



Far left: Figure 1

Left: Figure 2

# Transforming urban open space:

## The development of two parks in Soweto with emphasis on art in the park

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### Introduction

The urban park is a relatively 'unknown' entity in township areas in South Africa. People see parks as areas to squat, dump rubbish and graze livestock, or to be developed for housing (figure 1). A recent study carried out for the Klipspruit River community in Soweto asked, 'what do you most like about the Klipspruit?' (Duthie, Young & Vollmer 2000). Of the respondents, 62.4 percent stated outright that there was nothing they liked about the Klipspruit and its adjacent open space. In Soweto, most of the historically developed parks are in a state of decay, and maintenance is never undertaken. The perception of parks and open space in township areas has therefore not been positive.

Parks and park space is not a phenomenon that most township dwellers have had a chance or the luxury to appreciate. They therefore have few points of reference as to what makes a park 'good'. As designers concerned about the development of urban parks, it is helpful to remember that what people do not understand, they will not value. And what they do not value, they do not embrace.

The challenge for people concerned with the future provision of parks is to promote aggressively the important role that parks can play in uplifting communities. If the current perception of urban parks as places of fear, crime and vandalism' can evolve into a vision of parks being catalysts for community development and enhancement, parks can become an essential component in transforming and enriching town-

ship areas. A park and its surrounding area can become a place not only to understand and relate to nature, but it can also be a place for recreation and social exchange (figure 2). It can be a place where one can meet friends and watch the world pass by in safe, comfortable surroundings that are an important part of the neighbourhood – a place that you have helped create and where your 'mark' has been made.

Fortunately, the idea of parkland is evolving from representing a liability to representing valuable land that provides real benefits to society. In the new South Africa, with the political and legislative agenda now focused squarely on developing resources in a sustainable manner and providing recreation facilities in previously disadvantaged areas, the need has arisen to revisit the planning and design of parks in urban areas.





Figure 3



Figure 4

This article demonstrates how the designers applied an ecological design approach to two parks in Soweto (Moroka Dam and Thokoza Park). Complemented by meaningful community participation and training, political will and a favourable legislative framework, the project gained acceptance by the local community, which is crucial in the long term for the sustainability of the parks.

## Legislative and planning framework

It is imperative to examine the protection, integration and upgrade of open space into the urban environment within the new legal and legislative framework that began with the dramatic events of 1994. In 1992 Agenda 21, an action plan for sustainable development, came into being. It is based on the principle of sustainability and the assumption that development issues can only be truly addressed through the participation and co-operation of local authorities through participatory local planning processes.

In South Africa, all development related legislation passed since 1994 requires participative processes in plan formulation. In 1995, Integrated Development Planning (IDP) emerged as a distinct approach to planning. Its principles were articulated in a range of policy documents and given legal substance in legislation such as the Development Facilitation Act, 1995, the Municipal Systems Act, 2000, and the National Environmental Management Act, 1998, which are also based on IDP principles and Agenda 21 philosophy. Integrated Development Plans for all urban areas were commissioned within this legislative framework.

## Planning background

In 2000, the Soweto Integrated Development Plan was completed (Mayne, Richardson & Sekoto 2002). Supporting this document are a number of studies that identify ecologically sensitive areas (Young 1999), and provide a land use plan, programme and framework (figure 3) for the development and management of the Klipspruit River Corridor (Duthie et al 2000).

The framework study began with an ecological analysis and consultation with the community to establish their needs, concerns and preferences with regard to neighbourhood and regional parks. Planning was informed by the greenways concept (Fabos & Ahern 1995), and ecological design principles (Van der Ryn & Cowan 1996) were applied to the design of a pilot project.

With the assistance of the community and Councillors from Soweto, the pilot project was identified on a tributary of the Klipspruit in Moroka. Thokaza Park, bordering Moroka Dam, was selected because it would achieve a noticeable improvement for the limited funding (R250,000) donated by the Danish Environmental Development Agency (DANCED), who funded the initial framework study. Consequent to the environmental and social research a network of community structures were already in place, which would facilitate the design and implementation process. The project initially required the upgrade of Thokoza Park but, with a mandate from the community and the Mayor of Johannesburg towards the end of 2001, evolved to include the rehabilitation of the Moroka Dam and its associated wetlands. The Mayor endorsed this project as a showcase for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, which was held in Johannesburg in 2002. An amount of R6,000,000 was allocated to landscape develop-





Figure 5



Figure 6

ment and R13,000,000 to civil works (desilting the dam, constructed wetlands, the construction of a weir and the rehabilitation of the dam wall). Newtown Landscape Architects and Chris Brooker, an engineer, were appointed as the joint consultants for the project.

## Challenges

As with most parks in Soweto, Moroka Dam and Thokoza Park (as the parks were to be renamed) were poorly developed – with few landscape interventions, a lack of maintenance and a place where people dumped garbage and ash.



Figure 7

The community had not taken ownership or placed value on the parks. The dam had completely silted up and was considered both an eyesore and a major safety risk.

## Design process

The parks were designed using an ecological approach that brings social and ecological objectives together with security, economics and productivity (Young 1993). The starting point – a principle not to be deviated from – was to involve the community from the outset (figure 4) and to ensure that they stayed involved throughout the process. There are a number of reasons for this:

- The community has valuable insights into how the area functions and an understanding of the critical issues that are meaningful to it. Tapping into this information at the beginning of the process helped to create a sense of 'teamwork' that was of great benefit to the project sponsors, the design consultants and the community.
- It is necessary to determine how the assets of the community can be used to develop the plan, the programme



Figure 8

and the implementation of the park. This led to the development of a community vision for the park, which included the idea of art in the park. It was decided that artists from the area as well as non-skilled labourers would be employed during construction for purposes of capacity building and skills transfer.

- The design vision (figure 5) should evoke a sense of pride and anticipation in the people who live and work in the surrounding area.

The importance of this approach was that it gave the community a focus and a 'cause' around which to rally. Political scientist John Q Wilson has suggested that when people feel a sense of order in their communities, it is less likely that crimes will be committed (Funches 1994), which from observation, seems to be holding true.

## Art in the park – mosaics

As mandated by the participation process, it was decided that in addition to using trained artists from the community, an arts training programme should be introduced into



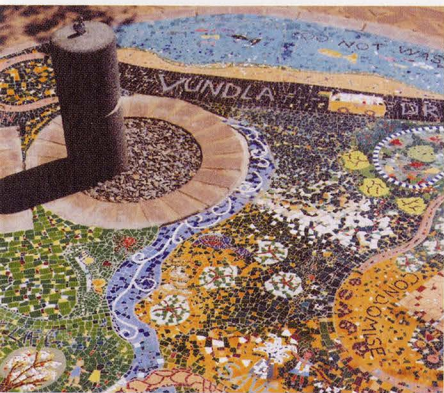


Figure 9



Figure 10a

the implementation process. Since the project was to be fast tracked, a method that could work relatively quickly as well as one that would involve the maximum number of unskilled locals was employed. The programme would allow individuals to add personal touches to their environment through the creation of mosaic art works<sup>3</sup> that reflect their own ideas. These works would then be installed in strategic locations throughout the park. *Arts in Actions*,<sup>3</sup> under the leadership of Erica Luttich, was employed to undertake the project as they had extensive experience in this field.

In total, fourteen people (women and local artists) were trained to work on the project (figure 6). Four mosaics bearing social messages and meaning were completed and installed. Many of the images were derived from neighbourhood and park activities, as well as environmental and social issues associated with the community.

During the first phase of the project, a mosaic was created by local artists working with the landscape architects and Erica Luttich (figure 7). It was placed near the main entrance to the park and is a colourful schematic representation of



Figure 10b

the park in plan (figure 8). The dam and stream, basketball court, soccer field, barbecue and picnic areas and trees in different seasons, were all depicted. Community social issues punctuate the mosaic with phrases such as, 'keep clean', 'do not waste water', and 'condomise' (figure 9).

Fourteen women and one man volunteered for the second phase, which entitled them to be trained from the basics. They participated in a four-day workshop and four days working on-site training in the art of mosaics. During the workshop much emphasis was placed on creative writing, drawing and design (figure 10). Erica Luttich (2003) states "it was very important that the artwork stems from the people in the community and also portrays messages and hopes of the community."

The artwork, which was placed amongst rocks as a curved edge to paving near the basketball court, dealt with issues in the park (figure 11). 'No fires', 'pick up litter', 'play nicely together', and 'save fuel' were the messages that mostly dealt with people's rights in the park and created an awareness of looking after 'their' new park (figure 12).

The third mosaic was a triangle in the main pathway connecting two opposite and important entrances to the park (figure 13). The idea for it grew during a discussion about women's rights and the general abuse of women. "Abathintha umfazi, abanthintha umbokodo" ("You strike the women, you strike the rock"), became the powerful theme. This slogan was used during the march by women to the Union Buildings in Pretoria in 1956 to protest against the 'dompas'.<sup>4</sup> The reference is made even more meaningful by the presence of a large rock in the middle of the triangle with simply set black lettering on a background of hand painted tiles in softer more delicate tones of beige, brown and white. The base of the mosaic is anchored with a series of stylised trees depicting the changing seasons (figure 14).

The fourth and final mosaic was created on a raised oval near the basketball court where people tend to gather (figure 15). According to Erica Luttich (2003):

By the time the ladies started to work here, a strong sense of belonging to a group and responsibility to each other grew very strong. It took a long time for the

Figure 11





team groups to develop and generally the idea was to have a strong worker together with a good cutter and the third member checking colour, shape and form. Most children learn about shape and colour but the lack of basic education of the past undermined the opportunity for most of the women to learn the basic art skills. Mosaic work is not kind and forgiving – a shape is a shape and therefore determines the packing and rhythms - the shapes need to be correct right from the beginning. Many of the women struggled with this concept and the need to understand colours, which caused many hardships in a working day.

The drawings for the oval dealt with children's rights (figure 16). Onthandweni Orphanage and children in the park contributed to the artwork. Their small drawings were enlarged to 1,35m by 0,85m and a team of three women worked on one panel. The children's drawings are varied and carry messages of respect, education and protection with delightful details (figures 17, 18, 19, 20).

It is the author's belief that the artwork program has been a success. It has added a unique aesthetic to the park, trained people in the art of mosaic and contributed to the community sense of pride and ownership. Also, because of the messages contained in the mosaics, much conversation and debate has been stimulated about their potential meaning.

## Final comment

The approach adopted for this project was centred on the notion that in order to secure the sustainability of quality urban parks, it is vital to ensure, as far as possible, that there is community involvement throughout the process. The approach, while grounded in ecological design principles and supported by current legislation, not only focuses on the creation of a physical end product, but also purposefully strove to ensure a process that facilitated community pride and ownership. The aim was, through the planning, design and implementation of the project, to create a catalyst for community development and enhancement, so that

the parks can become an essential component in transforming and enriching the Moroka area of Soweto.

## Endnotes

- 1 Respondents identified the following uses of the Klipspruit open space: Dumping 43%, Soccer Fields 37%, Rape 25%, Criminal hideout 23%, Church groups 9%, Grazing 6% and Picnics 5% (Duthie, Young & Vollmer 2000).
- 2 Mosaics were used as the art form for the park as they are robust and flexible and can be applied to a variety of situations. Today mosaics in the widest sense are stimulating artists, both professional and amateur, to explore the visual possibilities in all varieties of material, form, colour, and texture.
- 3 *Arts in Action* is a group of artists working on collaborative interactive public arts, participatory community projects and developmental programmes concerned with social transformation and change. Projects include temporary and permanent artworks, community outreach, educational workshops, as well as entrepreneurial projects. In addition the group promotes public knowledge and awareness of the community arts and 'new genre public art'. Erica Luttich was the artist in charge of this project.
- 4 The hated identity document, which black people were forced to carry at all times and produce on demand by the police. If the document could not be produced the person was often carted off to prison.

Figure 12



Figure 13

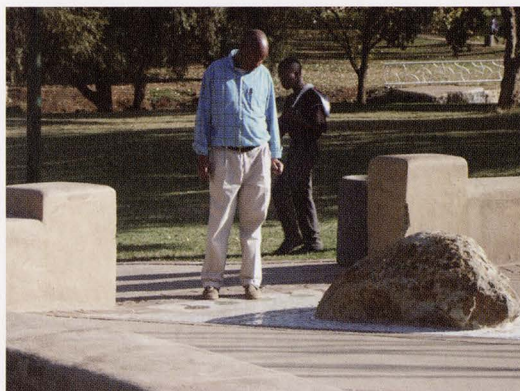


Figure 14



Figure 15







Figure 16

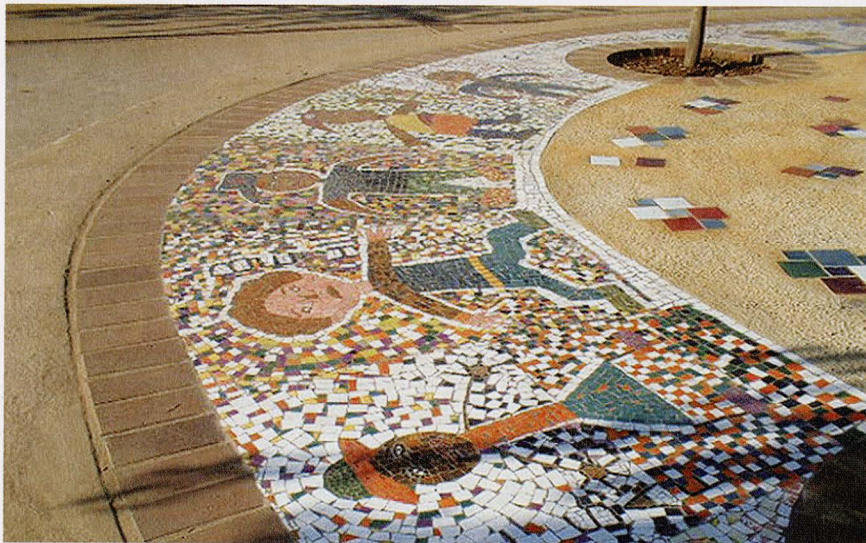


Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



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Figure 20