

Urban renewal: Towards a social process

Chapter 6

Synthesis and
Recommendations

Chapter 6 - Synthesis and planning recommendations

6.1 Introduction

The study has up until now established urban social systems as important underlying driving forces in cities and has shown the importance of incorporating social dynamics in urban renewal initiatives (Lee and Chan, 2010:33), as urban renewal is as much a social process as it is a physical product (Friedman, 2010:158). The focus of this chapter is how planners can incorporate these dynamics in planning, for example with regard to urban renewal. The planning recommendations are based on the main synthesis points from the study, which will firstly be discussed as background for developing the proposals.

6.2 Synthesis of theoretical concepts

6.2.1 Planning evolved from a product oriented physical discipline to a discipline that focuses on planning as a social process

Planning is a dynamic discipline that underwent major paradigm shifts throughout history. While the ancient planning models of the Mediterranean and Egyptian civilisation developed spontaneously in response to daily spiritual and social practices, it was the idealism and rationalism of the Classical civilisations (Greece and Rome) that laid a prominent foundation for planning. Planning was used as instrument to enforce geometrical order in spite of natural landscape forms and social dynamics. The failure to address social problems with this physical order and the consequent collapse of the Roman Empire, established Medieval planning as a more human response to natural processes (e.g. social and economic interaction) and a suitable alternative to the inhuman geometry enforced by the Classical period. Due to uncontrolled urban growth and associated problems (e.g. health issues as a result of high densities) of medieval unplanned cities, the rediscovery of geometric rational planning ideas of Classical times and the propagation of humanism laid a permanent foundation for modern town planning. The modernist paradigm in planning, presented in the form of a Garden City and various interpretations of it (the Neighbourhood Unit, Super Block, Linear City and Futuristic City, and planning ideas inspired by these) developed mostly in reaction to the Industrial slum city and presented what modernism in planning stood for: planning as a physical discipline with fixed utopian models/plans designed by planners as the experts. The systems approach to planning that acknowledged the complexity of cities was yet another blueprint view of planning, although planners started to incorporate the input of other experts into the plans. It was the questioning of planning as rational fixed science that paved the way for a radical change in planning thought and a return to its anarchistic roots, laid by Proudhon and Kropotkin. Physical plans as fixed end products became less important and planning moved to the centre of socio-political contexts in which plans were debated and negotiated. The communicative turn in

planning set the scene for planning through debate – a more bottom-up approach in planning practice. The process of planning emerged as a dominant theme in planning debates and emphasised people, the dynamics between them (e.g. how social systems interact) and the participation of people in decision-making as building blocks in planning.

6.2.2 Cities are interactive complex urban social systems

The planning of cities for the public by the public is closely related to the question whether cities are seen as social systems, something that some planners have been asking for centuries. A city is seen as a complex system that interacts on a micro- or macro-sociological level. This was determined by the question if society could be seen as an integral part of a city. This was found to be true, as society is seen as the complex system creating cities as socially driven. Society is organised into primary sub-systems and human cultures, and this is known as civilisation. One of these sub-systems is the social sphere within civilisation. The social sub-system is seen as a social macro-system, with smaller social micro-systems. A socially driven society is known as a civilisation, with their social dynamics as a foundational building block, which means that the city is a society with interacting systems. This makes the city a complex social system with the metabolism of complex social systems as the link between systems. The linkages between social systems refer to the interaction between social systems. Different agents are seen as the main structure within complex social systems, with these agents chosen by the shape of the social life (norms, values and physical behaviour). The city is seen as a society with interacting systems with different agents that form a complex macro-sociological system. Different strategies have been identified to form the basis of the social city. These are (1) the idealist strategy, (2) materialist strategy, (3) structural functionalism and the (4) conflict strategy. This forms the foundation for almost all urban social behaviour within the city as a complex macro-social system. The interacting parts of this macro-social system are the economic dimension, physical dimension and the social dimension. These dimensions form the basis of a sustainable city. As the social dimension often does not receive any priority, the urban environment falls into either one of two social dimensions which is either (1) fear or (2) hope. In order to enhance hopeful sustainable cities, cultural relativism is seen as a hope inspiring sociological theory that places social systems within an inclusive, open-minded and socially sensitive atmosphere within society. Therefore cities is seen as a complex macro-social system that should be utilised in order to form hope and not fear, making the city a inclusive, open-minded and socially sensitive system.

6.2.3 Urban renewal is as much a social process as a physical product

Throughout the world urbanisation forces cities to face tremendous change due to accelerated urban growth. Factors associated with urban change include rural-urban migration, political factors, urbanisation, social factors and accelerated urban growth. In many instances, as in South Africa, this eventually culminates in urban decay, as cities are sometimes slow to

respond to these rapid changes. One of the ways cities respond to urban change is through urban renewal interventions. Urban renewal used to focus on physical intervention in the past, while social dynamics as the drivers of cities were not readily acknowledged. However, there was a question mark regarding possible long term consequences in terms of social sustainability of city centres if people are omitted as buildings blocks for urban renewal initiatives. Urban renewal's earlier definition as physical intervention changed to a more integrated complex view of urban renewal in which social dynamics are emphasised. It is therefore as much a social process as a physical product in which planners play a central role because of the spatial knowledge they can bring to an integrated social process. Various models now places social reform within urban renewal initiatives central to planning for the benefit of people. Furthermore, urban renewal initiatives are seen as participatory process in which social systems form the underlining of participants. Urban renewal is therefore seen as an integrated social process in which both physical and social aspects are important, the social aspects being informative for the physical environment. A design process has been stated that uses social dynamics as main focus, providing social design criteria along which a social process could be started. The result of these developments is that social urban renewal is seen as a social process in order to enhance our city centres in a sustainable way by using urban social systems.

6.3 Synthesis of empirical concepts

6.3.1 Potchefstroom Central Business District consists of complex dynamic social systems

6.3.1.1 Identified social systems

Three groups of people were identified through observations conducted in the Central Business District of Potchefstroom. These include the private sector (that mainly consists of formal and informal businesses as the most prominent role-players), formal community groups (people interacting within the space on a daily basis) and the general public (including unrelated individuals that use the CBD for a specific reason). These groups, referred to as social systems, interact on a continuous daily basis with one another in a dynamic and interactive way.

6.3.1.2 Social systems are dynamic and complex and foster positive social relationships

Two levels of interaction occur within the research context: the first level of interaction includes the continuous daily social interaction that takes place amongst the various social systems. A second level of interaction entails the constant reciprocal interaction that takes place between social systems and their physical environment.

With regard to the first level of interaction, an intricate complex network of social relationships developed over time in this space. This relationship is characterised by mutual respect, material

supportiveness among people, friendliness, cooperativeness, people who are comfortable with one another and who are accommodating, which in turn fosters an atmosphere that is conducive for positive social relationships. This establishes a sense of security for social systems operating in the area and contributes to sustaining daily needs. The interactions and relationships are considered as sensitive because of the high level of pro-social behaviour, as the interaction can be classified as complex and culturally relative due to the accommodative and welcoming approach to newcomers in the area.

Interaction between the social systems and the physical environment mainly revolves around two urban dimensions. These dimensions were classified into the sub-themes that were identified as agents. These sub-themes include flexibility and adoptiveness, ownership, pride, unsafe physical environment, limited choices, relaxation and dissatisfaction. As hope and fear are both visible, the interaction between the social systems and the physical environment represent a more hopeful urban dimension. This enhances a positive role towards the urban environment as these people would work together for creating hopeful cities. The hope dimension in cities could therefore be stated as the (1) focus on long term plans, (2) co-operation and (3) partnership. The intervention of an urban renewal programme could be beneficial to the social systems present, and foster a positive social atmosphere towards the physical environment.

6.3.1.3 Social systems play a prominent role in the urban environment

Social systems have strong underlying dynamics that inform the role these systems play in cities (such as Potchefstroom). First their role in the urban environment are discussed and then the possible implication of this for urban renewal initiatives.

The role of social systems within the central business district:

- *Role towards the creation of social accessibility and stability*

Social systems seem to have an important role in terms of the creation of (1) social accessibility and (2) social stability within the urban centre. As the high level of interaction is prominent within the centre this interaction constitutes a building block for the stability of the area. (1) Social accessibility can be defined as attracting social interaction for intended social groups, which creates an accessible urban centre for social interaction. (2) Social stability can be defined as the maintenance or conservation of social systems and their interaction. Social systems are consequently seen as the creators of social stability. They furthermore help to ensure the sustainability of the social dimension of urban centres and therefore plays a role within the vibrancy of the area.

- *Role towards social vitality*

There seem to be the possibility of enhancing the social vitality of the area. Social systems create a capacity to socialise when they have characteristics such as

friendliness, respect and comfort towards each other. Most of these characteristics are visible within the centre and indicates a positive view of the social vitality of the area. By enhancing the social vitality in the area, the social atmosphere becomes more positive and this benefits other sustainable dimensions such as economic sustainability (social interaction benefit the economic trade as individuals will always be present within the CBD).

- *Role in creating and sustaining social identity*

The social identity projected onto this area impacts on the physical aspects of this urban environment. Social identity can be defined as individuals who see themselves as part of a group and who project a certain character onto the physical environment. With this said the interaction of these social systems creates an identity within the urban centre that shows the presence of ownership. In this case the urban environment is modified and altered by the personal needs of the individuals who personalise the urban centre. Social systems could play an important role in the maintenance of the physical environment as the government seems to neglect their role.

- *Role towards adaptation and change*

Social systems seem to play a very adaptive role within the urban centre, as constant comfort to adapt within the area is quite visible. Playing an adaptive role can be defined as constant changes towards positive benefit. This makes social systems flexible building blocks within urban changes.

Social systems role within urban renewal:

- *Role as catalyst for socio-economic functions*

Social systems have an important role as the catalyst for social and economic functions within the urban centre. Social dynamics are highly dependent on the interaction showed in the urban centre and therefore help to sustain and develop any social function that is needed within urban renewal programmes. Also, interaction between various social systems such as the formal and informal businesses creates the possibility of economic dynamics and therefore stimulates the economic functions. Both of these dynamics are very important for urban renewal interventions as it is seen as an integrated process.

- *Role in the understanding of functioning of facilities*

Social systems seem to have an important role in the understanding of the functioning of the urban centre and the facilities present. As the adaptation of the physical environment by the social systems is visible, it is clear that social systems know their needs and what is needed within the physical setting. Therefore, social systems tend to understand the physical setting and its working, making them ideal participants within the planning process.

- *Role within maintenance*

Social systems tend to attach ownership to the area. This makes them ideal stakeholders in the role of maintenance within the area. As it was visible that maintenance seems to be a problem from the government side, there is the potential for using the social systems as a supplement to government responsibilities.

- *Role as stakeholders*

Social systems have a role as stakeholders for urban renewal projects. As the presence of cultural relativism is clear in the area, the use of social systems within the urban renewal project has various benefits. By using social systems in order to contribute to the modification of the urban environment, these systems would attach a form of belonging and ownership to the area. This could benefit the social sustainability of the urban renewal project.

6.4 Urban planning recommendations for the urban renewal process of decayed urban areas

From this study, the following broad recommendations can be formulated:

6.4.1 Identification of in situ social systems prior to plan formulation

The study first and foremost suggests that any urban renewal initiative should be based on an understanding of the dynamics of the social systems present in the context that urban renewal is planned for. This will provide a more integrated and sustainable foundation for urban renewal initiatives. This entails that social systems should form one of the most important building blocks of urban renewal and should be acknowledge from the outset of such a process. However, it should be noted that every urban setting is unique and as such the social systems present may differ.

6.4.2 Proactive integration of social systems as integral role players in the plan formulation

Social systems should be pro-actively included throughout the urban renewal process. The following table suggests a communicative approach that includes the where and how of including social systems in an urban renewal project

Table 6-1 Project stages
Stage 1: Pre-project (based on the suggested research process) Base urban renewal projects on social dynamics by means of a better understanding of the interaction between social systems. • Identify all urban social systems present in the urban centre. • Identify behavioural patterns. • Identify the levels of interaction. • Identify the role of social systems in the particular context.

Stage 2: During the urban renewal project

Involve social systems proactively during urban renewal project in the following ways:

- Involve key individuals of each social system in meetings with other role-players such as local government and private consultants on a continuous base in the analysis and plan-making stages of urban renewal initiatives.
- Regular community based meetings should be held.
- Involve social systems in the physical construction of the area to enhance ownership.
- Involve the community in the development of an open space for use as a space for a community based event (entertainment that is locally produced). This enhances ownership and belonging (e.g. involve the community in a mural project, as this would give a sense of belonging to the social systems).

Stage 3: Post-project

- A follow-up feedback session should be held about the successes of the implementation initiatives and thereafter. This serves as lessons for future interventions and acknowledges continuous involvement of social systems.
- Create a special urban renewal forum of various stakeholders e.g. each social system, a government official and urban renewal experts that can advise and inform local government about the area – this serves as a feedback structure.

(Source: Compiled by researcher)

6.4.3 Utilise social systems to identify community needs not formally catered for in the area

Utilise social systems to indicate their preferred needs for the context. As social systems usually function in a specific area daily, they have insider knowledge and experience of the area that can be of vital importance to understanding the functioning (whether positive or negative) of the area. In the case of this specific study, various special requests became apparent, such as play areas for children. Expressed needs such as this should then be further investigated in terms of its feasibility and need in the area. In the case of Potchefstroom the need expressed can be incorporated by means of an integrated open space with mixed uses. For example: building a play area for children that could also be used for picnics or street musicians. There are definite areas in the CBD where children are present; therefore further investigation is needed in order to make viable recommendations. In figure 6-2 a zone is identified where children often play and interact. There could also be the need for ways to accommodate the elderly or the disabled. This needs further investigation.

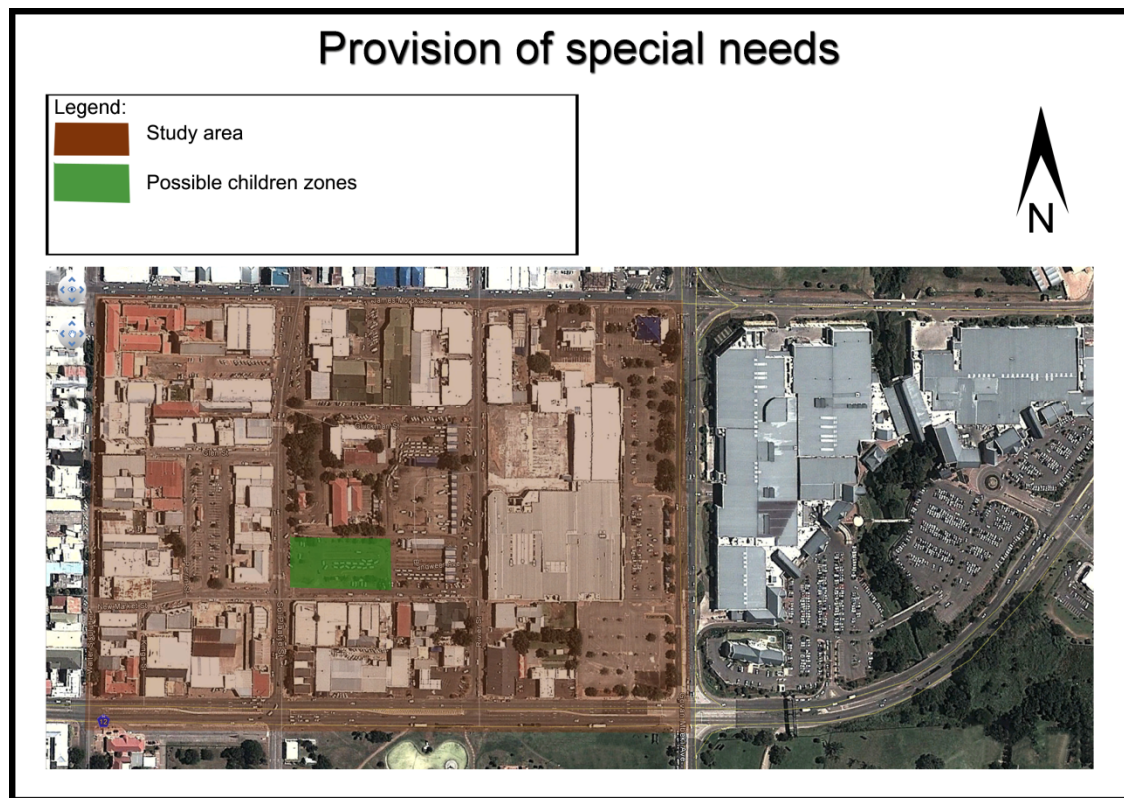


Figure 6-1 Suggestions for the provision of special needs (Source: Google earth adaptation, February 2013)

Another need expressed was the need for trees and green construction. This can be addressed the use of green spaces and environmentally friendly ornaments and street furniture. A proposed way of integrating and expanding this in the study area is by encouraging the community to apply green construction.

Also, greening can (1) be done by means of a city council or private stakeholder competition for greenest community garden. The government can encourage the application of green construction by utilising community gardens for the produce of fresh fruits and vegetables. The informal business sector can use these gardens for fresh produce to sell. This could also enhance the social dynamics, as it sets the stage for socialising. (2) Physical ornaments and street furniture that save energy and water should be used. This will also address maintenance problems, for example solar-powered street lightning will rarely have any maintenance as it is powered by the sun. (3) Applying a green code initiative for the informal and formal businesses within the area where tax incentives are given to the most green building or business. However, the need for other stakeholders is great in order to test and confirm the feasibility of such recommendations. In figure 6-3 there are possible locations been identified for community gardens, as well as the expressed needs for trees are allocated.

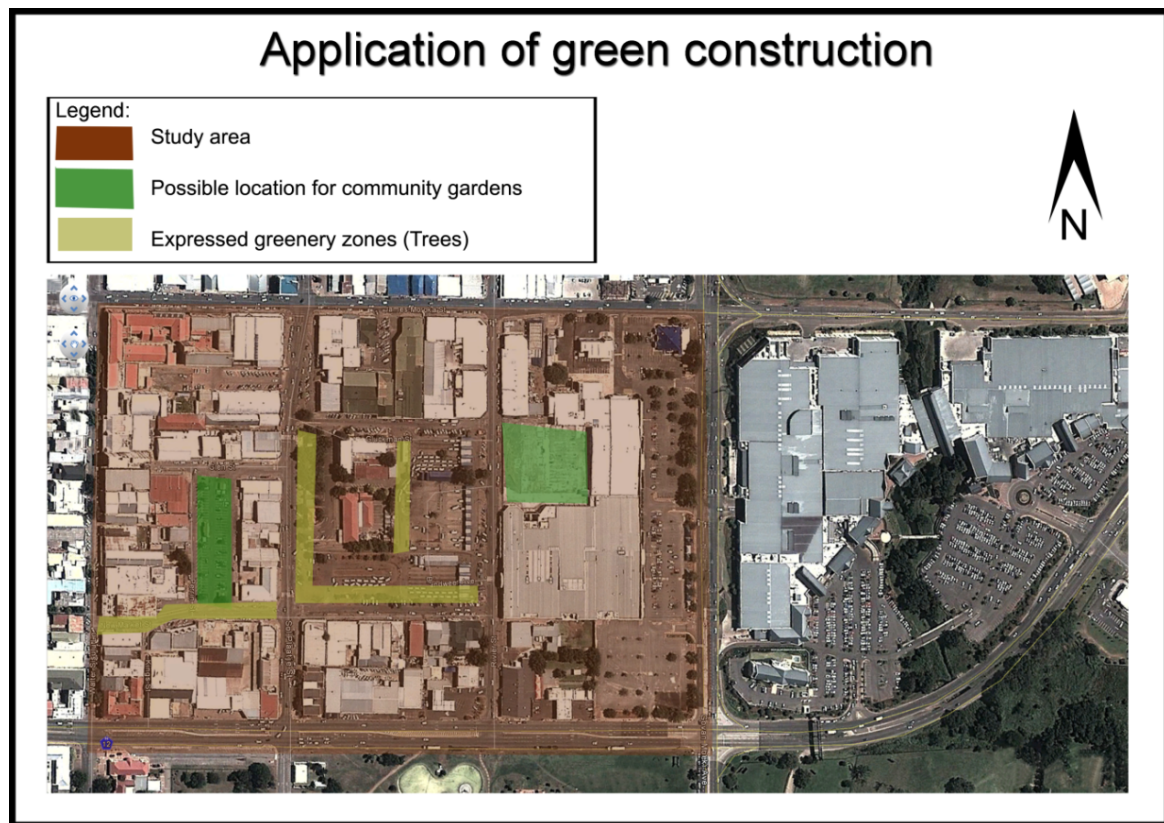


Figure 6-2 Application of green construction (Source: Google earth adaptation, February 2013)

Participants stressed a need for local distinctiveness in addition to the needs discussed above. Local distinctiveness shows the character of the environment and therefore it is essential to understand the urban environment within the context of its local character. Within Potchefstroom the social interaction forms an integral part of the local distinctiveness. This should be preserved by physical interventions. An example: The presence of street artists was prominent. One could approach these artists to create artwork in the area that incorporates the local character on an esthetical level. An art mural could for instance strengthen the local character and the urban atmosphere. As the high level of interaction within the area is seen as part of the local distinctiveness, the provision of well-planned socialising areas such as open spaces or plazas should be considered. Entertainment was also visible in the form of street musicians making music and dancing. A possible arena or plaza for the use of entertainment purposes is proposed, with further investigation. The social systems should be present within the planning of such ideas in order to keep it feasible. Figure 6-4 gives an example of possible entertainment zones and shows how murals and artwork can be distributed across the area. By enhancing the local distinctiveness the pride in the area could be enhanced, making the area pleasant and welcoming.

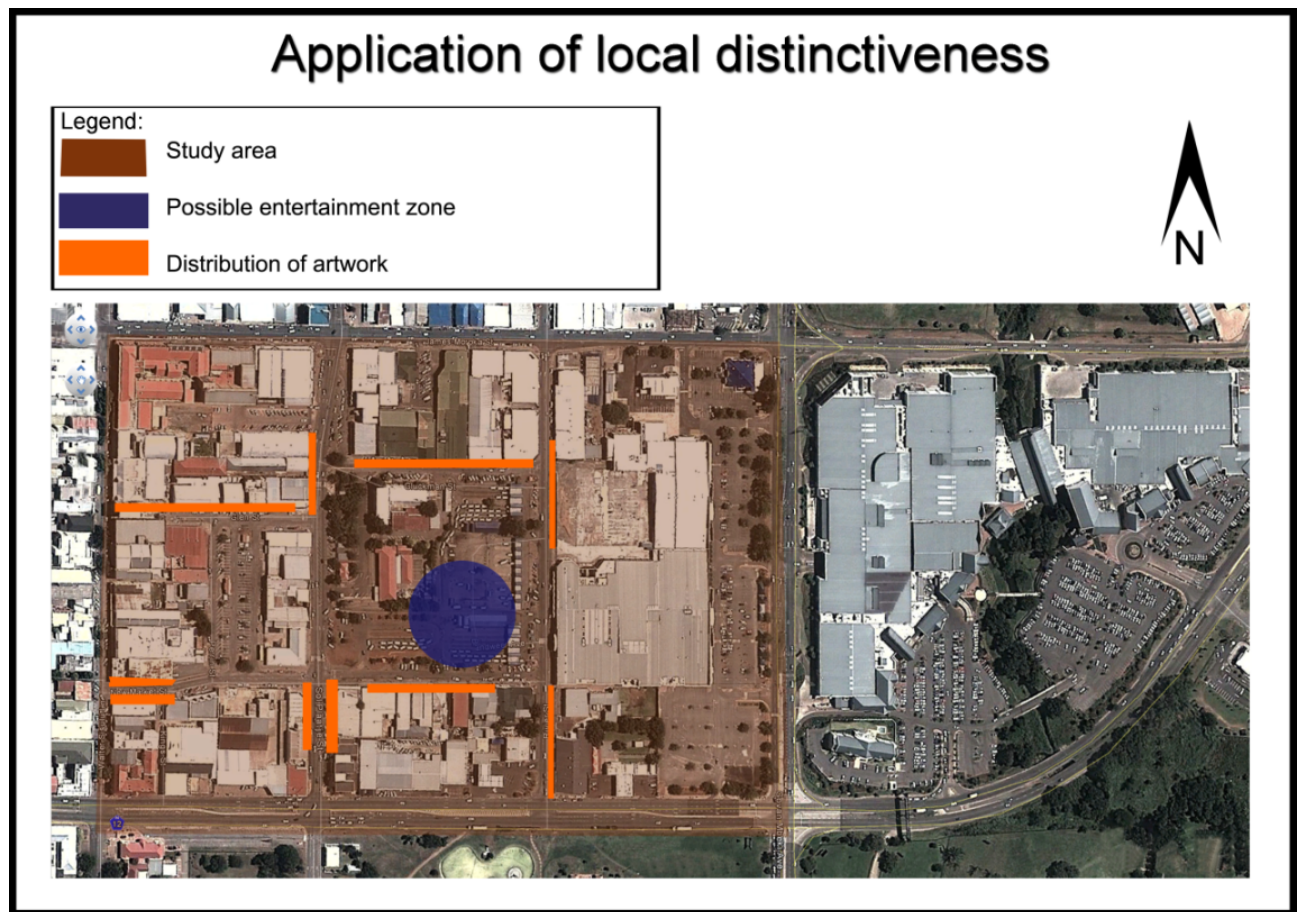


Figure 6-3 Application of local distinctiveness (Source: Google earth adaptation, February 2013)

Lastly, individuals within the social systems identified access to open spaces as lacking. This area in Potchefstroom is linked to various open spaces, the CBD could be linked in a much more distinctive and visible manner, creating a flow of public spaces in the CBD of Potchefstroom. Networks of public spaces ideally provide accessibility. Within the Potchefstroom area, trees could be planted along sidewalks in order to link the different open spaces. Trees often form a pedestrian friendly environment, leading pedestrians to various destinations. These trees could be placed along the densest pedestrian ways, which would also enhance the pleasantness of the area for social interaction. Access to any open space should be easy and comfortable, inviting social systems in. This could be done by not placing fencing and dense shrubs, but instead using certain paving patterns and a similar type of paving throughout the CBD to enhance the flow of pedestrians from open space to open space. By defining the open spaces, the entrances could be made more distinctive and visible. Figure 6-5 gives suggestions on how to link the different existing open spaces by means of defining the areas and creating linkages with trees and paving.

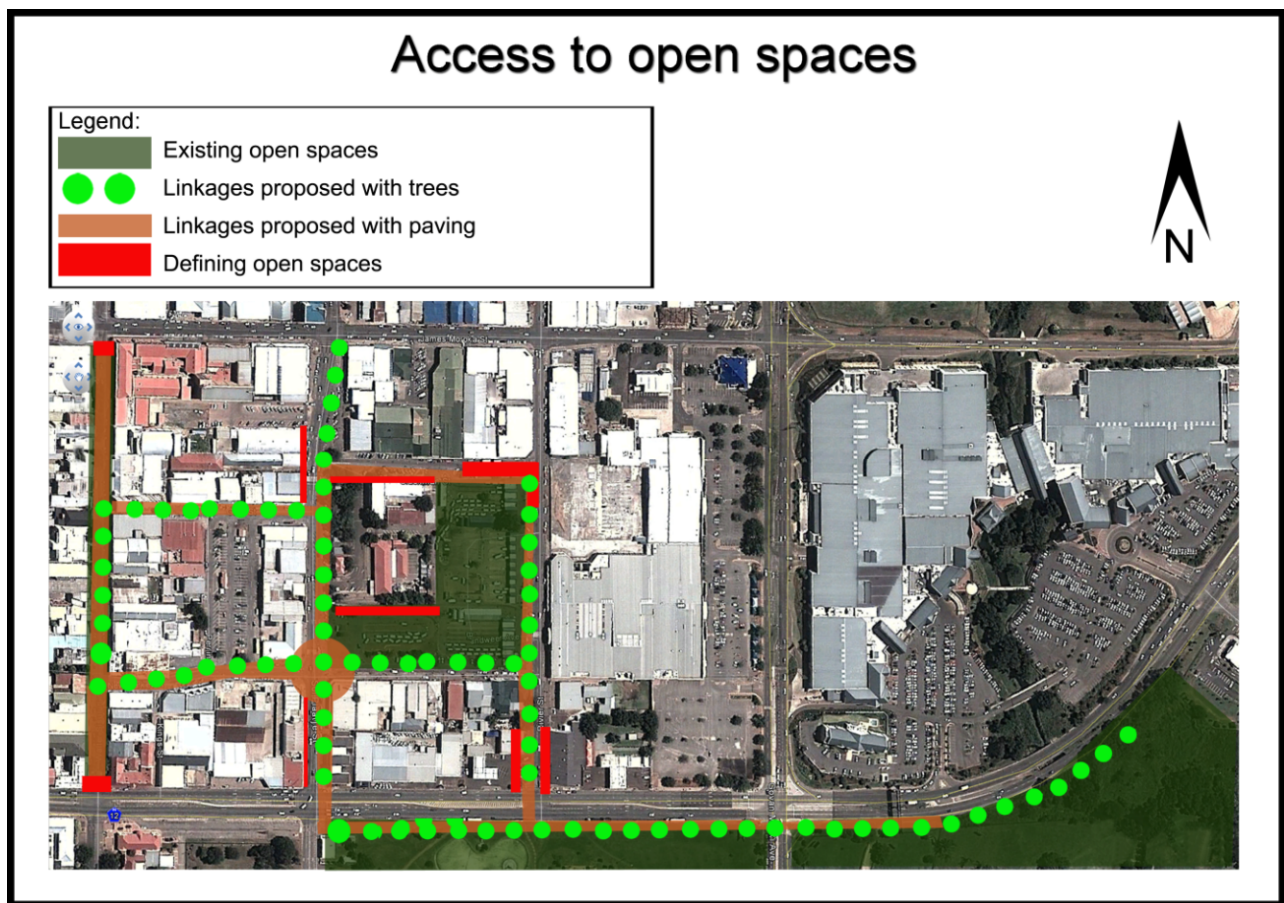


Figure 6-4 Enhancing access to open spaces (Source: Google earth adaptation, February 2013)

6.4.4 Holistic perspective on social systems as role players in the urban arena

It is important to remember that the three social systems identified in this study function in an entwined manner. As such, the social systems within a specific urban context must be considered as a whole, supporting each other in various ways. Failing to consider one social system, or favouring one above the other in urban renewal projects can create a situation where this support system unravels, leading to failure of the renewal project.

Social systems are knowledgeable role players in the urban arena and vital for a rich understanding of areas that are in some cases considered as 'decayed'. They make up an integral part in the informal economy of such areas and provide vitality to spaces which – in other cases – would have been termed as 'lost space' (Trancik, 1986). Social systems point things out to planners so that spaces can be more intensely utilised and used in more creative ways than formal planning could have done without proactive inclusion of knowledge of these social systems and their nature.

6.6 Conclusion

This chapter offered recommendations for urban renewal initiatives in general and for the Potchefstroom CBD. Any urban renewal intervention needs assistance to understand the urban social atmosphere, therefore certain practical points were provided for the application of urban renewal initiatives, followed by suggestions for Potchefstroom CBD. Three identified urban social systems were identified within the Potchefstroom CBD that should be included in urban renewal strategies during all three stages of the process. The roles of these systems have been identified as: (1) role towards the creation of social accessibility and stability; (2) role towards social vitality; (3) role in creating and sustaining social identity; and the (4) role towards adaptation and change. The roles of social systems within urban renewal initiatives are: (1) role as catalyst for socio-economic functions; (2) role related to the understanding of functioning of facilities; (3) role in maintenance and (4) role as stakeholders. These roles are informative for incorporating urban renewal initiatives. The chapter offered physical recommendations for the Potchefstroom CBD. These recommendations include the provision of special requests; application of local distinctiveness; application of green construction and access to open spaces. The practical implementation of a project such as this can encounter challenges. The aim of this study was to explore the role of urban social systems within the CBD of Potchefstroom in order to contribute to the debate in urban planning, and the possible challenges enriched the outcomes. The following chapter concludes the study.