Walking along Dr Ka Seme Pixley Street in Inner City Durban, South Africa

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Abstract

The inner city of Durban, the third largest city in South Africa, is currently considered an unsafe and difficult place to live in and traverse – and also for short/temporary visits. Nevertheless, should a person find themselves walking along Dr Ka Seme Pixley Street, they will find themselves in the most significant and vibrant atmosphere of the city, filled with people undertaking a variety of activities. From the 1960s to the 1980s this urban path, which crosses the whole inner city from the railway station and the main markets to the beachfront, was an important business and commercial area. The presence of the city hall, churches, bars, shops and banks formed the most important outdoor shopping mall at the time – but it was defined by the apartheid government as the core of the city only for white, privileged people. The city is still dynamic and is lived in by mixed-culture inhabitants, but the high level of crime, growing poverty and social problems have greatly changed its circumstances. The aim of the research is to explore the area around Dr Ka Seme Pixley Street from an architectural and urban point of view – from the apartheid era through to the contemporary era. Making use of several analytical procedures of architecture (such as mapping, drawing, analyses of historical and contemporary documents, plans and projects), the idea is to propose a critical analysis of the aspects that could potentially improve the unique character of this area, and build a habitable and vibrant city for the 21st century.

Keywords: urban history, urban planning, city mapping
Introduction

One of the oldest streets in Durban, the third most populous city of South Africa, Dr Pixley Ka Seme Street, was formerly called West Street when it was founded in the mid nineteenth century. The street crosses all of the inner city for approximately 2.5 km, from the area of the markets and the cemetery to the ocean, and from the west to the east side of the city. It is one of the most important and vibrant parts of the city and is mainly commercial, with shopping malls, small- and large-scale shops, and informal commerce. Here two and three storey buildings cohabit with large towers, which are significant landmarks of the urban landscape. The street includes the central business district, the Warwick Markets, public institutions like the old City Hall (that now hosts a museum, a space for temporary exhibitions and the concert hall), the post office, the Africana library, government offices, and spans an area of approximately 17 km².

Currently, Dr Pixley Ka Seme Street is considered an unsafe and difficult place to live in and also traverse, even for short and temporary visits. Nevertheless, should a person find themselves walking along the street, they will discover a highly significant and vibrant atmosphere, filled with people undertaking a variety of activities. From the 1960s to the 1980s this urban path was the most important outdoor shopping mall at that time, but it was defined by the apartheid government as the core of the city, and meant only for privileged white people. The city is still dynamic and is lived in by mixed-culture inhabitants – but the high level of crime, growing poverty and social problems have greatly changed its circumstances.

The research is based on a study developed in the School of Built Environment and Development Studies (Architecture, Planning and Housing), at the University of KwaZulu-Natal in Durban. The project is in its first phase, and involves architecture undergraduate students. Currently the investigation is in working progress, and consists of exploring the street, from the past to the present – in order to understand its potential from the point of view of the form of the city, the city’s architecture, and its inhabitants.

The methodology in this first phase is mainly based on mapping the area using different methods (e.g. drawings, pictures, videos, site visits, data collection), and in the next phase there will be a dialogue with the community (questionnaires, samples, data collection and analysis). The project will conclude with a concrete pilot project, still in preparation, related to reactivation of part of the street. Starting from the history of the street and the development of the inner city, and analysing different visions of the street developed by the municipality, the purpose of the work is to discover aspects and elements that can help and build new scenarios for the area.

Context and History of the Street

Durban, as mentioned previously, is the third most populous city in South Africa after Johannesburg and Cape Town – with an area of 2 297 km² and a population of 3 442 361 inhabitants.¹ Its inner city is home to approximately 70 000 people in a diverse society, which faces various social, economic, environmental and governance

¹ eThekwini Municipality (2011).
challenges. The area has a population density of 4,768 people per km². The current land uses mapped by eThekwini Municipality (Durban Municipality) in the Inner City Local Area Plan (LAP) in 2016, are Residential (60%), Retail (5%), Commercial/Industrial (20%), and “Other Amenities” (15%) (see eThekwini Inner City LAP, 2016).

The form of the street is marked by an important reticular structure that is laid out on three main streets: Anton Lembede (formerly Smith Street), Dr Pixley Ka Seme Street (formerly West Street) and Monty Naicker Road (formerly Pine Terrace) – between which lie a market square and a series of short cross streets (Dick, 1998). Durban’s colonial heritage is visible in the urban grid that illustrates the form of the first settlement of the city in the mid nineteenth century (Bennett, Adams & Brusse, 1987). The Inner City LAP describes the area as follows: “in the early 1800’s the natural environment of the Inner City was relatively untouched and the topography and natural environment restricted the growth of the community that settled along the Durban Bay” (eThekwini Inner City LAP, 2016). The town layout was formalised in 1850 by a grid pattern, designed by the English businessman Cato, who was also the town’s first mayor. The Street is 100 feet wide (30.48 m) – to enable a wagon and a span of 16 oxen to turn in comfort, and most of the land was divided into module areas of 100 x 500 feet (30.48 x 152.40 m). In 1910, there was a building boom after the Anglo-Boer War, especially during the years immediately before the establishment of the Union of South Africa in 1910, and the building density of the street changed in a process that continued through to the twentieth century and the 1970s (Morrison, 1987).

The urban landscape of Durban is marked also by the history of apartheid (1948-1994) and apartheid spatial planning still characterises this city and, in general, the South African city space (Bickford-Smith, 2016). Thus, “Through spatial legislation (esp. Group Areas Act, 1950) the people’s movements were administrated and the white people [European] controlled both town and country space. […] ‘White space’ included city centres, farms, beaches, and mountains, and black people used these spaces temporarily as labourers and had to certify their rights to enter” (Shepherd, Murray, & Hall, 2007). Indeed under apartheid, the policies that Durban developed were along segregated racial lines and the poorest of the population (mainly the black “native” population) were located on the outskirts of the city – resulting in long travel times and expensive, subsidised travel to the workplace, mostly via the Warwick markets, which are located in the eastern part of Dr Pixley Kaseme Street.

The book Dear old Durban, published in 1985, describes the atmosphere of the street in the 1950s and 1960s thus: “the business and commercial centre of Durban is much bigger than it was, but it is still essentially the same three streets that it used to be. These are Smith Street the ‘business centre’, West Street the ‘shopping centre’ and Pine Street which had all sorts of functions, but seemed to be mostly hardware or fruit and vegetable shops. […] West Street was the most important. Let’s make a tour of it!” This comment follows a long and detailed description of the activities and places along the main street that suggests a rich and populated place that was part of a white area, and black people were only allowed to stay there for work purposes (Miller & Stone, 1985).

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2 George Christopher Cato (1814-93).
The Contemporary Street

Despite concerted efforts since 1994, when apartheid policies were abolished, the structure of the city remains segregated. The city is still vibrant, but very problematic in terms of security and only a part of the population live and transit there. These aspects demonstrate that the inner city area is a crucial area for the growth and development of Durban, and needs the requisite attention to retain and attract investment in the future.

South African national government has therefore identified, through the planning tool of the “Local Area Plan” (LAP), development of the regeneration of inner cities as a policy priority – providing potential for access to employment, reduced transport costs, and a range of housing opportunities. In addition, within the Durban metropolitan area, the value of business property assets is the highest in the inner city area and generates a significant portion of the rates base of the city (eThekwini Inner City LAP, 2016). The appropriate redevelopment of this part of the city offers an opportunity to start to restructure the segregated city with large tracts of undeveloped and underdeveloped land (eThekwini Inner City LAP, 2016). The idea of the Municipality – developed in Inner City LAP and in the subsequent eThekwini Inner City Regeneration Strategy (2017) – is that there are opportunities to densify and restructure the city to accommodate many more people and jobs.

The expectation of the Durban Inner City LAP is that the population will have grown from 61 985 in 2016 to 370 000 by 2040 - with an ultimate total of 450 000 people. The Municipality’s vision is to regenerate the area to become a “vibrant, liveable, walkable City Centre” (eThekwini Inner City LAP, 2016).

Furthermore the Ethekwini Inner City Regeneration Strategy (2017) explains in detail its vision, based on “Four Spatial Principles” that define the city. According to the document, the urban city centre environment will be developed to be “Connected” (e.g. appropriate roads, pedestrian and cycle paths, public transport); “Walkable” (e.g. relating to neighbourhood structures, public realm upgrades, mixed use, higher densities, the public realm, small blocks, crime, cleanliness); and “Integrated and Inclusive” with land-use intensity. The fourth aspect consists of “realising the potential”, based on the idea of inserting in the urban environment “small or large projects that contribute to the overall vision, promote a sustainable, resilient city and unlock other development opportunities” (Ethekwini Inner City Regeneration Strategy, 2017).

The municipality divided the inner city into 8 precincts and currently is developing the regeneration plan of each part (eThekwini Inner City LAP Precinct Plan, 2017). The precincts that involve Dr Pixley Kaseme Street are Warwick, City Port, and Beach. The LAP for Warwick is completed, but there are no significant changes to the street. To the contrary, in 2014 a study commissioned by the eThekwini Municipality, the Durban Architectural Office Designworkshop, presented a proposal for the street that transformed it into a long, walkable linear park with a strong reduction in car mobility and the implementation of public transport. The proposal takes as a reference

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3 The precincts are Umgeni, Sports, Greyville, Centrum, Beach, Warwick, City Port, Point, and the Ethekwini Municipality has developed the Sports, Centrum, and Warwick.
three other cases of walkable streets that have similar wide dimensions to Dr Pixley Ka Seme Street: Las Ramblas in Barcelona (30 m wide), 15 November Street in Curitiba (Mexico) (25-30 m wide), and Bahnhofstrasse in Zurich, Switzerland. This proposal was the first step in a concrete and significant transformation of the inner city, but the project – presented at the XXV International Union of Architects World Congress in Durban⁴ – has not yet had any applications.

At this stage, the purpose of the research is to try to realise the potential of the street, and identify the characteristics of the street that can reactive the city’s social and economic development of the area, – starting from the Municipality vision and past proposals. Mapping the area is the first phase of the research and will give new ideas for new urban scenarios – especially for its major street – Dr Pixley Ka Seme Street. Mapping considers two main aspects: the city form and architecture, and then people’s activities (emergent social forms, informal versus formal). Cullen (1961) described the “urban vista” of a street “like a complete sentence containing subject and predicate, the use of word punctuation may clarify those demarcations of the enclosed phrase which this picture illustrates. In the continuing narrative of the street, function and pattern change from place to place; this should be acknowledged by some physical signals” (Cullen, 1961). Starting from this idea, we decided to consider the street as “a system of elements” that we composed, with the students, into a big Atlas that includes the buildings and their ground floor elements, like arcades, corners, passages, and entrances (Kearney, 1984). At the same time, we studied the plans and significant sections of the street. The exercise was a collective project, combining first and second year students, to document Pixley Ka Seme Street from the cemetery to the ocean.⁵ As a combined work, we studied graphically the characteristics of each of the 19 blocks (divided and assigned to 10 groups of students) that make up this street. Each group of students realised a collective large land uses map model, onto which they placed stickers to note major land uses, and drawings with plans, sections and sketches that form a large storyboard of the street.

During the work of mapping, we discovered that the physical elements that we were analysing were overlapping in the formal and informal people’s activities that also shaped the street layout in different ways. Indeed, the street changes its narrative along the path and forms five main, different parts. Starting from the west area and walking to the east, the first part of the street is characterised by buildings of 2-3 storeys and are full of informal activities constituting an extension of the markets. After this area, is a second part where there is the most important concentration of towers that cohabit with low buildings and a significant presence of small and large commerce, both formal and informal. There is also a third area where the main green space and the public and representative buildings (e.g. concert hall, post office, two museums) are located. However, the fourth part is mainly made up of 2-3 storey buildings and the ground floor hosts big commerce – mainly car dealers and show rooms. The last part, which ends in the beachfront, is mostly housing and hosts poor

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⁴ The proposal was presented by Designworkshop at the XXV International Union of Architects World Congress in Durban in February 2014 – with the title “Transforming our city: Doctor Pixley Ka Isaka Seme Linear Park, Durban”.

⁵ The two courses involved in the research were Architectural Design and Technology 1B and 2B (School of Built Environment and Development studies, Architecture, Planning and Housing, University of Kwazulu-Natal, Durban, South Africa). Studio staff were: Silvia Bodei, Bridget Horner, Mr Bonga Ntuli, Viloshin Govender, Lindsay Bush, Mark Oswell, and Clair Clifton.
immigrants from other African countries. Here informal commerce is present again. As a result of this work of mapping, we presented a combined exhibition with a map model and drawings, which showed graphically the characteristics of the street and its population, who we also consider to be important infrastructure of the area.

**Conclusions**

The observations collected from the experience realised with the students formed the basis for the next phase of a pilot project that we are discussing with eThekwini Municipality, where we will consider the urban public realm as a strong part of the urban space for the social reactivation of the inner city. The research strategy is to start from the drivers of the Ethekwini Municipality plans that imagine a city “connected”, walkable” and “integrated and inclusive” – trying to realise the potential of the consolidated form of the city and the population who live there, including informal merchants, squatters, but also social entities such as NGOs.

Apartheid history has strongly determined the spatial and formal characteristics of Dr Pixley Ka Seme Street, and in this sense this important urban path expresses “an intersection that reveals notions of space of power and privilege, identity and difference; palimpsests of historical experience; lived spaces in the everyday performance of urban life” (Shepherd & Murray, 2007). In general, contemporary South Africa is particularly influenced by a combination of nostalgia, desire and consumerism. Retail activities, drinking, movies, and consumerism combined with perimeter controls and insecurity, are the new borders – and the relation with order and disorder, formal and informal, is significant. The aim of this research is to exceed the psychological and physical borders and barriers, to produce new scenarios, and transform the street and context of the street into a safe and socially open space.
References

Books


Urban planning


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