Navigating the Margins: The Interrelationship between Public Urban Open Spaces and Homelessness

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1 ABSTRACT

Open spaces, such as parks and streetscapes, play a vital role in fostering social interaction, environmental sustainability, and community well-being. However, in developing countries, these spaces are increasingly intersecting with the complex and persistent issue of homelessness. This study explores the interrelationship between public urban open spaces and homelessness, focusing on spatial, social, and policy dimensions. The study employs a mixed-method approach, combining interviews and spatial datasets. Key findings reveal that open spaces serve as vital refuges for the homeless community, providing temporary shelter and opportunities for social interaction. Scavenging and intermittent aid are crucial components of survival strategies, highlighting the pressing need for consistent support. However, these spaces have become contested sites, as seen through the implementation of anti-homeless design elements by various stakeholders, such as municipal authorities and local businesses, often to the detriment of the homeless population. In conclusion, the study emphasizes the need for collaborative efforts involving governments, businesses, charitable organisations, and the community to address the multifaceted challenges faced by homeless individuals in urban spaces. It provides critical insights for urban planners, policymakers, and social advocates aiming to reconcile competing demands in public spaces, thereby contributing to more sustainable and equitable urban environments.

Keywords: homelessness, sustainable, Open space, spatial, social

2 INTRODUCTION

There has been an increase in conflict between homeless people and those who are housed about the use of public areas, which led to attempts to restrict the public space usage of homeless people (Addo , 2018). The use of open spaces by the homeless such as plazas, streetscapes, and parks is often viewed as an issue of social concern (Kingery & Brown, 2019). Homeless people spend most of their lives on the streets without access to basic needs like potable water and sanitary facilities. For homeless individuals, maintaining personal hygiene can be difficult because clean water is scarce (Padgett & Priyam, 2019). As a result, homeless persons who do not have access to basic amenities like toilets may end up pissing in public areas (Mahlangu & Kgadima, 2021). According to the body of research, homelessness-related issues like begging and littering among housed residents frequently worsen when homeless persons are visible on the streets and in public urban spaces. This creates discomfort and affects general safety in addition to posing aesthetic and environmental problems.

There are no reliable statistics available regarding homelessness (Speak , 2019). It is estimated that at least 150 million people, roughly 2% of the world's population, are homeless. (World Economic Forum , 2021). The statistical data highlights a remarkable population increase for Pretoria of 36.28% from 2001 to 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). The most recent statistical data indicates a substantial 38.33% population growth from 2011 to 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). Specifically, in 2001, the population of the City of Tshwane was 2,143,869, which increased to 2,921,488 in 2011 (Statistics South Africa, 2023), and then surged to 4,040,315 by 2022 (Statistics South Africa, 2023). This transformation has brought about various urban issues, with homelessness being one of the most visible and socially significant.

3 LITERATURE REVIEW

The issue of homelessness in South Africa has roots that stretch back to the apartheid era. To truly grasp the complexities of homelessness in the country, one must delve into its historical context and understand how policies enacted during the apartheid regime, have played a significant role in shaping its current state (Mashau, 2019; Mhlongo et al., 2024). As those who were displaced resisted the apartheid attempts to enforce compliance, the result was additional forced removals and increased sulering among the dispossessed.

While the inception of homelessness in the country can be linked to policies enforced during the apartheid era, it also finds its roots in social and economic factors (De Beer and Vally, 2021). Divorce, domestic violence, health problems, disabilities, and drug addiction are examples of contributing societal factors. Furthermore, migration from rural to urban areas, which is frequently motivated by a desire to escape poverty, can result in homelessness. It is imperative to emphasize that a strong correlation exists between homelessness and poverty, mostly resulting from joblessness (Mabona, 2023).

The pathways in and out of homelessness have been considered by scholars to come from a multitude of structural and personal factors (Hodgetts and Stolte, 2016). The issue is compounded by rising unemployment rates, a shortage of alordable housing, social breakdown, and the impact of social and economic policies. Addressing homelessness begins with meeting basic needs such as food and clothing, then progresses to providing support for drug and alcohol rehabilitation (De Beer, 2015). The journey culminates in a life-change programme that nurtures an individual's personal and vocational skills, while also focusing on relapse prevention (Musakwa and Moyo, 2020).

Housed citizens perceive the homeless as a threat to public safety and the economic vitality for their cities (Toolis and Hammack, 2015). Homeless individuals find safety in public spaces, such as parks, through interaction with others experiencing the same issue (Rennels and Purnell, 2017). The presence of homeless individuals in public spaces not only alects the local residents who have homes but also places a strain on local governments responsible for overseeing those parks.

Park policies and code enforcement by local law enforcement and public safety departments are often utilised to criminalise the homeless, leading to additional legal and budgetary challenges. Rather than instituting new regulations in public parks that criminalise homelessness, policymakers should engage with the homeless population within these spaces. Listening to their concerns and collaborating to find more positive and elective solutions would be a more constructive approach (Addo, 2018). The impact of homelessness spans far beyond the individual experiencing it.

In 2021, the World Economic Forum disclosed that a staggering 150 million people faced homelessness globally (Henry, 2021). Nigeria held the unfortunate distinction of having the highest number of homeless individuals worldwide. Meanwhile, in South Africa, the homeless population was estimated to be around 200 000 (Homeless World Cup Foundation, 2020). A survey counted 4 177 homeless people in the City of Tshwane (Mabona, 2023). As many as 1.6 billion people lacked adequate housing (UN-Habitat, 2015).

Place-making theory

Place-making represents an urban design approach that places emphasis on prioritizing people over infrastructure. The primary objective is to develop public spaces that transcend mere functionality, aspiring to be environments that inspire and facilitate social interaction and cultural interchange (Urban Design Lab, 2023; Tabane et al., 2021).

The success of urban open spaces relies on the consideration of several interconnected criteria. To create vibrant urban environments, one must assess their quality using four fundamental attributes from the place-making theory thus: Access and linkages, Comfort and image, Uses and activities and Sociability (Eltarabily., 2022).

Access and Linkages: This attribute encompasses both physical access to a place and its connectivity to different transportation options. Linkages refer to the clear connections between the place and its surroundings that should encourage people to enter without obstacles (Surico, 2023). A section of Church Street in Pretoria, leading to Church Square, has been closed to vehicular traffic in order to prioritize pedestrian access and allow people to walk freely.

Comfort and Image: "Comfort" pertains to the feeling of safety, achieved through pedestrian-friendly design. It also involves providing adequate seating options, some of which should be located in areas with both sun and shade. "Image" is related to the overall aesthetic and unique qualities of a place that create a positive first impression and offer an enjoyable social experience.

Uses and Activities: A successful urban space should offer a variety of interesting activities that cater to different age groups throughout the day. The presence of a diverse range of activities and effective management contribute to the vibrancy of a place. When a place lacks activities that engage people, it tends to become deserted and unused (Peinhardt, 2023).

Sociability: Sociability is enhanced when a place has features that encourage community connectivity. "what attracts people most is other people" underscores the importance of designing spaces where individuals can meet friends, engage in group conversations, and use the area frequently. A strong sense of adaptation to the place contributes to a pleasurable experience when interacting with both friends and strangers.

Competing interests for the same space

In many parts across the country, the legal system treats beggars and individuals compelled by their circumstances to sleep in the streets and public areas as offenders (Killander, 2019). The conflict between citizens with homes and those without has persisted for many years, and the issue of utilizing public areas remains a contentious subject. Alternative approaches employed by homeless individuals to sustain themselves are frequently categorized as unlawful actions and subject to legal penalties, including activities like loitering, trespassing, sleeping on public property, or scavenging (Halton, 2022). When individuals believe that parks are linked to activities with elevated risk factors that could potentially pose dangers, they often choose to stay away. (Slater, Christiana, & Gustat, 2020).

While bylaws function effectively for those with homes, they prove wholly inadequate when applied to homeless individuals (United Nations, 2023). Homeless individuals not only inhabit public spaces like the general "public," but they essentially live within these shared spaces (Bergamaschi, Castrignanò, & De Rubertis, 2014). The choice to stay in public open spaces is a rational decision and such rationality is based on the reality of the individual's situation.

The control of public space

The sight of homeless individuals in urban areas is often viewed as a disruption. It can create the impression that an "ideal city" is one devoid of homeless people loitering in the streets and public urban spaces. This perspective is particularly evident in cities such as Cape Town. 11 homeless individuals took the city of Cape Town to court, contesting the City's bylaws related to Streets, Public Spaces, and the Prevention of Noise Nuisances as well as Integrated Waste Management (Damons, 2021). The City of Cape Town proposed an amendment to fine homeless people, according to the stipulations of the "Streets, Public Places and the Prevention of Noise Nuisances By-Law (Nkhoma, 2021). In the year 2022, the City of Cape Town allocated R142 million to operate and expand the City-run safe space "facilities to accommodate homeless people" (City of Cape Town, 2022)

Homelessness carries a strong social stigma and is frequently met with punitive measures, violence, and assertive policies that infringe upon the rights of individuals rather than protecting them (Mahlangu, 2021). The multifaceted socio-cultural, economic, political, and environmental conditions in each nation significantly shape the factors contributing to and the encounters of homelessness, as well as the attributes of homeless individuals and the strategies and initiatives aimed at tackling homelessness (de. Beer & Vally, 2017).

Exploring the lived experiences of homelessness in a Cape Town suburb by Kerry-Lee Black The themes that emerged from the data clarified the complex nature of the process that leads to homelessness. Numerous causative factors interacted in a sophisticated way to impact each participant's journey towards homelessness. In a similar vein, a variety of circumstances intersected throughout their difficult effort to break free from homelessness, leading to a vicious circle of entrapment. These elements covered several societal levels, ranging from the individual to the community, the family unit, and society at large.

4 METHODOLOGY

Using qualitative research techniques, the researcher set out to explore the relationship between homelessness and public urban open spaces. Key participants comprising a total of twenty-seven (27) were interviewed. Thirteen (13) homeless people who volunteered to participate made up this number, while six (6) businesses/vendors were interviewed. Due to their frequent encounters with homeless people and the fact that they spend most of the days in Pretoria's Church Square, these vendors were recognized as prominent participants. As key participants four (4) organizations that work with the homeless population were interviewed. These organizations have years of experience working with homeless people and have frequent interactions with them. During the data-gathering phase, other important participants were interviewed, including City of Tshwane Municipal officials, Four (4) prominent officials were interviewed.

Participant No. 1: Thirteen Homeless People

The homeless people who participated in the interview indicated that they stayed at Church Square for more than 3 years. The homeless people at Church Square, Pretoria indicated that Unemployment, Trauma, Drugs and Alcohol Use, Housing , Domestic Violence and Mental Health.

The following criteria were used to guide interviews with homeless people: how long they had been staying in Church Square; what had caused them to become homeless; their access to basic services; their ability to get food; their sense of security; their interactions with visitors; and any potential actions that could be taken to improve their stay in Church Square.

Participant No.2: Businesses operating at Church Square Pretoria

Prominent participants for this study were identified among businesses operating at Church Square Pretoria, given their significant presence in the study area. Six street vendors were interviewed. The church serves as their primary business location, with established permanent spots. Additionally, mobile vendors were also observed, such as individuals selling Maize mealies on a trolley. The interviews with vendors were conducted based on the following criteria: the selected location for their operations, their access to basic needs, the duration of their business activities, their interactions with homeless individuals, their observations of interactions among homeless people, and their interactions with visitors. The participation of those approached for interviews depended on their willingness, as the researcher sought input from individuals who were open to participating.

Participant No.3: Institutions for homeless people.

Four institutions catering to homeless individuals were interviewed, as their day-to-day experiences with the homeless were considered essential for gaining insight into the subject. Many studies have shed light on the issues of stigmatization faced by homeless individuals. The interviews with these institutions, aimed at assisting the homeless, were conducted with a focus on the following parameters: the perspective on the interrelationship between public open space and people experiencing homelessness, the types of accommodations that can ensure the dignity of homeless individuals, the facilities that should constitute public open spaces, the factors contributing to homelessness, and the perspective on whether the presence of homeless individuals causes problems.

Participant No.4: City of Tshwane Municipal Officials

Four key municipal officials responsible for overseeing the management of Church Square in Pretoria were interviewed. The purpose of these interviews was to ascertain the existence of an effective plan for maintaining the square. The interviews with representatives from the City of Tshwane were conducted with a focus on the following parameters: the establishment of the municipality's plan for managing the square, the commitment of the municipality to addressing homelessness, the strategies employed by the city to tackle homelessness, and the municipality's perspective on the interrelationship between public open space and homelessness.

5   FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

In Church Square, Pretoria, thirteen people who were homeless were interviewed for the research. The majority gave their prolonged stay as a result of having few options, being unemployed, and having disrupted family ties. One of the challenges was getting access to basic amenities like food and restrooms. For survival, participants had to rely on scavenging, sporadic help, and piece work. The researcher found that over the course of the interviews, the homeless people were with their belongings. The majority of the homeless individuals found in Church Square were sleeping, tired and hungry. Safety problems were highlighted, particularly throughout the night, and social services were not always constant. The participants begged for empathy from the general public, stressing that stereotypes about them should not be based on their financial situation.

Institution for the homeless

In order to determine how urban open spaces and homelessness are related, the study conducted interviews with four different institutions. The results brought to light the difficulties that homeless people encounter, such as maltreatment, a lack of trust, and a lack of municipal help. NGOs were urged to be involved, as well as to treat the homeless with decency, provide basic amenities, and deal with the underlying causes of

homelessness, which include abuse, unemployment, and mental health problems. The organizations stressed how crucial it is to provide everyone with access to public areas and give homeless people the tools they need to reintegrate into society. In general, the research recommends all-encompassing enhancements to tackle the intricate problem of homelessness.

Business/vendor at the Church Square

Six Church Square businesses were interviewed and the results showed that the presence of homeless people presents serious issues. Businesses complained about how dirty the Square was and raised worries about safety, citing violent conduct from certain homeless people among other issues. As a result, foot traffic and sales decreased. In order to address the economic impact on companies and provide a safer atmosphere for both enterprises and the homeless population, the businesses stressed their everyday anxieties for personal safety and advocated for government engagement, notably the development of shelter facilities for the homeless.

City of Tshwane Municipality

Four municipal officials from the City of Tshwane were interviewed for the research about homelessness in Pretoria's Church Square. The results show that there are homeless people in the area, that there are problems with money and personnel that lead to inadequate management of urban open areas, and that these concerns are being addressed by the Adopt-a-Spot initiative. Historical and economic variables were found to be among the elements that contribute to homelessness, and there were both positive and negative dynamics in the interaction between homelessness and public places. The difficulties experienced by those who were homeless included being vulnerable to extreme weather, having little access to healthcare, and feeling unsafe. In order to solve the issues encountered by the homeless population in metropolitan areas, the study's conclusion emphasizes the need for comprehensive methods that address both immediate and underlying reasons. It also advocates for cooperative efforts including the government, communities, and companies. The image that goes with it shows a municipal worker cleaning with a high-pressure pipe because of issues including a persistent stench and human faeces.

Existing Secondary Data

The documentation that is now in existence shows how Church Square has changed over time. The Paul Kruger statue was accessible to everyone in the 2009 picture. In 2017, the City of Tshwane launched a landscaping project that significantly altered the square. This involved erecting concrete seats, trash bins, paths, and fences around the Paul Kruger statue. Trees were also planted to provide shade. Furthermore, a significant infrastructure shift was signalled by the installation of Areyeng bus lanes, which are not shown in the 2009 photo.

It is evident from the most current image, taken in November 2023, that the City of Tshwane has kept up its efforts to improve Church Square's usability. As a result of a conscious effort to meet a range of requirements, the square today provides opportunity for different people. This development points to a dedication to improving the square's use and visual attractiveness while bringing it into line with modern urban planning ideas. The continual modifications highlight the square's versatility and its function as a dynamic public area that transforms to suit the needs of the modern world.

6 RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSION

The study recommends establishing partnerships with non-profit organisation to provide steady assistance for basic necessities like clothing, food, and water. It is crucial to deal with the underlying causes of homelessness by putting policies in place that provide chances for work, drug rehab, and mental health assistance. The study recommends the installation of free, conveniently located bathrooms in public spaces and emphasizes working with local government officials to make this happen. It also recommends collaborating with governmental and non-governmental groups to locate mobile bathrooms in convenient locations.

To counteract cultural stigma, increasing knowledge and awareness of homelessness is another crucial suggestion. The study promotes media engagement, community forums, and educational activities as means of raising public awareness. The goal is to dispel myths about the difficulties experienced by the homeless people and to promote empathy. The study proposes that in order to solve homelessness, land development

policies need to be changed. It is important to include policies that help to lessen homelessness in urban planning and development initiatives and urges for the identification of homelessness in land development regulations.

Comprehensive government interventions for shelter shelters are firmly supported by the literature as a critical way to reduce homelessness. It promotes vigorous support and advocacy of broad government programs targeted at giving homeless people a somewhere to live. In order to provide resources and expertise for the development and implementation of these initiatives, collaboration with local authorities is stressed. It is suggested that the state think about allocating funding for building and land in order to support the efforts to house the homeless people.

The study emphasises the significance of education and career opportunities, the research recognizes the variety of reasons why people may become homeless. It implies that giving jobs and education can play a significant role in assisting people in moving away from homelessness by addressing both the root causes of homelessness and the urgent need for housing.

Establishing a balance between the demands of the homeless community and economic interests is crucial, and legislation that does this is recommended. It is advised to work with local government officials to promote the building of cost-free and conveniently located bathrooms in public spaces. Additionally, the study recommends collaborating with governmental and non-governmental groups to deploy mobile bathrooms in key locations for convenient accessibility.

The study emphasizes that adequate funding is required to carry out plans for cleanliness and the supply of basic services, and it suggests assigning enough staff and cash to guarantee the management of public urban open spaces. It emphasizes the value of space maintenance and community involvement initiatives like Adopt-a-Spot and argues in favour of their growth and enhancement to encourage more community involvement in improving public spaces. The study also emphasizes how crucial it is to work with businesses and non- governmental organizations to provide workable, long-term solutions to homelessness. In order to develop comprehensive and long-lasting solutions. A collaboration between the City of Tshwane, businesses, non-governmental organizations, and local stakeholders is recommended.

In order to guarantee that interventions are efficient, adaptable, and capable of meeting the ever-changing requirements of the community, the study suggests creating frequent channels for coordination and communication. This suggestion attempts to make it easier for everyone participating in the fight against homelessness to continue collaborating and coordinating, so that interventions are effective and responsive to the community's changing needs. In conclusion, the study underscored the need for collaborative efforts involving government, businesses, charitable organisations, and the community to address the multifaceted challenges faced by homeless individuals in urban spaces. Comprehensive solutions that prioritise the dignity and well-being of homeless individuals, while considering the concerns of businesses, are essential for creating a more inclusive and supportive urban environment.

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