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Diary of a public space user: reflections on Southern Urbanism

Raynhard Supra and Karina Landman

Department of Town and Regional Planning, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, South Africa

ABSTRACT

Public spaces in South Africa reflect the everyday urban realities of public space users. These spaces embrace a complex narrative of past ideas, current needs and future dreams. This article focuses on the diary of a public space user in a dynamic Global South city, Pretoria, South Africa. It presents the critical reflections of a young planner obtained through multiple walks in two sets of public spaces, recorded in a research diary. The experiences of the young planner are then compared to those of other public space users to investigate different everyday urban experiences. Rooted in a Southern perspective, the article reflects on the nature and meaning of everyday realities through the lens of critical urbanism. The discussion highlights the value of critical reflection through the use of research diaries to assist young planners in understanding the everyday dynamics associated with southern urbanism in Pretoria.

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1. Introduction

Public spaces are important for all urban societies to gather together and foster inclusion, social cohesion and cultural diversity, especially in much-needed spaces in the Global South (Landman, 2019; Mady 2019). A vibrant, diverse, and supportive public life in rapidly urbanising spaces in African cities will increasingly become critical for the public good, especially in the context of informality, poverty and specific cultural needs (Toffa and Molonza 2022). However, despite the positive potential of public space, the use of public space can also be influenced by broader socio-economic conditions in unstable contexts characterised by unpredictability, such as political turmoil, fear of crime, memory of place, ownership and appropriation at a local level, especially in the Global South (Iqbal and Midhat 2022; Mady 2019; Makakavhule 2022; Vanka 2022). Given the particular nature of cities in the Global South, several scholars have called for research from a Southern perspective, reconsidering the role of planning and design that are more relevant in this context (Bhan, Srinivas, and Watson 2018; Connell 2014). Reconsidering the role of planning is especially important in situations where the past continues to shape the urban present, raising questions about how the past could be repaired in contemporary urban life (Disretti and Cupers 2022), especially in countries with complex histories and significant socio-economic challenges, such as South Africa. In 2024, the World Population Review classified the country as the most unequal globally, raising many challenges related to safe, accessible and inclusive public space.

This uncertainty can become daunting for young planners facing many doubts in insecure environments. In such conditions, the role of planning is often challenged or downplayed, and

CONTACT Karina Landman  karina.landman@up.ac.za  Department of Town and Regional Planning, Building 8, South Campus, University of Pretoria, Pretoria, 0002, South Africa

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the dominant theories taught in planning schools do not always reflect the realities in practice, both in space and in various public sector offices. Experiences from Turkey and South Africa indicated that young planners in the public sector lost their enthusiasm and faith in planning and focused only on 'staying out of trouble' to secure their employment opportunities to progress in life. Given this, there is a critical need to break the silence and give young planners a voice to reveal 'what is inside' (Tasan-Kok and Oranje 2018).

This article gives a voice to a young planner through his research diary written during many walks in different public spaces, reflecting his experiences and perceptions within the urban dynamics of a Global South City, Pretoria. He is a 23-year-old white male from South Africa who has lived in large cities, Pretoria and Durban, and small rural communities. Growing up in a lower-middle-class family, he sometimes experienced limited access to resources, contributing to his awareness of how economic and other disparities manifest in public space. However, being a product of post-apartheid South Africa, he recognises that his perspective, as a white male, may differ from that of other public space users. Nevertheless, post-apartheid South African universities offer many opportunities to engage with people from diverse socio-economic and racial backgrounds.

The research included walks from a gathering space along a street to another gathering space in two different neighbourhoods, the inner city and a mixed-use university neighbourhood, Hatfield. Rooted in a Southern perspective, the authors reflect on the nature and meaning of everyday Southern urbanism through the lens of critical urbanism (Cupers et al. 2022). They argue that planners must also engage with alternative modes of inquiry to confront everyday life in the public realm and ensure diverse ways of knowing that reflect policy perspectives and multiple experiences and representations. The article highlights the value of critical reflection and personal diaries to assist young planners in understanding the everyday dynamics associated with southern urbanism through a focus on critical urbanism.

2. Everyday urban realities and public space in the Global South: reconsidering the role of planners and designers through critical urbanism

While public space planning and design aim to create stable and safe environments, urban spaces are often experienced as uncertain, troubled, imbued with challenges and perpetually under pressure. Some may experience public spaces as inspiring, while others may feel distressed, creating continuous tensions between settled and unsettled spaces. Various factors contribute to unsettled space, including violence, exploitation, polarisation, fear, domination, and environmental challenges such as floods, water scarcity and extreme heat. Settling and unsettling, therefore, represent continuous processes reproducing disparities related to the right to claim territory (Viderman et al. 2022). These continuous processes of change directly impact the use and experience of everyday urban lived realities of public spaces, raising many questions about the production of space and the fluctuating dynamics of settled and unsettled spaces in different contexts.

Planners and designers in the Global South confront tremendous hurdles due to growing urbanisation, inequality, poverty and informal settlements. Watson (2009) criticises traditional urban planning approaches, claiming that they frequently fail to consider the realities of public space demands in fast-developing cities with informal economies. McFarlane (2012) and Parnell and Robinson (2012) call for planners and designers to negotiate these complexities by utilising adaptable approaches to both formal and informal elements of public space development, illustrating the diverse and dynamic nature of urban environments in the Global South.

In South Africa, post-apartheid difficulties and socio-economic inequality significantly impacted planners' and designers' roles. Landman (2019) indicated how safety and crime concerns influence the design and operation of public places, emphasising the need for planners to forge a balance between security and inclusion. Harrison and Todes (2015), investigating the spatial transformations in post-apartheid South Africa, emphasised that public space design must confront past injustices while achieving just development objectives. Turok and Borel-Saladin (2014) and

Dubbelman (2018) offer more insights into how South African public space planning is changing to address modern urban concerns, highlighting the need for methods that integrate historical legacies with present urban demands. Planning and designing democratic public space, therefore, needs to find a way to balance the needs of users and the ideas of planners about nature and the meaning of public space (Makakavhule and Landman 2020). These issues highlight the importance of planners and designers working from a Southern perspective in the Global South and embracing the past to address the present.

Understanding a specific environment necessitates appropriate methods to address the distinct issues and potential of various public spaces. These methods must understand users' everyday experiences and incorporate these understandings into planning processes. Critical urbanism offers an approach to deal with specific contexts and embrace diverse ways of knowing in a radically fragmented and increasingly urban world. This approach embraces a notion of open, grounded and propositional critique, combining thinking and doing, writing and engaging, and caring and challenging (Cupers et al. 2022). It allows the urban researcher and practitioner, such as the planner and designer, to pivot between different perspectives and across city spaces.

The benefits of embracing critical urbanism are threefold. Firstly, it offers an opportunity for urban researchers and/or practitioners to engage with the everyday realities of cities and experience the complex practices on the ground. Oldfield and Nkula-Wenz (2022, 21) note that 'cities generate and are produced in different and contradictory knowledge systems, from state logics and capital regimes to the lifeworld of residents, shaped by the built environment, in movements and mobilisations'. Through immersion in urban space and engaging with critical experiments, urban explorers can practice engaged scholarship and develop the capacity to work with real-world questions.

Secondly, critical urbanism allows the urban researcher to transverse time. 'The past, for instance, is not a fixed past; its reinterpretation can make a difference to how we see and live in the present, and thus how we imagine and shape the future' (Cupers et al. 2022, 8). Planners and designers are often called upon to address the pressing concerns of the present through developing plans for the future. However, these concerns are framed and lived by many people in multiple spaces, where the urban has become an entanglement between global and local, centre and periphery, here and there. At the same time, North/South are refracted and transformed. Cities act as conduits of contestation and spaces of counter-imagination. By engaging with these contradictions, critical urbanists can force new historical narratives to mobilise the past for new interventions (Distretti and Cupers 2022, 110). Critical urbanism, therefore, offers a way to negotiate the past, present and future.

Thirdly, this approach allows urban practitioners to learn across geographies while experimenting with diverse ways of knowing. Critical urbanism draws from two strands of work – Southern Urbanism and post-colonial approaches to the city and the built environment. The Southern turn in urban studies has reshaped urban debates and called for new ways of understanding cities, including the practices and people. Departing from everyday urban experiences in Global South Cities, Southern approaches challenge the previously dominating Western narratives dictating the way of knowing and representing the city. A Southern Perspective is committed to addressing social, material, and epistemological inequalities shaping everyday life in Southern Cities (Nkula-Wenz and Cupers 2022). Everyday urbanism in southern cities is characterised by five characteristics with a noticeable difference between southern and northern cities: dominance of informal process and context, weak planning and governance, high vulnerability among resident groups, persistence of conflict, and rapid and differential urbanisation. These characteristics are leading scholars to rethink more nuanced ways of looking at cities in the South through new perspectives and frameworks (Parida and Agrawal 2023).

'Such perspectives contribute to rewiring urban studies by studying built and lived environments beyond the city as methodological containers for individual or comparative study. This foregrounds architecture,

infrastructure and landscape, not as “authored” artefacts, but as the media through which modes of production, extraction and dispossession are organised and through which ways of life are contested and negotiated across localities’ (Ibid 2023, 67).

A Southern perspective, thus, calls for an in-depth understanding of built and lived environments in the context of growing informality, weak governance, high vulnerability and conflict and rapid urbanisation in the Global South. Experimenting with diverse methods opens up new ways of knowing to assist urban planners and designers respond more appropriately in specific places. It also offers young planners new ways to engage with different publics and develop a context-specific understanding of the urban spaces they have to plan, which is essential in rapidly changing cities and spaces where planners cannot just assume that the spaces of the past will remain the same or could be addressed in the same way as in traditional Western contexts of the Global North. This article focuses on the everyday urban realities and public space in the Global South, specifically South Africa, reconsidering the role of planners and designers through critical urbanism.

3. Study background: research areas and methods

3.1. Study areas

This study focused on two sets of public spaces in Pretoria, located in the City of Tshwane in South Africa. As mentioned, South Africa, with a Gini Index¹ In South Africa, the top 1% of earners take home almost 20% of income, and the top 10% take home 65%. That means 90% of South African earners take home only 35% of all income (World Population Review 2024). Alongside high levels of inequality, poverty, unemployment, and crime remain significant challenges. South Africa’s unemployment rate rose to 33.5% in Q2 of 2024. Approximately half (30.3 million people) of the population of 63 million is living in poverty at the national upper poverty line (~ZAR992), while a total of 13.8 million people (a quarter) are experiencing food poverty. Poverty measured at the international poverty lines of \$1.90 and \$3.20 per person per day (2011) is estimated at 18.9 per cent and 37.6 per cent in 2014/15 (World Bank Group 2020). Recent statistics indicated that household crimes such as housebreaking, home robbery and theft of motor vehicles increased compared to 2021/22. The percentage of adults aged 16 years and older who felt safe walking alone in their neighbourhoods during the day decreased from 81,3% in 2021/22 to 80,8% in 2022/23 (Stats SA 2023).

The City of Tshwane is the municipal area that includes Pretoria – the capital city. The municipality covers an extensive area of 6,345 km². In 2017, the population was 3.31 million, housing 25% of the provincial (Gauteng) population. The principal economic activities included government and community services (30%), finance (25%) and manufacturing (13%). Tshwane contributed 28.4% of Gauteng’s GDP and 10% of the national GDP in 2017. However, despite the concentration of economic and research activities, unemployment was estimated to be around 24% in 2017. There are a growing number of informal settlements, with an estimated 19% of the population residing in informal dwellings (City of Tshwane 2020/2021 IDP). The economic conditions have since deteriorated due to the COVID-19 pandemic, contributing to rising levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment and challenges related to service delivery and urban management and maintenance.

The article focuses on two public spaces in Pretoria: the inner city and Hatfield, east of the inner city (Figure 1). The first public space set is two older parks in the inner city, Burgers Park and Church Square (Figure 2), and the streets connecting them are Paul Kruger Avenue and Minnaar Street. Situated in the heart of Pretoria, these public spaces hold significant historical value and represent the administrative and historical centre of Pretoria. The proximity of Burgers Park to Church Square creates a historical continuity within the city centre, blending open green space with the formal urban landscape and capturing Pretoria’s multifaceted past. The inner city is a focal point for cultural events and festivals that honour South Africa’s rich past and remains an essential element of the city’s spatial and social makeup. However, it also faces challenges such as neglect, vandalism, and social concerns, all of which are connected with the city’s more significant urban dynamics,

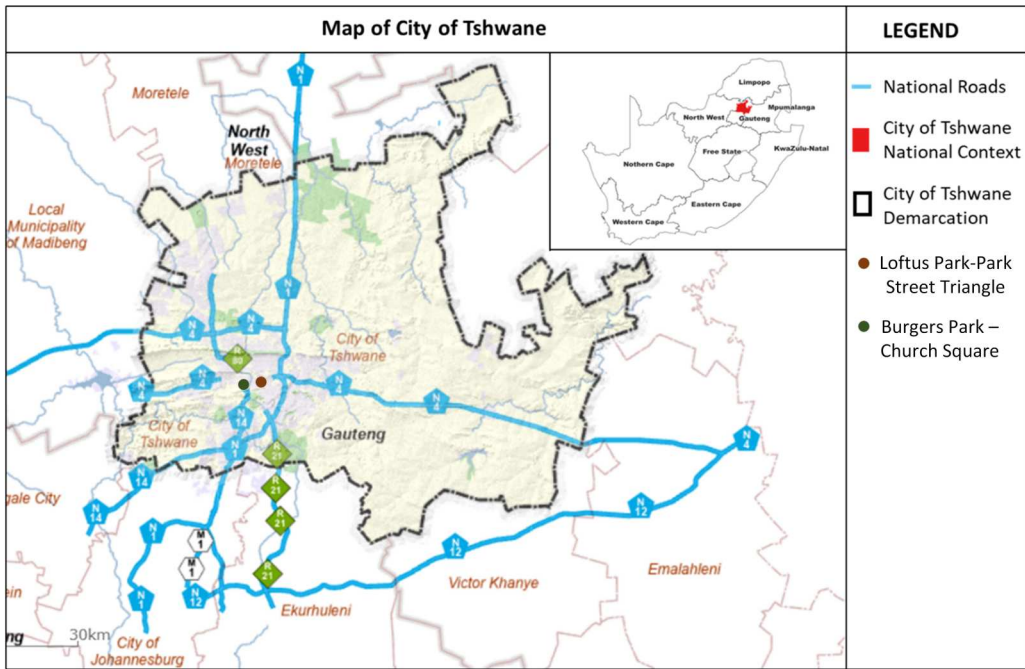


Figure 1. Broader context of the two sets of public space in the City of Tshwane and Gauteng Province in South Africa (Source: City of Tshwane Maps adapted by the Author).

such as disputes over historic preservation, urban deterioration, and social equality (Burgess & Harris, 2018; Landman and Nel 2022).

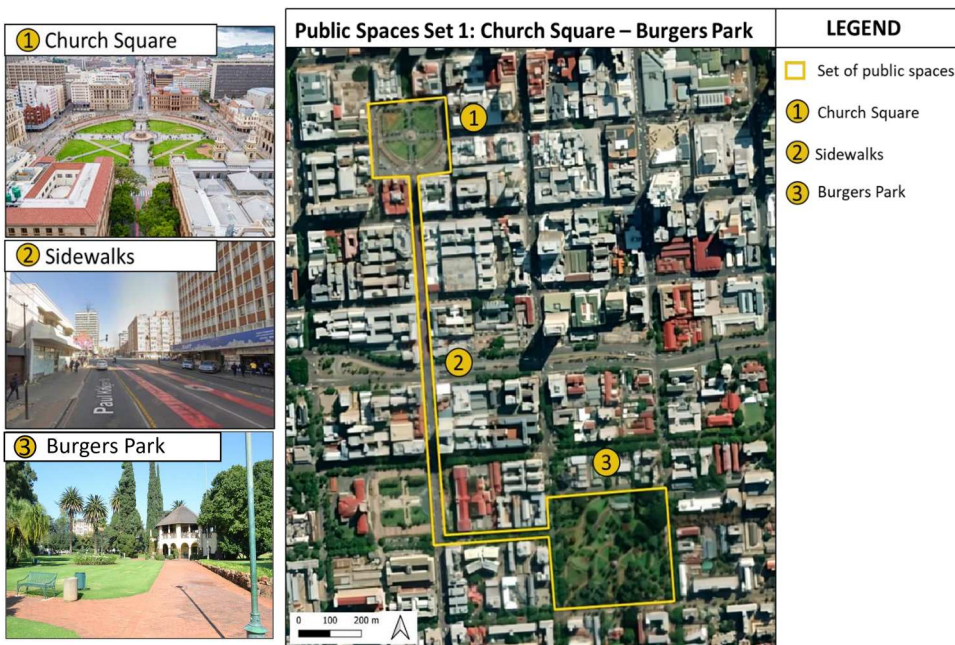


Figure 2. Church Square, Paul Kruger Avenue and Burgers Park (Source: Author’s elaboration from Google Maps).

The second set is the new pseudo-public space, Loftus Park and its connection to an older park along a prominent street in Hatfield (Figure 3). Loftus Park is a contemporary public space in Hatfield, a thriving neighbourhood known for its economic activity and proximity to the University of Pretoria. The neighbourhood has a lively ambience due to its contemporary architecture, commercial developments, and various cuisine alternatives, making it an essential crossroads for education, urban expansion, and trade. Loftus Park is a mixed-use development that combines commercial, recreational, and public activities, following worldwide urban design trends that value multifunctionality and sustainability. Though less formalised, the Park Street Triangle provides informal recreational opportunities essential to maintaining biological equilibrium. With continuous business expansion and infrastructure improvements, such as the construction of the Gautrain station, Hatfield is becoming an epicentre for urban development that improves accessibility and connectivity. The contrast between these two sets of public spaces highlights the varied functions that public spaces play in Tshwane.

3.2. Research framework and methods

The study, conceptualised by the supervisor (co-author) as an honours-level project for a few students in 2023, used three data collection methods, each designed to comprehensively understand the selected public spaces' nature, use, experiences, and perceptions. The methods included spatial analysis and observation of the two sets of public spaces, compiling a research diary through various walkabouts in these spaces, and semi-structured interviews. Although none of these methods are particularly novel, combining the methods within the framework of critical urbanism (Figure 4) enabled a novel approach to obtaining diverse ways of knowing from various stakeholders.

In-depth site analyses and walkabout observations were conducted to better understand the two sets of public spaces. Dionisio (2023) maintains that walking through public spaces offers a valuable method to systematically observe and map behavioural tendencies and understand the use of public space. Walking in space is especially useful for young planners to experience the everyday realities in public space. Multiple visits were made to each public space at different times of the day and week in late September and October 2023. Tools such as Google Maps, QGIS, and direct observations were essential to identify and describe these public spaces' spatial configuration and use trends.



Figure 3. Loftus Park, Park Street and Park Street Triangle (Source: Author's elaboration from Google Maps).

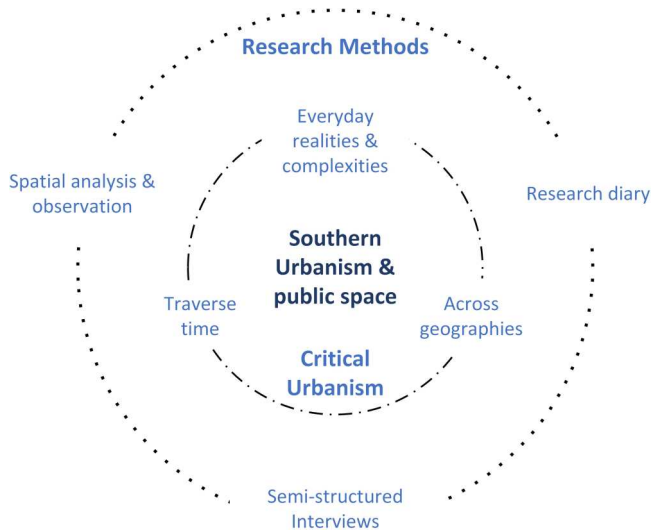


Figure 4. Theoretical and methodological framework.

A combination of diagrams, images, aerial photographs, and GIS mapping was utilised to visually and spatially represent the main features and dynamics. However, this method had limitations in capturing users' nuanced experiences and perceptions.

The perceptions of the researcher – a young planner – were captured through a research diary. Research diaries are valuable for recording the researcher's perceptions and experiences. Diaries capture life as it is lived by an individual over time. The diary author's thoughts, the internal and external events and observations s/he experiences, are fixed in a medium to 'provide a record of an ever-changing present' (Allport cited in Shelbe and Wildemuth 2009). What distinguishes diary methods from other methods is that diary protocols require participants to make self-reports repeatedly over time (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli 2003). The researcher conducted several walkabouts at different times of the day, observing, walking, engaging in conversations, and documenting his thoughts, feelings, and insights to identify the meaning of the public spaces. The diary provided a detailed account of interactions and perceptions of the public spaces, capturing subtleties, nuances, and unexpected insights that might otherwise be overlooked in casual observation. This method enabled the collection of rich, longitudinal data, revealing the evolving nature of the young planner's understanding of the spaces. Using a research diary enabled critical reflection on the complexities of different types of public spaces in Pretoria. However, the reliance on self-reporting introduces potential biases and may not fully reflect the experiences and perceptions of others (Bolger, Davis, and Rafaeli 2003). Hence, it was also necessary to obtain the views of the public space users.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with five users in each set of public spaces to obtain in-depth insights from public space users. This approach allows participants to freely express their experiences and perceptions through open-ended discussions (Leedy and Ormrod 2019). The interviews focused on identifying how users use, experience, and perceive the spaces to understand the meaning of the public spaces better. The interviews were recorded and transcribed to capture spoken and unspoken reactions.

4. Perceptions and experiences of a young planner and other public space users

Critical urbanism requires reflecting on the everyday experiences of the researcher and the researched users of public space (Cupers et al. 2022). This section discusses the experiences and

reflections of a young planner and compares them with the everyday realities of public space users across time and space.

4.1. Perceptions and experiences of a young planner

Established in the 1850s, Church Square is Pretoria's symbolic centre, originally designed to serve as the city's colonial administrative and judicial hub. It is surrounded by heritage buildings, including the Palace of Justice and the Old Capitol Theatre, which showcases the city's colonial and apartheid architectural history (Pistorius, 2011). Burgers Park, which lies south of Church Square, is one of Pretoria's oldest parks, developed in the late 1800s as part of the city's greenbelt. The Park's Victorian-style design showcases the British influence on town and regional planning during that period (Van Eeden 2014).

Presently, Church Square acts as a cultural and historical hub. The public space plays a vital role in social interaction and historical education through cultural activities, public gatherings, and historical tours. The sidewalks along Paul Kruger Avenue facilitate pedestrian movement and connectivity. They encourage informal social interactions and street-level activity, and proximity to mixed-use developments and informal traders enriches the space. Burgers Park serves as a tranquil green space for relaxation, picnics, and leisure activities and acts as a serene refuge that complements urban life (Figure 5). The Park is used for democratic assemblies and community mobilisation, such as Feast of the Clowns (Figure 6) and Church Choir practices.

As I engaged with the community, a gentleman shared a unique facet of Burgers Park – its religious use. Sundays come alive with the harmonious echoes of a church choir practising in the Park. Intriguingly, I also delved into the lore of the Feast of the Clowns, a cultural celebration that finds a home within the Park's embrace. The tales shared painted vivid images of laughter, vibrant costumes, and a sense of communal revelry (Dairy Entry, October 9 2023).

The Feast of the Clowns is an inner-city festival in Pretoria. It was created by the Tshwane Leadership Foundation (TLF) in 1995 and is still hosted by the TLF as a festival celebrating the city, building community and creating awareness of social justice issues. 'It is an annual proclamation of the



Figure 5. Burgers Park (Source: Author).



Figure 6. Feast of the Clowns, 2022 (Source: Author).

city as a good place to be, lamenting that which seeks to rob the city of its soul and its people of access, dignity and justice' (De Beer 2020, 234).

However, despite Burgers Park's great potential, signs of degradation and neglect are visible throughout the space, reflecting a general lack of maintenance.

'Today, I ventured into Burgers Park, drawn by the allure of what once was, but what I found was a stark contrast to its former glory. The initial steps into this once vibrant oasis were tinged with a sombre hue as the beauty of the Park felt eclipsed by neglect and an unfortunate convergence of hardships. As I strolled amidst the walkways, the remnants of its former splendour became evident – the picturesque playgrounds, grand statues, and abundant trees offering respite in their shade. Nevertheless, the Park's current state, marred by litter and an unsettling odour, painted a distressing portrait of disarray and disregard. The greenhouse, a shadow of its former self, displayed the scars of vandalism, its once vibrant greenery now an overgrown and neglected testament to time's passage. What struck me most profoundly was the congregation of homeless individuals along the Park's scattered fences and throughout the entire Park under trees and in bushes, a visual testament to the challenges faced by many. The once beautiful pond is now bereft of its former allure. Amidst this poignant scene, what astonished me was the community's perseverance. Despite the dilapidation, the Park was abuzz with families, children frolicking at the playground, and groups gathering under the trees for picnics. I spoke to one visitor who reminisced about the Park's former glory, lamenting its gradual deterioration and the bare minimum being done to maintain the place while finding solace in the lingering fresh air that still graces the space. Despite the desolation, the Park remains a haven for many, a testament to resilience and the enduring spirit of the community. Families continue to seek solace amidst the chaos, finding joy in the little pockets of beauty that persist, unwavering amid the decay.' (Dairy Entry, October 14 2023)

It is clear that despite the neglect, the Park is still used extensively. However, the Park has also become a temporary home for some of the less fortunate residents of Pretoria. In a city where poverty and unemployment remain a significant challenge, homeless people often have to revert to public spaces, such as parks, to find refuge for the night (Landman, 2019). The presence of homelessness in Burgers Park creates challenges for inclusivity, as it can make some users feel unsafe or unwelcome, leading

them to avoid the Park. This dynamic can result in social exclusion and further marginalise homeless individuals, complicating the Park's inclusive atmosphere. The presence of homeless people was evident in Burgers Park and Church Square. In addition, the SquareSquare was poorly maintained, with issues like full bins, litter, bird faeces, and non-functional lights. There were also vandalised statues and graffiti on benches and other furniture. The statue of Paul Kruger and soldiers were fenced off (Figure 7). These observations and reflections highlight the challenges related to the management and maintenance of public space and the role of various stakeholders in the process. While there is clearly a need for intervention, the local government struggles to highlight a clear vision and policy for public space development and maintenance in the city.

The second set of spaces is located in Hatfield. Loftus Park is a recent development located next to the large rugby/soccer stadium in Pretoria called Loftus Versfeld (loftuspark.co.za). The area is well-designed and offers a mix of activities, including shopping, dining, and social events such as concerts and rugby matches, which creates a lively atmosphere for social interaction and relaxation (Figure 8).

'The atmosphere was electric, brimming with joy and a palpable sense of togetherness. Engaging with each other, laughter, and collective cheers fostered a genuine sense of community that transcended all differences. The vibrant celebration was incredibly heart-warming, and I found immense joy in being part of this collective experience.' (Diary Entry, October 21 2023).

Park Street Serves primarily as a conduit for movement between key areas. The street provides basic pedestrian and cyclist access but needs more diverse activities, seating and good lighting, which impacts engagement. Park Street Triangle is located opposite one of the oldest high schools in the city, Pretoria High School for Girls and operates as a transitional space connecting different destinations. There is limited vitality and diversity. While there are occasional interactions, there are minimal attractors or events to enhance engagement. Nevertheless, there was one occasion that attracted several people.



Figure 7. Revitalised Church Square with the fenced statues in the centre. (Source: Author).



Figure 8. People gathering in Loftus Park.

‘Just before school dismissal, the once tranquil and somewhat abandoned space transformed into a bustling hub teeming with activity. The Park’s edges found cars still trying to find parking, adding to the burgeoning crowd. As the school day concluded, the space evolved further, becoming a magnet for children who gathered to chat, eat, and laugh. The limited shade beneath the lone tree became a coveted spot, albeit leading to some sidewalk obstruction (See Figure 9). The joyful chatter and impromptu games created a lively ambience, painting the area with the vibrancy of youthful exuberance. A food truck added to the newfound energy, offering a convenient refreshment spot. The previously unassuming and underutilised space blossomed into a vibrant, albeit transient, community gathering point even though just for a few hours after school, showcasing its latent potential to serve as a focal point for communal activities’ (Diary Entry, October 22 2023).

However, despite the general positive experiences and potential exhibited in these spaces, there were also challenges related to crime and insecurity.

‘Throughout my visits to Loftus Park and conversations that I had with people, I generally considered Loftus Park as a haven. However, even a space like this cannot entirely escape the shadow of crime. Today, during my visit to watch the semi-finals at Loftus Park, an unfortunate incident unfolded. One of the people in my friend group reported the theft of their phone. It serves as a stark reminder that even in seemingly secure spaces, vigilance is crucial’. (Diary Entry, October 21 2023).



Figure 9. Park Street triangle with people gathering under the tree.

Pseudo-public spaces such as these have become common in South Africa and Kenya amidst the challenges of inequality and insecurity (Adams et al. 2021; Landman 2016). However, it is these establishments that draw people.

4.2. Perceptions and experiences of other public space users

Despite the volatility in the inner city, public spaces are still used. During the interviews, Church Square was described as a popular spot for tourists and locals alike for historical and cultural reasons.

‘Everyone wants to go to Church Square to take photos of the old buildings and the statue of Paul Kruger because it reminds us of our history. But it is also a nice place to chill and talk to people or feed the birds’ (Church Square interviewee, October 15 2023).

These excerpts highlight the value of the historical setting and echo the young planner’s impressions. Church Square was also described as a nice place to relax and interact with people, reiterating the importance of the SquareSquare at present. Users appreciated the vibrancy and presence of informal vendors and street markets nearby.

‘There are some informal traders and formal shops close by, and It is a pretty vibrant area right around the square, too, with busy streets and also a street market lined with various vendors on both sides just about a block away’ (Church Square interviewee, October 9 2023).

The excerpt indicates that some current users are not intimidated by the informal traders in Church Square. Paul Kruger Avenue was valued for ease of movement between spaces and noted as a space for casual interactions and occasional street activities. Burgers Park, due to its greenery, was viewed as a peaceful retreat for picnics and relaxation. The Park is in a high-density area in the inner city and is surrounded by many apartment blocks. One of the users reiterated the Park's value.

'I love to come here and have a picnic with my family while my kids can play at the playground. It is also nice to stroll through the Park. It helps to get fresh air and clear your mind, so it is perfect for chilling. But I must say it offers a few activities, and you have to walk some distance to get some refreshments.' (Burgers Park Interviewee, October 15 2023).

The Park offers few activities, such as informal trading and refreshment access, but is known for cultural events, tradition and community support. The TLF and several Churches, including Doxa Deo and the Methodist Church, located next to the Park, are responsible for cultural events and community support and play an important role in community events in the Park. The park users also had concerns about the lack of maintenance and safety, including concerns about and compassion for Burgers Park's homeless.

'To see all the homeless people is so sad. I feel so sorry for them, but it also makes me feel unsafe' (Burgers Park interviewee, October 9 2023).

Users of Church Square raised similar concerns, noting a lack of maintenance and vandalism. Again, homelessness was mentioned as an issue, making the space less pleasant and uncomfortable.

'The whole Square is pretty much grass-covered, which is not too meticulous but more or less well maintained. However, it is still a bit unhygienic. The bins are always full; there is some litter and bird faeces here and there, but it is not too bad. The lights in the SquareSquare also do not work. Look, some of the statues here have been vandalised; you can see the gun of one statue got sawed off (Figure 10). And then there's the thing with a bunch of beggars and homeless people around; it makes the place a bit unpleasant and gives off this uneasy vibe. But I think addressing these small issues would greatly improve this space' (Church Square interviewee, October 14 2023).

Homelessness remains a significant issue that challenges public space use in South African cities. For many of these park dwellers, sleeping in parks is due to economic forces and spatiality: they cannot afford alternative accommodation close to job opportunities or travel to where they may have a place to stay (Charlton 2019). These conditions affect both people experiencing homelessness, who have to sleep rough without proper facilities, and those who come to public spaces to relax and enjoy the open space. It also raises issues about the country's socio-economic conditions and the response from local governments and other stakeholders. While some users are not intimidated by informal traders and homeless people, others feel unsafe. These trends have contributed to establishing pseudo-public spaces in the country (Landman 2017). For example, Loftus Park is popular for community events and casual socialising.

'Apart from all the activities this place has to offer, it is just nice to sit here in the breeze and watch people, watch the kids playing in the fountain, see people in the restaurants, and even feed the birds. It is a nice place to just chill and clear your mind' (Loftus Park Interviewee, October 22 2023).

Park Street is mainly used for transit rather than lingering. Park Street Triangle was considered vibrant, albeit for brief community interactions after school, highlighting the space's latent potential as a gathering point. Although Loftus Park was generally viewed as a well-maintained and safe space, some users reflected on the space's target group, primarily middle—to higher-income groups.

'Even though I like to use this space, it is a good space, I do feel like it needs to be improved. The space needs cheaper shops and restaurants. All the shops and restaurants here are very expensive. Even the normal shops here, such as Checkers, are more expensive than elsewhere. If you sit and watch the people, you will see most of the people that use this space seem rich' (Loftus Park Interviewee, October 22 2023).



Figure 10. Vandalised statue in Church Square.

The user's view reflects the high levels of inequality and growing differentiation of different types of spaces for different income groups in the country. Because of its proximity to the university, the region draws a sizable number of students, adding to its lively and active atmosphere. Nonetheless, rapid urbanisation poses challenges concerning affordability, inclusivity, and the conservation of green spaces (Davied & Cook, 2017). It also highlights the need for safety. Compared to Burgers Park, there were similar safety concerns in the Park Street Triangle, mainly linked to a lack of lighting in the evening, as expressed by a user.

'I try to avoid this place in the evening. There is no light at all, and it feels unsafe.' (Park Street Interviewee, September 29 2023).

The discussion highlighted the nature and meaning of various types of public spaces across time and space. It indicated that while older spaces are still significant, changing socio-economic conditions challenge experiences in micro-urban spaces and often give rise to new types of pseudo-public spaces. In addition, the reflections of the young planner are not entirely removed from the everyday urban realities of the general public space users. These trends raise several questions about the future of public space related to accessibility, inclusion, and safety for various users in the city.

5. Implications of everyday southern urbanism for planners and designers

The discussion confirmed that the experiences of the selected public spaces reflect both settled and unsettled public spaces and that these experiences may be different for various people and at different times of the day or week. The discussion also indicated how factors such as violence and fear can contribute to unsettled spaces. However, fear transcends the fear of crime and also involves the fear of others—of homeless people dwelling in the parks.

The findings revealed complex narratives of past ideas, current needs and future dreams. While the experience of Church Square as a historically significant space was positive, the actions in the space also reflected the tensions embedded in the use of space linked to past ideas and events. In 2014, the City of Tshwane initiated the revitalisation of Church Square. However, during the

civil protest linked to the call for decolonisation in South Africa in 2016, many statues were targeted as being representative of Colonialism and Apartheid. The Church Square statues were also damaged and fenced off to protect them from further vandalism. It, therefore, indicates that the past can be perceived as both positive and negative, depending on whose perspective. In the case of Burgers Park, past ideas and current needs merge to make sense of the present. While the users lament the former glory of the Park, others highlight the need to connect to nature and have access to outdoor space. However, the state of the parks and sidewalks also reflects the current realities within the city, where limited budgets and opposing visions do not prioritise the maintenance of these spaces despite their value to users. It also highlights the desperate plea of park dwellers in the context of high levels of poverty and inequality, raising many questions about future dreams in Global South Cities.

Reconsidering the changes over time requires planners to reflect on Southern urbanism critically. The experiences reflected the five characteristics of Southern Urbanism (Parida and Agrawal 2023). The discussion highlighted the dominance of informality within public spaces, where homeless people and traders seek shelter and livelihood opportunities. The increasing presence and dominance of informality in Global South cities often require extraordinary demands (Toffa and Molonza 2022). However, weak planning and governance contribute to a lack of maintenance of the public space, except where the private sector takes over, as in the case of Loftus Park. It also questions the commitment of local governments to public space (Kumar-Nair and Landman 2022). Thirdly, there was ample evidence of high vulnerability among resident groups, both from the homeless people and those who perceive them as a threat. Safety remains a critical concern for public space users in South Africa and other African cities (Adams et al. 2021; Murray 2020). Safety is also linked to the persistence of inner conflicts, where public space users feel sad about the park dwellers and conflicts related to the fear of crime and others. Confronting conflict is a recurring theme in public space debates in South Africa (Charlton 2019; Landman, 2019; Makakavhule 2022). Finally, the discussion also revealed some of the impacts of rapid and differential urbanisation linked to high levels of inequality, poverty and unemployment in South Africa and the City of Tshwane, as many people experiencing poverty are migrants. Achieving democratic spaces and spatial democracy in these contexts remains a constant challenge (Makakavhule and Landman 2020). However, as a microcosm of the larger city and country, public space offers a valuable entry point to different ways of knowing in the Global South.

As the Southern turn in academia led scholars to rethink more nuanced ways of looking at cities in the South through new perspectives and frameworks (Parida and Agrawal 2023), the study of public spaces holds several implications for planners and designers. It is essential to extend research beyond the familiar cities. Parida and Agrawal (2023) note that much research has been carried out in well-known Indian and Chinese cities, while research on Southern Urbanism in South Africa mainly focussed on Cape Town and Johannesburg. Including Pretoria as part of the City of Tshwane extends the knowledge about everyday realities and complexities at a micro level. Secondly, following Parida and Agrawal (2023), we acknowledge that the South is both a location and a power relation and argue that planners should consider this in developing policies and plans. Power not only refers to the foregrounding of Southern knowledge and practices but also reflects the voices of young planners vs. more established views and the views of public space users vs. built environment professionals. The discussion confirmed that planning theory and practice can benefit from being flexible while acknowledging the cues from regional and post-colonial approaches to cities (Parida and Agrawal 2023). Southern urbanism recognises space and time as embroidered across everyday realities and complexities in Global South cities.

6. Conclusion

The article set out to share the critical reflections of a young planner through his research diary to illustrate Southern Urbanism as a negotiation of past, present, and future. An embodied perspective

has facilitated a fundamental analysis of the relationship between the experience of young planners and public space users in public space as the research setting to connect these experiences and perspectives of everyday realities with the often abstract actions of policy development. The contrast between the two sets of public spaces revealed different nuances at play in the City of Tshwane. They offered important insights into opportunities and challenges for social interaction, cohesion, and power in South Africa.

However, for the significance of Southern urbanism as a guide to planners to be fully realised, it requires a more nuanced reading of public space in its specific context through (1) a relevant conceptual approach, (2) suitable research methods and (3) a reflection of the role of the planner in everyday space. Firstly, critical urbanism offers a practical conceptual approach to expand our understanding of Southern Urbanism. Critical urbanism allows urban researchers and planning/design practitioners to engage with the everyday realities in Global South Cities. Through the emersion in space, planners can develop the capacity to work with real-world issues, such as the maintenance of urban spaces or the lack of affordable housing. This approach also allows for understanding the past, present and future and their relationship. Through engagement in city spaces, younger planners can understand multiple concerns in various spaces and contribute to developing new historical narratives that can mobilise the past to enable new interventions to reshape the future, giving them a presence and voice to engage with the extraordinary demands in Global South cities. Critical urbanism also allows built environment practitioners to learn across geographies while experimenting with different ways of knowing.

Different ways of knowing relate to the second issue, namely suitable research methods. Utilising multiple walks in different public spaces allowed for critical reflection, which was documented in a research diary, and exposed the young planner to different spaces and experiences of the people who ultimately have to use the planned and designed spaces. Experimenting with diverse methods, therefore, opens up new ways of knowing that could assist urban planners and designers to respond more appropriately in specific places. New ways of understanding cities also beg to reconsider the role of planners in everyday space. Southern approaches challenge the dominating Western narratives, dictating alternative ways of knowing and representing cities while acknowledging power relations. These power relations include the power of the younger planner/ designer to reshape urban space and the power of citizens to guide their visions.

For those committed to more inclusive, safe, accessible and sustainable public spaces in cities, there is a need for an emersion in urban space and critical reflection through, for example, research diaries. In addition, they also need a more significant commitment to understanding the everyday dynamics associated with southern urbanism in contested urban spaces. Rethinking ways to understand urban spaces also implies that urban planners and designers need to be more aware of the everyday realities within public spaces. It also means that local authorities need to recognise the value of public space to contribute to an increased quality of life for urban residents and seek to revitalise and maintain them while addressing concerns related to the safety and vulnerability of their various users.

Note

1. Income inequality within a population can be measured quantitatively using the Gini Index, commonly known as the Gini Coefficient. It is represented by a number between 0 and 1, where 0 denotes complete equality, in which a country's income is divided equally among all people, and 1 denotes complete inequality, in which a single person has all the money. This metric frequently assesses wealth distribution in social and economic analyses. With a Gini Index of roughly 0.63 and the most significant degree of income inequality in the world according to recent data, South Africa is a glaring example of how wealth disparity affects many facets of social life.

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