

Towards improving inner city park uses and safety – The benefits of a participatory approach to design

The case of End Street South Park

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Johannesburg is experiencing a deteriorating rate of open public spaces, due to growing levels of privatisation and the challenges of managing and maintaining public (open) spaces in the city, by both government and the private sector.

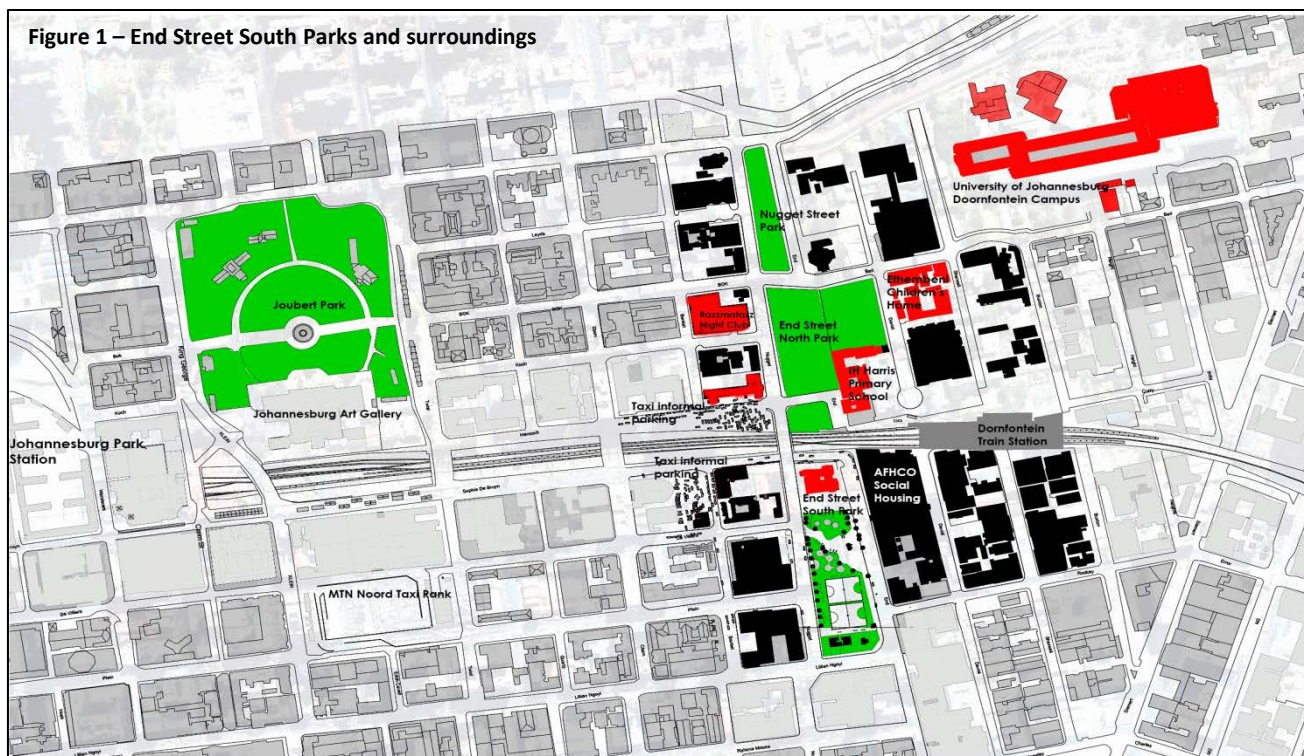
This study illustrates how the public parks in Johannesburg's inner-city are being used by different user groups and how this is affected by the way they are physically designed and managed. It focuses on End Street South Park, a recently upgraded park in Doornfontein, Johannesburg, and assesses the process in which it was designed and upgraded, as well as the outcomes of its design in terms how its current users engage and feel in the space. It argues, based on a constructive critique of this process, for a more participatory design approach, demonstrating how it could mitigate some of the negative outcomes of the park design and management. Whilst the participatory design (and management) approach is not a complete solution to current challenges faced in Johannesburg's parks, it is argued to improve knowledge and understanding of the contested nature of public space in the city and how design can aid in achieving inclusivity in the parks.

The Case of End Street South Park - History, Current Use and Management

End Street South park is located in Doornfontein on the south end of Nugget Street (See Figure 1) and was commissioned for an upgrade in 2010 by the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA). It is surrounded by various apartment blocks, shops, schools and taxi ranks (e.g. AFCHO Social Housing, Shoprite supermarket and IH Harris Primary School).

It is currently privately managed by the African Housing Company (AFHCO). It was designed by Newtown Landscape Architects (NLA) and predominantly consists of kids playing spaces and active sports facilities such as soccer fields. AFHCO also initiated and involved an NGO called the Inner City Ambassadors (ICA) who facilitates soccer related activities in the park for children of various ages. Although the park caters mostly for the youth, elders use it for community or religious meetings trade along the edges of its fence and for.

Figure 1 – End Street South Parks and surroundings



2. What Is Public In the Park? – Perceptions of Managers and People

Perspectives from end users and managers of parks reveal differing thoughts on how the parks can be improved. Johannesburg City Parks and Zoos (JCPZ) envisions making parks accessible, inclusive, safe, vibrant and environmentally sustainable public spaces. The route to achieving this vision will involve deepening citizen involvement/engagement in improving quality. The vision that private managers of the parks in the city (such as AFHCO) is however often contrary to this as they see public park space as an **“open space for recreation and entertainment subject to use by an ‘appropriate public’ that is allowed in”** (Mitchell, 1995: 115).

This means that users such as the homeless, traders or waste pickers are not allowed to sleep, sell or collect their waste in the park. For the users of End Street South Park, **the ‘publicness’ of the park space is represented by the ability different users with different interests and needs to use the park freely without any dictatorship or coercion by institutions such as the police or city authorities** on the users can or cannot do in the space.

Mitchell, D., (1995), “The End of Public Space: People’s Park, Definition of the Public, and Democracy”, *Association of American Geographers*, 85(1): 108-33.

Observations on the Ground – Design Successes and Failures



Figure 2: Design Successes of the park

- Active & well used play facilities for various age groups
- Pedestrian walkway & space that allows pedestrian flow & gathering & provides economic opportunities for informal traders

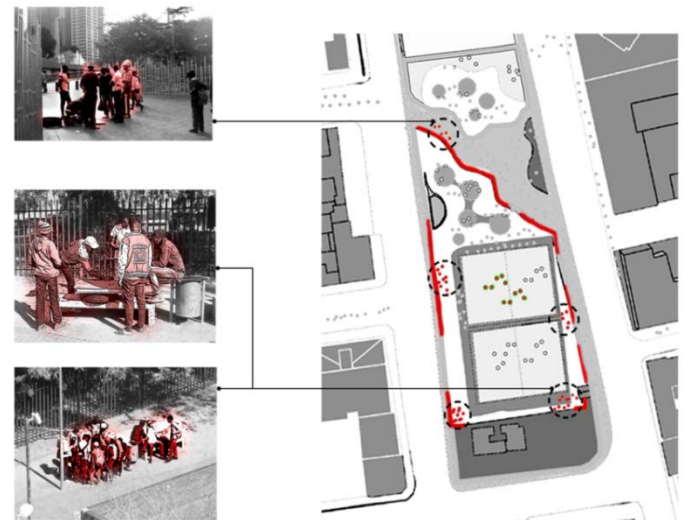


Figure 3: Design Failures of the Park

- Gambling & Drug use spots on park edges & corners
- Dominance of youth activity/facilities, no adult supervision
- Fencing creates hidden spaces for illicit activities & crime to occur

Critique of the Design Process - Readily Made Designs Do Not Fully Solve Park Issues

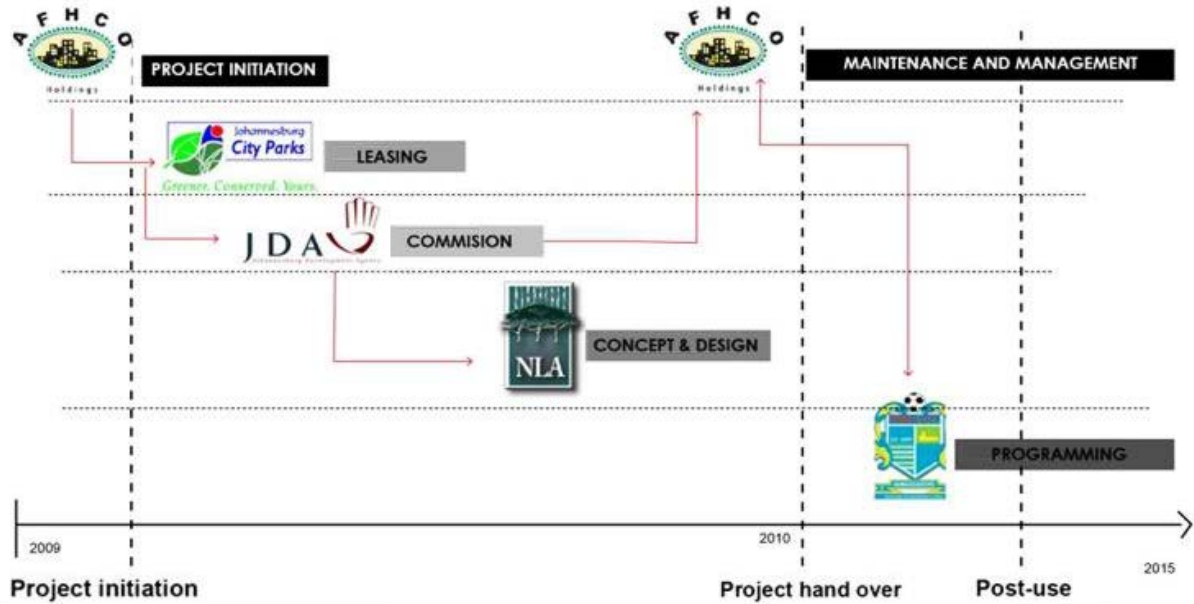
Designing for Safety: Negative Effects of Park Fencing

There was evidently a lack of involvement of crucial stakeholders in the park design and implementation process. Only AFHCO, JCPZ, JDA, NLA and ICA were involved in the process of the park design, upgrade and management. Residents, Schools, Shop Owners, Informal traders and Taxi Drivers in were not – yet, it is them who often witness how criminal activities such as muggings happen in the park, and who might know ways in which residents-based surveillance can be used to reprimand and apprehend those who engage in such acts. Instead the installation of a high fence and employment of security guards have not solved the safety problem to a large extent.

The high fencing that was installed is on the contrary one of the main contributors to the occurrence of illicit activities in and around the park.

The fence contributes towards creating hidden spaces for the above mentioned illicit activities to occur away from the eyes of the public. Also, the installing of dominantly youth orientated facilities, and less for other groups such as adults, was a mistake in the design, as this has allowed for youth gangs to form and engage in gambling and smoking without adult watch in large parts of the park.

On countless occasions of my visits to the park, I witnessed young children (particularly boys) smoking cigarettes or drugs and engaging in gambling activity in the corner spots of the park - a highly alarming scene. A number of the young boys (mostly primary school going) interviewed in the park stated how unhappy they were with the current condition of the park and expressed how unsafe they felt most of the time.



Missing Stakeholders in Project



Neighbourhood Schools

e.g. IH Harris New Model College



Taxi Associations



Residents



Shop Owners

Recommendations –The Benefit of a Participatory Approach in the Design Process

Investing in the Process rather than just the Product of a Park Design

There needs to be an investment in the design *process* rather than on the design *product* to ensure inclusivity and publicness in the city's parks.

Investment in the process allows for a debate or dialogue to occur between the people who own, manage and use the park and provide a platform for learning and understanding of different perspectives and needs of the current and/or future users. Representatives of current and (anticipated) future users of the park need to be involved within the design process to ensure that the park caters (spatially) for the needs of all possible users of the parks, including the so-called "undesirables" (the homeless, waste pickers, informal traders, drug users etc.).

Institutions such as homeless shelters, rehab facilities, contractors/ employers, law enforcers (police) and other Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) that deal with social development issues therefore need to be brought on board in park stakeholder discussions as they possess knowledge on the issues and needs of the more vulnerable users of parks that are aforementioned.

Reducing of outsourcing of design services – Building internal design skills capacity within JCPZ

The outsourcing of designers and or project managers by the City to design and/or (re)develop the parks is often problematic as designers often fail to sufficiently engage with communities to gain knowledge on the current conditions and needs of the context and the people they are designing for.

They also fail to bridge the gap between the state and people. Design Consultants are often detached from JCPZ's institutional vision and framework and lack knowledge on the challenges of management and maintenance that follow after project handover. **JCPZ therefore needs to build internal skills capacity in order to reduce outsourcing of design work and be better able to critically assess the possible impacts of a design proposed for a park development or upgrade.**

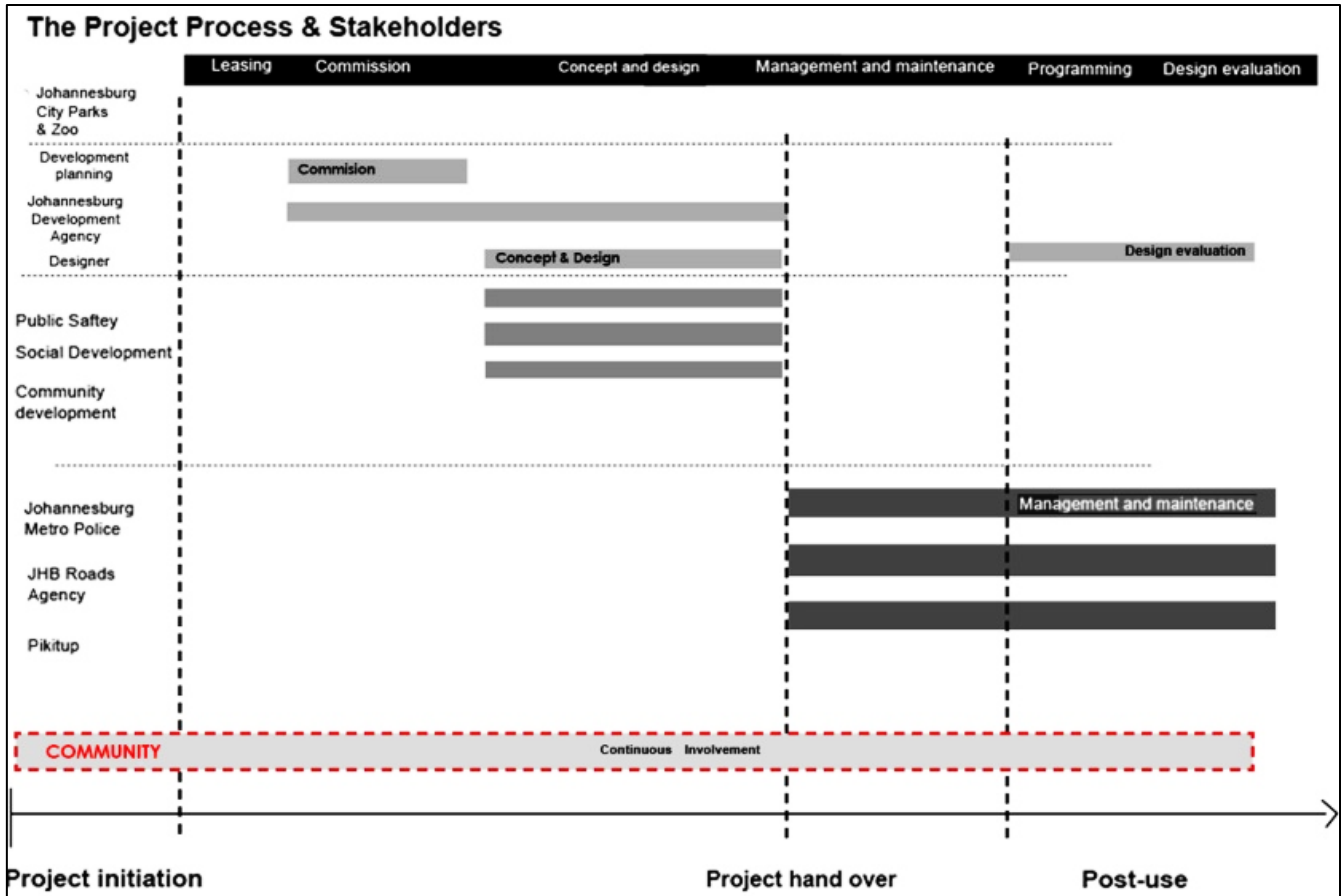
"What I don't like about the park is that there is gambling and smoking of weed taking place and all these things are bad. The security guards do not monitor the park as they should and we don't feel safe inside." (young boy park user)

Articulating timelines and coordinating stakeholders to make space for an iterative participatory process : a long term investment in communities and sustainable park management

The development of public space in the city needs to be formulated through a cohesive, public institution led urban design framework, project team and implementation plans. Part of this will require an increased focus on the physical integration of park adjacent external environment such as streets, transport, institutions, economies and built form.

Upon project handover there needs to follow up and evaluation of the design of a park which should occur over various times after the (re)opening of the park. Project timeframes and budgets need to adjusted in order to do this as the process takes time (often years) in engaging, evaluating and re-evaluating the design.

Figure 5: Recommended Design Process With All Relevant Stakeholders



Concluding Remarks

The participation process requires increased resources within JCPZ in terms of skills, facilitation and time in order to implement appropriate and effective design processes and outcomes. It is worth recognising that these resources are scarce; however it will be beneficial to JCPZ to invest in these resources from the beginning of the park design/upgrade process as this will save more resources in the medium and long term (e.g. less vandalism, less social ills) as well as contribute to social cohesion – of which parks are (arguably) all about. There therefore needs to be a strong reflection on the real value of intervening in Inner-City Parks and a higher investment in developing knowledge and internal capacity in design expertise in JCPZ in order to drive and direct the design process towards coming up with relevant solutions for the challenges faced by communities (and JCPZ) in using and managing the parks.

Simply engaging communities and /or stakeholders is not enough. The design process needs to enable capacity building, self-reliance, community integration and participatory democracy amongst all stakeholders involved.

This will however require patience and a continuous back and forth (long-term) community engagement in the design process, in order to build value and sense ownership of open public space in the citizens of the inner-city and not just on City government.

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