Main Title

`Insurgent Planning` in Durban; An investigation on the proliferation of religious sites for the Nazareth Baptist Church

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Abstract

This paper discusses ` insurgent planning` as relevant approach to planning practice, then applies it to the city of Durban in an attempt to shed light on the proliferation of religious sites of the Nazareth Baptist Church. The paper seeks to make a contribution to a growing body of literature on critical urban studies by drawing attention to other ways of conceiving and engaging space in the city. Arguing that predominant planning theories are inadequate to account for the diversity of urban experiences, the paper explores alternative theoretical frameworks that speak more eloquently to contemporary issues, more especially in contexts that are increasingly marked by diversity, difference, informality, marginality, and `otherness`. These theoretical frameworks foreground these issues as constitutive of being (in the city), and as contributions to the collective reimagining of the city. The paper discusses how such a planning approach could improve theory, pedagogy, and planning practice.



1. Introduction

Cities in South African are going through a process of unprecedented social and spatial transformation following the ushering of a more democratic political dispensation almost two decades ago. Urban Planners and other built environment professionals are at the forefront of trying to generate an understanding of the processes that continue to shape current cities in Africa, and to use that understanding to inform Planning Theory and meaningful practice (Dewar et al 2013, Murray 2004, Harrison 1996, Simone 2004, Mangcu et al 2003). This research represents an endeavor at contributing to this rejuvenated theoretical space of critical Urban Studies.

The paper investigates and documents an instance of `insurgent planning` in the city of Durban involving the proliferation of religious sites that belongs to the Shembe Church. 'Insurgent planning` ingrains existing but hitherto officially unacknowledged land uses, and/or introduces new identities and practices into the city's urban-scape. While this serves to empower ordinary citizens, it also parodies the official disciplining rational use of space. Such urban narratives are too often ignored in the process of official space making and therefore suggest other ways of being in the city.

The research draws inspiration from a well-trodden path of researchers on `unconventional` uses of space that challenges the predominant notions of space-making. It is foreshadowed, for example, in the pioneering work of de Certeau's (1984) flaneurism along Parisian street; Sandercock's (1998) writings on the challenge of multiculturalism to the (Australian) planning system, and perhaps more recently, Ameel et al's (2012) research on Parkour in Finnish cities, to name a few.

The purpose of the paper is to make a contribution to a growing body of literature on critical urban studies by drawing attention to other ways of conceiving and engaging space in the city. The paper investigates and documents the extent of the Shembe religious sites; describes the process involved with `establishing` the sites; discusses site design and maintenance; and deliberates on how the site is utilized; all with the view to informing public policy/practice, planning theory, and pedagogy. Concepts such as mis-use of space (Mchunu 2006) and loose space (Franck et al, 2007) are deployed as tools for analysis. Both concepts describe the pervasive phenomenon concerning the use of urban spaces contrary to what they were intended or against their zoning designations.



The research relied on both primary and secondary sources of data. In-depth interviews were conducted with key informants. Photographs, and site visits were also sources of primary data. Secondary sources concerning the historical and recent media reports were obtained from the internet.

To begin to think of ways and means of addressing this and perhaps similar challenges, it may be necessary to situate the discussion within the broader political, social, and economic forces that are shaping Durban as a city. Equally important is to try and shed some light on the Shembe Church, including their cosmology.

2. Reimagining Spaces in the City

Around the world new ways of being in the city are emerging, instances of `insurgent planning` abound. Ameel and Tani's (2012:17) discussion of the phenomenon of Parkour in Finnish cities as `new way of movement that challenges conceptions of acceptable or appropriate behavior in urban public space` provides another case in point. They argue that the practice does not `follow the conventional regulations of space and its intended use....they are able to draw their own maps, imposing them on the normal restrictions and codes of behavior' (ibid, 19).

In 2005, I documented the need for spaces to practice initiation among the Xhosa speaking peoples in Cape Town, South Africa. Upon reaching a certain age, boys undergo a process of initiation into manhood which involves prolonged stays in the bush during which, among other things, they are circumcised as a rite of passage into manhood. Communities were forced to improvise as a way out of the impasse as these spaces were not provided for in official plans.

There is also the phenomenon of `street memorials` (Ojo-Aromokudu and Mchunu 2013), which involves the laying of wreaths and crucifixes on sites of fatal road accidents. Franck and Stevens' (2007) introduced the concept of `loose space` as a framework for analyzing such practices.

These studies echo Lefebvre's (1991) notion of space as socially produced through and from the human body. They are also anticipated in de Certeau's (1984) ground-breaking work on flaneurism, which through relaxed strolling along the Parisian streets made the tightly controlled rhythms of the city visible. In a sense flaneurs provided a critique of the strict rules of urban life. The use of space by the Sheme Church needs to be also understood in this



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context of this increasing phenomenon of informal use of urban space for activities other than what it was intended.

3. The Legacy of Past Planning

Faced with the demands for diversity and difference, the fabric of the modern city continues to lose its relevance and meaning to the lived experiences of many urban dwellers. Its ensemble of buildings and spaces are confronted with an amalgam of aspirations, imaginations, and social practices that transcend current paradigms that informed its conception. It seems as though from inception, the socio-economic arrangements and the logistics of `belonging` and becoming have proven to be difficult to read for modern planners and decision makers.

It is also becoming increasingly doubtful that local government is a legitimate locus for decision-making and implementation of an inclusive vision of the city. This stems from the perceived halting intervention of the local authority in shaping the city. The means may not yet be at hand to respond to the challenges of a postmodern present (Mabin 1995), whose pace and character of developments demand new and innovative methods.

There is also the issue with past planning practice that has also been discussed extensively in planning literature (Muller 1982 and 1995, Laburn-Peart 1991 and 1998, Parnell 1993, Mabin 1991, Harrison 1996. These authors highlighted among other issues, the discriminatory nature of apartheid planning, the marginalization based on racial, ethnic and other markers of difference.

The challenges of the Shembe spatial practice to planning intervention have to be seen in terms of the broader social processes that are responsible for persisting inequality; what Mbembe (2013) described as the `lust for our lost segregation`; the deep tensions along racial lines; the proliferation of enclaves of affluence and degradation; and the ubiquitous informality; all of which characterize the current city-form.

There is also the halting intervention of local authorities in shaping the city, resulting in what Peattie (1991:36) described as the `splendid entrepreneurial disorder and hustling boosterism`, and `a functioning order that seems messy on the ground` (ibid: 39). The pace with which development takes place and its character poses additional challenges for meaning government intervention in terms of setting the agenda.



Equally powerful is the ascendency of a market-driven consumerist culture that revolves around the buying and selling of goods and services, which pervades all aspects of contemporary city life. This has contributed to the pervasive spiritual malaise. The combination of these factors contributes and shapes the current form of the city of Durban.

4. Spontaneous Self-Diversification

In Lefebvre terms (1987), the city of Durban may be characterized as a 'spatial practice' produced between 'spatial representation' of professionals and city officials, and 'representational spaces' as lived and imagined by inhabitants of the city. 'Spatial representation' refers to those spaces produced by professionals and officials, and 'representational spaces' refers to those spaces that result from people's interaction with the built environment that is produced by professionals.

`Representational spaces` oftentimes are instances of cultural conflict and change, which activates spaces in ways hitherto not imagined, and as such, bring excitement and stimulation that transforms cities beyond the imaginations of officials and academic theory. The numerous siting of these `religious sites` by the Shembe Church predominantly on public/municipal land in and around the city represent instances of `insurgent planning`, which results in `representational spaces.'

In the context of South Africa, planning challenges presented by `representational spaces` cannot be understood without reference to both the colonial and apartheid pasts, which, with the aid of modern planning techniques, marginalized groups in society and other ways of being in the city. Overcoming this legacy is the single most defining aspect of current state planning initiatives in South Africa. Opportunities for `spontaneous self-diversification` emanate, in part, from a more inclusive post-apartheid political dispensation that is more tolerant of difference.

The discussion now turns briefly to focus on the historical background of the Shembe Church and their cosmology with the view to assisting with the reformulating of informative policies and plans. If these sites are to be accommodated in official plans and policies instead of the prevailing polite acquiescence, a better understanding of the practice may be necessary.

5. The Nazareth Baptist Church/ Shembe Church

The Nazareth Baptist Church (Ibandla lamaNazarites or Shembe Church) is the oldest African Independent/Indigenous Church in South Africa. It was founded by Inkosi Isaiah



Shembe (1860's-1935) in 1910. The church forms part of African Initiated Churches that date back to the 4th century Ethiopian Orthodox Church.

The Shembe religion is a combination of Zulu culture and Christianity. The main church is located on a sacred site north of Durban called Ekuphakameni, which is translated to mean 'Place of Spiritual Upliftment'. Recently, there has been a marked proliferation in the number of sites of different shapes and dimensions in and around the city, which bear the hallmark of the Nazareth Baptist Church.

The mere sight of the Shembe religious gathering in seemingly awkward shaped and random spaces in and around the city, especially on Saturdays, is enough to arouse curiosity from tourist and locals alike. White stones arranged in a semi-circle preferably under a tree have become a common sight not only in Durban, but can be seen in other cities as well.

According to the informants, the `founding` of the site follows a well-established ritual of prayer, weeding as part of cleaning process, planting of trees for shade usually at the centre, the placement of white stones, and finally another prayer to `open` the site for service. The penultimate blessing of the site takes place after all the above and this involves what seems from the descriptions, like a more elaborate affair involving a number of priests and invited guests.

Trees are planted where none exists to provide shade. Church members volunteer their time for the upkeep of the site. The size of the space is dictated by the number of the congregation on each particular site, which can be extended depending on the physical extent of the site.

To the uninitiated there appears to be no logic behind the selection of sites, size and orientation, if any, but according a guided `tour` of one site revealed that men sit separate from women, who in turn sit separate from girls and the priesthood. Furthermore, entrances are also separated in similar fashion, with each entrance oriented towards the center, which serves as the focal point for all who enter the space.





Figure 1: A recent site on private property. It illustrates an arrangement of white stones with 4 entrances and a marked centre, typical of all similar sites by Shembe Church. Photograph: K Mchunu, 2013

Every Saturday these `ordinary` urban spaces, majority of which are the postscripts of planning, are activated and come alive as worshippers all dressed in a combination of white and black garb with pieces of traditional Zulu jewelry could be seen gathering together for a service. In addition to Saturdays, specials services are held every 14, 23, and 25th of the month for women, men, and girls respectively. Upon further probing, the significance of these dates did could not be readily explained by the informants.

However, it is noteworthy that once permission has been granted, the site is altered, albeit lightly, to the specific requirements of the Shembe Church. Following a specified set of rituals to mark the site as a worshipping space, strict rules governing entrance into the space are introduced, including removing ones shoes. Although all are welcome for prayers, and the site alterations slight, there is an implicit assumption that these spaces are now to be regarded as religious sites (and `belong` to the Shembe church), to the exclusion of other uses.



6. Implications for Planning Theory and Practice

This practice by the Shembe Church poses numerous challenges for planning as to the appropriate response. What should planners and policy makers do in the face of such a practice? Are such `spontaneous self-diversification among urban population`, as Jacobs (1961) dubbed similar acts of difference and diversity in the city, to be nurtured and embraced in the formulation of policies and plans? A decision of some sort has to be made and action taken as about every facet of urban infrastructure.

Part of the way forward may be found in that dog-eared, well-thumbed copy of Jane Jacobs (ibid), her argument for the need to embrace such practices; Young's (1990) conception of justice, the notion of cultural imperialism in particular; Sandercock's (1998, 2000) and Qadeer's (1994) discussions on the limitations of modern planning in contexts that are increasingly marked by multiculturalism and the need to transcend the limitations through inter alia, a process of inclusion; Harvey's (1992) concept of Social Justice as universal meta-narrative that transcends issues of otherness; and a host of writers concerned with issues of diversity and difference. Also, Schon's (1993) reflective practitioner is also relevant in this context of contested meanings and diverse value systems.

Armed with these perspectives, we could try to `decode` the seemingly random and indiscriminate siting of these spaces in order to celebrate difference, perhaps develop empathies for `otherness` in the city; or allow such practices to `...stand forth with their difference acknowledged and respected, though perhaps not completely understood, by others` (Young, 1990:108).

Identifying relevant sites involves an element of flaneurism by church members may be necessary to discover potential sites. With this ability to navigate urban terrain and to identify suitable spaces, the Shembes seem not bothered to follow conventional planning regulations for space and its designated purpose. They seem to stake a claim on the urban environment without demanding legal ownership, and with a rather uncanny ability to transform the mundane into the transcendental, and in the process reshape urban space.

Once a site has been identified, and a process of negotiation with owners concluded, sites are then transformed into sacred spaces following the process alluded earlier. It is therefore not surprising that thus far, the uses have not turned out to be conflictual, and the forces of law have not yet decided to impose some authoritarian solution. Instead there seems to be a polite nod on the part of the municipality, which may suffice in the short-term.



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There is a sense in which it could be argued, and rather convincingly, that this practice by spatial practice by the Shembe Church is posing a question as to who has a right to decide on the correct way to use public space? Through a combination of negotiation with relevant owners, and a rather footloose use of space, the Church introduces a less onerous method for land use management. The Shembe Church is, in a sense, creating a parallel city, a city with a different tempo, value system, and character, utilizing the fabric of the current city. Their city registers on a different scale and answers a different set of needs. The Church of Nazareth is creating islands of tranquility, serene spaces amidst the hustle and haggling, where, according to the informants all are welcome for a pause, a moment of reflection, and prayer irrespective of one's religious persuasion.

7. Diversity and the Modernity

The foregoing raises epistemological challenges around the limitations of modern planning, much about which has been written in planning literature (some refs). Modernism and other fashionable meta-paradigms (Global Cities, World Cities) have come under criticism for failing to adequately account for the diversity of urban practices (Murray 2004, Baum 1996, Sandercock, 1998; Dear 1986, Verma 1996). This diversity is a product of historically specific practices that connect with local circumstances in particular ways (Murray 2004).

The privileging of mainly western epistemology that does not adequately account for this diversity of urban experiences is regarded as problematic. The deconstruction of these predominantly western universal narratives is one of the major achievements of the radical critique of the past couple of decades. But the ground had already been laid long before as Harvey (Op cit.) rightfully noted.

This meant that all forms of meta-theories are either misplaced or illegitimate. Instead, alternative epistemologies, which speak to particular contexts, are touted as more relevant. These fragmented discourses were regarded as more grounded because they articulated particular local circumstances in which individuals and groups found themselves. But fragmented discourses could never go beyond challenging particular issues affecting their groups or members. This fails to address the broader system in which the particular issues are embedded.

Similarly, the spatial practice by Shembe and other similar uses articulate particular issues, advocate for the rights of their constituencies whose ignored needs are symptoms of a much



broader issue of marginalisation and discrimination in society. Although it may be hard to fault the sentiment for embracing the Shembe practice by acquiescing to the request for space as an act of `spontaneous self-diversification` of which Jacobs (Op cit.) speak, its operationalization is fraught with difficulties, especially in the South African context where apartheid perverted and manipulated group differences for political ends` (Mchunu, 2005:223).

The deconstruction of all meta-narratives as a universal basis for action although significant, left in its wake a plethora of fragmented discourses whose legitimacy obtains from being grounded in the particularities of their contexts. This either drains the legitimacy of state policy in the face of such a multitude of voices all clamouring to be heard and accommodated, or at worst attribute such policies to serving the sole interest of the ruling class that Plato's Republic admonished about and the history of South Africa suggest.

Also, group identity may provide an opportunistic launching pad for the redistributive claim on public resources (Mchunu, ibid), such as the appropriation of these spaces in this instance. This may be problematic, particularly if the claim is perceived not to be in proportion to the size of the group concerned, and in the context of limited resources (ibid). Yet freedom of city life encourages diversity, `the openness to unassimilated otherness` (Young, Op cit.).



Figure 2: A well-maintained site by city council in the suburb of Morningside. Photograph: K Mchunu, 2013



The suggestion to engage as Jacobs (op cit.) advocated also raises other concerns that Harvey (op cit.) highlights as problematic: in what ways can for example informality the like be (shantytowns, street vendors), homelessness, gang turf-warfare's and understood as `spontaneous self-diversification`?

8. Conflicting Uses of Space

The sites are usually located in urban areas in and around the Central Business District (CBD), in spaces officially designated for other land uses. It is to be expected that worshippers will meet other people who have different opinions about how best to utilise the space, or those who preferred the original use for which the plot was designated.

Although these sites are a result of negotiation with the owners for temporal use by the church, this becomes problematic if the land is publicly owned and the municipality has granted permission to occupy without consulting the public. By law, any change in land use requires comment by the public.

The potential conflict that might arise through such appropriation of public spaces by certain groups has been highlighted before. Mchunu (2006) describes a similar phenomenon involving `street monuments` that mark the sites of fatal road accidents. Wreaths and crucifixes are placed on these spots for indefinite periods of time in memory of those who perished. The sentiment is hard to fault, inasmuch as it is hard to challenge the rather benign uses by the Shembe Church. But there is a sense in which public spaces are usurped by particular groups to the exclusion of others without any due processes being followed.

Franck and Stevens (2007) also popularised a somewhat similar notion with their concepts of `tight and loose` spaces. Loose spaces occur where the designated use seems no longer relevant, or where different land uses are tolerated simultaneously. These also tend to be spaces that seem superfluous, or `leftover spaces that are free of official planning and commodification` (ibid, 8), as exemplified in figure 2 above. According to Franck and Stevens (ibid), loose spaces are central to the production of a healthy urban texture. What happens when loose space is appropriated and no longer becomes loose by nature of the use being introduced?

These practices activate spaces in unconventional manners, appropriating public open spaces for their activities. In the case of Shembe, they negotiate their right to use these



spaces with owners, be they private or local authorities. According to the one informant, such uses are always temporal, subject to the agreement with the owner. They also pointed to the lack of physical structures to indicate the non-permanent nature of the use, and that all denominations are welcome to pray.

9. Informality and Marginality

The Shembe practice is representative of instances of marginality and informality that are constitutive of life in the cities. One of the characteristics of contemporary cities, more especially in Africa, is the pervasive informality and marginality as manifested among other examples in street trading, the predominant modes of public transport involving privately operated vehicles, and the infamous squatter settlements or slums, cross-border and rural migrants, (see AlSayyad and Roy 2004). Both marginality and informality thrive on loose spaces of the crumbling urban fabric of the modern city.

Informality and marginality speaks to notions of temporality, ephemerality, uncertainty, and ambiguity. But also inherent in the discussions around informality and marginality are notions of movement and lightness. It is no coincidence that the predominant metaphor of airport cities (aero-polis) is popular in planning and government circles, the emphasis being on speed and lightness. Public transport terminals (airports, bus and taxi ranks, highways, fast-speed rail networks) have become dominant land uses and landmarks. The point being made is that the idea of movement, which has captured official imaginations, resonates with the experience of informality and marginality as other equally important ways of life in the city.

Living on the borderlands as Sandercock (2000) dubs life on the margins or living with informality, is a reality for some of the urban dwellers who have embraced them as positive spaces that are full of potential. She suggests that planners could learn from these marginalised groups by listening to their stories in order to improve not only planning theory and practice, but their lives as well.

Witness how the negative connotations associated with marginal spaces like the infamous townships have been gradually subverted, through popular imagination, by a much more positive narrative of townships as hip spaces. This popular view has been reinforced lately by both private and public sector investments in shopping atria and public infrastructure respectively.



10. Implications for Theory and Planning Practice

Sandercock (2000:6) began spelling out some of the elements required for planning practice to engage more meaningfully with this practice:

`Dialogue and negotiation across the gulf of cultural difference requires its practitioners to be fluent in a range of ways of knowing and communicating. Something more than the tool-kit of negotiation and mediation is needed, some `method`, which complements but also transcends the highly rational process typical of the communicative action model`.

Similar to other expressions of `spontaneous self-diversification` in the city, the official response could either be characterized as respectful, or as providing, as suggested by Jacobs (op cit.), in the sense that there has never been any violent confrontation by the city or members of the public.

In another sense the official response has been uninspiringly halting and at best acquiescing irrespective of where these religious sites may be occurring. This polite `openness to unassimilated otherness` (Young, Op cit.) may be all that planners could do yet, liberating public space for the heterogeneity that comes with the mixing of religions and other expressions of diversity in public space.

To this view I also bring her notion of cultural imperialism as one of what she describes as the `five faces` of oppression, which `the dominant meanings of a society render the particular perspective of one's own group invisible at the same time as they stereotype one's group and mark it out as the Other`. However, this is not to suggest the rest of her views on justice are not relevant, cultural imperialism speaks more to the issue at hand.

Schon (1993:18) called to attention the `mismatch of traditional patterns of practice and knowledge to features of the practice situation – complexity, uncertainty, instability, uniqueness and value conflict`. He proposed substitute the idea of reflection in action for the knowledge and application model of positivism and epistemology based on the idea of reflection in action.

Such approaches should be underpinned by a higher-order unified discourse, one that transcends the postmodern fragmentation that paralyses policy formulation. While acknowledging that justice and rationality as unifying discourses take on different meanings across space and time, Harvey (1991:598) also argues that `the existence of everyday



meanings to which people do attach importance and which to them appear unproblematic, gives the terms a political and mobilizing power that can never be neglected`.

Flyvbjerg (1990, 2001) and Peattie (2001) draw attention to Aristotle's distinction of three forms of knowing; Episteme, which refers to science or knowledge that is fixed and universal; Techne or Technique, what is distinguished as art and craft; and Phronesis, which is defined as knowing what to do in particular circumstances, not generalizable but context-dependent. Phronesis is preferred as the appropriate mode of knowledge for Planning. It is knowledge that is largely experientially determined. This is likely to entail Schon's (Op cit.) reflection in action on a wide repertoire of similar instances.

In conclusion, a context such as obtainable in South Africa, issues of exclusion and inclusion, domination and marginalization remain relevant owing largely to the colonial and apartheid pasts. Sensitivity to Young's notion of justice as discussed above, in particular her idea of cultural imperialism is relevant and inescapable in dealing with instances such as the Shembe practice. The appeal to a unifying discourse as alluded above as demonstrated by Harvey serves as the bedrock upon which the operationalization of the above rests.

The writers cited above are all grappling progressively about the challenges at hand. They all embody the positive aspects of postmodernism as opportunity to rethink and re-energise planning theory and practice.

If cities are a result of collective creation (Peattie 1991), `voices from borderlands` that Sandercock (1995) speaks about have become increasingly vociferous in their challenge for planners to re-envision theory and practice to be more inclusive. They show us what is wrong with our cities and suggest ways for addressing some of these challenges. She elaborates further (ibid: 85) that they:

`...describe the state of living on/in the borderlands, living in between, living on the margins....living with uncertainty, living without universals. But they do not live without hope or without meaning. They embrace uncertainty as a potential space of radical openness which nourishes the vision of a more experimental culture, a more tolerant and multifocal one.

The building and sustenance of more inclusive and tolerant cities demands no less than a practice and a pedagogy that embraces the inherent diversity of city-life. Planning is still relevant in assisting to direct the form and scale of mainly government but also private sector



investment in cities. It also remains relevant in facilitating a much broader envisioning of the city.



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