

**CONVERSATIONS ON CONVERSION: UNANTICIPATED CONSEQUENCES OF  
CONVERTING STUDENT PUBLIC SPACE**

**Niclesse Mariette**

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

[u28154208@tuks.co.za](mailto:u28154208@tuks.co.za)

**Jacques du Toit**

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

[jacques.dutoit@up.ac.za](mailto:jacques.dutoit@up.ac.za)

Corresponding Author: **Dr Jacques du Toit**

Department of Town and Regional Planning

University of Pretoria

Private Bag X20

Hatfield, Pretoria

0028

South Africa

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**Abstract:**

Following the conversion of Pretoria's most prominent student public space, Hatfield Square, the character of the space was completely altered, resulting in unanticipated perceptions, feelings and socialisation patterns amongst students who were regulars at the 'Square'. This article explores some of these consequences in terms of the personal meaning they had for students. A qualitative study was conducted within an interpretive-, social constructivist paradigm using an explorative case study design combined with elements of phenomenology and Glaser's classic Grounded Theory. Atlas.ti 7 was used to analyse and enrich the interpretation of the data. A core theoretical category, namely 'loss', was uncovered that also had consequences beyond students' immediate experiences. Developers and stakeholders neglected to consider the unquantifiable social dynamics that were as much part of Hatfield Square as its physical structures. Developers and stakeholders should, despite market forces, be more considered about public spaces, especially those shaped by young people, while the role of planners is critical in assisting developers with such consideration.

## **Introduction**

Hatfield is a prominent node just east of the Pretoria city centre, the administrative capital of South Africa. In contrast to sprawling mono-functional suburbs that are characteristic of much of Pretoria, Hatfield is characterised by diverse activities and high population densities relative to the surrounding area. Hatfield's diversity and density is largely due to the presence of the University of Pretoria, the largest contact university in South Africa with close to 60 000 students. The university's main campus and most of its residences as well as research- and sport facilities are all located adjacent to Hatfield.

Hatfield Square was developed as a mixed-use student public space during 1994 when South Africa also emerged from political and economic isolation following its first fully democratic election. The 'Square' soon became a popular hub of night-life activity with various restaurants, bars and night-clubs that were frequented mostly by students. Although privately owned, Hatfield Square served as one of the most prominent public spaces in Pretoria for two decades; a welcome feature in a city otherwise characterised by privatised spaces and insular shopping malls. Due to its close proximity to the university and spatial configuration, in which ten to twelve restaurants, bars and clubs surrounded a central space, Hatfield Square soon became an integral part of Hatfield.

Following greater access to higher education post 1994 that contributed to a pressing need for student accommodation close to the university, the owners of Hatfield Square decided to convert it from a social to a largely residential space. The conversion of Hatfield Square not only led to a change in the function of the space, but also a significant change in the perceptions, feelings and socialisation patterns of students who were regulars at Hatfield Square and for whom the Square came to form a large part of their phenomenological

experience of Pretoria. Developers and stakeholders appeared to neither have considered nor anticipated the latter.

The aim of this qualitative study was to explore the closure and subsequent conversion of Hatfield Square from the perspective of students who were regulars at the Square. The study took the shape of conversations with students about their perceptions, feelings and socialisation patterns following the conversion of the Square with the purpose of providing an explanation for some of the unanticipated consequences of changing student public space. From the conversations a number of unanticipated consequences emerged that were all related to the notion of 'loss'. Emotional geographies surrounded the topic and a near uniform set of corroborating responses were received.

There is a shortage of literature specifically on the emotional relationship between people and places and the unquantifiable social dynamics resulting from such emotions. Studies from developing countries are also underrepresented in the literature, as are studies related to student public space. Some studies focussed on spatial change in public spaces and the meaning of social spaces in the form of emotional geographies (Abaza, 2001; Bala Garba, 2010; Du Toit, 2009; Hubbard, 2012; Landman, 2006; Lemanski, 2004; Madanipour, 1996; Spiropoulos & Fraser, 2003; Von Hirsch & Shearing, 2000; Wood, 2015; Wright, 2012).

Some seminal works on public space offered insights and assisted with the interpretation of findings from the Hatfield Square study. The work of Banerjee (2001) on the future of public space offered some insight into the development of public space on a city-scale. Talen (2000) also contributed to the understanding of the relationship between users and space. In his book, *'Whose public space?: International case studies in urban design and development'*,

Madanipour (2010) compiled case studies with varying significance that are, as with this study, specific to context.

## **Method**

The Hatfield Square study was designed as a case study with elements of phenomenology and classic Grounded Theory<sup>1</sup>. This qualitative, inductive and exploratory approach purposefully avoids extensive literature reviews and preconceived ideas about a topic in order to avoid ‘contaminating’ a new theory that is to take shape from data. Hence, the new theory is *grounded* in data. Given the nature of the Hatfield Square study and in accordance with Grounded Theory, the study was simultaneously cast within an interpretive and social constructionist paradigm, which argues that knowledge is socially constructed (Andrews, 2012, p. 39). Social constructionists, sometimes incorrectly regarded as constructivists (Raskin, 2002; Sommers-Flanagan, 2015), see knowledge as constructed from the socially shared experiences and interactions of a phenomenon, event or place, accepted as fact from a common, agreed interpretation (Andrews, 2012; Charmaz, 2008).

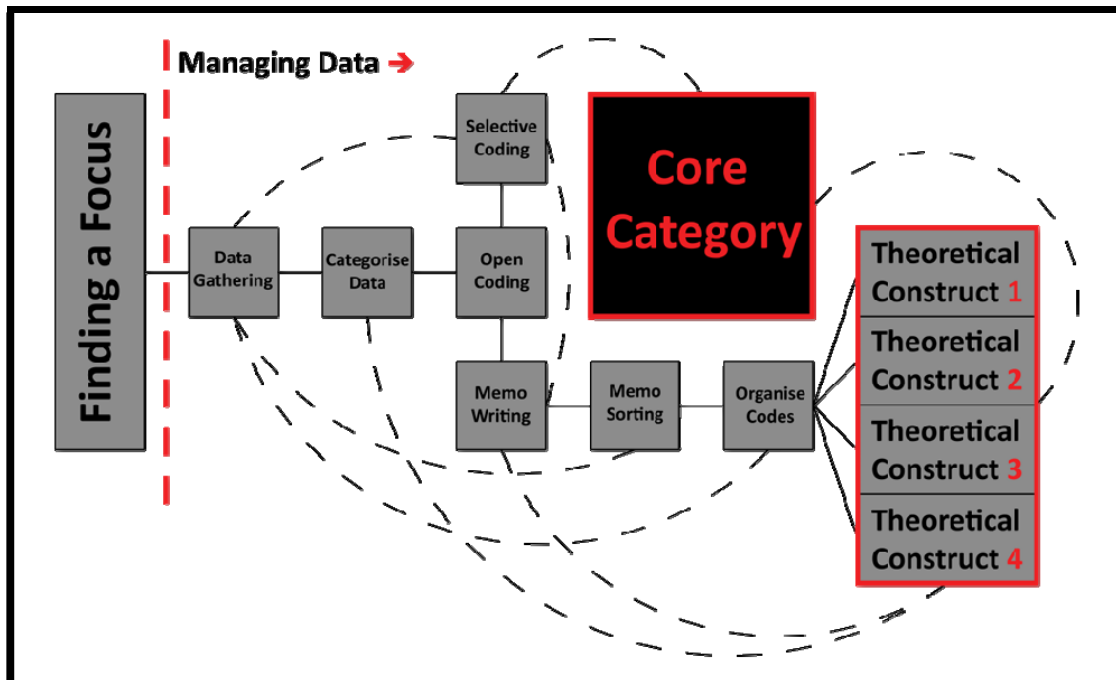
In this case study, Hatfield Square presented a unique and confined case that allowed for meaningful in-depth research (e.g., see Baxter and Jack (2008), Bergen and While (2000), Du Toit and Mouton (2013), Flyvbjerg (2006), Gerring (2007, 2011), Verschuren (2003) and notably Yin (1981, 1994)). In accordance with the classic Grounded Theory process, conversations took the form of in-depth unstructured interviews and focus groups with a convenient sample of former students and frequenters of Hatfield Square. Data collection

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<sup>1</sup> Classic (also referred to as ‘Glaserian’) Grounded Theory refers to the work of Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss (1967), and that was subsequently continued by Glaser (1978, 1992, 2002; Glaser & Holton, 2004). Strauss deviated his approach to Grounded Theory in the work conducted with Juliette Corbin (Corbin & Strauss, 1990, 2008; Strauss & Corbin, 1990, 1998) resulting in fundamental differences in approach.

took place over the course of a year, starting with an initial pilot focus group and continuing with interviews and analysis of the contents of newspaper articles, social media posts, as well as blogs and message forums. Based on Glaser's school of thought, the process of Grounded Theory involved finding a focus and identifying data sources through theoretical sampling (Breckenridge & Jones, 2009; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Data management followed through a continuous non-linear cycle of data-gathering, categorisation, and analysis through open-, and selective coding, coupled with memo-writing and sorting. Emerging constructs were identified to shape a core category (Dey, 1993; Scott 2009).

According to Hunter and Kelly (2009, p. 89), "data analysis should be conducted in conjunction with data collection to identify areas of interest early on and to ensure that the method used was well suited." The process followed in this study therefore took the form of a complex, interwoven, and continuous feedback structure that continued until no new categories could be extracted from the data. Figure 1 shows the process of Grounded Theory followed in the Hatfield Square study.



**Figure 1: The process of Grounded Theory followed in the Hatfield Square study**

A Computer Aided Qualitative Data Analysis Software (CAQDAS) platform, Atlas.ti 7, was used to analyse data for this study. Atlas.ti 7 simplified and economised the research process through the effective management of data and intuitive coding mechanisms offered by the software. Using CAQDAS, the codes and categories could easily be created, grouped and changed as needed to feed into emerging theoretical constructs. CAQDAS has become more prolific in qualitative research over the last three decades as the software became increasingly efficient and user friendly (Tesch, 1990; Weitzman, 2010). Yet, its application in built-environment research remains limited, while this study may serve as an example for similar studies about the consequences of changing public space.

By following a classic Grounded Theory process from the outset, it was possible to develop a theory about the consequences of the conversion of Hatfield Square based on the experiences and perceptions of students who interacted with and helped shape the phenomenon that was

'Hatfield Square'. The theory was then compared to existing literature on public space in order to tie in with current understandings of public space.

## **Findings**

The findings are presented in terms of (1) the core category, (2) the constructs, and (3) the eventual grounded theory.

### ***The core category***

Grounded Theory largely depends on building and saturating categories, while the links between different categories start to shape theoretical constructs (Urquhart *et al.*, 2010). Eventually, a single core category ought to emerge that is considered the essence of the data. This category forms the basis for the development of a theory. Following the Glaserian approach to Grounded Theory meant that the repetition of processes and refinement took place until a single core category was determined; a category that explained and encompassed all other categories and that was central to the data as a whole. Following this exhaustive process served to 'ground' the theory in data.

The core category that emerged from the data related to *loss*; the loss of a social space, of opportunities, (including jobs, local music, and meaningful socialisation patterns), of a place with substantial sentimental value, and of a landmark for all who lived, worked and leisured in Hatfield. Madanipour differentiates between 'space' and 'place' where "space is considered to be more abstract and impersonal, while place is interpreted as having meaning and value" (2010, p. 6). Given this differentiation, Hatfield Square was not simply a *space* but a *place* for those who frequented it.

All the categories and codes eventually pointed towards the consequences of a loss of public space. This loss implied consequences beyond students' immediate experiences and perceptions. Surrounding the core category of loss, constructs could be identified that allowed linkages to emerge between them which in turn shaped the framework for the grounded theory.

### *The constructs*

The emerging constructs served as pillars between links that tied these constructs together, forming the eventual framework for the grounded theory. As discussed above, the core category that emerged from the data related to 'loss'. Sub-categories that fed into this core category yielded the following four main constructs that were all interlinked, i.e., (1) the **meaning** of Hatfield Square, (2) the **impact** on the live music industry, (3) the **role** played by the University of Pretoria, and (4) the **altered perception** of the Hatfield area in general.

The first construct that emerged from the data related to the **meaning** that was attached to Hatfield Square. The meaning attributed to the Square varied in sentiment and value. Various respondents and other sources alluded to and even expressed a strong emotional connection with the Square and the formative effect it had on them as individuals. Some were however happy to see it close down as it also represented other meanings, i.e., anti-social behaviour, including brawls and alcohol and drug use.

An unexpected yet central theme that emerged related to the role Hatfield Square played in the live music industry in Pretoria and how its conversion had a significant **impact** on the industry. Given the critical mass and variety of different venues resulted in the Square being a strong attraction for live music events of all kinds, genres and tastes; an aspect that was

critical given the multi-cultural nature of South Africa and the university's support of an inclusive and diverse environment for students. Respondents noted the plethora of events that they attended at the Square and how the scale and proximity to the university meant that there was never a shortage of activity and live music to choose from. Since the conversion, the perceived impact on the industry was, undoubtedly, one of significant decline.

Due to its proximity and prominent role as a major land-use in the area, the University of Pretoria was perceived to have played a **role** in the conversion of Hatfield Square, whether directly or indirectly. Many respondents implied that the university played a role in the conversion of Hatfield Square, which was corroborated with contents from various secondary sources. The closure of a beloved public space for students were heartfelt while a measure of blame was to be expected.

With the conversion of Hatfield Square, Hatfield's social function appeared to diminish, which inevitably led to an **altered perception** of Hatfield as a whole. Respondents reminisced how Hatfield used to be synonymous with two things; the University of Pretoria, and Hatfield Square. The latter however took centre stage in most conversations around Hatfield as the Square represented a unique social space with such fame and infamy to the extent that many people in Pretoria, and even elsewhere in South Africa, associated Hatfield with its 'Square'. Over its lifespan, probably almost every student that attended the University of Pretoria either visited or at least knew about the 'Square'. Most students would have interacted with the space at least a couple of times during the course of their studies while others became frequenters, visiting on a daily basis. The current perception of Hatfield compared to the 'glory days' of Hatfield Square, shows how the presence of such a prominent space can be *the* formative element in the general perception of an area.

*A theory to explain the consequences of the conversion of Hatfield Square*

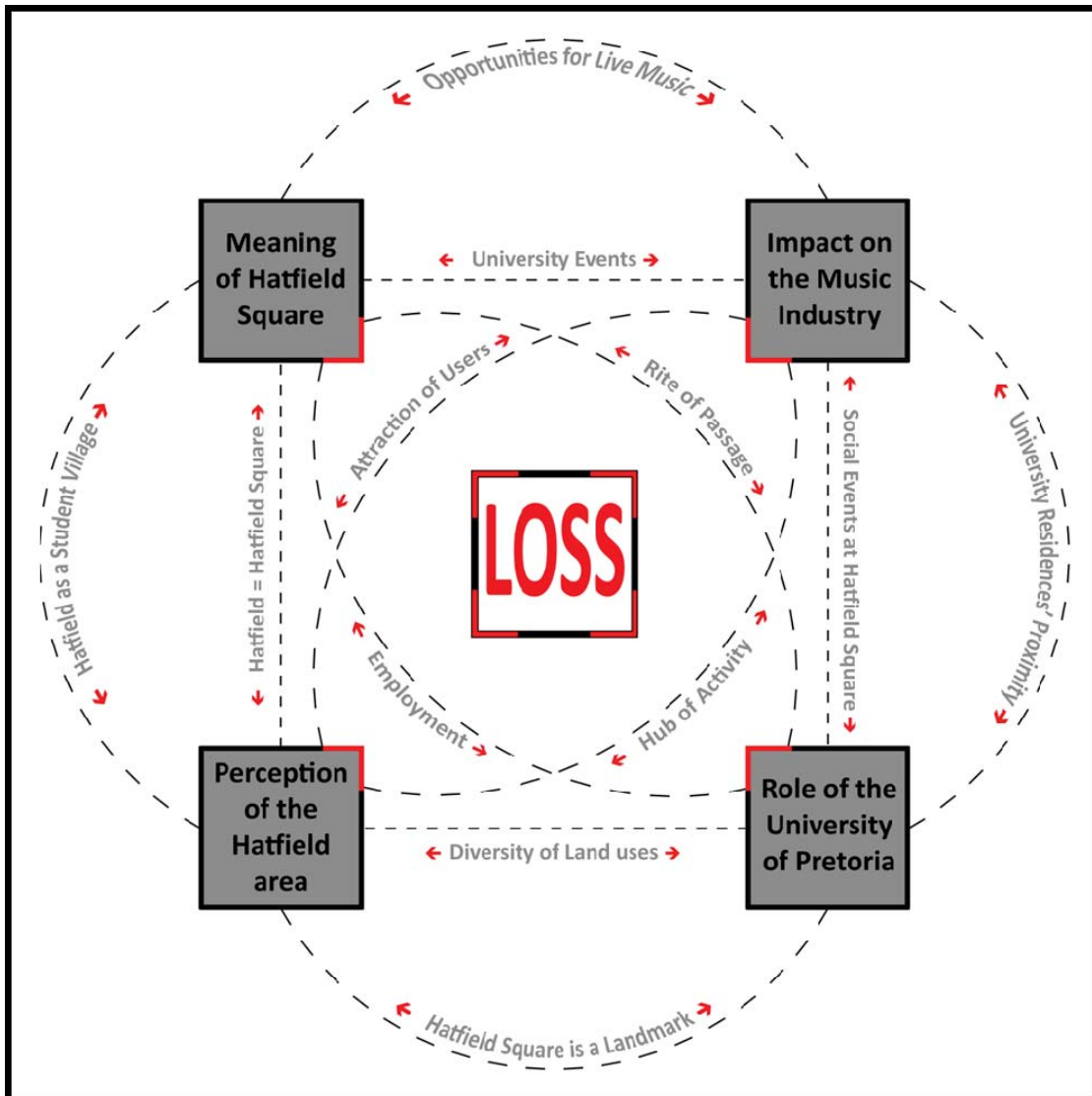
The outcome of a Grounded Theory study is a theory about a series of events studied. Strauss and Corbin define ‘theory’ within the context of Grounded Theory as a “set of well-developed concepts related through statements of relationship, which together constitute an integrated framework that can be used to explain or predict phenomena” (1998, p. 15). The refinement of the concepts above into a single core category and the subsequent constructs discovered shaped the framework of the theory. The theory therefore provides an explanation for the lived experiences and perceptions of students who were regulars at Hatfield Square. The central theme of ‘loss’ ties all the constructs together, from the meaning attached to Hatfield Square, the impact on the live music industry, the implied role of the University of Pretoria, to the altered perception of Hatfield as a whole. As Strauss and Corbin suggest, the linkages between the constructs play an important role in shaping the theoretical framework. Table 1 lists some of the more prominent linkages between the constructs in the Hatfield Square study.

**Table 1: Linkages between the constructs**

| <b>Relationships with the meaning of Hatfield Square</b>   | <b>Relationships with the impact on the live music industry</b>   |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• University events played a major role in the activities and associated meaning of Hatfield Square.</li> <li>• Hatfield was seen as a student village due to the interconnected nature of the University of Pretoria, the Hatfield area and the activity associated with Hatfield Square.</li> <li>• A rite of passage for many students living in university residences close to Hatfield Square as they were only ‘allowed’ to attend parties at Hatfield Square in their second year of study.</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Social events at Hatfield Square were a regular occurrence which frequently featured live music performances.</li> <li>• Opportunities for live music were plentiful due to the large number of venues in close proximity and the associated critical mass.</li> <li>• A hub of activity was created with the close proximity between the university, student accommodation and Hatfield Square along with all the related activities/uses that emerged in the vicinity, often creating the required critical mass.</li> </ul>     |
| <b>Relationships with the role of the University of Pretoria</b>   | <b>Relationships with the perception of Hatfield</b>  |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proximity of university residences to the Square played a major role in the success and pace of growth that took place in Hatfield Square as well as the negative externalities such as noise, alcohol and drug abuse and safety concerns causing the university to take active steps to counteract these.</li> <li>• The Square resulted in a diversity of land uses that attracted further activities. The conversion of the space has subsequently led to a perceived decline in the diversity.</li> <li>• Employment opportunities existed for a large number of students in Hatfield Square as service staff in restaurants, bars and clubs, musicians and DJ’s as well as promotional work leveraging on large crowds that were often present. These have all disappeared.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Hatfield was equated to Hatfield Square due to the reputation and level of activity the Square offered.</li> <li>• Hatfield Square was a landmark for many coming to and from the area as it was a prominent and well-known space with a far-reaching reputation.</li> <li>• The attraction of users was another major benefit the area enjoyed as a result of Hatfield Square. The combination of all the other elements mentioned here meant that the area was constantly abuzz with activity and a variety of users.</li> </ul> |

The linkages in Table 1 were all interconnected as many of them had an influence on each of the four categories and *vice versa*. These linkages were created in CAQDAS through the use

of colour coding and grouping of codes, allowing clear linkages to emerge and to graphically illustrate them. Figure 2 shows the theoretical framework around the core category and its constructs, as well as the linkages that emerged between the constructs.



**Figure 2: Theoretical framework to explain the consequences of the conversion of Hatfield Square**

As per Figure 2, the theory can therefore be expressed as follows: The decision to convert Hatfield Square from a predominantly social public space for students to a predominantly

residential development along market forces led to a loss of meaning, a detrimental impact on the live music industry in Pretoria, negative perceptions towards the University of Pretoria for their perceived role and responsibility, and an altered perception of the Hatfield area as a whole. There was a strong relationship between Hatfield Square and students who were regulars. They carried an interest in the Square while the meaning of the Square gave them a sense of community. The unanticipated consequences of the conversion are in the form of several losses experienced by students; the loss of (1) social interaction between university residences and the Square; (2) a landmark in the area; (3) the sense of a 'student village'; (4) live music events and opportunities for musicians to play in Pretoria, especially emerging musicians; (5) land-use diversity; (6) a rite-of-passage for students; (7) casual employment opportunities for students; and finally, (8) a hub of activity that attracted more activity.

These losses reflect the unquantifiable value and meaning that Hatfield Square had for students who were regulars and highlights a lack of consideration for these losses in the decision to convert the Square. The theory also alludes to the people-environment relationship that existed between students and the Square, highlighted by the emotional conversations about the conversion.

## **Conclusion**

Following the conversion of Pretoria's most prominent student public space, Hatfield Square, the character of the space was completely altered, resulting in unanticipated perceptions, feelings and socialisation patterns amongst students who were regulars at the 'Square'. This article explored some of these consequences in terms of the personal meaning they had for students. A qualitative study was conducted within an interpretive-, social constructivist paradigm using an explorative case study design combined with elements of phenomenology

and Glaser's classic Grounded Theory. Atlas.ti 7 was used to analyse and enrich the interpretation of the data. A core theoretical category, namely 'loss', was uncovered that also had consequences beyond students' immediate experiences.

Developers and stakeholders neglected to consider the unquantifiable social dynamics that were as much part of Hatfield Square as its physical structures. Developers and stakeholders should, despite market forces, be more considered about public spaces, especially those shaped by young people, while the role of planners is critical in assisting developers with such consideration. Lawhon (2003) for example addresses the role of planners in creating socially responsive neighbourhoods, which is equally applicable to creating student public spaces that are responsive to students' phenomenological experiences of place.

In the case of Hatfield Square, the more market related interests of developers and stakeholders may still have been achieved while at the same time considering some of the potential social consequences of converting and redeveloping the Square. By conversing with students, many of the negative consequences could perhaps have been avoided or mitigated. Instead of a spatial void in the area, the conversion of Hatfield Square involved altered physical space as well as social and emotional dissolution, resulting in a platial<sup>2</sup> void being left instead.

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<sup>2</sup> Space is to spatial as place is to "platial".

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### **Autobiographical sketches**

**Niclesse Mariette** was a research master's student in the Department of Town and Regional Planning, University of Pretoria, South Africa, at the time of this study. He is currently a planner in private practice.

**Jacques du Toit** is a senior lecturer in the Department of Town and Regional Planning, University of Pretoria, South Africa. His research interests include social sciences methodology, planning methods and techniques, and person-environment studies.