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Third Places for Social Sustainability: A Planning Framework Based on Local and International Comparisons

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***Abstract*—**Social sustainability, as an independent perspective of sustainable development, has gained some acknowledgement, becoming an important aspect in sustainable urban planning internationally. However, limited research aiming at promoting social sustainability within urban areas exists within the South African context. This is mainly due to the different perspectives of sustainable development (e.g., Environmental, Economic, and Social) not being equally prioritized by policy makers and supported by implementation strategies, guidelines, and planning frameworks. The enhancement of social sustainability within urban areas relies on urban dweller satisfaction and the quality of urban life. Inclusive cities with high-quality public spaces are proposed within this research through implementing the third place theory. Third places are introduced as any place other than our homes (first place) and work (second place) and have become an integrated part of sustainable urban planning. As Third Places consist of every place 'in between', the approach has taken on a large role of the everyday life of city residents, and the importance of planning for such places can only be measured through identifying and highlighting the social sustainability benefits thereof. The aim of this research paper is to introduce third place planning within the urban area to ultimately enhance social sustainability. Selected background planning approaches influencing the planning of third places will briefly be touched on, as the focus will be placed on the social sustainability benefits provided through third place planning within an urban setting. The study will commence by defining and introducing the concept of third places within urban areas as well as a discussion on social sustainability, acting as one of the three perspectives of sustainable development. This will gain the researcher an improved understanding on social sustainability in order for the study to flow into an integrated discussion of the benefits Third places provide in terms of social sustainability and the impact it has on improved quality of life within urban areas. Finally, a visual case study comparison of local and international examples of third places identified will be illustrated. These international case studies will contribute towards the conclusion of this study where a local gap analysis will be formulated, based on local third place evidence and international best practices in order to formulate a strategic planning framework on improving social sustainability through third place planning within the local South African context.

***Keywords*—**Planning benefits, social sustainability, third places, urban area.

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I. Introduction

THE Third Place concept [20] has become a well-known common theme within build up areas around the word, due to transformed urban areas drawing more and more people to live and work in cities. It is argued that urban areas have always had Third Places, but due to places and their functions becoming blurred, Third Places as yet have not taken on the larger role as required within urban areas. This paper aims to introduce the Third Place concept based on three core planning approaches to improve quality living for residents within an urban setting through impacting social sustainability. A framework to incorporate Third Places is provided based on an evident based visual case study comparison flowing into a gap analysis.

II. Presenting the Third Place Concept

Observed through the lens of Oldenburg's theory [20] on Third Places, where the Third Place [15], introduced as any space other than our homes (First Place) or work (Second Place), are designed to enhance the lifestyle experience throughout a community, fostering social connections [2], [7]. Third Places are understood as public places on neutral ground where people wish to gather and interact voluntary, regularly and informally. Although Third Places are not necessarily permanent places within urban area, they are known for their qualities that support social ability and place attachment, serving as central hubs for local social interaction within any urban setting.

Reference [20] coined the term Third Place to ideally represent public places where regular, voluntary gatherings of individuals usually take place [7]. But Third Place literature has taken the Oldenburg's concept to new heights. Without having to plan or prepare for it, Third Places have started to exist spontaneously where movement occurs in a familiar and casual environment [11], [17].

III. Strategic Planning of Third Places

Three main planning approaches were identified in order to create a theoretical framework to improve the development of Third Places within the South African urban context. Table I depicts the applicable design elements and considerations of each selected planning approach [5], [13], [16], [19].

TABLE I
PLANNING APPROACH DESIGN ELEMENTS AND CONSIDERATIONS

Approach	Design Element	Consideration
Place-making	Access and Linkage	Movement patterns, inclusiveness, network linkages, connectedness to surroundings, visibility, entrance and exits.
	Comfort and Image	Safety, maintenance and cleanliness, public furniture and facilities, convenience, pedestrian (eye level) scale.
	Uses and Activity	Characteristics incorporated, activity, function, regularity.
	Sociability	Sense of place, social activity, diversity, interactivity.
Lively Planning	Vibrant & Diverse	Sociable stage, centralized amenities, mixed-uses, attraction elements, variety.
	Temporary	Temporary elements, activities and enhancements. Easy to change in order to provide for variety and ensure regularity.
	Compatibility	Linkage with surroundings and need within specific location.
	Creativity	Creative design, surface variety, texture, colour, shapes, city art.
	Pedestrian Friendly	Car free zone, walkability, bicycle friendly.
	Design	Authenticity, consistency, durability, sustainability.
Green Urbanism	Multi-sustainable	Green approach sustaining the economic, environmental and social perspectives of sustainable development.
	Multi-scale	Integration between land-use patterns, benefitting urban, neighbourhood and human scale.
	Multi-functional	Combined services, benefit people and the environment and improve human-nature interaction.
	Aesthetic value	Visually beneficial, green-grey scale improvement.

IV. COMING TO TERMS WITH SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Previous research conducted on sustainability has mostly focused on economic and environmental concerns, neglecting the third perspective of social concerns. But in recent years, social sustainability has gained more recognition, attracting interest and receiving political and institutional endorsement to enhance social sustainability as part of achieving overall sustainable development.

While various social research studies and policy documents exist, these have rarely been integrated into sustainability frameworks. This results in the concept of social sustainability often being under-theorized or oversimplified in existing literature, with few attempts in defining social sustainability as an independent perspective of sustainable development. Reference [23] states that it is still unclear whether the concept of social sustainability refers to the social preconditions for sustainable development or the need to sustain specific structures and customs in communities and societies. Reference [3] argues that social sustainability is concerned with the finality of sustainable development, while economic and environmental sustainability has to do with the goals and instruments of achieving sustainable development. Reference [14] contributes to this statement by interpreting social sustainability purely as the social condition necessary to support environmental sustainability.

In addition to [3], [14], a strong definition of social sustainability is given within a society when specific arrangements satisfy a specific set of human needs. These needs and arrangements should be shaped in a way where reproductive capabilities are preserved over a long period of time. In addition, social sustainability rests on the fulfilment of participation, a shared sense of place, social interaction, and improved quality of life in terms of all segments of the population and encourage social sustainability through human well-being [6], [23].

Due to social activity being interconnected with the physical context in which it transpires [12], the connections between social sustainability and the opportunities provided by the physical environment become apparent. Thus, when the built environment displays poor maintenance and development conditions, which are often the case of public places within South Africa, people are physiologically affected by it [12]. These poor conditions incite anti-social behaviour, automatically fueling a negative impact on social sustainability [12].

V. THE BENEFITS OF THIRD PLACES REGARDING SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

The communal benefits provided by Third Places should be established in order to determine the importance thereof, understand the social impact and fulfil the social needs of these regulars.

In addition to social benefits, Third Places also contribute towards environmental as well as economic benefits. For this reason the benefits in terms of Third Places is divided into direct and indirect benefits, where the direct benefits is related to social sustainability and indirect benefits are related to economic and environmental sustainability [1], [4], [8]-[10], [15], [18], [21], [22], [24], [25].

VI. THIRD PLACE CASE STUDIES: EVIDENT BASED VISUAL COMPARISON

Three local and international case study examples of Third Places within an urban setting were identified and are visually illustrated. These evident based visual comparisons influenced the compiling of a gap analysis in terms of Third Places within the local context of South Africa, based on the design elements of the planning approaches identified.

VII. PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Based on the evident based visual comparison and gap analysis, a planning framework is developed to improve the specific design elements rating moderate to high in terms of the gap ratings. This framework includes proposals and action plans, along with the timescale proposed.

TABLE II
DIRECT AND INDIRECT BENEFITS OF THIRD PLACES

Benefit	*Low Impact*	*Moderate Impact*	*High Impact*
DIRECT: SOCIAL SUSTAINABILITY			
Aid in unifying neighbourhoods		X	
Bring youth and adults into association with one another			X
Improve neighbourhood relations to encourage social interaction and community cohesion: - Safe - Crime free - Pedestrian friendly			X
Entertaining, providing for entertainment.			X
Foster social interaction through recreation: - Forming friendships - Important for retired people - Tourist attraction - Encourage volunteerism			X
Increase use of public transport		X	
Child Development - Positive impact on development stages, health and well-being - Early interaction enhance social skills and improve confidence levels - Identifying future abilities and identities		X	
Reduce stress and increase happiness			X
Human health and well-being (physical, mental & psychological)			X
Quality of life: Urban liveability (quality living space)			X
Beautification: Sense of Community & Sense of Place			X
INDIRECT: ENVIRONMENTAL & ECONOMIC SUSTAINABILITY			
Increased neighbourhood and property value by making areas more attractive for the people.		X	
Reducing air and noise pollution		X	
Create, enhance and restore ecological, biodiversity and ecosystem conservation: - Increases wildlife habitat - Saves species from extinction - Protects native plant gene pools and halts invasion of non-native species - Mitigate the situation of heat island effect		X	
Contribution to aesthetic value (visually): Substituting grey infrastructure in urban areas.			X
Attract business investment: Successful Third Place could potentially push building rents upwards and reduce vacancy rates. The Third Place itself could also generate revenue through event user fees and food operation leases. This collaboration with stakeholders could aid in the offset operational cost.		X	
Support local economies: Vibrant green Third Place and pedestrian-friendly street contributes directly to customer satisfaction and ultimately enhances the competitiveness and economic return of the surrounding buildings or a mixed-use developments (and that of its tenants).		X	

TABLE III
VISUAL BASED CASE STUDY COMPARISON

International	Local
	
	
	

TABLE IV
GAP ANALYSIS

Design Element	Gap Identified	Gap Rating
Access and Linkage	▪ Access visibility ▪ External linkages ▪ Sense of community	1
Comfort and Image	▪ Welcoming ▪ Attractiveness ▪ Atmosphere ▪ Safety	2
Uses and Activity	▪ Social activities ▪ Regularity ▪ Interactive ▪ Public facilities	2
Sociability	▪ Stage for social interaction	2
Vibrant & Diverse	▪ Uniqueness	2
Temporary	▪ Experimental designs	2
Compatibility	▪ Need of the people	1
Creativity	▪ Textures and colours	2
Pedestrian Friendly	▪ Pedestrian scale ▪ Walkability	1
Design	▪ Sustainable ▪ Consistent	1
Multi-sustainable	▪ Neglect social perspective	2
Multi-scale	▪ Pedestrian and city scale	2
Multi-functional	▪ Function of place	2
Aesthetic value	▪ Sense of place	2

[1]*Low – Moderate*, [2]*Moderate – High*

TABLE V
PLANNING FRAMEWORK

Proposal	Action Plan	Timescale
Comfort and Image[1]	✓ Increase the role of "Public Place Watch" to improve safety. ✓ Enhance cultural elements on a human scale. ✓ Improve convenience to ensure comfort.	Medium term
Uses and Activity[1]	✓ Improve regularity through providing to the needs of the user groups by developing a model of community involvement and engagement. ✓ Develop web content to maximize the use of the space through the internet as an information resource.	Medium term
Sociability[1]	✓ Develop a system and associated cost/benefit analysis to calculate cost and impact of anti-social behaviour against alternative preventative measures. ✓ Encourage and promote events that bring communities together and promote social cohesion.	Short term
Vibrant & Diverse[2]	✓ Promote partnership working to complement initiatives to ensure uniqueness and diversity.	Medium term
Temporary[2]	✓ Target "career changers' to consider Third Places as opportunities, temporary improvements, changes and designs could be featured.	Short term
Creativity[2]	✓ Promote short term community engagement projects to increase creativity.	Short term
Multi-sustainable[3]	✓ Establish a continued program of investment in Third Places to ensure multi-sustainability from different investors. ✓ Support the management of improving social sustainability as a main priority of sustainable development along with economic and environmental sustainability. ✓ Promote the value of Third Places for sustainable development.	Medium term
Multi-scale[3]	✓ Improve the design and implementation strategy to accommodate Third Places on a multi-scale level.	Medium term
Multi-functional[3]	✓ Improve awareness of the Third Place serving as a social stage for different events and occasions.	Short term
Aesthetic value[3]	✓ Improve the sense of place through regularity of different user groups.	Short term

[1] *Place-making,* [2] *Lively Planning,* [3] *Green Urbanism*

VIII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

The benefits that Third Places provide within urban areas in terms of social sustainability have been well documented and motivated. This study aimed at proposing a strategic framework based on design elements and considerations of three main planning approaches in order to encourage the inclusion of Third Places within South Africa, where public space is reclaimed for public use. To conclude, planning within urban areas of South Africa do include the provision and development of open/recreational space, yet a sense of place and community within these places are absent. Consequently, the selected planning approaches fueling Third Place planning within South Africa should be considered in terms of the local context realities and challenges to ensure social sustainability is improved through enhancing quality of life within urban area.

IX. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

This study is limited to the planning of Third Places to enhance social sustainability within urban areas, based on three main planning approaches. Although additional planning approached also plays a part in the provision and implementation of successful Third Places, these three identified planning approaches combined covers all elements that should be achieved and provided within the subject matter of Third Places, where the opportunity is provided to relate theory directly to practice within the local South African context.

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