An exploration of the role of social systems in urban renewal:
Preface

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Abstract

Cities, as complex social systems within society, are the most complex of all human systems. An increase in this complexity is anticipated since projections estimate that two-thirds of the world’s population will be urbanised by 2030. Cities are “melting pots” of cultures and systems that share the same spatial environment. In South Africa this challenge is exacerbated by one of the highest urbanisation rates in the world. Urban growth implies tremendous change. City centres are especially at risk to structural changes of urban growth and consequent urban decay. Governments commonly adopt urban renewal to cope with changing urban environments. However, the long term sustainability of current urban renewal practices is questioned as they tend to over-emphasise economic revival and physical intervention. The focus on people is often missed and misunderstood, even though social dynamics are the driving forces in cities. Urban renewal is complex and multi-dimensional. In theory it moved away from the linear top-down approach that focused on the physical environment towards a more inclusive, integrated and socially oriented process. This is reflected in paradigm shifts in planning thought from a physical planning and design based product orientated discipline (as reflected in historical and modernist planning approaches), to a socio-political process in which the communicative planning paradigm is the most recent post-modern theory.

Understanding cities as social systems and exploring their role in central business areas to include them in urban renewal are important starting points when urban planners work with urban renewal initiatives. As research about social systems and their role in urban renewal is limited in South Africa, this study provides a step towards acknowledging and including urban social systems proactively in urban renewal initiatives. This is especially relevant in central business districts of medium sized cities such as Potchefstroom (Tlokwe Municipality) that experience urban decay and where urban renewal initiatives have not yet been implemented. The Mission Statement of the Tlokwe Municipality emphasises the need for social understanding in the economic sphere, as this enjoys a high priority in the development choices made.

A qualitative ethnographic research approach was followed to explore the role of social systems in this context. This allowed the research to capture social dynamics in its natural setting where no extraneous influences occur. This resulted in rich textual descriptions of how people experience social interactions and the physical environment. Unstructured and non-participant field observations and face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews were used as methods to identify social systems within the research context and to understand interactions and behaviour patterns that emerge from this context.

Findings from the observations expose a dynamic and cyclical network of inter- and intra-relationships that culminate in continuous intense interaction amongst three social systems,
namely the private sector, community groups and the general public. Pro-social behaviour patterns (behaviour that promotes good social relations) were observed, including cultural relativism and social awareness. Findings from the interviews provided insight into how social systems interact with one another and with the physical environment. Themes that emerged for the data to describe interactions among social systems include material support, friendliness, cooperativeness, comfortableness, accommodativeness, fixed and established relations and respect for one another. This creates a vibrant, synergetic environment conducive to sustainability and describes an environment of hope. The counter-experience includes forced flexibility and adaptiveness (due to unmet physical needs), feelings of being unsafe, limited choices and a general dissatisfaction with the physical environment in terms of its support. This describes an urban environment of fear. The role of social systems in terms of urban renewal is inclusive, participating and socially sensitive. They should be catalysts for socio-economic functions, contribute to maintenance and act as stakeholders.

Based on the above, the study offers recommendations to include social systems in urban renewal in terms of the research process and method to be followed, how and where to include social systems in urban renewal projects and suggestions for physical change to make the area more supportive to the social dynamics. Practical guidelines are offered related to the practice of observations and interviews for the identification and exploration of social systems. The following suggestions are made regarding the urban renewal process: pro-active inclusion of social systems throughout the process in the pre-project stage, during the urban renewal project and post-project stage. Interventions to enhance the physical environment include provision of special requests, access to open space, application of green construction and local distinctiveness. As planners play a proactive role in urban renewal they may contribute to enhancing the sustainability of urban renewal initiatives by understanding urban social systems and their role in city centres in order to acknowledge and include them as important partners.

(Keywords: social systems, urban systems, cultural relativism, ethnocentrism, urban renewal, urban planning, modernist planning, post-modern planning, central business district, social sustainability)
Opsomming

Stede as komplekse sosiale sisteme is die mees komplekse van alle menslike sisteme in die samelewing. ’n Toename in die kompleksiteit word verwag met vooruitskattings dat byna twee derdes van die wêreldbevolking verstedelik sal wees teen 2030. Stede word beskou as “melting pots” van kulture en sisteme wat dieselfde ruimtelike omgewing bewoon. In Suid-Afrika word hierdie uitdaging verhoog deur een van die hoogste verstedelikingsyfers in die wêreld. Stedelike groei impliseer dat stede gekonfronteer word met geweldige vinnige verandering. Middestede word die ergste hierdeur geraak as gevolg van stedelike verval. Stedelike vernuwing word algemeen deur die regering aanvaar as deel van veranderende stedelike omgewings. Die volhoubaarheid van huidige stedelike vernuwingsprojekte word egter bevraagteken omdat hierdie inisiatiewe geneig is om meer klem op ekonomiese herlewing en fisiese ingryping te plaas, terwyl die fokus op mense en sosiale dynamiek dikwels gemis en misverstaan word. Stedelike vernuwing is kompleks en multi-dimensioneel. In teorie het dit wegbeweeg van die liniere “top-down” benadering wat fokus op die fisiese omgewing na ’n meer inklusiewe, geïntegreerde en sosiaal-georiënteerde proses. Dit word weerspieël in paradigmaskuiwe in stadsbeplanning van ’n fisiese beplanning en ontwerpgebaseerde, produk-georiënteerde dissipline (soos weerspieël in historiese en modernistiese beplanningsbenaderings) na dié van ’n sosio-politieke proses waarin die kommunikatiewe beplanningsparadigma inpas as ’n post-modernistiese teorie.

Die vertrekpunt neem stede as sosiale sisteme binne die sentrale sakegebied. Die verkenning van die rol van sosiale sisteme in stedelike vernuwingsprojekte word voorgestel as belangrike vertrekpunt vir stadsbeplanners in stedelike vernuwingsprojekte. Navorsing oor sosiale sisteme en hulle rol in stedelike vernuwingsprojekte is beperk, veral in Suid-Afrika. Stedelike sosiale sisteme word as pro-aktiewe deelnemers in vernuwingsprojekte gesien. Dit is veral relevant in die sentrale sakegebiede van mediumgrootte stede soos Potchefstroom (Tlokwe Munisipaliteit), waar stedelike verval plaasvind en stedelike vernuwingsinisiatiewe nog nie geïmplementeer is nie. In die Missie van die Tlokwe Munisipaliteit word die behoefte aan sosiale begrip in die sentrale sakegebied as ’n hoë prioriteit beskou.

’n Kwalitatiewe etnografiese navorsingsbenadering is gevolg om die rol van sosiale sisteme te ondersoek binne hierdie spesifieke konteks. Ryk tekstuele data is uit die omgewing verkry, insluitende die sosiale dynamika van sosiale sisteme. Ongestructureerde en nie-deelnemer veldwaarnemings is gedoen, waaruit aangesig-tot-aangesig, in-diepte semi-gestructureerde onderhoude gebruik is as metodes om die teenwoordigheid van sosiale sisteme en hulle interaksies en gedragspatrone te identifiseer. Bevindinge van die waarnemings toon ’n
dinamiese en sikkiese netwerk van inter- en intra-verhoudings wat kulmineer in aaneenlopende interaksie tussen drie sosiale stelsels. Hierdie is die privaat-sektor, die gemeenskap en die algemene publiek. Pro-sosiale gedragspatrone (gedrag wat bevorderlik is vir goeie sosiale verhoudings) is waargeneem, wat insluit kulturele relativisme en sosiale bewustheid. Bevindinge van die onderhoude het insig oor hoë sosiale sisteme met mekaar sowel as met die fisiese omgewing bevorder. Temas wat na vore gekom het in die data sluit in: materiële ondersteuning, vriendelikheid, samewerking, gemak met aanpassing, akkomoderendheid, vaste en gevestigde verhoudings en respek vir mekaar. Dit skep 'n lewendige omgewing wat bevorderlik is vir volhoubaarheid en symboliseer 'n omgewing van hoop. In teenstelling hiermee staan temas soos: dwang; buigsaamheid en aanpasbaarheid (as gevolg van onvervulde fisiese behoeftes); onveiligheid; beperking in keuse en 'n algemene ontevredenheid met die fisiese omgewing. Dit symboliseer 'n stedelike omgewing van vrees. Die rolle van die betrokke sisteme in terme van stedelike vernuwing word gesien as inklusief, deelnemend en sosiaal sensitief. Hulle rol is om 'n katalisator vir sosio-ekonomiese funksies te wees wat bydra tot die instandhouding en optree as belanghebbendes.

Beplanningsaanbevelings word gemaak om sosiale sisteme binne stedelike vernuwing te inkorporeer. Dit sluit in 'n voorgestelde navorsingsproses en die metode van ondersoek. Praktiese riglyne word aangebied rakende waarnemings en onderhoude vir die identifisering en verkenning van sosiale stelsels vir die praktys. Met betrekking tot die stedelike vernuwingproses word die volgende fisiese voorstelle gemaak: pro-aktiewe insluiting van sosiale sisteme in die pre-proej stadium, gedurende die stedelike vernuwingprojek en die post-proej stadium. Voorstelle vir die fisiese vernuwing van die Potchefstroomse SSK sluit in: die voorsiening van spesiale versoekte, toegang tot die oop ruimtes, toepassing van groen konstruksie en laastens plaaslike karakter. Beplanners speel 'n pro-aktiewe rol in stedelike vernuwing wat kon bydra tot die volhoubaarheid van stedelike vernuwinginisiatiewe. 'n Beter begrip van stedelike sosiale sisteme en hulle rol in die middestand kan bydra tot hulle insluiting as fundementele vennote.
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