

RESEARCH IN PROGRESS: PLANNING FOR PEDESTRIANS IN THE CORE OF SOUTH AFRICAN CITIES

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Continuing research concerning the real needs of the pedestrian in S.A. city centres is described. To determine the quality of "pedestrian experiences" three hypotheses were formulated and tested using street surveys. As regards perceptions of quality: Life-cycle and culture play an important role as to the First and Third World syndromes, for example, Whites regard the concept "streetlife" as strange while Blacks react differently. Instead of a friendly centre one finds an artificial commercial core where the motor car is dominant, human needs are lost and planning is seen as a rigid techno-economic exercise.

Lopende navorsing oor die werklike behoeftes van die voetganger in SA stads-kerne word beskryf. Om die gehalte van "voetgangerservaringe" te bepaal, word drie hipoteses gestel en deur middel van straatopnames getoets. Met betrekking tot persepsie van gehalte speel lewenssiklus en kultuur 'n belangrike rol, asook die Eerste Derdewêreld sindroom, bv. vir die Blankes is die begrip "openbare straatlewe" vreemd, maar die Swarte reageer anders. In stede van die gesellige kern, kry ons die kunsmatige sakekern, waar die motor dominant is, menslike behoeftes verlore gaan en beplanning as 'n eng tegniese-ekonomiese oefening gesien word.

1. INTRODUCTION

In this article two contrasting perceptions of the central-city core, namely the business versus the social core are discussed. Critical qualitative factors which apply to the pedestrian, such as centrality, accessibility, convenience, beauty and sociability are identified. Many city cores lack convenience, beauty and sociability, because visual surprise and human activity are dominated by the needs of the motor vehicle.

Sociability can be coupled to the broader interpretation of the term "market-place" which may suggest some solutions to downtown pedestrian problems of identity, safety, stimulus, recreation and participation. A general assumption is made that a clear image and human scale (in contrast to false scale) enable pedestrians to perceive the city core in positive terms. At a micro level, it is important to give attention to practical design elements such as walking surfaces, change of level and meeting places.

2. PROCEDURE

2.1 Hypotheses

In a somewhat restricted and special sense "perception" is defined as:

Pedestrian reaction to qualitative design elements in the core city which make it both functional and attractive.

Such elements might include human scale, greenery, water, eating facilities, seating, toilets, weather protection, pavements, walking surfaces and absence of cars.

In order to assess the qualitative experience and perceptions of the pedestrian in the core, several hypotheses had to be tested in the field.

The following three major hypotheses were formulated:

1. That a difference in perception of the quality of the core exists among different population groups.
2. That a difference in perception of the quality of the core exists among different age groups.
3. That men and women have different perception of the city core.

2.2 Survey sample

As part of the main research project still in progress the author and eighteen planning students undertook street surveys in three smaller South African cities, namely Kimberley, Bloemfontein and Welkom. About 600 respondents in each city were interviewed. These are equally divided by sex and race and with a fair number from all age groups. Expert observation of pedestrian flow patterns and nodes of concentrated ac-

tivity helped to determine the position of survey stations in each of the city cores. Once the data had been encoded, use was made of a SPSS computer programme to obtain the necessary frequencies and cross tabulations (Van Zyl, 1986).

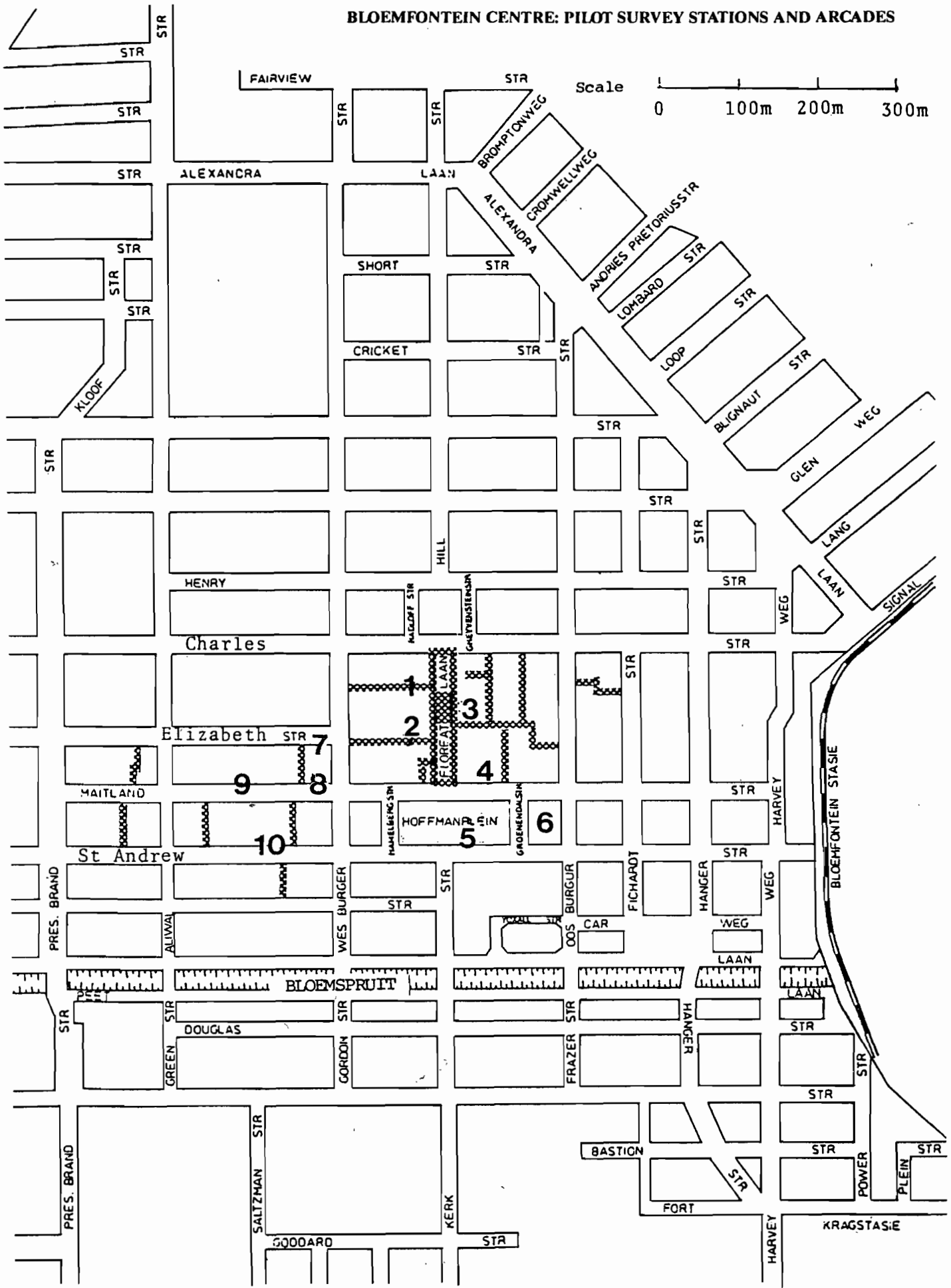
3. COMMENTS ON THE PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

As this article reports on preliminary findings of a much larger research project still in progress, only an impressionistic discussion of these hypotheses is possible.

3.1 Life Cycles

With small variations between cities, the surveys clearly showed a life cycle "syndrome" in which different age groups have different perceptions of the core. For example, the needs of toddlers, primary school children, teenagers, students, senior citizens and families vary greatly. Each group has different expectations of how the core should satisfy their needs as pedestrians. In relation to social contact and sociability, the most group formation takes place among teenagers and students. Families on the other hand were interested in shopping, promotions and exhibits, while toddlers and senior

BLOEMFONTEIN CENTRE: PILOT SURVEY STATIONS AND ARCADES



BLOEMFONTEIN CORE



HOFFMAN SQUARE



FLOREAT MALL



SANLAM CENTRE

citizens came off second best due to physical inconvenience and a lack of facilities to meet their special needs.

Special pedestrian spaces have recently been created in all three cities, e.g. Sanlam Court (Kimberley), Floreat Mall (Bloemfontein) and Liberty Mall (Welkom). In each of these the surveys showed that most White pedestrians are uninvolved either with other people or their immediate environment. Since the accent in these central areas is on business, there is a lack of design elements that encourage urban core sociability. The tensions caused by time, business pressure and intrusive traffic were most evident.

On the other hand Blacks were observed forming social groups more easily since they appear to be less reserved than Whites. Besides a more relaxed attitude towards time and work pressures, most Blacks have lower expectations of finding spaces and amenities of high quality in the core.

3.2 Youth and Visitor Perceptions

From the previous discussion of life cycles, one would expect a number of young people to visit the core for the purpose of recreation, and more thought should be given to their needs as pedestrians. The lack of social facilities came to the fore in Kimberley and Bloemfontein, where young males undergoing national service complained of a lack of activities and places to meet. Younger people are looking for other pedestrians in busy malls, arcades or shopping centres, and they patronise music bars, game arcades and bookshops.

Most people are vague about the distances they are "prepared to walk" after parking their car or bicycle, or after alighting from a bus or taxi. One thing is however certain in that they are surprised to discover how many short walking trips they do make. Young people say that they are prepared to walk three or four city blocks, and are not unduly bothered by poor walking surfaces or frequent changes of level. It follows however, that young children and the aged are more bothered by long walking distances, poor walking surfaces or frequent changes of level. It is true that the more attractions along a pedestrian route, the less people notice its length.

Younger people also made some crea-



WELKOM CORE: POSITION OF NEW LIBERTY MALL, SOUTH OF HORSESHOE

tive proposals for pedestrian improvement:

- provide street entertainment like music and theatre,
- close some streets between 10h00 and 16h00,
- establish street cafes where people can meet,
- use more colour, water and greenery.

Because all three cities studied are major service centres for their hinterlands, one finds a number of out-of-town visitors who use the city core for business, social and entertainment purposes. As pedestrians they tend to be less critical of design detail than local residents, do not mind crowding and tend to be more sociable and less tense. It is noticeable that visitors use landmarks to orient themselves and to meet friends, e.g. the post office, railway station, under the clock or at the fountain. Landmarks are an important element in the city image (the others are nodes, paths, districts and edges) which seems to suggest that the pedestrian image of

the city core should be carefully planned (Lynch, 1974).

3.3 Street Life and Culture

While living in West Europe (and during frequent subsequent visits) the author has seen city streets being used in a manner which differs from that of the average White South African. In the first instance, the European street is not only seen as a functional transport route or carpark, but is also treated as an urban catalyst for social contact and recreation. Besides reflecting a local social, historic and climatic context, the street possesses qualities of human scale, landscape and even beauty. With a few exceptions, the South African climate presents great potential for practising the art of "street life". Because of good public transport and extensive housing downtown, the motor vehicle is treated as an intruder and kept out of European town centres: primarily by using inner ring roads and loops. By contrast many South African cities are

choked by motor cars and freeways: presumably in the belief that more motor cars will keep business alive – a one-sided approach ignoring sociability and symbolism (Van Zyl, 1983).

Even before post-war pedestrian malls became commonplace in Northern Europe (led by Rotterdam and Stockholm), the Mediterranean peoples had always treated certain city squares and streets as pedestrian promenades and social meeting places. Countless examples of social streets exist in Spain, Portugal, Italy and Greece, which have evolved naturally over centuries in contrast to artificially created pedestrian malls. However, surveys confirm that White South Africans tend to have a more reserved temperament and different customs, which colour their attitude towards street life. Is there perhaps something sinful about enjoying oneself in public, about wasting time or being idle? Some respondents thought so. A better explanation of South African perceptions of street life is to be found

in the complex social mix of different races and cultures at different stages of development, which are all encountered in our city cores. Thus there are widely divergent cultural usages and modes of thinking which come into play when considering behaviour in public spaces. For example, what is the difference between public and personal space for different races and cultures? Should one's behaviour be selfconscious or spontaneous on a public street? All the answers have not yet been found, and these form fruitful fields for further studies.

3.4 Pleasant and Unpleasant Streets

When pedestrians were asked what street they found to be the most pleasant for walking, not surprisingly they chose the main shopping streets in all three cities, i.e. Jones Street (Kimberley), Maitland Street (Bloemfontein) and Mooi Street (Welkom). Their reasons (included) cleanliness, bustle and choice of shops, but social factors were only mentioned after some probing. In the case of both Kimberley and Bloemfontein there were positive comments from all sexes and age groups about informal sales of fruit and vegetables by Blacks on the pavement (informal sector). It is to be credit of the authorities that they have not driven these people away.

When the negative question about "unpleasant" streets was put to pedestrians, some field workers found that an element of prejudice broke to the surface. To take the case of Kimberley first: the city core has developed a bipolar north-south structure, with the old City Hall in the north being connected to "superstores" and in the south by means of two winding one-way streets (Jones and Chapel streets).

The surveys showed that the old City Hall is perceived as a point of concentration for Black and Coloured pedestrians, while the shops to the south are perceived to be for Whites. White pedestrians said that the north was dangerous and overcrowded while Blacks felt that it was "too far" to shop in the south. One explanation may be the narrow width and poor walking surfaces found in Jones Street, but another explanation may be a lack of tolerance.

In Bloemfontein's core there was a perceived east-west division between races.



MOOI STREET – CONFLICT AND CONGESTION



BOK AND KARROO STREETS CONFLICTS



BLACK TAXI AND BUS TERMINUS

Both black and White respondents felt that the eastern side of the city core was unpleasant and unsafe for walking. Blacks had a negative image of their own trading area (Harvey Road) because of "pickpockets and a young criminal element". White pedestrians would avoid the railway station area because (they said) it was crowded with Blacks. There were also other places or sections of pavement where Whites felt that their safety was threatened by crowds of Blacks. Some Whites did not even like informal sales, saying that beggars were a nuisance.

In answer to the critical question of whether they felt threatened by cars, two-thirds of respondents did indeed feel threatened: Blacks to a lesser extent than White females.

3.5 The Black Pedestrian

With few exceptions, the surveys showed that Blacks walk considerably further than Whites in the core of South African cities. This is explained by their socio-economic status, and the long distances which they travel between home and work. Cities like Kimberley, Bloemfontein and Welkom make little provision for Black pedestrian needs with regard to toilets or eating facilities. This situation is partly a throwback to the period when Blacks were treated as temporary residents in White cities. With the abolition of Influx Control and the opening of parts of the Central Business District to all races, this situation has begun to change.

Like West Europeans, the majority of Blacks make use of public transport but there is no smooth interchange between bus, train or taxi. Black bus stations and taxi stands are often a kilometer from the city core, and even if Blacks preferred to alight at the post office or city square they are forced to walk long distances. The location of eating and rest facilities along busy pedestrian routes requires urgent attention. Under the present circumstances overcrowding of narrow pavements is inevitable. Interviews suggest negative perceptions of the Black pedestrians among Whites and vice versa. Some of these attitudes are no doubt due to mutual ignorance about one another, and also cultural and socio-economic factors. The physical layout of the city should not perpetuate these differences.

4. CLOSING THOUGHTS

At the outset it was noted that as this is a vast subject with many ramifications, at this stage of the study only an impressionistic discussion is possible, hence some closing thoughts rather than hard and fast conclusions, seem more appropriate. Of the three hypotheses originally formulated it was "easier" to obtain answers regarding the perceptions of different age groups and sexes. (Hypotheses 2 and 3), than for the first hypothesis. With respect to the latter i.e. on the different perceptions between population groups and cultures, responses produced some suggestive evidence, which must be tested further. Due to the mixture of First and Third World peoples found in South African cities, pedestrian problems are highly complex and unique.

Countless examples of successful urban design for pedestrians exist world-wide, but a unique solution must be found for each. Street interviews proved conclusively that there is a reservoir of ideas among the general public waiting to be tapped.

The needs of the pedestrian are never measured and seldom taken into account by downtown developers and decision-makers; whether in the private or public sectors. It would appear that narrow business or traffic engineering priorities should be replaced by teamwork and comprehensive planning.

Further research and public involvement are urgently required to shape long-term plans for our inner cities. The author would like to hear from other planners and researchers working in the same broad field.

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