

Urban renewal: Towards a social process

Chapter 7

Conclusion

Chapter 7- Conclusion

7.1 Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the role of social systems in urban renewal from a planning perspective. Urban planning practices have always included a social side to every intervention attempted in the past. Purposefully including the social aspects of planning into urban renewal projects proved to be more successful than only planning with economic or physical design principles.

The main research question was: "What is the role of social systems in the Central Business District of Potchefstroom?" The secondary research questions included: (1) How did the urban renewal process develop from a product based view to a social process that takes into account the existence of urban social systems within the urban centre of Potchefstroom? (2) What urban social systems are present within the Potchefstroom Central Business District (CBD)? (3) What is the role of urban social systems towards the physical setting and towards each other? (4) What is the role of urban social systems within the planning process of urban renewal initiatives?

This chapter sets out to briefly synthesise the empirical findings of this dissertation with regard to the various research questions, to succinctly discuss the lessons learned from this study, to provide recommendations for future research and to delineate the limitations of the study.

7.2 Concluding empirical findings

The main empirical findings are confined to their respective chapters. This section serves as a synthesis of the empirical aspects of the research and answers the various research questions:

- ***What is the role of social systems in the Central Business District of Potchefstroom?***

Social systems play a prominent role in the urban environment with regard to the Central Business District of Potchefstroom. Their role in this urban centre can be described as one that creates a welcoming feeling for visitors and a stable social environment for economic investment. Their role is further expressed by a vital and lively, people-friendly area that emerged from the positive social dynamics that are there. This creates a unique and strong social identity in the area that can be positively utilised to develop a strong physical identity in the area. Lastly, the social systems have a definite role in terms of adaption to change in the sense that they may assist in implementing urban renewal initiatives in a cooperative way as they seem to cope well with change.

Social systems also play a prominent role in the urban environment with regard to the general renewal of the area as they form a catalyst for socio-economic functions. As these systems clearly understand the functioning of the urban centre and the facilities, they may have a valuable contribution to make with regard to locating facilities, usefulness of facilities and future needs in the area. The sustainability of urban renewal initiatives is strongly underlied by the role of social systems in terms of the general day-to-day management of the area, as the social systems are already spontaneously involved in maintaining the spaces they use. The most important role of these systems is their value as stakeholders in initiating, driving and managing the area on the long term for their own benefit, that of the public and to strenghten local government.

- ***How did the urban renewal process develop from a product based view to a social process that takes into account the existence of urban social systems within the urban centre of Potchefstroom?***

The urban renewal process developed from a physical product to a social process during the course of history, opening up the urban planning atmosphere for social interventions within the planning process. This started to conceptualise social attributes to sustainable urban renewal. With this said the city was explained as an interwoven complex systems made up of various social systems within society. Urban social systems should therefore be seen as building blocks in developing sustainable cities.

From this viewpoint, exploration and identification of urban social systems within the urban centre of Potchefstroom was possible.

- ***What urban social systems are present within the Potchefstroom Central Business District (CBD)?***

The private sector, formal community groups and the general public were the social systems identified.

- ***What is the role of urban social systems towards (a) the physical setting and (b) towards each other?***

i) Urban social systems kindle adaptive physical environments in areas that are otherwise under-utilised or poorly supplied by infrastructure.

ii) Urban social systems kindle pro-social, culturally sensitive and security generating behaviour by interacting with each other.

- ***What is the role of urban social systems within the planning process of urban renewal initiatives?***

- i) Social systems catalyse socio-economic functions (often informally in cases where formal functions have fled the area) in the urban centre.
- ii) They increase town planners' understanding of how the urban centre functions with respect to the social and physical context, especially with regard to the CBD users' needs.
- iii) They increase (often informal) ownership and maintenance of the CBD.

In general the formulation and implementation of urban renewal initiatives based on social dynamics seems positive for the Central Business District of Potchefstroom. However, informal discussions with the previous Mayor of Potchefstroom (Prof Annette Combrink) and other government officials exposed challenges with regard to the practical implementation of urban renewal. These may be obstacles on the practical side.

7.3 Challenges for the way forward

The following challenges exist for future urban renewal initiatives in Potchefstroom:

- Lack of funding from the local government and limited resources are major challenges that need to be addressed;
- Private sector investments are difficult to obtain, and should be proactively incorporated into urban renewal initiatives;
- The regulation of the informal business sector is seen as a management challenge;
- The misunderstood idea of urban renewal projects as only physical and economically oriented and a general lack of acknowledging the social structure of urban renewal.

7.4 Suggested building blocks for practical projects

The following are important building blocks that should inform the practical implementation of urban renewal initiatives in Potchefstroom CBD:

- Political support should be obtained for the initiation of urban renewal initiatives;
- Social system involvement and participation is crucial to the success of any project in this context;
- Urban renewal is not just a physical and economic rehabilitation, but social development should run parallel;
- Urban renewal is not a "one size fit all" solution: it has to be specific to the context and social systems present and the findings of this study can therefore not be duplicated elsewhere. However, the research approach and method (Chapter 5) suggests a process to follow in similar contexts to inform urban renewal.

7.5 Recommendations for future research

From the challenges and suggested building blocks, the following recommendations for future research can be made:

- Sustainable development has three attributes where this study only focuses on one of these attributes, social sustainability. There is a need for further research that includes the economic and environmental attributes.
- Within this study, only three social systems were visible. An opportunity for further research exists to explore other possible social systems outside city centers that may inform and/or influence urban renewal e.g. local government, business forums and community groups/associations.

7.6 Limitation of the study

As this study included a micro-study context to understand the role of social systems in-depth, it is not generalisable and the findings cannot be transferred to other contexts. Urban social systems may differ from urban centre to urban centre and have different roles.

7.7 Conclusion

Most important conclusions reached in this study:

- Urban planning shifted its focus from a discipline that is technocratically based and physically orientated towards a discipline that is more inclusive and driven as a social process.
- Cities consist of complex urban social systems that are driving forces in urban environments.
- Urban renewal is as much a social process as it is a physical product and is therefore defined as complex and inclusive.
- Three social systems were identified in Potchefstroom's Central Business District namely the private sector, general public and community groups.
- Social systems in Potchefstroom CBD reveal dynamic and complex interrelationships in which positive relations are developed.
- Social systems play a prominent role in the underlying structure of the CBD and may be determined for the success of implementing urban renewal initiatives in the area.