



Chapter 1

Introduction

Chapter 1 – Contextualisation of the study

1.1 Introduction and background

In 2008 the United Nations projected that by 2012, three billion of the world's seven billion population would be urbanised. By 2030 the number of urban residents will have risen to more than 60% of the world population. Such rapid urbanisation means increasing development pressure in urban areas to provide housing, infrastructure and rising living standards for residents (Beall & Fox, 2009; Cohen, 2001). South Africa is experiencing a similar problem since it has one of the highest urbanisation rates in the world (Yari, 2011:6). Various authors (Hendrix, 2009:4, Couch & Dennemann, 2000:5 and Rosada, 1994:2) refer to the social challenge with regard to urban growth as the increasing agglomeration of people in cities brings various cultures into closer contact with each other. This anticipated growth implies that cities are becoming increasingly complex phenomena to study as they are developing into cultural "melting pots" that share the same spatial environment (Carnevale, 2007:3). With this in mind it is undoubted that cities are faced with tremendous change in the future.

One of the spatial ways to cope with changing urban environments is through urban renewal (Chan & Lee, 2008:243). Urban renewal is defined as the physical rebuilding of an urban area to its former physical and social state (Stouten, 2005:7). According to Tsenkova (2002:11) urban renewal over the last forty years has mainly been addressed through economic and planning policies geared towards physical renewal, but with little understanding of social revival. Various authors view the focus on urban renewal as a physical product as an outdated approach (Carmon, 1999:154, Zhang & Fang, 2004:288). There is a global trend in the concept of redevelopment practices to adopt more sustainable ways to ensure the enhancement of urban centres (Lee & Chan, 2010:9). In order to ensure more sustainable urban centres, Lee and Chan (2010:9) emphasise the importance of acknowledging the social dimension of cities in urban renewal processes, as social dynamics are important driving factors in cities (Shutkin, 2000).

The creation of more socially sustainable cities is an important goal in spatial planning proposals (Newman, 2010:12 & Carnevale, 2007:80). This goal started a debate on whether it is desirable and sustainable to force physical planning onto social dynamics, as social dynamics are underlying driving forces of the physical environment (Lee & Chan, 2010:9). The sustainability of urban renewal attempts up until now is therefore questioned due to its disregard of the role of social dynamics in the urban environment. According to Voges (2011:5) social systems contribute to the urban renewal process and is important to understand because they give rise to a unique set of social dynamics. Newman (2010:6) describes urban social systems as interacting parts working together in a fluent manner. For Zhang, Shengsheng, Fath and

Yang (2011:14) an urban social system essentially involves the human space that is created and constructed for the interaction of daily social life. This is probably why an author such as Stouten (2005:7) suggests the building or rebuilding of a social city as one of the primary goals in urban renewal. This is especially true for planning that seeks an optimum fit between people and their environment (Johnson, 2002:246). The failure to include social systems in the urban renewal process therefore seems to be alarming and the consequences detrimental (Yari, 2011:5).

Up until now very little research has been conducted on the role of social systems in the urban renewal process (Pulselli, Ratti & Tiezzi, 2006:132). An understanding of social systems in the urban renewal process may possibly contribute to enhance urban renewal in South Africa because of South Africa's culturally sensitive urban environment (Yari, 2011:5). International studies that focus on incorporating social systems within urban environments include for example: (1) that of Lee and Chan (2010:110) in Hong Kong; (2) Embarcadero in San Francisco in the United States (Portman, 2000) and (3) the Cheonggyecheon Restoration project in South Korea (Lee, 2006:51). Lee and Chan (2010:112) suggest design criteria for specific social systems present in urban centres. However, they did not explore the role of existing social systems or incorporate these systems within the planning process. In South Africa research is extremely limited in this regard. Examples of studies in South Africa include more practice orientated studies such as the revitalisation of Nelson Mandela Bay, done by the Port Elizabeth Development Agency (Voges, 2011:2). The study followed a public participation process, but did not specifically refer to the role of social systems. There seems to be a rich potential for research in this regard, because no research could be found that particularly seeks to understand the role of social systems in central business districts and how to acknowledge these in urban renewal initiatives in the South African context.

Although urban renewal is a multi-disciplinary intervention involving different professions in the process, Stouten (2005:5) emphasises the fact that urban planning is one of the most important disciplines in the urban renewal process because urban planners can define urban space. Newman (2010:12) views the multi-disciplinary nature of the planning profession as important in contributing to the physical, social and economic well-being of an area (Newman, 2010:12). While urban renewal seems to take the physical and economic factors into account in the planning process, urban social systems are treated as less significant (Stouten, 2005:4). Not taking the role of social systems into account may hinder the sustainability of urban renewal programmes in the long term (Lee & Chan, 2010:252).

1.2 Problem statement

Although sustainable development in theory recognises the social dimension and the ecological and economic aspects as equally important, this dimension is not yet fully integrated in urban renewal initiatives, especially in South Africa. This is significant given the fact that the country experiences high urban growth and an increase in agglomeration of people from diverse cultural backgrounds that share the same spatial environment. When planners, who are the key professionals involved in urban renewal, do not realise what systems exist in cities and do not understand the role of these, they may ignore the social aspect because they do not know how to incorporate these elements. This is possibly the reason why no criteria or guidelines exist on how to incorporate social systems in the urban renewal processes.

The Tlokwe Municipality has recently emphasised the need for social understanding within an economic sphere, as indicated in its Mission Statement (South Africa, 2007:2): "Social understanding should form the underpinning for economic and physical revitalisation". This enjoys a high priority in the development choices made. The problem with regard to a limited understanding of how to incorporate social dynamics (or social systems) in development on the theoretical and methodological level is therefore a problem that needs to be researched.

1.3 Aims and objectives of the study

1.3.1 Aim

The primary goal of this ethnographical study was to identify and understand social systems in the Central Business District of Potchefstroom in order to make recommendations for enhancing urban renewal. Secondary aims were developed as guiding points in the research in order to accomplish the primary goal.

1.3.2 Objectives

- To give a historical overview of urban planning in terms of the inclusion of social dynamics;
- To obtain a theoretical understanding of the cities as complex urban social systems;
- To understand the concept of urban renewal;
- To identify possible social systems embedded in the urban environment of Potchefstroom Central Business District;
- To explore how urban social systems interact with one another and with the physical environment in the CBD of Potchefstroom; and
- To contribute to the current debate on urban renewal in terms of sustainable development.

1.4 Research question

The main research question that guided this study was “What is the role of social systems in the Central Business District of Potchefstroom with regard to urban renewal?”

Secondary questions include theoretical and empirically related questions and include the following:

- How did planning evolve from a product oriented discipline to that of a social process and how is urban renewal defined against this background?
- What urban social systems are present within the Potchefstroom Central Business District (CBD)?
- How do social systems interact with each other in the Central Business District of Potchefstroom?
- How do social systems interact with the physical environment in the Central Business District of Potchefstroom?
- How can urban social systems be included within urban renewal initiatives?

1.5 Research context

This research was conducted in the Central Business Area of Potchefstroom, a medium sized city located in the North West Province of South Africa. Potchefstroom was identified as a primary regional node and one of six urban growth areas in the North West Province (South Africa, 2005). The Tlokwe Spatial Development Framework (South Africa, 2008) identified Potchefstroom CBD as a regional economic node (South Africa, 2008), as economic development within Potchefstroom are considered as important (South Africa, 2006). Potchefstroom CBD was therefore earmarked for strategic interventions such as urban renewal initiatives (South Africa, 2006).

The Southern District Joint Development Forum conducted a Revitalisation Strategy in 2006 which identified urban decay in Potchefstroom. The Forum further said that the decay in medium-sized cities like Potchefstroom usually occurs in fast and concentrated intervals, making it deadly for the city centre. Okaba and Nte (2008) state that the effects of urban decay in African towns is considered to be typical of an African city. The photograph below (Figure 1-1) gives a general impression of how these problems manifest physically. Figure 1-2 gives a map to contextualise the area within the Municipal boundaries of Potchefstroom.



Figure 1-1 Research context (Source: Meiring, GH, 10 April 2012)

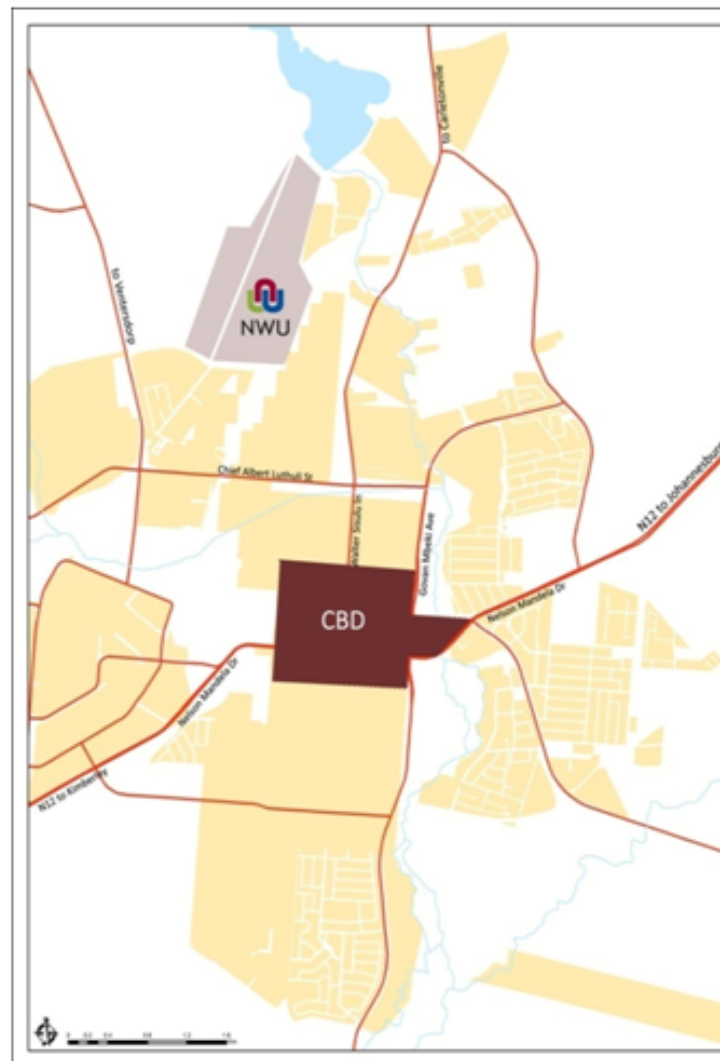


Figure 1-2 Map of the CBD of Potchefstroom (Source: Compiled by GISCOE, 10 August 2012)

1.6 Research design

1.6.1 Research approach

As this study is focused on interactions between urban social systems and the physical setting, a qualitative research approach seems more suitable to explore and create an understanding of the phenomena at study (Ritchie & Lewis, 2004:2). According to Wolcott (2001:15) qualitative research is a scientific research method used in various abstract research environments such as studying the patterns of animals and humans. It can in particular generate rich detailed accounts of social behaviour and relationship between certain identified groups (Wolcott, 2001:13). It is an explorative study as described by Leedy and Ormord (2002:13), because it seeks to understand the human aspects of urban planning.

1.6.2 Methodology

Ethnography was chosen as the overarching methodological approach because this methodology allows for greater flexibility and it evolves contextually in response to the lived realities encountered in the field (Ritchie & Lewis, 2004:1). The research therefore took place in a natural setting where no extraneous influences occur (Creswell, 2007:16; Wolcott, 2001:12).

This particular study is ethnographic in nature because it aims to capture and explore the nature of the social phenomenon in the physical setting. The focus lies not with the physical CBD or study area, but with the people within the physical setting.

A literature study was conducted to contextualise the themes that emerged from the empirical study. Certain key concepts were identified in light of the qualitative research done. The key concepts explored in the literature include: (1) the nature and evolution of planning, (2) the complex nature of cities and (3) the evolution of urban renewal. The literature review was conducted by using books, articles published in academic journals on international databases such as Science direct, Web of knowledge and Africa-wide information and South African databases such as Sabinet and Boloka. Due to the strong sociological outlook on this study, various sociology books were used as background to understand cities and people.

1.6.3 Data collection

Various qualitative methods for data collection are appropriate for this type of research. The most common of these methods, according to Wolcott (2001:21) are observations and interviews. Since the research area is a socially sensitive, the researcher selected explorative research methods that pose as little as possible interference.

- **Observations**

Non-participant observations of the study area were used as an appropriate way for collecting data on naturally occurring behaviours in normal everyday contexts (Maree, 2007:84). In this

case the exploration of different social systems within the area was conducted by observing the social systems in their normal context with no interference (Wolcott, 2001:21). Observations were done in July of 2012 and approximately 48 hours were spent within the CBD over a period of 24 days with 2 hours per day, representing every day of the week within the time frame of 07:00 to 19:00. According to Maree (2007:86) it is better to observe one to two hours a day over a longer time period in order to capture rich data. Longer hours on fewer occasions produce less data.

- **Interviews**

The observations were followed by in-depth interviews. Rich descriptive data were essential. In this case the interviews served two purposes (1) to obtain insight in the group dynamics and behaviours that were observed during the first phase of the research and (2) to explore participant's perception on their environment to serve as input for urban renewal. Purposive sampling was used in order to select the participants. A total of seventy-five interviews were conducted from three social systems identified during the observation phase. The profiles of the participants include 61% male and 39% female, with ages that vary between 27 and 56. All participants selected were individuals who are inhabitants of Potchefstroom and use the CBD on a daily basis. The main languages used in the interview process were Setswana, isiXhosa and English, while Afrikaans was only used if it was the participant's mother tongue. As Setswana and isiXhosa are closely related, a Setswana interpreter was used as part of the interview process.

1.6.4 Data analysis.

- **Observations**

According to Roland, Jansen, Wiertz, Meyer and Noldus (2003:392) the data analysis of the observations measures the level of agreement between sets of observational data. Observations are usually done by one observer who observes different times in the process (Roland et al., 2003:391). The following steps were used in the data analysis process: (1) field notes and photographs were grouped together, (2) time was allowed for reflecting on data, (3) behavioural patterns were identified, and finally the data were grouped into behavioural categories. Each observation was placed in a behavioural category in line with the previous theories. The themes or categories were chosen based on the settings observed most (Roland et al., 2003:391).

- **Interviews**

Qualitative data analysis tends to be an ongoing and iterative process, implying that data collection, processing, analysis and reporting are intertwined, and not merely a number of successive steps (Maree, 2007:101). An interim data analysis was conducted to determine if

rich descriptive data was obtained regarding the phenomenon being studied, as well as whether data saturation was achieved (Bates, Droste, Cuba & Swingle, 2008:14). All interviews were transcribed using verbatim transcriptions. The data were constantly engaged with determining great in-depth data. This would eventually help with the coding process. A qualitative content analysis was done by using open coding. This included labeling concepts, defining and developing categories based on their properties and dimensions (Maree, 2007:105). As various codes were identified a category would flow from this, eventually contextualising the data to themes.

1.7 Chapter Summary

Chapter 2: Planning paradigms: From physical product to social process

This chapter aims to conceptualise the people orientated approach as propagated in this dissertation by investigating the paradigm shifts that have occurred in urban planning. The historical overview of planning includes discussions of the historical, modernist and post-modernism approaches to planning. The communicative turn in planning theory is highlighted as the most appropriate paradigm for the inclusion of social aspects in urban renewal.

Chapter 3: Cities as complex urban social systems in society

This chapter will first and foremost aim to create an understanding of the city as an interwoven complex system made up of various social systems within society. A systematic approach is taken to various contexts in which social systems are embedded: society, the civilisation and the existence of urban systems. The chapter turns to an understanding of the different urban social systems and the theories underpinning the discipline, such as cultural relativism. In the final instance the chapter looks at how this could benefit social sustainability.

Chapter 4: Urban renewal: Towards a social process

This chapter focuses on how urban renewal evolved from a narrow physical orientated intervention to a more comprehensive intervention into which social dynamics are included. Definitions and theories of urban renewal are discussed. As social systems are recognised as primary forces behind urban renewal, stakeholder participation is emphasised as possible building blocks in urban renewal.

Chapter 5: Exploring social systems in the Potchefstroom Central Business District

This chapter is a step towards understanding social systems in an existing area that experiences inner city decline and urban decay. The main aim of the chapter is to explore the interaction of the social systems that operate in practice and the role of the identified systems.

Chapter 6: Synthesis and Recommendations

This chapter concludes the study by formulating recommendations for the process of urban renewal in order to acknowledge social dynamics in social systems and physical planning, as well as design recommendations to support the social dynamics in the area.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

Finally, this chapter reflects in how the primary and secondary research questions have been answered and how the aims of the study were met. The study will conclude by bringing the theory and practice of urban planning in relation to social dynamics (in the form of interactions between social systems and the physical environment) in such a way that the role of urban social systems within the city as complex system will be better understood.