanga* (author, 2002).



Figure 4

Photo 3 Social housing project in Mamelodi (author, 2002).



Figure 5

Photo 4 Ethnic houses situated in *Sudwala, Mpumalanga* (author, 2002).



Figure 6

Photo 5 Social housing project in *Mamelodi Ext. 5* (author, 2002).



Figure 7

Photo 6 House situated in *Mamelodi*, auto constructed (author, 2002).



Figure 8

Photo 7 House situated in *Waterkloof*, Mamelodi (author, 2002).



Figure 9

Photo 8_ Ethnic house situated in *Sudwala*, *Mpumalanga* (author, 2002).



Figure 10

Photo 9_ Social housing Project in *Nelmapius*, Pretoria (author, 2002).



Figure 11

Photo 10_ Large contemporary house situated in Mamelodi Ext 7 (author, 2002).

For the analysis it was not specifically important to identify the most or least preferred housing option, but rather to become aware of which characteristics were important to the users. The reasoning behind the selection was more important than the selection as such. All the interviews were transcribed and analysed by using Atlas ti software²² and personal reflection. The individual comments were analysed in terms of negative or positive connotations and whether the interviewee was willing to live in a similar house. The comments were combined by grouping reoccurring themes and giving specific attention to contradictory and conflicting arguments identified as motivations for preferences from one interviewee or between interviewees. Furthermore quotes that revealed intense subjective thoughts that are related to the identity of the users were also singled out and carefully considered. Two examples are shown below to indicate the summary of thoughts on particular photographs.



Figure 12

Photo 4_ Ethnic houses situated in *Sudwala, Mpumalanga*. They are round and constructed in *Ndebele* style. They have a pitched thatched roof with ethnic patterns painted in various colours on the walls that are of brick and cement. The doors are visible, there are trees between the houses and in the background you see a hill covered in vegetation (author, 2002).

Photo 4 Interviewees	Positive comment	Negative comment	Opinion regarding living
Agnes, 50's, project, Stanza.	Size, environment, yard size, family, climate.		Positive
Athur, late 40's, preacher.		Ethnic group, not in Mamelodi.	Negative
Azec, 19, scholar.	Camping, rural areas, environment, windows, air.	Entrance, decoration, ethnic group, placement of houses.	Positive
Grace, 42, Show house.	Material – neutral.	Ethnic group, not in Mamelodi.	Negative
Maria, 58, pensioner.	Climate, relaxed, tradition.	Not Mamelodi, rural areas.	OK
Mary, 40's, missionary.		Traditional, building style.	Negative
Sipo, 35, ward committee.	Traditional, relaxed.	Rural areas, access, no services.	Negative

Figure 13

Table 1 Comments on photo 4 (autor, 2002).

Summary of comments:

Positive: size, family, size of the erf, climate, windows, air, material, tradition, relaxed, camping, environment.

Negative: ethnic group, entrance, decorations, position of the house, rural areas, tradition, style, access, services, it is not in Mamelodi

Contradictions: some people liked the traditional display and others did not.

Revealing quotations:

Question –Would you like to live in that house?

I don't like this house I am not Ndebele I am Pedi. I like my tradition. We build with stone, grass or stone" (Grace, 42, show house).

I don't like this second one. You see it's different, it's traditional. The difference is the first one has stairs, and so it's all right, it's called a thatched house. The second one, they also put grass but it's not nice like the first (Mary, 40's, missionary).

Maybe if I go to a suburb I can build my own beautiful house and then build the lapa (veranda) at the back for me to relax with my friends, other people do this, even whites build this type of houses (Sipo, 35, ward committee).



Figure 14

Photo 9_ Social housing Project in Nelmapius, Pretoria. Typical RDP houses, a perfect rectangle with pitched roof of corrugated iron. Walls are of plastered brick. Each house is painted in a different colour. Some houses have one window others two, with the door facing the street. There are no fences but lawn in front of the first two houses. An electricity line is visible as well as an asphalt street (author, 2002).

Photo 9 Interviewees	Positive comment	Negative comment	Opinion regarding living
Agnes, 50's, project, Stanza.	Better, material, security.	Size, family, too close, cannot extend, yard too small, no garden.	Positive
Arthur, late 40's, preacher.	OK, material, security – elements, extendable.	Poverty, size.	Positive
Azec, 19, scholar.	OK.	No fence – security, no privacy.	Positive
Grace, 42, Show house.	Better.	Size, rooms.	Positive
Maria, 58, pensioner.		Size, rooms, young people, no aesthetics, poverty, family.	Negative
Mary, 40's, missionary.		Size, rooms.	Negative
Rosemary, 18, scholar.			Negative
Sipo, 35, ward committee.		Look the same.	Negative

Figure 15
Table 2 Comments.

Summary of comments:

Positive: better, material, security, can be enlarged

Negative: size, family, cannot be enlarged, without garden, security, privacy, rooms, aesthetics, poverty, all similar.

Contradictions: some people saw it as enlargeable and others did not; some thought it was safe and others not; some thought it was better, others that it represented poverty.

These are better than these tin houses, because they are built with the bricks and then it's safer, this one is a tin house, if hurricanes come they'll take everything; but this one is better it can maybe take the roofing but the walls will be there. Another thing is they're too small, especially for a family, they are good for two people, not more than two. They are too close to each other, you can't even try and extend, there's no space.

Question –What do you think of their gardens?

At least you can see it is new houses, even the garden is new, maybe as times go on, people that are staying there can improve it. But the yard is too small; you can't do anything to help yourself (Agnes, 50's, Project, Stanza).

They all look the same so we don't want houses like this, you know, they look like match boxes (Sipo, 35, Ward committee).

An example of a few provoking quotes from interviews:

Referring to photo no. 2: “Yes it's traditional house, but when you go to Malawi, they build like this. Myself I come from Malawi, yes (laughs) That's why I like this house” (Mary, 40's, missionary).

Referring to photo no. 6:

No, I just like to paint it, rather than to decorate it, because when you look at the decoration like these houses, if you decorate this house like this, you'll know that this is traditional. People will take it that you are coming from a specific area, because if you decorate that house you are showing that you are coming from Zululand.

So the house must be painted simply, just cream white or other paint outside, just without other decorations. If you want to decorate the houses with something, you can put lawn and some flowers, then people they can't say anything. For me with decorations or other things it's like giving it a certain association, so it's better just to make it simple, so they don't give me a name that I am from this place or that one (Arthur, late 40's, preacher).

Referring to photo no. 3:

Now it's very nice, but the thing is, it is built to face that way, and you cannot order the house to be built like you want it. So if you want to have space at the other end, it's not possible (Arthur, late 40's, preacher).

Summary of findings: physical form and socio-cultural process

From the interviews the following findings were made: The interviewees have in common a preference for large houses with several bedrooms. The size is related to privacy and to large family sizes. Varying opinions were expressed about preferred size – what is considered big and what is small. The house's potential to be enlarged was seen as a very important aspect. The safety of houses was also an important theme – more often than not interviewees referred to environmental safety against the elements rather than criminal activity. Materials are important in terms of environmental security but also to provide an agreeable climate inside the house. For this reason large windows are favoured to provide sufficient air and light.

Some interviewees prefer a neat/ simplistic house while others prefer decorations that can include cultural and traditional aspects. Cultural diversity, especially relating to immigrants, seems to be a contentious issue that leads to the desire for homogeneity. There were also contradictions regarding aesthetics; in most cases the idea of something made the houses attractive not as much as the physical reality. For example, some people like decorations or materials because these reminded them of tradition, ethnic associations, culture, nature etc. Others, however, noticed the physical reality without symbolic connotation, complaining that decorations mean additional work in terms of cleaning and organising. There are also those who prefer a simplistic house that does not reveal any ethnic identity.

Rural areas enjoyed preference in some cases while the proximity of the city was also an important consideration. The space around the house is important because it permits enlargement of the house in future. In the exterior of the house it is important to have a patio or a garden to rest in, or a garage or other entrances to the house. The additional entrances also refer to a social-economic reality of additional dwellers on the premises that might need to use ablution facilities, etc.

There does seem to be a negative connotation to repetition and homogeneity, houses constructed in the same layout and a similar size and quantity. Similar colours and forms are not favoured, as if this would rob the identity of the families. The negative connotations towards these include that they are primitive, old, poor, unorganised and similar to shacks, which is possibly more a mental perception than a spatial reality. This reaction is potentially due to its association with the political discrimination of the past.

Money as a necessity to obtain or finish the house is another important theme. The availability of basic services or high quality services is also deemed important. Interviewees referred to the houses shown as *acceptable* and not as *good* choices which indicates high aspirations.

The photographic interviews assisted more than any other qualitative field work method used in the case of Mamelodi to open up intimate discussions on preferences based on or motivated by social identity. Several themes that would have been either difficult to bring into the conversation or tricky to communicate were easily and spontaneously introduced. The researcher did not want to steer conversations into predetermined topics of interest or preconceived ideas. The photographs allowed for memory and association to be stimulated that generated responses based on the interviewees' spontaneous reaction to the image and less so on guidance of the interviewer. The complexity of social preference, social economic realities, matters related to group identity and practical considerations regarding form and space were all easily revealed and led to a concrete understanding of socio-spatial reality.

Recapturing

The unit and structure of the complete person reflects the unity and structure of the social process as a whole and each elemental person of which the complete person is made up, reflects the unit and structure of one of the various aspects of this process in which the individual is involved (Mead 1972: 175).

The abstraction of space and user needs by designers to facilitated understanding and dialogue on urban space, lead to homogenous urban environments. This method of spatial understanding is seen as an objective reading of space (Kallus 2001). The predicament with design that rests on objective reading alone is the reality that “what is ostensibly good for all is in fact good for no one” (Kallus 2001: 147).

Qualitative research methods engage the researcher to a personal subjective level with specific individuals that in their thoughts and interpretations reveal the structure of the social process. The use of photographs in interviews as a research method helps the researcher gain a better understanding of the mental or symbolic interpretations of public space by the user. The emotional and subjective responses provoked by the photographs help the researcher gain a subjective reading of urban space. These concrete perceptions and uses, which are often abstracted by designers, also reveal the non-environmental factors that influence the preferences of the users. “The three-dimensional analysis of daily urban life, assuming the total experience of the space in which this life takes place, can be used to represent not only the designer’s understanding of the urban space, but also the understanding of the users” (Kallus 2001:136).

If the designers of urban form additionally take cognisance of the non-environmental reasons for user preference, the design and layout of urban space can coincide to a larger degree with the concrete practice of real people. This can craft public spaces that do not homogenise and still allows for choice and user preference incorporation. The subjective and pluralistic perception of space and its uses express the fundamental relationships between space and the socio-cultural process. When considered in design this can lead to a greater morphological inclusiveness (Kallus, 2001: 130). This paper argues for augmentation of pluralistic public space that is unrestrictive to its users, allows for appropriation and values diversity.

Notes

1. See Hamdi, N. 2004. *Small Change: The Art of Practice and the Limits of Planning in Cities*. London: Earthscan.
2. According to Kallus (2001: 131) this results in an objective reading that is abstract and addresses the morphology (form and structure) of the city, often in isolation. Examples are found in the work of Lynch, Trancik, Krier, and Rossi (see also Norberg-Schultz – striated space in Coetzer 2008: 145).
3. See for example a study by Perring (1991: 279). This research illustrates how change in urban structure - main streets and location and/or presence of a forum, as well as the way of construction and activities that are practices in the forum - influenced the social life of old Roman cities
4. In contrast to abstraction is the subjective reading of space which is concrete in nature and aims to capture the physiology (process and functions) of the city. Social scientists and philosophers like Broadbent, Moudon, George, Schurch, Mandanipour (see also Foucault, De Certeau, Heynen, Dovey, Leach, Deleuze, Guattari – smooth space) seem to prefer this type of assessment (Kallus, 2001: 131) (Coetzer 2008: 145).
5. According to Juarez & Brown (2008: 190) the questions that should guide public participation are: “who should participate, which methods should be employed, what type of knowledge will be produced, and how will that knowledge be integrated into the process?”
6. Recently climate change has been added to this list, which holds radical implications.

7. In the case of South Africa, when working with national or local authorities, more often than not the cultural and/or social background of designers are different from that of the community they design for. For this reason the idea of community participation has become a priority in decision making processes. Additionally in South Africa, we find that certain cultural perceptions and social habits were prioritised for decades due to political inequality. This priority is now sometimes reversed to try and gain equilibrium but can have equally problematic side effects.
8. For examples see Gyuse 1993 and Goh 2001.
9. Another argument that has become the alternative to flexible and adaptable designs is that of multiple layering and multiple references. Drawing upon multiple influences and references can culminate in architecture that contains multiple narratives. See Message, K. 2006. *New Museums and the Making of Culture*. Oxford: Berg.
10. "I think (architecture) can and does produce positive effects when the liberating intentions of the architect coincide with the real practice of people in the exercise of their freedom" (Foucault in Leach 1999:120).
11. "[C]omo resultado, nuestros datos intentan describir su vocabulario, sus formas de ver, su sentido de lo que es importante y de lo que no lo es y así sucesivamente. La ciencia es sustituida por el acceso a los sentidos o 'comprensión' como la preocupación más importante de la sociología" (Schwartz en Esquivel, 1999: 52).
12. "La investigación cualitativa es un acercamiento indispensable para comprender ciertas dimensiones de la realidad como son la subjetividad humana, las identidades, las relaciones de género, la interacción social y los sistemas de significación compartidos, entre otras. Aparece como una forma necesaria de acercamiento cuando la perspectiva de la realidad que se busca conocer es el punto de vista de los actores, es decir, la interpretación desde la experiencia vivida" (Esquivel, 1999: 65).
13. These key elements are: The spatial practices: i.e. the way space is organised and used; the representation: conceived primarily by architects and other designers; and the symbolic space: this is the image and meaning of the environment associated with the perception of the user (Lefebvre in Merrifield 2000: 174).
14. Vila bases his research on identity on the following authors' work: (Bhavnani and Haraway 1994, Gergen and Gergen 1983, Novitz 1989, Ricoeur 1992, Rorty 1990, Rosenwald 1992, Rosenwald and Ochberg 1992, Sarbin 1986, Sewell 1992, Shotter 1989, Sommers 1992, 1994, Taylor 1989 in Vila 1997).
15. "continuo movimiento de ida y vuelta entre contar y vivir, entre narrar y ser" (Vila 1997: 128).
16. "La mirada no es neutra... por el contrario 'significa'. Siempre con relación a un tipo particular de civilización, a una cultura, a un paquete de creencias, a una trama argumental, la manera en que vemos las imágenes (la 'postura' de la mirada) significa, crea sentido" (Vila 1997: 130).
17. According to Vila (1997: 134) "... the categories and interpellations that we use to describe something is intimately related to the peculiar narrative that we use to sketch ourselves to us and 'others'. Accordingly we construct our identity by selection of what we are and what we are not, thereby classifying between us and 'others'.
18. En realidad solamente vemos lo que...queremos ver y de la manera en que lo queremos percibir (Vila 1997: 131).
19. Por lo tanto podemos sostener que la peculiar característica de la entrevista a profundidad con fotografías es que la fotografía, por definición, siempre requiere el entrevistado proyecte en la escena mostrada su particular narrativa identitaria de manera tal que la escena solamente adquiere significado al interior de la narrativa de tal entrevistado (Vila 1997: 136).
20. "el hablante elige siempre sus palabras teniendo en cuenta la interpretación del oyente. [...] el oyente interpreta siempre teniendo en cuenta el significado subjetivo del hablante" (Schutz 1993: 157) (Berger and Luckmann, 1968).
21. Approximately \$15 USD at the time of the research i.e. 2002.
22. Atlas ti software help search electronic data for reoccurring dialogue themes in interviews and the like. It is thus possible to group and compare different interviewees' statements on specific research interests and reoccurring themes.

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