

From space to place in urban planning: facilitating change through Participatory Action Research

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Abstract

Transforming space to place implies an open accountable process during which people can influence decision-making about how and what their physical spaces should become. Spatial planning plays a prominent role in this process as planning is an important change agent to enhance democracy. While communicative planning theory serves as a theoretical framework to follow a participatory approach in urban planning, the practical application of this theory is questioned. Participatory Action Research (PAR) aims to develop equal distribution of power in terms of decision-making by embracing values such as empowerment, social justice and equity, collaborative relationships, learning and respect towards diversity. This research describes the use of PAR in urban planning by proactively including community members in transforming an open space to place in their neighbourhood. The study area, located in Ikageng, Potchefstroom, South Africa, is facing stark socio and economic realities after Apartheid. A qualitative research approach was followed where no extraneous influences occurred. Data was generated by focus group discussions about participants' experiences and expectations of the process followed. The findings suggested that the process followed created a platform for change in terms of (i) the physical site (upgrade, beautification and functional use), (ii) social change (the formation of positive relationships) and (iii) psychological change (pride, sense of ownership, the development of responsibility and respect for diversity). PAR is suggested as a valuable method for planners to create meaningful places while space is used as a platform for personal and collective change.

Keywords: space, place, Participatory Action Research (PAR), spatial planning, qualitative research.



1 Contextualisation of research

Theoretical discussions on space and place and their role in shaping cultural, social, economic and political life is an established topic in spatial disciplines such as urban planning. However, it remains as contentious as ever, as illustrated by Hubbard *et al.* [1]. One of the most prominent conceptual approaches to space in spatial planning literature is that of space as empirical, objective and mappable. Space is considered as absolute, regardless of what it contains or the movements that occur in it. Hubbard *et al.* [1] refer to a neutral backdrop against which human behaviour occurs. Space is thus separated from human existence, understood and explained by means of Euclidian geometry. The Euclidian model treats space as something to which universal principles and standards can be applied [2]. As such this approach is predominantly interested in the physical and objective properties of spatial arrangements [3]. Human phenomena are thus implicitly reduced to objective entities, models and static compositions that can be understood by means of statistical analysis, geometrical order and aesthetic design. This approach also dominated planning for long. Jacobs [4] criticised the failure of planning to incorporate complex and dynamic processes that unfold across space through social processes in cities. Eventually this criticism contributed to a new thought tradition that propagates a move away from the application of artistic principles towards understanding the way in which people use space socially [5]. Traditional views on space were challenged to include metaphysical, ethical and aesthetic aspects [6]. Crang and Thrift [7] highlight a general move away from the Kantian notion of space as something that is absolute towards the view of space as a process and in process. Hubbard *et al.* [1] clearly illustrate this by defining place as ‘relational and contingent, experienced and understood differently by different people’ and define place as ‘multiple, contested, fluid and uncertain rather than fixed territorial units’. Space and place are clearly distinct concepts, as space becomes place when endowed with meanings and values. Place is therefore not a neutral backdrop to people’s lives, but intertwined with their life-worlds. In order to provide in the needs of a society, space is often shaped and controlled in order to change it into a viable public place [8]. This change aids the transformation of the social environment into meaningful place. More important than just the manner in which societies relate to their surroundings is the fact that people have the choice to create a place that not only reflects their desires, but also the deeper values connected to a particular space [7]. Participation in transforming space into place implies an open and accountable process during which people can influence decision-making on spaces in their community. The recent move to democracy in South Africa heralded the inclusion of communities in the process of decision-making [9] since inclusive planning processes have the potential to enhance democracy. In this sense spatial planning forms an important change agent to enhance democracy.

With the above discussion as background, an inclusive collaborative process was followed in this research to transform space to place. The research was guided by the following research questions: (i) how can space be transformed into place? (ii) What change is unlocked when following a participatory oriented process in

urban planning? The paper aims to reflect on these two questions by using an example of a research process referred to as Participatory Action Research (PAR), conducted in Ikageng, South Africa in order to transform a lost space into a vibrant public place.

2 Theoretical constructs

2.1 The communicative planning paradigm as point of departure

Although the 1960s emergence of democracy as a goal in planning processes paved the way for public participation as generally acceptable within planning [10], stakeholders (e.g. the public) were still seen as assistive within the planning process rather than directive. The communicative planning theory, the latest paradigm in planning theory, emerged as a framework to include participants on all levels of decision-making in planning [11]. This paradigm takes critical theory as point of departure, which challenges the status quo of societal systems of domination and alienation and aims to minimise these through rational decision-making and consensus. Communicative planning's primary focus is on the "democratic management and control of urban and regional environments and the design of less oppressive planning mechanisms" [10]. Communicative planning theory is thus described as the multi-dimensional process [12] during which power is shared and decisions negotiated with all the affected stakeholders. This alternative to previous rational models in planning emphasises particular key aspects namely: (i) the recognition of the social construction of knowledge and the exercise of both practical and scientific knowledge; (ii) acknowledgment of different ways of developing and communicating knowledge (analysis, storytelling, expression); (iii) internal within social contexts; (iv) identification of diverse interests and the subordination of interests through relations of power; (v) the concept of stake holding, spreading ownership and the range of knowledge and reasoning; (vi) a shift from competitive interest bargaining to collaborative consensus building; and (vii) recognition of planning activity as embedded in day-to-day relations [11]. Due to its interactive nature, communicative planning theory seems closely related to PAR as both strive to involve all role players on an active level, discussing similar concerns with diverse world views [12]. PAR seems to be a suitable methodology to link the abstract theoretical constructs of the communicative planning theory to the practical application of planning.

2.2 Participatory Action Research

PAR is not a linear process with a fixed outcome [13] as researchers constantly strive to integrate expert knowledge, native wisdom and practice during this process. PAR is considered a cyclical process concerned with gathering diverse knowledge to motivate change within individuals and the community [13]. The purpose of PAR, according to Reason and Bradbury [14], is to liberate participants to improve their daily lives [12] while it ultimately promotes democracy [13]. Numerous authors [15–18] emphasise the importance of unlocking particular



intrinsic values during PAR processes to generate change. These values include: (i) empowerment, (ii) social justice and equity, (iii) good relationships, (iv) learning, and (v) respect. While the first four values related to PAR have long been accepted as core values, Ochocka *et al.* [15] add respect as a fifth value because community-based research is conducted in the real world where respect and appreciation of different perspectives, beliefs and norms are crucial.

Table 1: PAR values (1998–2013).

Authors:	Year:	PAR value:				
		Empowerment	Social justice and equity	Positive relationships	Learning	Respect towards diversity
Nelson <i>et al.</i>	1998	▪	▪	▪	▪	
Ochocka <i>et al.</i>	2002	▪	▪	▪	▪	
Ochocka & Janzen	2007	▪	▪	▪	▪	
Ochocka <i>et al.</i>	2010	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪
Winkler	2013	▪	▪	▪	▪	▪

(Source: own construction from [15–18].)

Empowerment, apart from referring to a sense of personal power, also entails a deeper essence of positive change within the lives of individual community members. This value emphasises the promotion of knowledge gathering to empower community members to share their opinions [17]. Sharing opinions forms part of a true collaboration that helps participants to experience change in terms of stronger self-esteem, self-assurance, better control and improved skills [12, 18]. The second value, *social justice and equity*, describes the manner in which participants experience liberation from systems that used to oppress them. Through this value PAR enables participants to explore and discover challenges that affect their lives [19] to motivate change within themselves, as well as their surroundings. This value allows participants to learn how to address and use power structures [13] to ultimately change the level of oppression they experienced in the past [20]. The third value revolves around *improving relationships* as people learn to share and accept knowledge of other people while partaking and conducting research [21] and this in turn promotes communication. Improved relationships tend towards power sharing with regard to decision-making [16, 20]. In contrast with previous traditional views of knowledge, the fourth PAR value revolves around *mutual and reciprocal learning*, which entails that all role players (researchers, community members, stakeholder etc.) are allowed to gather knowledge on an on-going basis. Especially researchers learn valuable lessons in terms of how to refrain from practices with predetermined outcomes and communities' ideas of aesthetic outcomes. This value embraces a collective learning experience for all partaking role players [16, 19]. Winkler [18], a South African planner, confirms the importance of *respect for diversity* as a fifth value as it corroborates Sandercock's [22] theory for planning in multi-cultural societies.

Winkler's [18] advice that planners need to be aware of, respect and facilitate diversity rather than repress it with bureaucratic planning practices seems crucial within the South African context.

3 Research context and participants

Ikageng (translated from Northern Sotho to English as “we build for ourselves”), a former apartheid township situated in Potchefstroom in the North West Province, South Africa (see Figure 1), offered a suitable context to apply this research that aimed to uplift and empower a previously disadvantaged community. The research site, a small open space of approximately 1000m² is an epitome of what Dewar and Uytenbogaardt [23] refer to as a typical post-Apartheid urban landscape: one that is characterised by isolation, homogeneity and limited and poor quality open spaces. In low income residential settings like Ikageng, with prevailing high population densities and limited open spaces, public spaces are important as they provide social infrastructure and aesthetics and fulfil a recreational function for communities [24].

The criteria for the selection of participants included that participants should make themselves available voluntarily, should be able to express themselves verbally, should interact with the site daily and should have had a long standing relation with the site. Participants included an initial group of twenty community members from different age groups (ranging from 25–60) and gender groups (14 female and 6 male), who live in close proximity to the site. Of these participants, sixteen have been living there for more than 10 years and four for 3–5 years. As the participants have little to no income, most of them live with family members and only four are home owners. Of this group, fourteen (14) members remained the core group of participants up until the current implementation phase of the research project.

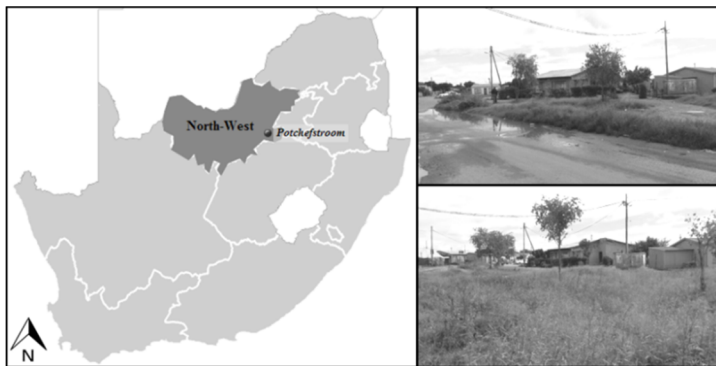


Figure 1: Location of research site (left) and photographs of research site (right).

4 Research design

4.1 Research approach

An interpretive approach is followed that acknowledges that realities and meanings are context bound which allows for meaningful and holistic understanding of embedded experiences [25]. This type of research is qualitative in nature rather than quantitative as it allows for in-depth understanding and acknowledging involved realities and context bound meanings holistically and in natural surroundings where no extraneous influences occur [26]. As the focus is on gaining an in-depth understanding of concepts rather than generalising facts, the research is smaller in scale and includes a small spontaneous and reflective group of participants [27] as opposed to presenting evidence in quantifiable terms.

4.2 Research methodology

PAR was thought to be a useful method for this study as it has the potential to build a strong relationship between researchers and participants to address the needs and desires of the community [18]. PAR's ideal of facilitating change coincides well with the goals of public participation according to the communicative theory in planning. True participation is authentic and empowering – a process generated from within where ordinary citizens have the opportunity to actively and meaningfully contribute to their own development [28].

4.3 Research process

The research project, upon which this paper is based, followed a number of stages (Figure 2) over a two year period (2012–2014) of intense collaboration with the community and interaction with the research site. The ward committee served as the gateway to gain entrance to the community. Ward committees are official representative structures within communities, elected in terms of the Municipal Structures Act [29]. These committees are regarded as having the potential to build strong relationships with communities [30] as they are closest to the people on the ground. Gaining access to a community for research purposes is important as this establishes a sense of trust between participants and researchers so that communication can flow spontaneously [30].

The overall process included numerous focus group discussions, a collaborative design workshop and various meetings with stakeholders. While the collaborative design workshop constituted an important step in the process of creating a plan for implementation, it is beyond the scope of this paper to report on the details of the design process itself. The focus in this paper is rather on the change that was facilitated through the process that was followed.

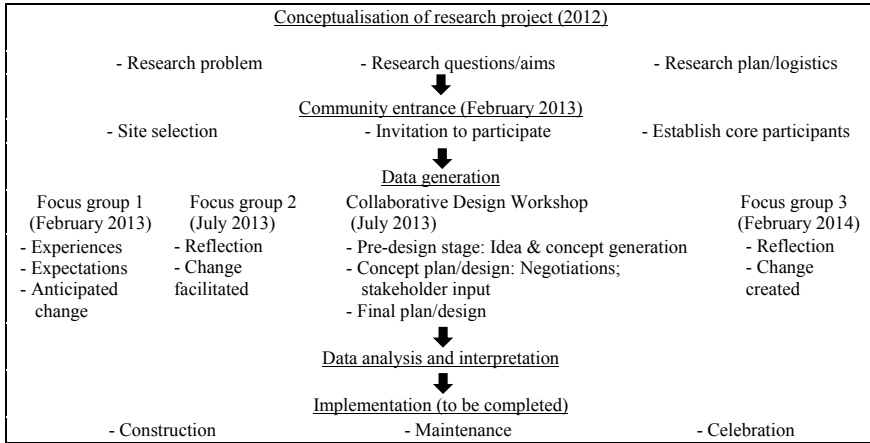


Figure 2: Research process followed (source: own construction).

4.4 Data generation

The method used to generate data includes focus group discussions. Focus groups are valuable platforms for spontaneous interaction between participants who experience similar challenges and have similar opinions, understanding and feelings while participants communicate, mediate and share personal knowledge between themselves and with the researchers [18]. The overall aim of the focus groups was to explore if and how PAR could create a platform for change within communities. Focus group discussions consisted of: (i) an on-site discussion about participant's experiences and expectations of the site and the process to be followed, (ii) a second reflective discussion up until the design workshop and (iii) a third discussion after finalisation of the plan/design to reflect on the process up until the implementation phase. All discussions were tape recorded and video recorded for the purpose of data analysis.

4.5 Data analysis and interpretation of data

Both of the reflective focus group discussions were analysed using inductive content analysis [31]. This process is particularly interesting as an analytical method when capturing emotional, social and physical feelings and experiences associated with the participatory process in terms of open spaces [32]. An open coding process was followed and themes and sub-themes emerged quite easily from the broader themes. As the discussion of themes and relationships among themes lies at the centre of data interpretation in qualitative studies such as this one, direct quotes from participants were used to describe the relationship between themes. This allows for generation of data from the ground up (referred to as grounded theory) in order to make sense of the meaning of the data and to move to higher levels of abstraction in terms of the theoretical content.

4.6 Trustworthiness and ethical aspects

Trustworthiness is viewed as the most important criterion for the assessment of qualitative research. Trustworthiness in this study is informed by Tracy's [33] concept of crystallisation, and Sandelowski [34] suggestion for credibility where descriptions or interpretation of human experience should be accurate enough so that people who also share that experience would immediately recognise the descriptions. The trustworthiness of the findings in this research was ensured by constantly reflecting on participants' experiences during the focus groups. Brinkmann and Kvale [35] identify informed consent, confidentiality, and the possible consequences of the research and the bias of the researcher as ethical issues that have to be addressed in qualitative research. In this research all participants completed informed consent forms in which voluntary participation and anonymity were confirmed and possible consequences of the research stipulated. The bias of the researcher was addressed by means of member checking during which feedback on findings were discussed with participants to ensure that data accurately reflects the feelings and experiences of the participants [35].

5 Findings

The integrated findings are summarised in Table 2. Findings include themes and sub-themes that emerged from the data and the appropriate link with PAR values. While the themes generated from the focus groups revealed overall positive change that was created through the research process followed, progression is noticed in terms of how participant behaviour has changed. At first the focus was on the physical aspects of the site, while later the focus moved to positive relationship change that took place until empowerment started to emerge within the last focus group discussion.

6 Discussion

The findings illustrate how the interactive involvement of participants allowed for debate and negotiations to take place in which participants could share ideas and generate solutions. The open and accountable processes followed by using PAR allowed for debate and negotiations to take place in such a way that participants could share ideas and generate solutions in a collective way as supported by the consensus-building focus of the communicative planning theory. While the communicative planning theory emphasises the importance of democratic decision-making in planning, it does not necessarily provide guidelines how to empower local communities to manipulate power structures. In this sense PAR is a more activist approach that incorporates both participation and action on the ground. Through this process, the unlocking of personal and collective values such as empowerment, the strengthening of existing and forming of new relationships, mutual learning and respect for diversity was formed. Instead of being a mere backdrop for people's lives, space in this instance was used as a platform to create



Table 2: Integrated findings: focus group discussions, PAR values and change facilitated.

Focus group	Themes	Direct quotes from participants in support of themes	PAR values	Change facilitated/anticipated change by the PAR method
Experience of the site	(i) Dissatisfaction about the physical appearance of site (e.g. safety, low maintenance)	<p>“...dangerous... look, look... because there are broken glasses are... here... they broke the bottles and everything... they throw everything...”</p> <p>“...the grass is long here, it's problematic... 'cause when it rains... you cannot even open your front door... or... window... because of mosquitoes...”</p>	PAR values had not yet been unlocked at this stage	The participants focused on physical aspects of the site and the need to address problems such as the fact that the physical appearance of the site affects its functional use. Freedom to allow participants to voice their opinions and share their ideas/future vision for the site created a foundation for the establishment of social relations through the process. Participants expressed their willingness to collaborate voluntarily. They saw the researchers as a ‘mouthpiece’ to voice their opinions with the local government. While the discussion mainly focused on the expectations of the facilitation of physical change of the site, it was recognised that positive relationships could be beneficial to the process.
	(ii) Territoriality (e.g. stark insider/outsider division)	<p>“...if you're a stranger here... we can see that”</p> <p>“We are actually... eh... fighting with the people... who are... throwing... things here”</p>		
	(iii) Disregard by government	<p>“... he said to the council... to let us... to clean here... they didn't answer us... never answer us...”</p>		
Expectations of the process	(i) Physical change of the site e.g. upgrade and beautification	<p>“she'd like to have the, the place made beautiful...and smart...uhm... so that when you walk in... you want to be part of the area...”</p>	PAR values had not yet been unlocked at this stage	The participants focused on physical aspects of the site and the need to address problems such as the fact that the physical appearance of the site affects its functional use. Freedom to allow participants to voice their opinions and share their ideas/future vision for the site created a foundation for the establishment of social relations through the process. Participants expressed their willingness to collaborate voluntarily. They saw the researchers as a ‘mouthpiece’ to voice their opinions with the local government. While the discussion mainly focused on the expectations of the facilitation of physical change of the site, it was recognised that positive relationships could be beneficial to the process.
	(ii) Collaboration of participants and researchers	<p>“Maybe we can volunteer ourselves by uhm... we can help... each other by doing that [physical implementation]...”</p> <p>“...if you can be our mouthpiece...especially...eh...with the council...”</p>		



Table 2: Continued.

Focus group	Themes	Direct quotes from participants in support of themes	PAR values	Change facilitated/anticipated change by the PAR method
(2) July 2013	Experience of the process	(i) Positive feelings towards the process (e.g. happiness, excitement and appreciation) “I am, very happy about it...” “...since you [researchers] arrived, people [community] became exited” “Thank you... this initiative... that you're [researchers] undertaking... is... very important to us [community]...”	Relationships: learning; empowerment	During the second focus group session, progression is evident as more PAR values are unlocked. The anticipated functional and physical change of the site started to create a platform for change in terms of PAR values such as relationship formation, respect, learning and empowerment. Participants realised the importance of stakeholder participation. A sense of empowerment surfaced as participants started to generate own solutions (e.g. approach companies for funding). They realised the potential for the facilitation of learning through change of the physical space. While PAR values started to emerge during the process, trust in the realisation of physical change remains a concern for participants due to financial uncertainty.
	Expectations of the process	(i) Involvement of various stakeholders “... we want... we want something there... but we... can't make it on our own...” “I think it's important... to... to have... our ward councillor... must be involved in that... so he can help us with... with... the councils.....” “...engage the Potchefstroom University... to take on the park place...” “We [community] must go to the companies around... in Potchefstroom...”		
		(ii) Creation of learning opportunities “...for the children to play... and learn... something... while their playing... like... stop signs... road works... and... pedestrian crossing... and how to use the road...” (iii) Concerns about realisation of physical change “... we are struggling to... you know... to get that place to be very nice..... where is the money going to come from?”		



Table 2: Continued.

Focus group	Themes	Direct quotes from participants in support of themes	PAR values	Change facilitated/anticipated change by the PAR method
(3) February 2014 Experience of the process	(i) Formation of strong social relations	"I have an issue with age difference... Like she [older female participant]... she's older than me... I can't have a chat with her... But we can chat... yeah...it made it different... <laughter>" "We [participants] are friends now..."	Relationships, mutual learning, respect for diversity, empowerment	A third focus group was conducted after finalisation of the physical plan/design by the community, but before actual implementation. The process that was followed created an opportunity for participants from different age groups to form strong bonds (friendships). Working together unlocked mutual learning in terms of how to work with diverse stakeholders, such as ward committee members and students. Social skills were developed during the process of learning, including respect for other people's opinions. Empowerment started to emerge during this stage as positive behavioural changes such as responsibility and ownership had taken place. These changes had a positive influence on the physical space as participants developed a caring attitude towards the site.
	(ii) Creation of a sense of ownership	"...we [community] feels responsible for the upkeep of the site] don't want to see anybody throwing something bad there... We take care of the place..." "... this place of ours... the place of the children..."		
	(iii) Establishment of responsibility	"I never took this "parkie" [little park] into consideration anyway... nobody [community] did... but ever since we [researchers and community members] met... it's like... I don't even want anyone throwing their bottles there [research area]..."		
	(iv) Mutual learning	"... I learned a lot about working together with a group of people with different ideas..." "And I, think also... uhm... concerning working together with different people... working different people... community members who I didn't know... ward committee members... students..."		
	(i) Discouragement due to the time consuming nature of the process	"So... we were expecting for something happening... That's why not even [Participant Y] is coming... He doesn't really see why he should come back..."		
				The active involvement of participants in changing space to place is time consuming and poses commitment challenges. In this sense physical change is related to the formation of PAR values. Failure to implement physical change kept some participants from realising their true potential in the society in which they live – a first step towards social justice and equity.

(Source: authors' own construction of finding.)



positive change in people's lives. In order to facilitate change, the planning and design process behind the transformation of spaces to places is important as it is through the process, rather than the end product, that communities are liberated and empowered.

7 Conclusion

PAR proved to be an appropriate method to empower communities previously subjected to bureaucratic top-down planning systems. The findings suggest that PAR benefits the planning process as it moves beyond transformation of physical space to include social change such as (i) the establishment of strong bonds between participants and participants and researchers and (ii) mutual learning. Furthermore, it initiated change on a psychological level that included (i) the creation of pride, (ii) sense of ownership, (iii) the development of responsibility as well as (iv) respect for diversity. PAR is suggested here as a valuable method for planners to create meaningful places while space is used as a platform for personal and collective change.

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