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The meaning of place-making in planning: historical overview and implications for urban and regional planning

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Abstract

In its course of development, urban and regional planning has been greatly influenced by the modernist movement, which left human environments with various problematic ecological and social conditions. In reaction to these conditions, alternative planning approaches branched from the planning profession, one of these being the development approach known as place-making. Place-making is the physical designing of a place based on locational contexts. Place-making is offered as an alternative planning approach to current planning practice to ameliorate and possibly prevent continuation of the problematic ecological and social conditions. However, this implies that there has to come about a shift in the focus and aims of current planning practice. The main implications of place-making are that planning should become more contextually driven, holistic, multidisciplinary, as well as human and quality centred. Also, it is proposed to increase research on place in the South African context.

Keywords: Place-making, urban and regional planning, place, contextual design

Abstrak

Die ontwikkeling van stads- en streekbeplanning is grootliks beïnvloed deur die modernistiese beweging, wat menslike omgewings met verskeie ekologiese en sosiale probleme gelaat het. In teenreaksie op hierdie probleme, het verskeie alternatiewe beplanningsbenaderings die lig gesien, waarvan plekskepping een was. Plekskepping is die fisiese ontwerp van 'n plek gebaseer op die plek se *in situ* kontekste. Plekskepping word geopper as 'n alternatiewe beplanningsbenadering tot huidige beplanningspraktyk om sodoende die ekologiese en sosiale probleme te verbeter of te voorkom. Dit impliseer egter dat huidige beplanningspraktyk 'n verskuiwing in fokus en doelwitte moet ondergaan.

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Die hoofimplikasies van plekskepping is dat beplanning meer konteksgedrewe, holisties, multidissiplinêr, asook mens- en kwaliteitgesentreerd moet word. Ook word dit voorgestel dat meer navorsing oor plek in die Suid-Afrikaanse konteks gedoen word.

Sleutelwoorde: Plekskepping, stads- en streekbeplanning, plek, kontekstuele ontwerp

1. Introduction

Since the 1970s concepts like place, sense of place and place-making received increasing attention in both spatial research and practice (Windsor & McVey, 2005: 147; Cresswell, 2002: 12; Graumann, 2002: 107; Kaltenborn & Williams, 2002: 189; Casey, 1996: 20). This was to a large extent a reaction towards modernism that influenced urban planning practice – a reaction against the destruction of unique local identities that resulted from standardising and sterilising environments, or creating fantastic environments out of tune with their surroundings (Arefi, 1999: 185; Tibbalds, 1992: 9; Relph, 1976). Urban planners kept themselves uninvolved with the context[1] of the locations they designed in order to achieve efficiency or a large profit margin (Madanipour, 1996: 28; Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987: 168). These practices continue today and critique against these approaches has not yet slackened (Carmona, Heath, Oc & Tiesdell, 2003: 12; Arefi, 1999: 184; Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1995: 4).

In an attempt to understand and perhaps improve the imprints left by modernism on the physical and social realms of humans and environment, there seems to be a great interest in place research. Place research encompasses a wide variety of studies done in various disciplines and paradigms (Patterson & Williams, 2005). Humanistic geography, forestry, resource management, anthropology, sociology, psychology, architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, and urban and regional planning all contributed to place research. Both qualitative studies, as was done by Norberg-Schulz (1980), and quantitative studies, like those of Shamai & Ilatov (2005) have been done in place research. Because of the variety in disciplinary and paradigmic approaches in place studies, place is considered a complex phenomenon. Therefore, it cannot be classified as a singular research field. Rather, it must be considered as a phenomenon that ought to be studied in an interdisciplinary and encompassing way (Patterson & Williams, 2005).

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1   Contexts in this research refers to the natural cultural socio-economic political mythical ethnic and aesthetic milieus and whichever of these play the strongest role on a location as identified by Loukaki (1997: 309)

The overall characteristic of place research is the increasing attention given to affective and subjective dimensions of locations. On an international level, place research is fuelled by a spreading belief that a locally responsive approach in management and development of locations increases the quality of life for those inhabitants involved (Williams & Vaske, 2003: 831; Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1995; 1991; Tibbalds, 1992: 12). On a local level it is fuelled by an increasing need to address the existing shortcomings of modernistic planning – based mostly on economics and functionality – and *apartheid* planning, based on the separateness principle of the *apartheid* regime, in their inability to create locally responsive, unique, and viable settlements (CSIR, 2000; Behrens & Watson, 1997; Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1995). Despite this, it is disappointing to notice that current South African development law[2] makes precious little mention of place issues within development legislation, giving priority to socio-political, socio-economical, and land and resource issues.

Where humans are actively involved with their environment the landscape plays an active role in everyday life (Hufford, 1992: 241). Human experience and understanding do not exist separately from physical space (Hufford, 1992: 232). Research has shown that places have an enduring effect on the lifespan of an individual on both a physiological and psychological level (Chalwa, 1992; Marcus, 1992; Rubenstein & Parmelee, 1992; Saegert, 1976). This means that people's experiences of a place have spatial implications in the creation of human environments (Thwaites & Simkins, 2005: 11). If urban and regional planners pay more attention to meanings assigned to places by their users, they may possibly achieve a better understanding of development issues (Davenport & Anderson, 2005: 639). This may enable planners to manage and/or create places that are embedded in their context (place-making) rather than to implement homogenising or context-alien designs (space-making) favoured by global development pressures (Hague & Jenkins, 2005).

In the Western World globalisation causes increased international and interregional competitiveness in terms of economic growth (Hague & Jenkins, 2005: 25). A consequence of this competitiveness is physical expansion of cities. Current observers noted that this expansion can influence the rural hinterland around such centres in different ways: either homogenous sprawl creates an expanding semi-suburban rural waste, or local communities insist on contextual development that strengthens the local place identity and can be

2   For a more complete list of South African development law see Scheepers T. 2000. A practical guide to law and development in South Africa. Kenwyn: Juta.

used as a place-marketing tool (McCarthy, 2008; Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Carmona *et al.*, 2003: 101; Raagmaa, 2002; Haartsen, Groote & Huigen, 2000: 148). In South Africa cities also experience these globalisation forces, and together with the high levels of urbanisation, settlements are expanding rapidly. This causes uneven land use management, urban sprawl – notibly informal peripheral settlements with insufficient service delivery and government housing projects – and environmental degradation (South Africa. Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, 2007; South Africa. Department of Land Affairs, 2007; Pillay, 2004), all of which influence place meanings and identity. In areas that show tourism potential due to their strong sense of place, injudicious development, such as new middle to high income property developments, threatens to change the place identity and meanings that gave rise to its tourism potential in the first place (Ferreira, 2007). The loss of place meanings and identity is therefore very real in South Africa, and though place-making is not the panacea for this problem, it can redress it to some extent.

The question of importance is then why place-making is meaningful for urban and regional planning. To explore the validity of place-making in planning, one has to have an understanding of the historical development of place-making in urban and regional planning, as well as the possible meanings of place and place-making for planners. The aim of this article therefore is firstly, to clarify the concepts of place and place-making in planning by means of an historical overview of the development of place-making, and secondly, to highlight the possible implications of place-making in urban and regional planning.

2. Historical overview of place-making

Interest in place and place-making developed from a variety of disciplines. Of primary importance for this research is how this interest developed in urban and regional planning.

According to Wheeler (2002), the initial phase of the development of urban and regional planning as a profession gained momentum in 1902 with the *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* by Ebenezer Howard (1946) and in 1915 with the work of Patrick Geddes (1968). This phase, which Wheeler calls 'ecological regionalism', is characterised by a relatively encompassing and place-oriented approach (a planning approach embedded in the location's contexts) to urban and regional planning. Therefore planning's origin was considered to be initially a locally responsive spatial discipline.

A typical characteristic of the pre-modern communities was how they adapted to and fashioned their world according to the opportunities and constraints of their environment. Their living places were embedded in the contexts present and suitable for the existing conditions (Williams, 2002). With the advance of the modernistic era, the change in managerial and technical skills since the First World War, and the rising popularity of modernistic principles in the spatial discipline after the Second World War, the focus of urban and regional planning shifted. It changed drastically from its initial holistic place-centred development, to an approach where the physical development of the environment was increasingly determined by economic principles and technology (Wheeler, 2002; Relph, 1981; Porteous, 1977: 316). Interest in fashioning places according to the natural and social contexts in which they were located – as described by Norberg-Schulz (1980) – waned. Gone was the creation of unique and locally responsive places. In its place, human environments were now created to reflect economics and functionality according to modernistic interpretation (Arefi, 1999; McHarg, 1992; Bentley, Alcock, Murrain, McGlynn, & Smith, 1985; Relph, 1981; 1976). This pointed to a shift in planning towards a more abstract and positivistic way of thinking about human and natural environments, one in which the concept of 'space' gained some prominence over 'place'.

For the purpose of this article, 'space' is considered to be as how Relph (1976) described it – sterilised locations that can be anywhere, physical designs that one can duplicate elsewhere so that it is totally unrelated to its context, and what Trancik (1986) coined as lost spaces, no-man's lands that are unformed and under-utilised. Space is perceived through the physical senses and is different from people's mental interpretation of the space (Madanipour, 1996: 12). It carries no human meaning and is regarded as 'objective' (Tuan, 1977: 54). Space is therefore a developed site that stands unrelated to its relevant contexts and the symbolical meaning associated with its location. Space-making is then defined as the process of creating spaces.

This interpretation of space is not the only one that exists. The debate around space and place is particularly visible in the field of geography. Economists and economic geographers see space as a tool to develop scientific generalisations (Cresswell, 2002), especially when referring to the spatial distribution of social and economic activities, factor costs and market price differentials (Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Agnew & Duncan, 1989: 2). This view of space is clearly vis-

ible in regional planning theories, such as those of Christaller (1933), Perroux (1950), Hirschman (1958), Isard (1960) and Alonso (1964).

Human geography was the first academic field to take a step away from the notion of scientific space, to one of 'place' as the setting for everyday routine social interaction (Agnew & Duncan, 1989: 2), as was reflected in the works of authors Lynch (1960), Tuan (1974; 1977) and Rapoport (1977). More recently, cultural geography showed interest in the concept of 'sense of place' or the identification with a place engendered by living in it (Agnew & Duncan, 1989: 2). It is this latter view on 'place' – one in which intangible elements feature – that is the basis for this article, though it is by no means the only one that exists.

'Place' refers to personal, group, or cultural space that has subjective meanings and an emotional tie between humans and their location (Windsor & McVey, 2005: 147; Altman & Low, 1992: 5). It is a space with a specific character or a sense of place (Norberg-Schulz, 1980: 5). This means that it has meaning for the individual or group (Violich, 2000: 113). Sense of place implies that people are satisfied with a place, and appreciate the land in a way that stretches beyond its use value (Stedman, 2002: 563; Eisenhauer et al., 2000: 423). It is the character, the comprehensive atmosphere of a location, as well as the concrete space-defining forms present. It can be described as a place's "fingerprint" (Loukaki, 1997: 308; Rapoport, 1977: 179). It is the perception of what is most salient in a specific location (Cantrill, 1998: 303). Such places are unique and locally embedded, and vibrant with urbanity (if located in an urban setting) (Montgomery, 1998; Behrens & Watson, 1997; Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1995; Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987; Bentley et al., 1985; Jacobs, 1961). Place is therefore a location that is clearly embedded in (or has drawn inspiration from) its relevant contexts and reflect the symbolic meanings humans associate with it. Place-making would then be defined as the process of creating places, rather than the manifestation of the physical product, which is 'place'.

One of the aspects of modernistic planning that is greatly lamented is the loss of unique places. This was due to partial or complete physical destruction and redevelopment of such places, as well as newly created locations which can be described as mostly mono-functional, monotonous, and sterile (Arefi, 1999; Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1995; Bentley et al., 1985; Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Relph, 1976; Jacobs, 1961). This is not the only critique against modern planning. Authors (Arefi, 1999; Behrens & Watson, 1997; Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987; Trancik, 1986; Relph, 1976; Jacobs, 1961) site various problems

of modern design, such as large-scale developers creating ever larger-scale developments causing loss of residents' control of their own living places. Also, privatisation of the urban environment leads to loss of vibrancy in public places, while modern designs cause increasing spatial fragmentation between different social groups. Profit-based usage of valued places leads to these places' destruction, which increases placelessness, users' alienation from the urban environment, and inequality between environments of the rich and the poor. Lastly, design professions – influenced by positivism and consumerism – increasingly design for people and locations from a universal viewpoint, applying instant solutions without considering the contexts involved.

The above-mentioned limitations were the impetus for the initial attack on modernistic urban and regional planning. Urban journalist, Jane Jacobs (1961), strongly opposed the theoretical basis on which planning rested on, that was economically driven (for a more detailed discussion, also see Wheeler, 2002). The reality of how cities work – according to Jacobs – differs from the planning theories applied to them. Perhaps this was the spatial disciplines' first inspiration for turning towards a related academic field, humanistic geography, to try to understand the problems of the modern city.

It was during the 1960s and 1970s that the influence of humanistic geography on urban and regional planning became apparent. This contribution in the development of place-making is what can be called the era of environmental understanding[3].

2.1   Environmental understanding

Environmental understanding tries to explain the physiological and psychological processes involved in the way people perceive their natural and built environments. In addition, it tries to explain the way these perceptions influence people's experience of their environment. The way people experience their environment in turn influence how they use it, which also influence how the physical environment is further utilised.

The primary works of environmental understanding came from humanistic geography and urban and regional planning. According to Yi-Fu Tuan (1974; 1977), Downs & Stea (1977), Kevin Lynch (1960), and Amos Rapoport (1977), people gather environmental information in a physiological way through the senses (environmental

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3   Environmental understanding and enabling morphology are the authors' own terms used for classifying relevant literature that reflect similarities in content.

perception), which is then assimilated in a cognitive process, known as environmental cognition (Carmona *et al.*, 2003: 87; Rapoport, 1977: 31).

During environmental cognition people understand, structure, and learn about their environment (Rapoport, 1977: 31). It is an intellectual process and less consistent over cultural boundaries than environmental perception (Rapoport, 1977: 33; Tuan, 1977: 37). Through environmental cognition, people come to understand their environment, connecting it with communal or individual symbolism in the form of cognitive maps (Downs & Stea, 1977: 68; Rapoport, 1977: 31). Meanings are attached to both the physical and the social environment, and are represented as such in their cognitive maps (Rapoport, 1977: 168). The value of these meanings or symbols (whether positive, negative, or neutral) determines attitudes, attachment towards the environment, and usage of the environment. This is very similar to symbolic interactionism, in which people's actions towards things are based on the meanings they ascribe to those things while interacting with them (Blumer, 1969).

Two distinctive parts of environmental understanding is obvious from both the humanistic geographic and planning perspectives. Firstly, environmental input is experienced through the biological senses, as well as on a psychological level. The focus of Tuan's work (1977) overall relates to the way people experience space and place on both a biological and symbolical level. The dimensions of the human body, the cultural and the individual orientations of people holistically influence the way people experience physical places on all spatial levels, which in turn influence the symbols and meanings people assign to these places. Tuan's understanding of the physical environment therefore tries to explain how people assign meaning to the physical environment. Rapoport (1977), writing as an urban and regional planner, illustrates a similar biological and psychological process in the human experience of the environment which eventually leads to the assignation of meaning to physical places. Both studies are useful in terms of place-making, since place-making is the process of actively weaving contextual meaning, whether it is everyday, temporal, or symbolic meaning, into the structure of a place (DeMaria Harney, 2006: 25; Tuan, 1977: 102).

The second part of environmental understanding focuses on how these environmental meanings are spatially represented. Kevin Lynch (1960), as a planner, writes that people's spatial understanding of their environment can be categorised into five spatial elements, namely paths, edges, districts, nodes, and landmarks. These

elements can be superimposed on a physical map of an environment, creating a spatial representation of people's understanding of place. Similarly, though writing from a geographical viewpoint, Downs & Stea (1977) focus specifically on the development of cognitive maps relating to people's spatial experience of an environment. Cognitive maps are abstractions covering cognitive abilities that enable people to collect, organise, store, recall, and manipulate information about the spatial environment (Downs & Stea, 1977: 6). It is therefore the manner in which people organise their representations of some part of the spatial environment, which is obtained through the biological senses, interpreted through the cognitive processes and which are based on a unique personality, cultural, and demographic profile. Understanding the way in which cognitive maps are developed and used offers another way to explore the meaning that users of a specific environment attach to it.

After the spatial sciences' rather short focus on environmental understanding, the 1980s heralded the second contribution in the development of place-making, namely enabling morphology.

2.2   Enabling morphology

Enabling morphology seems to have developed partially due to the continuance of Lynch's initial work in the 1960s, and partially due to the burgeoning urban design movement as critique against the spatial legacy of modernism (Bentley *et al.*, 1985). It pays more attention to the qualities the urban environments must have to allow their inhabitants to fulfil their physical, socio-economic, and mental needs, rather than trying to understand how their inhabitants experience them.

Kevin Lynch in *Good City Form* (1981) did work in which he identified performance qualities that can be used to 'measure' whether an urban environment fulfils the needs of its inhabitants. Performance qualities are identifiable spatial characteristics reflecting on the performance of cities that are also measurable scales (Lynch, 1981: 111).

In *Responsive Environments: A Manual for Designers*, Bentley *et al.* (1985) discussed appropriate qualities for urban environments (from an urban design viewpoint), ranging from permeability on the larger scale of the city, to personalisation of the more personal, small-scale places. Similarly Montgomery (1998) – an urban and regional planner – lay down three principles for creating successful urban places, namely good city form, sensory experience, and human activity. All

of these author's performance qualities and principles are refined into qualities that describe either what the city must allow its citizens to experience, such as vitality and access, or the morphological qualities that must be achieved, like density and scale. Either way, the city is seen as a vessel that can be managed or manipulated to create certain human experiences or enable these experiences, based on the needs of the city's inhabitants.

The essence of enabling morphology is that the physical form of cities is subservient to the needs of its inhabitants. It is however important to create an appropriate physical form in order for the city to serve its inhabitants. This morphology of a city is, therefore, the vehicle for the possible fulfilment of its inhabitants' needs.

The contributions of environmental understanding and enabling morphology are important in urban and regional planning's movement from modernistic planning and towards a more contextually grounded planning of human environments. They both contributed to place-making in planning. However, they truly cannot be considered as place-making, since they do not carry the main elements of place-making, which is 'physical design' within 'locational context' (Behrens & Watson, 1997; Tuan, 1977).

2.3   Place-making

Place-making is considered to be the process through which an environment with a unique sense of place is created (Behrens & Watson, 1997: 10). It is the awareness of weaving contextual meaning – cultural, historical and natural – into physical structure (Trancik, 1986: 97; Tuan, 1977: 102). Built environments based on the principles of place-making reflect the characteristics of their unique natural and cultural settings (Behrens & Watson, 1997: 11). Through place-making, the site's uniqueness is enhanced, instead of standardising its character. Designers working from a place-making viewpoint are against imposing abstract designs unrelated to the contexts present like modernists often do (Trancik, 1986: 98).

Urban and regional planners seem to play an important role in the future application of place-making in the spatial professions. Hague & Jenkins (2005: 8) see planning as "being about place-making; that is to say that a key purpose of planning is to create, reproduce or mould the identities of places through manipulation of the activities, feelings, meanings and fabric that combine into place identity". However, "while place-making is more central to the profession of planners than to most other social groups, the planners do not have

a monopoly on the power to determine a place identity" (Hague & Jenkins, 2005: 8). The making of places, participation from vested individuals and groups, and planning are intimately intertwined.

Internationally, authors who endorsed the place-making viewpoint opposed modernistic planning as early as the 1960s (McHarg, 1969) and 1970s (Relph, 1976). In South Africa a similar reaction occurred in urban and regional planning, where the reaction also included a critique on the spatial legacy of the apartheid era (CSIR, 2000; Behrens & Watson, 1997; Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1995). Internationally, the past two decades gave rise to a distinctive kind of 'ecological thinking' regarding natural resources, focusing on both tangible objective and intangible subjective environmental properties. It also includes emotional and symbolic meanings people associate with specific places (Williams & Vaske, 2003: 830). Urban and regional planning is seemingly moving into what Wheeler has referred to as the 'new regionalism' era, which is characterised by a concern for the environment, equity, and economic development (Wheeler, 2002). In addition, there is an increasing focus on the developing or managing of human environments in a place-oriented manner. A large body of existing literature in the spatial sciences mirrors this new regionalism of Wheeler. The literature focuses on creating quality places rooted in their local contexts and not just places that purely reflect the principles of economy and efficiency, though not scorning it either (Hague & Jenkins, 2005; Behrens & Watson, 1997; Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1991, 1995; McHarg, 1992; Jacobs & Appleyard, 1987; Lynch & Hack, 1984; Norberg-Schulz, 1980; Relph, 1976).

Place-making's history has long been in the making. Starting in the 1960s with Ian McHarg's *Design with Nature* (1969/1992), environmental design ethics was very much at the forefront. McHarg believed that a consumerist approach towards development of human environments was leading to destruction of nature, as well as creating meaningless towns and cities without a sense of place. In order to stop environmental degradation and the creation of characterless profit-driven urban environments, McHarg – and later also Lynch & Hack (1984: 5) – proposed that any site's development must be guided by the inherent possibilities and constraints of that particular site, whether it is historical, physical, or biological. A development ought to adhere to the sense of place, and should therefore be rooted in its contexts. It is here that Lynch & Hack (1984: 5) refers to the skilled site planner as one that "suffers a constant anxiety about the 'spirit of place'".

Hague & Jenkins (2005) have recently illustrated the use of an area's unique character in guiding its development in a contract research project, NoordXXI, which formed part of the European Union's Interreg IIC project, *Quality by Identity: Beyond Traditional Spatial and Economic Development*. The project illustrated how place-making can be integrated into planning practice, which is in line with the increasing interest from professional planners in place constructs (Hague & Jenkins, 2005: 3). The aim of the project was to influence the spatial development of each region based on a stronger local identity (Hague & Jenkins, 2005: xiv). This place identity is more or less based on Norberg-Schulz's sense of place concept (1980), which means that a place has unique natural characteristics that can be strengthened by a sensitive design solution. Also, it is based on the intangible meanings people associate with these characteristics. Planning is, therefore, seen as intimately involved in the processes of creating and disseminating meanings and identities. In addition, it is important for planners to realise that past and present identities cannot be summarily erased in favour of a new identity, but must be used as an important point of reference for the construction of a new place identity (Hague & Jenkins, 2005: 11).

Similarly, South African planners Dewar & Uytenbogaardt (1991: 42) view place-making as allowing environments to develop their own 'logic'. A positive environment is one that is sensitive to the social and natural contexts of the place, allowing a fine-grained small-scale structure to exist between larger scale directional-giving structures that are coarser. To create quality places is to make built environments which are not based on ephemeral conditions – like population growth and rapid urbanisation – but places that encapsulate timeless qualities that support human activity, needs and reflect the natural and human contexts, as well as histories present (Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1991: 13). Place characteristics, human activities and cultural expressions all work together to co-create unique places, which are regarded as the basis of society. Seen from a place-making viewpoint, planning must not be a purely functional, programmatic and technocratic exercise, but rather one that "also calls into play intuition, imagination and insight" (Dewar & Uytenbogaardt, 1991: 13).

Championing the creation of unique places, Edward Relph (1976) and Christian Norberg-Schulz (1980) pleaded for the creation of authentic places (spaces with a sense of place) and saw consumeristic rootless development – based on modernism and the International Style – as destroying the meaningful places of peoples' lives by creating standardised places out of context. Jacobs & Appleyard

(1987) also opposed the universally designed developments and 'instant' development solutions. According to them, places must be designed to have a unique accessible character or sense of place in the whole, not as isolated icons unrelated to their contexts.

Overall, place-making can be seen as a complex, interdisciplinary phenomenon that was influenced by various spatial and humanistic paradigms (figure 1).
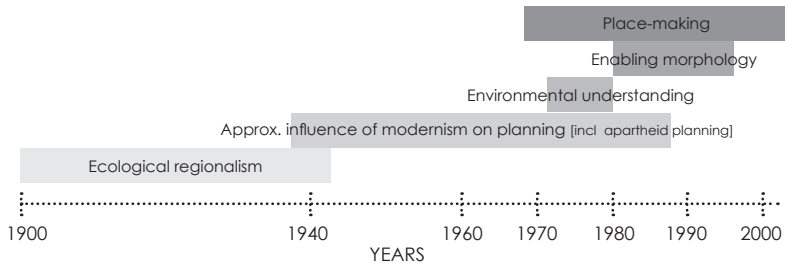

Figure 1:   The development of place-making in urban and regional planning (2007)

These influences did not necessarily follow each other chronologically, but rather subtly influenced each other over traditional disciplinary boundaries. Place-making is mostly about creating places that fit the natural contexts, human body, as well as the way the human mind and heart works (Lynch & Hack, 1984: 72). Finally, it is about embracing both tangible and intangible elements of human existence and using these elements to guide physical development in partnership with the meanings that vested individuals and groups associate with a specific environment.

3.   Discussion

Even though urban and regional planning might initially have been a contextually driven profession, it was drastically influenced by modernism. In fact, it seems as if its largest theoretical basis is still primarily based on the principles of 'objective' functionality and economy in which the end-users have less say in the development of a place than the developers do. These principles are also perpetuated by a profit-oriented approach to what the requirements of a good development are – the largest feasible number of units per area at the lowest cost. Global capitalism creates environments that focus more on quantity than quality. Place is devaluated and turned into a commodity. Numbers, economies, accessibility, and potential for growth change a collective experience and management of the

urban environment into a solitary one. The individual's living experience is not so important anymore as the privatisation and iconification of individual pieces of land. This 'everyone for himself' attitude breeds social incivilities and nuisances, replacing the self-policing nature of premodern neighbourhoods (Arefi, 1999: 182). Additionally, consumeristic development practices increase the potential for environmental degradation and poor quality living environments (McHarg, 1992; Lynch & Hack, 1984: 2; Relph, 1976).

The essence of this planning approach therefore implies that quantity is king over quality. This is not entirely reproachable – making the most of scarce resources cannot be criticised. However, a balance must be achieved. Priming resource use for financial gain over the ecological needs and needs of a place's users is surely to devaluate the human experience and the habitat that supports humans.

This 'objective' approach, or space-making, created (and still creates) various problems for the ecology and users of such spaces, mostly because such objective developments go against, or ignore, the very social and natural contexts in which they are located (McHarg, 1992). To rectify these problems the planner has to step away from this singular focused approach towards a more integrated and multi-disciplinary approach. Planners, for example, can draw on the expertise of environmental psychology, which can broaden the list of contexts that can be included in physical designs. Environmental psychology studies tangible and objective properties of the environment that influence humans, as well as the subjective and symbolic meanings attributed to places by people (Williams & Patterson, 1999: 142). This is important, since there are many spatially related meanings and values that cannot be identified through measurable or traceable means like market transactions (Williams & Vaske, 1999: 143). The use of knowledge from environmental psychology is not new – it has proven useful in disciplinary challenges in fields like urban and regional planning (Williams & Vaske 1999: 141; Lynch & Hack, 1984: 68).

In addition to broadening his/her theoretical scope, the planner will have to cultivate a new definition of what urban and regional planning ultimately has to achieve. Whereas 'objective' planning aimed to achieve economy and functionality, contextual planning aims to create places that are meaningful for its users without compromising the natural contexts in which it functions. The essence of contextual planning is therefore place-based design – the use of local knowledge and/or resources available in situ to guide the design.

The argument here is that place-based planning, or place-making, has a greater potential to rectify and prevent the problems associated with 'objective' planning. The motivation behind this reasoning is that place-making aims to understand the contexts in which a place is to be created before a design is created, while letting the physical design be guided by these contexts when the actual planning starts. This implies that the planner has a greater understanding of the history of the place aforehand, enabling him/her to minimise potential negative outcomes, such as anti-social user behaviour like vandalism and crime, which can have financial and security comebacks for the place's users (Bell, Greene, Fisher & Baum, 2001: 286).

Understanding a place also prevents the loss of a location's history – collective and personal – that preserves history for its current and future users. Place-making does not forcibly shear people from their known lived-in world and destroy their place identity. To do so can cause emotional reactions like grief, anxiety, despair, xenophobic reactions towards outsiders, migration, groundlessness, and rootlessness (Holmes, Patterson, & Stalling, 2003: 245; Tibbalds, 1992: 77). In a moving case study about the loss of place and place identity of the Cheslatta T'En Canadian First Nation, Windsor & McVey (2005) wrote about the social ills and the decline of the living standards amongst these people. The Cheslatta community was forced to migrate away from the place they had populated for at least 10 000 years because their valley was flooded for a dam to run a hydroelectric plant (Windsor & McVey, 2005: 154). The loss of place and sense of place created havoc among the traditional lifestyle, effectively destroying the core values and traditions of a whole rural community. This shows that a place's identity can quickly disintegrate when even one of its three formative elements – socio-economic, spatial, and historical-cultural meanings – are threatened, changed, or destroyed (Raagmaa, 2002: 56; Harner, 2001: 675). The influence of loss of place identity can be major because of the role places have in forming and affirming a sense of personal identity (Williams, 2002: 353).

Understanding a place also enables the planner to maximise positive outcomes, such as creating a cherished environment that satisfies human needs such as identity, belonging, groundedness, meaning, growth, and spiritual well-being (Stuart, 2004: 76; Holmes *et al.*, 2003: 241). In addition, when such a cherished environment is under threat from harm or destruction, inhabitants have a greater propensity to rehabilitate it or preserve it (Brehm, Eisenhauer & Krannich, 2006; Brody, Highfield & Alston, 2004; Gifford, 1997: 51) – an element which seemingly lacks in modern landscapes (Relph, 1981: 99).

One way to gain a better understanding of the human contexts of a place under scrutiny is to draw on the knowledge and methods of environmental understanding. Considering environmental understanding, planning opened itself up to the introduction of subjective, less quantifiable elements. Environmental understanding makes it clear that although there is a fundamental difference between the physiological and psychological experience processes, they are ultimately linked to each other (Bell *et al*., 2001: 95). The human body and mind cannot be treated as separate from its physical environment, since it is environmental input that drives these processes. Also, physiological experiences, such as environmental stress, have distinct physical and psychological effects on humans. This topic has been extensively researched in the field of environmental psychology. The link between environmental stress and psychological disorders shows an increasing occurrence in physical illnesses, mental disorders, performance decrements, aggression, irritation, social withdrawal, and decrease in prosocial behaviour (Bell *et al*., 2001; Gifford, 1997).

In addition, environmental understanding states that the physical dimensions and qualities of environments have the ability to produce personal and collective symbology for their users. How users perceive their environment has an influence on users' experience of it and on how users will use it (Tuan, 1974). Environmental understanding therefore enables the planner to acknowledge the human meanings attached to a physical location, which in turn gives a probable description of how this place might or ought to be used in the future.

When the planner has a clear understanding of the potential usage of a place, he/she can turn to enabling morphology, which gives guidelines on how to achieve a physical design that enables certain experiences and meanings, as asked for by its users. However, there is the question of relevance of these guidelines. Most of the goals and principles of enabling morphology are generalised, based on goals that are supposed to be representative of all human urban needs. The question arises, for example, on whether these goals and principles are as applicable to a European metropole as to a small village in Sub-Sahara Africa. Identical environmental elements are not necessarily meaningful for different people, as certain elements – like culture – influence people's meanings (Rapoport, 1977; Tuan, 1977: 162). To assume that environmental elements have the same meanings for all people, is to assume that most socio-cultural differences between countries have been eradicated by some global process, such as globalisation. Nevertheless, it still ought to be

possible to apply these principles to a relatively homogenous, local-ised population.

However, knowing what the end-users' needs are and how to cre-ate a place that has the physical dimensions to satisfy these needs, is not what true place-making entails. True place-making also entails, in addition to the formerly mentioned elements, that the place is created according to its location's and users' unique identity. Oth-erwise, such a place, no matter how successful it is in satisfying its users' basic needs, is just another place that only satisfies basic human needs.

The uniqueness in question can be achieved by letting the design be guided by the inherent (natural or built) potentialities – the sense of place – of such a site. Hague & Jenkins (2005), Ian McHarg (1992), Norberg-Schulz (1980) all give extended descriptions on how to do just so. Ultimately then, it is using a site's character, the sense of place, together with the meeting of ecological and users' needs, for a physical design that crowns long-term quality of place over short-term monetary gain (McHarg, 1992; Norberg-Schulz, 1980).

4.   Implications for urban and regional planning

Place-making has arisen from a human-inhabited landscape that was and still is characterised by definite environmental and social challenges due to certain planning practices. That is not to say that human settlements before the advance of urban and regional plan-ning were free of similar challenges – perhaps these problems were only more in proportion to its inhabitants and more localised than with today's budding global population.

As it is, planning physical environments from a locally responsive way will require some shift in the way planners perceive developments, cities, and regions (Wheeler, 2002). Place-making calls for a more holistic, integrated, and multidisciplinary approach to planning. This means that any form of physical development cannot happen in isolation from the natural, social, and historical contexts that aided in the forming of the site's character; planning must not happen in a way that ignores the site's sense of place. Also, place-making's focus is long term, encompassing a wide range of contexts and meanings.

Every site is unique due to the complexity of its parts and patterns (Lynch & Hack, 1984: 30). It is composed of many factors from various contexts, and to disturb one factor is to create a chain of reaction in others. Disturbance is inevitable in any form of planning – making

places is therefore the creative art of producing a design for a site based on the unique parts and patterns present.

The consequences of planning are therefore greater than might initially be expected. This has several implications for planning practice (table 1).

Table 1:   Main implications of place-making for urban and regional planning (2008)

Place-making	Implications for planning
Holistic integrated multi-disciplinary	Source information and techniques from related fields not just those commonly used in planning.
Contextually based	Unique designs based on *in situ* contexts and experiences.
Long term focus	Base design on projected long term ecological social and financial returns.
Complex approach	Include a wide range of elements in design.
Habitational and end-user oriented	Base design on site's ecological and end-users' needs not solely on the expectations of developer.
People matter	The human experience[1] must be considered prime over economic or functionality principles.
Quality versus quantity	Quality of places is more important than quantity of spaces.
Accountability	Planner is directly responsible for creating places that meet immediate ecological and user needs indirectly responsible for long-term quality of environment and life.
Lack of guidance	Increase place-making research on academic level.
Resources	Training personnel can cause short-term temporal and financial difficulties.

Place-making implies that "[r]eal space – seen through direct observation and understood through experience and contextual study – must take precedence over the abstraction of space contained within computer models, which are after all only tools to help planners understand the real world" (Wheeler, 2002: 274). The real world is not only about the level of cost-efficiency per spatial unit. The real world is also about the way the layperson feels about the settlement,

neighbourhood, and erf he or she lives in. If the layperson's lived-in world is characterised by a feeling of loss due to the obliteration of a place's inherent spirit; by spatial monotony that confuses place identity (but is easy to create on the drawing board); by frustration of a spatial design that does not fit or threatens his/her needs, cost-efficiency is the last thing this person thinks about. Ignoring the way people experience place and the meanings that they attach to places; ignoring the character – its inherent opportunities and constraints – of a place in favour of a context-alien design, is to scorn the value of human life and the world that makes life possible. Planning places must therefore ultimately be done from a point of view in which the site's and end-users' needs are prime, not the developer's (although in practice this might be harder to implement than in theory).

At first, including subjective aspects in planning practice may seem daunting, though this is indeed possible. Place-making starts with understanding the place and its various contexts as a whole (Lynch & Hack, 1984: 127). It integrates local knowledge and experience of the environment into the design – it is not a top-down design approach. When designing with the local contexts, the planner's development can perhaps avoid losses due to context-ignoring design of the environment as described by McHarg (one of his own examples refers *inter alia* to flooding). In addition, because place-making is contextually driven, basing designs on users' needs and meanings, it gives users control and choice over their environment. In cases where the planner does not know who the end-users are, design can be based on the locational envelope's natural and social contexts. Producing locally embedded developments might initially seem to be more expensive than the usual space-making, but they tend to have more long term gains – financially, ecologically, and socially – than the former because of the greater level of user responsibility (Brehm *et al.*, 2006; Brody *et al.*, 2004; Gifford, 1997: 51; McHarg, 1992).

However, despite the application value of place-making in urban and regional planning, several difficulties are anticipated. Firstly, there is very little clear guidance on how to proceed when making a place, since appropriate planning sources on this subject are scarce. Also, it is questionable whether the process of place-making should be made according to a 'mould', rather than develop organically from each individual project. Thirdly, there is the question of whose meanings to use to guide place-making. In a place where many cultures, groups with different levels of income, and personal preferences co-exist, it may be difficult to determine which

meanings and symbols to include or exclude in the design. Fourthly, the increased input from vested individuals has cost implications in terms of time and labour. Training personnel to handle qualitative data in the field and processing it afterwards takes time and money, which professionals might not have. It might also be difficult to create a cut-off line, a point to which vested individual participation is confined in the planning process. Lastly, one wonders whether it is possible to create a place with a unique identity that is meaningful over a long period of time when identities are constantly fluctuating in some way or another.

Despite these challenges, the authors still hold that place-making is a worthy design approach when compared to consumeristic or space-making approaches. It is a call for planners to take responsibility for their designs, not only towards those who pay the planner, but also those who have to inhabit or use it once completed, since the making of a place ...

> has a biological, social, and psychological impact that goes far beyond its more obvious influence on cost and technical function. It limits what people can do, and yet also opens new opportunities to them…Its influence outlives that of most buildings, since site organization persists for generations. What we do to our habitat has an enduring effect on our lives (Lynch & Hack, 1984: 2).

Urban and regional planners may consider place-making as a way to challenge the traditional view of planning. The course of human history is rife with examples of progress that was preceded by challenges in people's believes. Place-making holds definite challenges for the understanding and *status quo* of the planning profession. Perhaps planning should move away from its pride in efficiently organising spatial solutions for spatial demands, to a passion for providing spatial a design process that adds value to a place's sense of place and the lives of its users. As Lynch & Hack stated,

> [n]o one should engage in site design who does not have a passion for the land, who is not as fascinated by the variations of site character as a teacher is fascinated by the marvellous variations of the human personality. And so a site of uncertain form should disturb us as much as a person of disordered character (Lynch & Hack, 1984: 30).

5.   Conclusion

The legacy of modernism, apartheid planning and continuing development pressures in South Africa created – and still creates – concerns for the loss of place. Loss of place implies more than

physical loss; also at stake are the intangible elements of place that contribute to the physiological and psychological functioning of the inhabitants in question.

Internationally, concern for place and place-making increases and show some entrance into the spatial disciplines and practice, such as the EU's NoordXXI project. This, however, seems not to be the case for South Africa. Very little emphasis is placed on place-making in development policy and legislation, and planning research and practice, despite the scope for it due to growing levels of urban development in the country. Locations showing relatively high levels of tourism potential can also benefit from place-making to protect and strengthen the place identity for place-marketing reasons. This way these places can achieve capital gain without sacrificing their unique sense of place or way of life.

Understanding how 'place' and 'place-making' developed in the spatial disciplines broadens the South African planner's knowledge base, which currently is – to a large extent – based on positivistic learning. A quantitative approach to development issues cannot capture all of the intangibles of place. In a country such as South Africa, rich in different cultures, histories and place identities, one cannot expect to understand, safe-guard and manage these riches by focusing only on what can be quantified. Planners have to real-ise that these subjective elements can, to some extent, be used to broaden the economic base of cities, or even those of whole regions (Raagmaa, 2002). This is an important goal for a develop-ing country like South Africa where the number of people living on less than $1 per day, increased by 122.6% between 1996 and 2005 (South African Institute of Race Relations, 2007).

The inclusion of intangibles in the planning process is not the only implication for planners. Other implications have already been named in table 1. It ought to be of major importance for South Africa to increase research on place and place-making in South African contexts specifically, and to spread the word of place-mak-ing to the institutions that influence development policy and legisla-tion in the country. Also, greater effort ought to be made to include place-making in planning practice, which is incidentally one of the foreseeable difficulties, as this would challenge the existing *status quo* of the planning profession.

In the light of this, it is proposed that place research in the South African context ought to be increased. It is recommended that the research focuses firstly, on how places are experienced by different demographic groups (according to age, gender, culture, income,

etc.); secondly, on ways to determine the sense of place or place identity of locations in South Africa, as well as how to render them for practical purposes; and lastly, how to integrate and implement the above in the country's planning profession and development policy and legislation.

In conclusion, one has to state that place-making cannot predict the quality of life in a certain environment, though it can provide the positive or negative potential for the interactions and experiences people can have with the environment. Careless planning of the landscape harms humans; skilled organisation enhances them, as Lynch & Hack (1984: 12) wrote. Finally, place-making is not a rigid exercise bound by specific scientific standards. Rather, it is the spatial expression of common sense and a genuine caring attitude towards fellow human beings and the environment without which no living being can truly thrive.

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(Footnotes)

[1] The extent of the 'human experience' for the purpose of place-making is a topic that will have to be researched in the future, as different demographic groups experience the same place in different ways (Williams & Vaske, 2003: 831; Tuan, 1977: 162)