

Venting Practices: Navigating interpersonal dynamics of socio-technical spatial design work in neo-Apartheid cities

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Abstract

This paper will focus on the built environment dynamics of spatial design practitioners and the related discipline's involvement in addressing spatial inequality and draws from a series of recorded conversations between three South African socio-technical spatial design practitioners during the 2020 Covid19 Lockdown. These conversations were titled 'Gripe Sessions' and were held every 2 weeks between three socio-technical practitioners as a means of support, reflection, and knowledge sharing through a peer-led 'venting' model.

The paper's intent lies in making tangible a series of interpersonal dynamics that are present within working from the grass-roots neighbourhood scale of socially engaged built environment work in the contemporary neo-apartheid city condition. The paper draws from Feminist scholarly principles and offers an additional 'partial perspective' to this topic, in doing so it does not offer to employ empirical methods, rather it uses qualitative social studies technique to introduce and link the concerns identified by the co-authors to the larger discourse on city-making practice towards spatial justice in South Africa's built environment.

KEYWORDS: Socio-Technical Design, Grass-Roots, Neighbourhood Design, Positionality, Critical Practice

1. Introduction

South Africa's built urban form continues to re-enforce socio-spatial patterns of division and segregation decades after our 1994 political reform milestone (Myambo et al., 2018). A divided city remains divided not only by the physical manifestation of the built form, but it is further enhanced by the socio-spatial practices of human scale city-making that through the smallest interpersonal interactions between individuals is linked to the highest levels of policy making and discal allocation, an inter-scalar link that according to Southern Urbanist scholars (Bhan, 2019; Pieterse, 2014; Simone, 2004) are 'deeply' entwined in the infrastructural city roots of local and global understandings of self and other. Such readings of place and people are not incidental to the built environment, but- according to sociologist Anthony Giddens (2012) are entangled through the actions of individuals at various scales of both the city and region as a whole - a point similarly made by cities scholar Edgar Pieterse (2013) when describing the emergent nature of African cities.

With a specific focus on the disciplinary actors of spatial change around design, and drawing from Feminist scholarship there is an importance of acknowledging and engaging *with* one's own positionality (McDowell, 1992; Norber & Harding, 2005) and *through* one's technical mandate when working in any sector of South Africa's built environment *to* practice – but in particular in those areas that cover the largest contrasts of inequality in today's context of climate emergency, social inequality and rising nationalist sentiments typically considered the 'developmental sector'¹. These factors should not be considered a 'nice-to-have' within a practice framing, but rather a critical departure point of recognition to incorporate within technical consideration, project design, and implementation. These are not novel, nor revolutionary ideas, having been covered in detail in the work of Nabeel Hamdi (2010, 2013) and several South African spatial practitioners (Brown-Luthango, 2013; Oldfield, 2008; Winkler, 2018).

2. Theoretical and methodological approach(es) pursued

Drawing from the auto-ethnographical techniques of Dana Cuff's (1991) practice-orientated (Doucet & Janssens, 2011) studies of architectural practice combined with Donald Schon's cross-disciplinary concepts of 'reflection-on-action' in regards to spatial practice, this study has collected a set of initial

¹ A broad category of multi-disciplinary work that is in support of South Africa's National Development Goals.

findings from a series of auto-interviews² between the authors during the 2020 South African lockdown. It is important to note that this study does not use this qualitative data to make any overarching, ‘god-trick’ empirical claims to this knowledge sector, instead it works with an understanding of ‘objectivity’ that is better understood as multiple partial perspectives (Haraway, 1988) that provide a more useful situated understanding of knowledge. These were conducted over digital call, recorded, transcribed and the findings analysed between the authors in preparation for this submission. The working title of the exercise was called ‘Gripe Sessions’³ and was conceived as a means of providing both social and technical support to each other in a very difficult time. This took place over 7 events and was followed up by digital conversation to co-develop the *Socio-Technical Question Framework* set through what was called a ‘peer-led venting model’. This study shares these initial findings as means of introducing these topics to the field, but will be followed up in more detail in further research exercises conducted by the authors in their doctoral studies.

3. Major issue(s) addressed

There are many important conversations underway across South Africa regarding the myriad of issues around NGO’s, development practice and social justice work since 1994’s political shift. These topics were brought to a particular head during the 2020 Lockdowns when movement and access to already meagre resources ~~was~~ were made more difficult (Bhan et al., 2020). Within these discussions, the growing focus on the individuals, their stories, and their motivations between these city-city-making forces is gaining increasing importance as a crucial factor in *how* socially focussed practitioners conduct their work and *why*. The Gripe Sessions engaged head on with these questions in the spatial practice field of socio-technical support that the author’s collective work has engaged with over the last 10-15 years. These included very personal and often frank questions that the co-authors were dealing with during the discussions.

“Why are we doing this? Why aren’t we doing ‘normal work’?”

Extract from Analysis Notes on Gripe Session 2 (Authors, 2020)

4. Potential significance of the work

This discourse covers concepts of intersectional privilege, systemic injustice, structural poverty and identity dynamics in the post-Apartheid rebuilding efforts. Jordan Flaherty’s (2016) critique on developmental-industrial complex of the USA’s post-Katrina disaster in *No more heroes – Grass-Roots Challenge to Saviour Mentality*- begins with a carefully chosen statement made by Vietnamese mothers of the 1970’s war with America requesting for the mothers of returning soldiers to not only think of the work in addressing their country’s role in the conflict, but to also work with their own children in the post-war reconciliation efforts. This anecdote is intended to convey the importance of interpersonal shared responsibility across complicated socio-political conflict and to bring to attention the importance of interpersonal dynamics of positional work in regard to the socio-technical field of practice within the ‘development sector’.

5. Problem statement

Socio-technical practice is often seen through a ‘professionalised’ lens that ignores the interpersonal, intercultural, and intersectional dimensions from both the training curriculum as well as technical requirements regarding spatial practice in South Africa. The idea that the ‘ends justify the result’ (Hamdi, 2013) has long been proven to undo much of the good in such work. This is made harder to navigate in contexts such as post-Apartheid South Africa, where the nature of such work makes it

² Auto-Ethnography (Chang, 2008) employs the tacit (Schrijver, 2021) forms of architectural knowledge through carefully constructed, rigorously applied and ethically formulated means of knowledge production.

³ Gripe implies a space to ‘complain’ or share the difficulties of work between colleagues.

extremely difficult to interpersonally navigate such grey areas (Yiftachel, 2009) of value judgement and practice focus.

6. Initial Findings

Table 30.1 is a co-developed summary of the terms, concepts and important parts of the discussions. These have been organized under Framings (concepts that are informed by an action), Nature of the Questions (the type of questions the authors asked each other), and selected Statements/Quotes (that emerged during the various sessions).

Framings	Nature of Questions	Statements/Quotes
<i>Framing</i>	Questions of 'Approach':	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...where do you even start when you arrive at a shack fire..." • "...these ideas of 'community', 'leadership' and 'NGO' are so layered..." • "...is architecture even a relevant concept in this work ?..."
	Questions of 'Agency':	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...is it really ok that its me doing this work..." • "...if not me, then someone else..." • "...who gives us our mandate ?..."
<i>Positioning</i>	Questions of 'Location':	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...staying in our lane..." • "...choosing where we act..." • "...choosing who we act with..."
	Questions of 'Change':	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...deciding whether we will be around to see our 'change'..." • "...inter-generational systems of 'change'..." • "...what we choose to do: to make what 'change'..."
<i>Valuing</i>	Questions of 'Value':	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...whose values are we working with..." • "...conflicting values between us and our partners..." • "...divergence of values between us and our families..."
	Questions of 'Perception':	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...what the work looks like, versus what it entails..." • "...how issues appear, versus where they come from..." • "...virtue signaling, versus 'doing the hard work'..."
<i>Acting</i>	Questions of 'Process':	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...participation/inclusion doesn't always result in a 'better product'..." • "...sometimes people don't want 'process' they want 'product'..." • "...hard to value process across actors/sectors..."
	Questions of 'Voice':	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • "...the importance of Story Telling..." • "... the challenge of de-centering..." • "...the necessity of multiple voices at different scales of processes..."

Table 30.1: Analysis Summaries from Gripe Sessions 1-6 (Authors, 2022)

7. Conclusions

In much the same way the Cuff's (1991) conclusion to her extensive survey of architectural practice did not yield any concrete suggestions – nor should it have - this study has yielded a qualitative data sets that gives access to the interpersonal complexity of such socio-technical work in South Africa. This

work has value towards lifting much of the stigma, romanticization, and shallow perceptions of such work and sees value in making these experiences available to the growing sector of spatial practitioners who are and will be working in South African cities. Schon's suggestion to see spatial design processes not as a 'solutionary' process, but rather as a way to 'have a conversation with a context' (1983, p. 45) offers a means of understanding how this study can support such inquiry from this field, with the questions set being offered here as a tool for those working in these contexts, as can be seen in Figure 30.1.

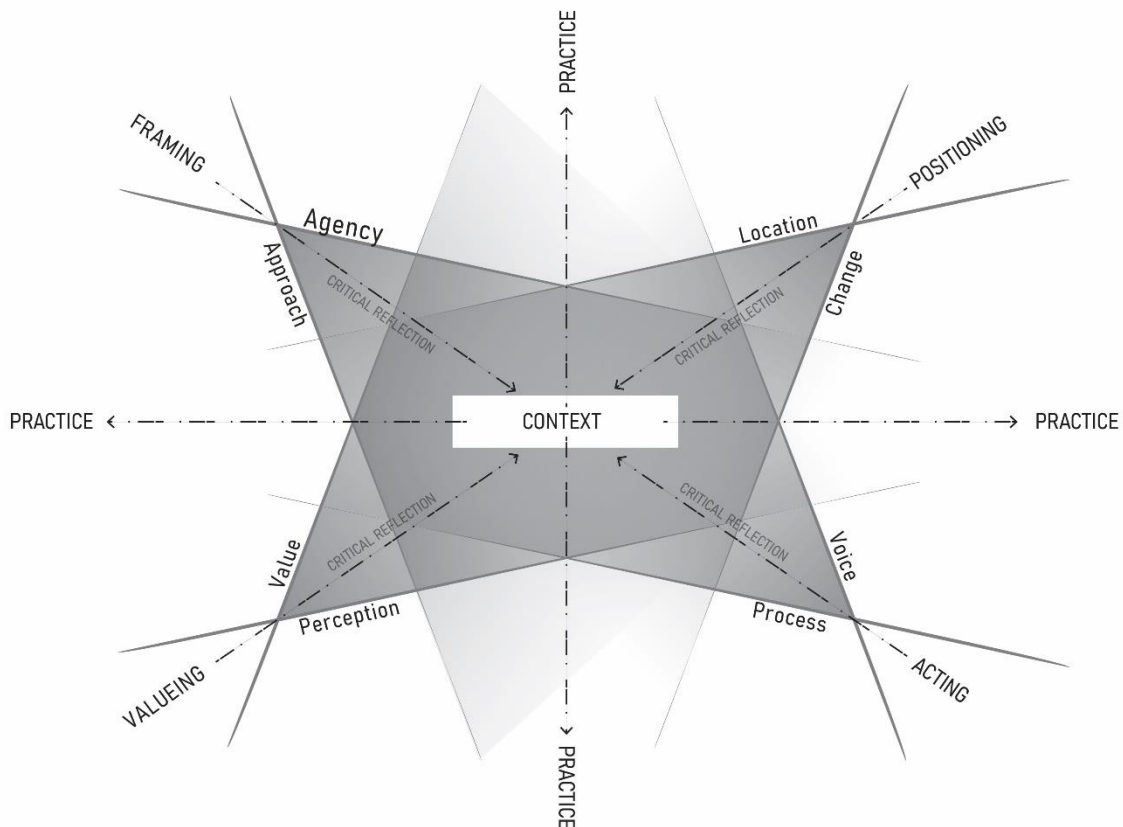


Figure 30.1: Questioning Practice Diagram (Author, 2022)

8. Implications

Urban scholars (Bradlow, 2021; Gotz et al., 2014) describes how such interpersonal and psycho-spatial factors difficulties manifest most clearly in the metropolitans of South Africa. These take place through spatial separations that host some of the most unequal living conditions on the planet (SACN, 2016); in spaces that are historically and spatially scarred by the systemic segregation of the populace that have been in place since the country's geo-political inception in 1652 and remains fundamentally unchallenged in the way the country operates (Biko, 2013). While it may seem a given to acknowledge such systemic inequality, many Southern Urbanist (Parnell et al., 2014; Sihlongonyane, 2015), South African post-colonial and post-Apartheid (Achille Mbembe, 2017; Matsipa, 2014) scholars remind us that the nature and manner in which spatial systems are perceived and acted upon are crucial to tacitly acknowledge and should be constantly challenged.

These interpersonal, intercultural and positional dynamics actively feed into the collective psycho-cultural application (Malaza, 2014) of making and using cities – an often-understated force in city-city-making (Yiftachel, 2009) - a set of conditions framed by Watson (2006) as a question of 'deep difference'. Such conditions are made more difficult to unpack due to the palimpsest of internalised negative perceptions, stigmas and unequal development of over 400 years of colonial and

Apartheid ‘development and re-development’ (Malaza, Nqobile, 2014) - a reality that makes any inclusion of reflective, empathetic or considered approaches difficult to justify or practice ethically,

In order to work through such complex challenges, these authors believe that interpersonal details, nuance and diversity of approaches within this work is-are crucial to recognise when considering training and spatial practice valuation in South Africa's built environment. Such interpersonal consideration or care within built environment work are should not be ‘nice-to-haves’ but are critical factors to engage with towards technical success and the emotional and organisational sustainability of spatial practitioners in post-Apartheid South African cities. This initial study, guided by the Gripe Sessions, is offered here - along with the questions framed - as a means of conducting reflective practice in the South African neo-Apartheid landscape and intentionally do not attempt to provide any ‘best-practice’ or ‘solutionary’ suggestions to the reader.

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