



RE-IMAGINING PUBLIC SPACES

Management Seminar

Learning Note

Thursday, 27 March 2013 | Durban Botanical Gardens Conference Hall

Introduction

The concept of Public Space has emerged as a significant issue in the international development arena. UN-HABITAT recently prepared a Global Toolkit on Public Space, which also aligns with the United Nations 2016 Sustainable Development Goals. It is a concept that is current and relevant to both developed and developing cities. As a leading metropolitan in South Africa, it is imperative Durban stays abreast with international planning trends.

The objective of this Management Seminar was to bring together interdisciplinary senior officials to discuss their stance on existing Public Space in Durban and encourage officials to be imaginative in the way that they approach the development of our spaces. With a mandate to drive the urban imaginary of the city, Imagine Durban championed the Seminar in an effort to promote ingenious thinking.

Overview

Public Spaces contribute to a city's environmental integrity, sense of community, sense of safety and attractiveness in a given area. This note captures the major points that were put forward by thought leaders, senior official's discussions on existing public space challenges and potential new development concepts, and lastly it captures the lessons learned from this exchange and proposes a way forward.

Thought Leaders

Two incredibly diverse thought leaders were approached to present their ideas at the Seminar. The first thought leader was Doung Anwar Jahangeer from dala. dala (which is to 'make' or 'create' in isiZulu) is a creative collective that believes in creativity as a champion for building safer and liveable cities. Jahangeer describes himself as an Architect practising in the realm of contemporary art as a way of interpreting how and what to build and focuses primarily on the people in public space.



The second thought leader to present was Erky Wood from GAPP Architects and Urban Designers. GAPP aims to create a built environment which stands as a legacy for the present and future generations. Wood's professional stance in developing public space is to use the public environment as a generator for the urban prospect and focuses on solid urban design principles and re-thinking public spaces by putting people first.

Key Points from Doung Anwar Jahangeer's Presentation

Jahangeer centred his discussion on emotion, dreams and imagination rather than rationality. He urged the participants to start thinking about Public Spaces within the context of 'our culture' and 'our struggles': South African Public Space is a reflection of a common struggle experienced broadly by the Global South and the struggle of the global north is different to that of the global south therefore we have to think within the context of our unique history.

Vibrant and unafraid of controversy, Jahangeer suggested that 'freedom has failed us' because pursued a development concept that was completely unknown. He believes that we need to personalise our public spaces to fully experience freedom. South Africa has essentially gone into democracy with a quantitative approach to development (number of houses, schools, hospitals delivered), instead of a qualitative approach to development.

The most notable and key point made by Jahangeer is that Durban is a 'special city'. While both Cape Town and Johannesburg have cemented their identities within South Africa, Durban is an ambiguous city, a blurred space and known commonly as the third city in the country. The 'in-between space' is also a space of 'magic', said Jahangeer. This means that we can start to create MEANING in our city. Durban could become an EXPERIMENTAL CITY.

In developing public spaces, Jahangeer proposed that we should not push out people from spaces they have claimed post 1994 and our intention as a city should be to promote community and gathering. Officials must always remember that "it's not the buildings or infrastructure that make a city, but the people and the culture". People in space make place; it is all about people. Experimentation cannot be institutionalised, and, as there are too many legislative barriers, we must therefore look at policy that would allow for flexibility.

Participants' Feedback

Jonathan Edkins (Deputy Head, Architecture, eThekweni Municipality) provided input on the Pedestrianisation Programme that the City is presently looking at. This programme falls within the framework of Durban's Public Space. It looks at enhancing the City's pedestrian routes



and includes concepts that are partly influenced by the Durban's direct environment but also reminiscent of what we see in other places.

Edkins stated that eThekweni Municipality would like to ensure that our spaces are collaborative by building trust with our citizens. This was said in the context that some of the Inner City Management Programmes are already facing barriers of misunderstanding and social concern regarding how people will be treated in the inner city. The goal is to ultimately create a clean, healthy, safe and robust environment for everyone utilising the Inner City and the data approach to establishing relationships with people who, justifiably, have suspicion, will help us get on track with our programmes.

Hoosen Moolla (Project Manager, iTrump, eThekweni Municipality) requested that Jahangeer touch on the argument he made at the Urban Future Seminar.

In response to the feedback from participants, Doung Jahangeer (Thought Leader, dala), suggested that "safety should not be a top-down approach, we need to give people agency to be proud of who they are and what they do in a space". In relation to the Urban Future Seminar, he said that it is difficult to find out who the creatives are in a community and the reality is for poor people to first be creative THEN find shelter.

Key Points from Erky Wood's Presentation

Wood's discussion centred mostly on the technical elements required to create a public space that will have a positive impact on the environment. He is interested in the public environment being a generator of an urban prospect and noted that much of our economy is driven by public enjoyment of open spaces.

In developing Public Spaces, Wood looks at sticking to the following physical attributes: walls or buildings that surround a space, natural elements (trees, grass, vegetation), distinctive paving and bollards to direct cars and act as a safety mechanism. He highlighted green spaces, specifically tree lined lanes are a very powerful mechanism to create a public space and said that our spaces must be safe for all age and culture demographics.

As practitioners, we must figure out how to make our public spaces as multifunctional as possible. Similar to Jahangeer's arguments, Wood recommended traders should not be displaced or redirected from their existing spaces. He said that one can't make economy or community happen – you can only enable it to a certain extent; there is a stimulus-response thought process in a design process.



"In optimising nothing, you optimise everything" is a philosophy that is applied by Wood. Essentially, optimising anything means that something else will be compromised and what you will always compromise is urbanism and the local economy that goes with urbanism.

Participants' Feedback

Jonathan Edkins (Deputy Head, Architecture, eThekweni Municipality) highlighted that the element of time is not something we always take into account: the plans we make now will only be realised in future generations. The sustainability and opportunity that is created now is essential and needs to be understood in its context of time. Many spaces that are contested are expected to evolve into something different in the future.

Roshini Bob (Project Executive, Parks and Recreation, eThekweni Municipality) made reference to the Cape Flats multipurpose social service model being designed by GAPP. Bob gave details on a similar approach being adopted by eThekweni in implementing multipurpose uses for social service environments. She was particularly interested in how social ills could be curbed using this model.

Puven Akkiah (Integrated Development Planning Manager, eThekweni Municipality) said that Public Space is about inclusivity, not exclusivity. Umhlanga is perceived to be an exclusive space and questioned how do we break that mindset?

Erky Wood (Thought Leader, GAPP Architects and Urban Designers) indicated that it would be difficult to curb social ills in one particular area when they affect cities on a larger scale. He suggested that a development (clinic for instance) has to achieve its objective but one must look at what other objectives it can achieve over and above that. In relation to Umhlanga, he remarked that it is a very new development and it is hoped that the area takes on the shape of the people that inhabit the area in years to come.

Facilitated Discussion Session

Key Question: What would it take for eThekweni Municipality to create vibrant people-centred public spaces?

The participants were seated in groups of 6 – 8 and given three subsidiary questions to look at. The questions and participants' responses are captured below:

1. Do we understand our users of public space?

- The users of our spaces are not always defined. There are often a range of people utilising our public spaces.



- We must conduct research on who our users are and understand the needs of the people.
- Public Spaces for many could simply be the space beneath a tree. We tend to think in formal terms, i.e. creating a Park and to come up with grand ideas because we have the means to do it and the public will have to passively accept and be recipients of what we've provided.
- Change is not always accepted by everyone in the city. Major reactions to change are usually received by about 25% of the population.
- We need to understand what the use of space means in terms of the economies of people.

2. Do we have a clear VISION for how we see public space?

- We must define, 'what is public space and where?' Is it our natural assets, (flora, fauna and beaches)? Who is responsible for the maintenance and operation of these spaces?
- We do not have a clear vision. We must stand by a definition that is clear to everyone.
- The vision should include pedestrianisation and the contribution to the health and well-being of our citizens (i.e. Bulwer Park).
- We must talk about US as an organisation and the people. We do not have a common vision. We cannot have a vision if we don't understand the people who are the users of the space.
- Economic activity within public spaces is prohibited. We need to look at policy development to facilitate the inclusion of the private sector in some of our spaces.

3. Do we have a single champion / driver to ensure the creation of vibrant public space?

- eThekweni Municipality does not have a driver specifically for public space. We lack co-ordination and alignment of our departments. A driver could assist in bringing in the relevant departments.
- This responsibility should be a cross cutting initiative. The driver of the initiative should be the City Manager, who understands the importance of Public Spaces.
- What type of activation method could we use for implementing a public space project?
- Once public spaces are implemented, we must work on a vigorous awareness campaign.

Final response from Doung Anwar Jahangeer (Thought Leader, dala)

"We need to look at shifting our mind set to being a city that leads rather than a city that follows. We need to be critical of our own practice and know who the users are. Ask the



people whom we think would give those spaces a democratic essence. Once we come up with an idea, we implement it. We must develop cultural action that looks at multiple identities in the context of their needs, the action then becomes a pilot and expands our questioning. We must implement ACTION from this discussion."

Lessons Learned

As leaders in the city, we must start thinking about approaching development from a creative angle. Durban has not cemented its positioning in South Africa. More focus must be placed on our citizens and the specific users of our Public Spaces. There is room for experimentation and growth. We must adopt a change in attitude. Durban can transform ITSELF from a city that follows to a city that leads.

Way Forward

It was agreed that the contributors to a PUBLIC SPACES FRAMEWORK would include the following departments:

- Architecture
- Parks and Recreation
- Transport
- Safer Cities and iTrump
- Libraries and Heritage
- Real Estate
- Development Management

The outputs and lessons learned from this seminar will be presented at an International Learning Exchange on Public Spaces (3 – 6 June 2014) and at an event that will run concurrently with the International Architecture Congress in August 2014. It is hoped that these initiatives will ultimately inform a new policy on Urban Space Management in eThekweni Municipality.

Conclusion

The Thought Leaders enabled senior officials to open their minds to new possibilities for Public Spaces in Durban. Participants were encouraged and motivated to work together towards the formation of an action plan to improve existing and future spaces. The biggest point that emerged from the Thought Leaders is that there is a gap in Durban that holds possibility. The enriching discussion challenged leaders in eThekweni to think imaginatively and take this concept forward in the near future.