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## GREENING NYANGA: DEVELOPING A COMMUNITY PARK IN A COMPLEX URBAN ENVIRONMENT IN CAPE TOWN, SOUTH AFRICA

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Green, recreational spaces are lacking in most low-income urban areas of Cape Town, South Africa. Public open spaces that do exist are often considered nuisance plots, as they attract anti-social behaviour. Thus, there is a dire need to create green, recreational spaces in such areas to provide the benefits of parks to the community members who live there. Nuisance plots are unsafe and should be developed into safe, convivial, and beautiful spaces for local communities to utilise. Using the development of a community park in the Cape Town township of Nyanga as a case study, this paper demonstrates the communality and contestations involved in the planning and implementation of green infrastructure in an urban landscape marred by socioeconomic inequalities. Sourcing data from nine months of ethnographic fieldwork, this paper aims to i) show the importance of inclusive planning and decision-making through participation of all stakeholders in urban design and spatial planning projects; ii) to highlight the complexities and social contestations of such projects, and the need to consider the social relations of an area during the planning and implementation phases; and iii) to emphasise the importance of incorporating sense of place and belonging in design and planning decisions.

**Keywords:** community park, inclusive governance, green infrastructure, socioeconomic inequality, place-making

The inequitable patterns of and access to green spaces within many cities are concerning in the sustainability debate. Recently, Venter et al. (2020) argue that studies from different world regions have shown that lower income urban residential areas are more likely to have the least access to green infrastructure in the form of green spaces or street trees. In particular, cities in the global South are commonly faced with challenges associated with natural resource threats, the inequitable distribution of wealth, informality, and poor infrastructure (Parnell and Robinson, 2012). Such challenges are attuned to rapid urbanisation happening in Southern cities. Parnell and Walawege (2011) argue that Africa's rapidly expanding urban areas are likely to experience the biggest impact of global environmental change over the next thirty to fifty years because of population growth and weak capacity and infrastructure of nation-states to manage urbanisation and environmental change in cities. More specifically, in Cape Town, the complex intersections between urban history and planning legacies (colonial segregation followed by apartheid), socio-cultural diversities, and socio-spatial differences in vulnerability, resilience, and coping capacity to environmental change will massively impact its poor and marginalised citizens (UN-Habitat, 2014).

A city renowned for its natural assets and cultural diversity, Cape Town is often referred to as 'Africa's most liveable city' (UN-Habitat, 2014), but is also widely known to be one of the most unequal cities in the world. Cape Town's inequality is felt across an array of areas, including social (for

example, access to water, Wilson and Pereira, 2012), spatial (including perpetuation of the apartheid city layout and its consequences, McFarlane, 2018), institutional (in terms of constraints in which participatory governance is designed and implemented, Lemanski, 2017), economic (for example, high poverty and unemployment levels, Brown-Luthango, Reyes and Gubevu, 2017) and environmental (regarding environmentally degraded spaces, for example, Arendse and Patel, 2014). The city is grappling with the challenge of how to prioritize pressing development needs and challenges with making choices that ensure medium and long-term sustainability (UN-Habitat, 2014).

Cape Town's urban periphery and the city itself today are like the two oceans surrounding Cape Town's coastline: they converge but do not meet. They portray a dichotomous image, where green spaces on the periphery are still poorly maintained compared to those in the city and suburbs. In many township areas, such as Nyanga, formal recreational and green spaces are rare, poorly maintained, and often avoided for fear of crime (Cocks et al., 2016). A seemingly low appreciation of green spaces is reflected in the general impression of Nyanga as a result of cuts in the municipality's maintenance budgets of these urban regions, for example (Chiesura, 2004).

Nyanga is located within the Cape Flats (see Fig. 1), which connects the False Bay coastline to the townships, and is characterised by a sandy landscape of sparsely vegetated dunes, the severe south-easterly winds (predominantly in summer), and periodic flooding (predominantly in winter)

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**Figure 1** Map showing the location of Nyanga within the context of the city of Cape Town and South Africa

(Awotona, Japha and Prinsloo, 1995). Nyanga is the second oldest black African township in Cape Town after Langa. This formerly racially-segregated neighbourhood was established in 1946 (Fast, 1995) as a result of addressing the overcrowded conditions in Langa, caused by the influx of (mainly) black African men who came to Cape Town to find employment (Field, 2007). Despite the socio-economic challenges in Nyanga, such as unemployment and crime, that portray impressions of a neglected township, local residents and community organisations are “spreading the story of how the forgotten structure could manifest a new kind of beauty” (Aalto and Ernstson, 2016). Everyday sustainability is manifest and portrayed in various activities that enliven the landscape with gardens, community parks, and the hustle and bustle of informal trading. In this paper, the development of a community park is used as a case study to show how an urban green infrastructure (GI) project was established through collaboration between the local municipality, a local non-governmental organisation (NGO), and the local community. The GI project was identified during the fieldwork phase of my PhD, when I was able to engage with all stakeholders in the planning and implementation phases of the project. The methodology of the ways in which this research was conducted will be discussed next.

## Material and method

Ethnography was used in this study to understand the ways of life of the local people of Nyanga in the context of their everyday, lived experiences during the development of the community park. Ethnographic data were gathered using the following methods: participation and observation, by spending time in Nyanga, walking around the area, and taking part in community activities, including community meetings; taking photographs; conducting 20 semi-structured interviews and an estimated 40 to 50 conversational encounters; and keeping a personal diary to record each day’s encounters. Participants in the study were selected based on their engagement with the development of the community park. Most of the participants from the local community were not employed, either because of retirement or because of not finding work, and the ages of the participants ranged broadly between 24 and 65 years.

The community-driven NGO involved in the project, called Etafeni, encompassed a multitude of programmes that focused on prominent development issues in Nyanga, including greening projects. The Greening Nyanga Programme’s projects encouraged community members to keep the environment clean and green, plant trees, and establish home vegetable gardens. Its main objective was to transform nuisance plots (a term used by Etafeni’s Greening Nyanga Programme) into beautiful, convivial, and safe spaces for the community to enjoy. My observation and participation at Etafeni included attending regular management meetings and team-building events, and the community meetings that revolved around the development of the community park. Upon my arrival at Etafeni, a plot had already been identified as being the next park to develop (see Figs. 2 and 3 showing the before and after pictures of the plot). I was able to participate in the design of the park with the community and Etafeni, and assist in the procurement of the resources to go into the park. I observed the conflict that arose between community members and the fence company that erected the fence around the plot, and then I observed the resolution of the conflict at a street committee meeting. Both these important events will be discussed in the next section of this paper.

## Results and deiscussion

The community park that was initiated by Etafeni in partnership with the surrounding local community and the local municipality that owned the land ultimately demonstrated the potential to blend space, people, nature, memory, and imagination. It was implemented as a result of a socio-ecological design process in response to current urban social and environmental challenges in the township. The environmental transformation of the park resonated with Gandy’s (2006) idea of New Urbanism, which was influenced by sustainability and nature-based formations in urban design processes. His notion of urban design being an extension of beauty in nature by being reflected in “the geometric arrangement of space or the embellishment of urban life through gardens” (Gandy, 2006).



**Figure 2 and Figure 3** Before (April 2016) and after (September 2017) images of the park

At one of the monthly community meetings I was introduced to the committee members, who allowed me to sit in on the meeting. The agenda included the project to build a community park in the section of road opposite Etafeni. It was at this moment that I realised that there were different communities within Nyanga. Portrayed as a socially divided and dichotomous township, gang violence and violent crime made this particular area one of the most dangerous areas of the township, yet it was an area where communities played an active role in managing it. This particular part of Nyanga in the vicinity of Etafeni consisted of various street committees. Performing as a type of governance structure, they met regularly on behalf of all residents living in the individual streets to discuss neighbourhood concerns. Decisions were made by the committee and relayed to the Ward Councillor of Nyanga to formally address and implement them at a Municipal level. These meetings were important for the communities as platforms for community members to voice their opinions and ideas.

The development of the park was a multi-stakeholder project, but the needs of the community were at the forefront of the design and implementation processes. Across the road from Etafeni, a derelict piece of land that was usually used for anti-social behaviour, such as illegal dumping of waste and gatherings for criminal activities, was identified by all parties (Municipal officials, Etafeni, and the local Street Committee) as the space for the new park to accommodate the elderly in the area. The plan was, thus, to recover and revitalise the land for the new park and design it according to the needs of the elderly. A partnership agreement was finalised by the parties, and the fundraising process by Etafeni began. The Municipal officials said upfront that their budget could only provide plants and trees. The first and most important item that the Street Committee requested from Etafeni was a palisade fence. Crime in the area dictated that a fence be erected to protect the various components that would make up the park, on which I will elaborate shortly.

During the erection of the fence by an external company, conflict arose from local community members. The community was adamant that it should be involved

in the work generated by the erection of the fence, rather than employees from an external to the neighbourhood company. The scale of this contestation was aligned to sense of place attachment and place meaning. According to Kil, Holland and Stein (2014), empirical research suggests that place attachment and meanings influence environmental concerns such as the acceptability of recreation settings (over housing developments, for example), which was indicative of this community park project. This community had come to an agreement to develop the space into a community park, and therefore, had shown interest and attachment to the imagined space. In addition, the high rate of unemployment in Nyanga placed some people in a position to seize upon work opportunities when they arose. Community members saw that outsiders (employees of the fence company) were making money from the green space, a place that they were protecting and uplifting for the sake of their community. Thus, the meaning behind the erection of the fence extended beyond place protection, but also an opportunity for temporary employment.

Moreover, such place-protective behaviour represented social exclusion and was symbolised by the fence. The fence was not only represented as a physical barrier to unwanted people, but also an emotional one. It evoked hostile emotions on the day that it was supposed to be erected. It was also a significant feature in the planning phase of the project, where the Street Committee requested that it be placed around the park. The concern of criminal activity and undesirable people in the park by the committee meant that it became a feature that was impossible to ignore. The practices of everyday life that were place-protective in the form of erecting a fence, for example, demonstrated adaptiveness and inventiveness in planning and transforming current situations, such as criminal activity. In this case, erecting the fence meant a safer space that people could use and perform other practices, such as socialising and playing, and one of opportunity for employment.

At this juncture in the development process I was awakened to the idea that this park was for the community, by the community. The tension alleviated through engagements between the stakeholders and the assurance that the community would be involved in all processes of



**Figure 4, Figure 5 and Figure 6** Flowers in bloom and the labyrinth

the development of the space going forward. I learnt that one of the community members, Whitey (male, late 30s), guarded the fence overnight for fear that parts of the half-built fence would be stolen. He expressed:

“The people who steal are on Tik (a local version of methamphetamine) and don’t care about the park. They and their children will use it, but they will steal from it. They don’t understand the importance of it.”

Whitey demonstrated the community commitment to a common cause in Nyanga of building a place that would become meaningful to the people living in the area. In addition to the emotional connection to a place, increased knowledge about a place increased the likelihood that individuals would demonstrate place-protective behaviours (Halpenny, 2010). Thus, residents with higher levels of neighbourhood attachment were more likely to fight against attempts to negatively change the social and physical nature of their neighbourhood.

The duration of the work done to complete the park spanned a period of 18 months. During this time, noteworthy interactions emerged. The commitment of a community member (male, early 50s) working in the park during the planting phase culminated with his commitment to planting a garden at his home. He explained to me that he learnt so much from working in the park and wished to replicate the practice at home. Similarly, a female (early 40s) community member walking past the park echoed the desire to make a garden of her own at home. As the plants started to flower (see Figs. 4 and 5), more community members showed an interest in the park. A male individual (early 40s) visited the park one day to specifically ask about the name of a ground covering plant that had pink flowers. He explained that he wished to buy such plants to grow in his own garden. The characteristics of practice, such as desire and imagination, and knowledge and meaning, were evident in these examples of interactions with community members and culminated in the practice of gardening in other contexts.

A design feature of the park that Etafeni introduced to the community to add to the calming nature of the park using hard forms of landscaping with pebbles and recycled bricks was the labyrinth, which piqued a lot of interest, where some people knew how to walk it and others didn’t (see Fig. 6 for

the image of the labyrinth). I realised that it may be because the bricks hadn’t been laid correctly, and caused dead ends in certain places. I saw this as a unique characteristic of the park that was symbolic of Nyanga, where people would come across dead ends in their lives, but would continue to persevere in life, sometimes on different trajectories, with commitment and support from others.

However, commitment towards completing the park at times was absent. Interestingly, all stakeholders played a role in this lack of commitment. At times members of the community who agreed to work in the park failed to arrive. Over time it seemed that the interest in the park by the Street Committee faded. At a Street Committee meeting I was told that people had other concerns to deal with, such as leaking roofs that needed attention after a storm. An elderly male individual suggested that the community was “in denial” and that people “lack motivation to want to improve their lives.” He blamed the rampant use of drugs in the area for making it unsafe and explained, “People in the area are robbing their own facilities and resources from their own people.” I was also told that some people see parks as crime hotspots, so people don’t like them. The ambiguity and tension of place-making was evident in this encounter where the space of the park was one that represented belonging and alienation, intimacy and violence, and desire and fear.

On a different note, the park was seen as a meeting place for people to initiate positive interventions. Where once community events and ceremonies, such as funerals, had no physical home, the park became one of civic and community importance. When the park was viewed as an extension of home, as a place of sanctuary, the fence, then, became a structure that was used to secure the park from potential criminal activity for the women and elderly who might feel vulnerable using it. Viewed by some as a safe and beautiful space, the park became a landmark as a meeting point for social gatherings. Enabling a sense of place and identity that facilitated positive place-making and the celebration of important social activities, saw the original social tensions subside. Thus, the park was not only an environmental asset that provided a home to various species of fauna and flora, but the park was also an important social and homely feature in the turbulent township setting.

### Conclusions

The urban green infrastructure project implemented by Etafeni showed that such projects connect people to nature, people to people, and also people to urban places. However, such communality was not without the social contestations that come with everyday life. This study has shown that people's choices to use a community park, or not, are influenced by their fear of crime, which, in this case, influenced the way in which the park was designed. Thus, people are seen and heard to be entangled in the ambiguity of their relationships with their communities. Although parks are developed in township areas, such as Nyanga, to address the environmental and social injustices of the past and the present, crime dictates the way parks are designed, which in turn, produces social exclusion. Therefore, in Nyanga, parks provide for social interaction and cohesion, but they are also fenced off to undesirable people.

This case study demonstrates that the complex nature of social relations, and how they are produced and modified by processes of change, such as in times of unemployment and crime, matter in the way people view the environment. It highlights the intricate relationship between the GI approach of creating socio-ecological connectedness and justice, and the reality of everyday challenges. The complexity of everyday urban issues means that the messiness of the socioeconomic and environmental challenges that characterise Nyanga, require different forms of expertise and knowledge that are contributed and influenced by different disciplines, temporalities, participants, and communities. Ultimately, this research highlights the importance of inclusive planning, decision-making, and implementation of such urban design projects through participation of all stakeholders because of the context specific complexities and social contestations associated with Nyanga. Furthermore, it provides evidence that place-making and sense of belonging are crucial components to the thinking behind urban green infrastructure and the implementation of such projects in order to attain permanent, or at least long-lasting, results in the transformation to sustainable urban communities.

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