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The revitalisation of parks and open spaces in downtown Johannesburg

Notwithstanding the “back-to-the-city” process taking place in pockets of Johannesburg’s inner city, the area investigated in this study is still perceived by some observers as one of decline and is associated with criminal activities. Although Johannesburg’s parks and open spaces have been subjected to urban decline over the past decades, they are currently undergoing urban revitalisation. This study investigates the size and user-friendliness of the open spaces and parks accessible to inner-city residents. It also considers current conditions and the level and effectiveness of the maintenance services available. Furthermore, it examines the regeneration strategies of Johannesburg, determining through them the specific provisions made for parks and open spaces by the local metropolitan council. The study determines that the redevelopment of

parks and open spaces has been adequately incorporated into Johannesburg’s urban regeneration plans. However, certain constraints are thwarting progress in implementing such improvements. The unique dynamics of the inner city pose a significant challenge to maintaining parks and open spaces, and these should be properly understood and planned for. There also appears to be a need for fairer and more efficient allocation of resources and for forging more effective partnerships. The study concludes that the needs of the community will only be met once these management issues have been prioritised and addressed.

Keywords: Johannesburg, parks, redevelopment, inner city, urban decline

1 Introduction

The decline of Johannesburg's inner city cannot be understood without considering the impact that apartheid had on all settlements in South Africa. This is generally clear in the case of central business districts in South Africa, which were zoned as white-only areas in the apartheid era. Because there was limited access to these areas by non-whites, they were confined to peripheral areas (Bollens, 1998). In the case of Johannesburg's inner city, decline followed as a result of the flight of white businesses and residential populations to Sandton, Midrand and Johannesburg, further north, in the 1970s and 1980s. As a result, the inner city experienced significant change in the following periods. Buildings were abandoned, infrastructure started to deteriorate and the previous predominantly white inner-city population was replaced by a rapidly increasing black population that had previously been denied access to the inner city (Young, 2012).

Johannesburg's inner city was unable to provide adequate services and infrastructure for this growing population and its accelerating demands (Garner, 2011). Therefore, it came to be characterised as accommodating a predominantly poor population (Winkler, 2009) and, as a result, underwent several transformations in its downward spiral of decline. After five decades of urban decline, Johannesburg's inner city, along with its network of parks and open spaces, today faces a number of challenges, such as a rapidly increasing population (Murray, 2011; Todes, 2012). This is also a destination for a large numbers of immigrants, especially from Sub-Saharan Africa (Landau & Gindrey, 2008; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2015). As such, it is essential that this growing population be assisted through provision of adequate services and facilities, employment and thereby the promise of improved prospects for making a living (Rudolph et al., 2012; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2015).

For almost two decades now, regeneration efforts have been underway to revive Johannesburg and raise it to the status of a "world-class African city" (Rogerson, 1996; Rogerson, 2004; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2015). However, notwithstanding these endeavours and the fact that Johannesburg is at the very core of South Africa's economic heartland, the city is weakly represented in scholarly urban research programmes in the country (Visser & Roger, 2014; Rogerson & Rogerson, 2015), which are fundamental for understanding and counteracting urban decline and promoting urban regeneration.

As in the rest of the world, a process of "returning to the city" is taking place in Johannesburg, a movement back to the inner city, largely driven by young suburbanites that want to



Figure 1: Inner-city and informal traders (photo: Nico Kotze).

play a role in the big city and be part of what it has to offer (Piiparinen, 2013; Walsh, 2013). The Maboneng Precinct, a privately controlled urban enclave, has been developed on portions of two of the oldest suburbs of the inner city (namely City and Suburban and Jeppestown), providing for the needs of these new urbanites by making urban living space available to them (Walsh, 2013). The second area undergoing rapid change is Doornfontein, where the renewal process is mainly being driven through developments providing accommodation to students (see also Donaldson et al., 2014). According to Tanja Winkler (2013), notwithstanding the large amounts of money that have already been invested in its redevelopment, Johannesburg's inner city – with the exception of these isolated pockets of regeneration – is still in a state of decline (see Figure 1). For many observers and the popular media, Hillbrow in particular remains an urban area in a state of decline, with criminal activities reigning supreme (Schnehaage, 2012). As early as 2005, Ivor Chipkin (2005) admitted that downtown Johannesburg needed to be cleaned up and that it should be done in cooperation with the private sector, which is regarded as a better partner in the regeneration process.

Parks and open spaces serve the surrounding community with a multitude of functions and benefits, and are therefore important considerations in attempts at urban regeneration that aim to assist decaying cities (Thwaites et al., 2005; Page & Connell, 2010; Özgüner, 2011; Bratina Jurković, 2014; Cerar, 2014; Pompe & Temeljotov Salaj, 2014). It should generally be acknowledged that the needs and demands of socially and culturally diverse groups should be accounted for in urban planning programmes specifically for parks and open spaces in order to adequately fulfil their purpose in the modern urban arena (Bollens, 1998; Chiesura, 2004; Goličnik, 2008). Access to parks and open spaces is a basic human right and, in light of the current and ongoing attempts to foster regeneration in Johannesburg, sufficient attention should be given to these

“green lungs” because they have the potential to contribute to the renewal and revival of the city.

This study investigates one aspect of attempts at rejuvenation taking place in the city; namely, the redevelopment of parks in inner-city Johannesburg as part of the city’s regeneration. The study is divided into five sections. The first section explains the decline of the inner city and the need for urban regeneration. The second describes the study area and presents the research objectives. The third section reviews the functions and benefits of parks and open spaces in urban areas. The fourth showcases the improvements to the ten parks in Johannesburg’s inner city included in this study. The final section offers recommendations and concluding remarks.

2 Study area and research aims

According to Martin Murray, cited in Christian Rogerson and Jayne Rogerson (2015), the metropolis of Johannesburg has an estimated population of 3.9 million, making it one of the largest urban areas in Africa. Johannesburg is divided into seven districts or regions (Regions A through G). Region F is the region of interest in this study. It includes both the inner city and the suburbs of Johannesburg South (see Figure 2). This study area was chosen to encompass a network of ten diverse parks randomly distributed within the inner city and bordered by main roads. It comprises the suburbs of Berea, Hillbrow and Joubert Park and is bordered by Braamfontein and Doornfontein. The streets marking the borders of the study area are Albertina Sisulu Street to the south, Louis Botha Avenue to the north, Harrison Street and Clarendon Place to the west, and Joe Slovo Drive to the east. The parks thus fall into different areas in the inner city, and the functions of these areas range from commercial to residential. The ten parks in the study are Nugget Street Park, the End Street Parks (North and South), Joubert Park, Attwell Gardens Park, Ernest Oppenheimer Park, Alec Gorschel Park, Tudhope Park, J. Z. de Villiers Park and Mitchell Park (see Figure 3).

This study had the following aims:

- To determine the size of the open spaces and parks available to inner-city residents.
- To analyse the current condition and level of maintenance of parks in the study area.
- To examine the regeneration strategies introduced by the City of Johannesburg and determine the specific provisions made for parks and open spaces through these strategies.

To attain these aims, a mixed-methods research design was adopted for this project to take advantage of a multiple-method

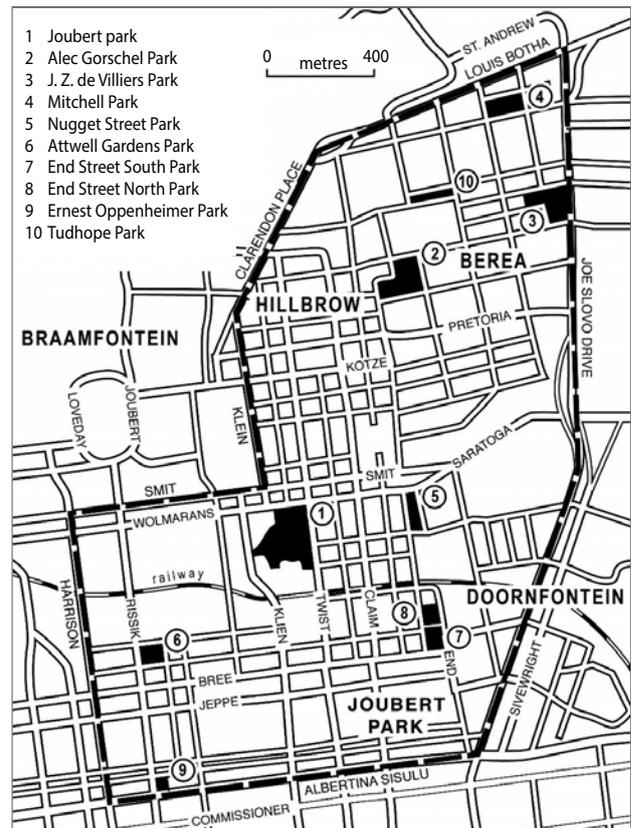


Figure 2: Parks in inner-city Johannesburg (illustration: Leani de Vries).

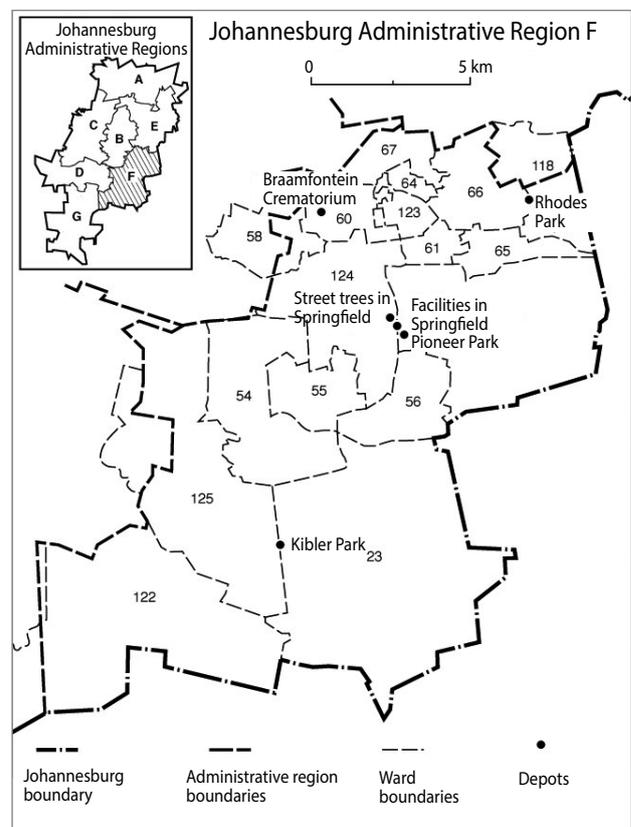


Figure 3: Administrative regions of Johannesburg (illustration: Leani de Vries).

approach to explore the problems of inner-city parks in Johannesburg. The locations and areas of the parks and open spaces were determined. A semi-structured interview was conducted with the manager of Region F to gather information on the condition of the ten parks and their levels of maintenance, and, finally, site visits were carried out over a year (from June 2014 to July 2015) to ascertain whether the parks were being maintained as claimed by the local government.

3 Parks and open spaces: Functions and benefits

Cities or urban areas are environments with a multiplicity and variety of land-use functions, including commercial, administrative, residential and leisure uses (Page & Connell, 2010). Urban open spaces are significant in urban areas because they perform several functions within the urban area and provide a wide variety of direct and indirect benefits. They are valuable because they provide for the social, psychological, environmental and health needs of the surrounding community (Chiesura, 2003). Studies have shown that both the psychological and physical health attributes of regular park users are generally greater than those for people that do not regularly visit parks and open spaces (Chiesura, 2003). Such spaces serve the community by offering an opportunity to reduce stress levels and enhance fitness levels. Children also benefit greatly from access to open spaces because they allow for play. This has been shown to be extremely beneficial to children's physiological and cognitive development (Page & Connell, 2010). Planning is important for parks in areas of social and cultural diversity and in open spaces in general. Halil Özgüner (2011) emphasises the importance of planning when he states that it is vital for urban parks and open spaces to be designed and managed effectively to successfully provide for the needs associated with the social and cultural diversity of the community in the vicinity of parks. In their studies, Michèle Jolé (2008) and William Solecki and Joan Welch (1995) also acknowledge the role that green open spaces play in serving the diverse communities that surround parks and open spaces and utilise these facilities. According to Emily Thompson (2002), open spaces in cities must be "beautiful places" that promote social cohesion and equity. Thus, the quality of urban areas is dependent on the provision of planning and management strategies for such open spaces (Council for the Environment, 1989). However, despite this, urban open spaces receive much less political attention than necessary (Chiesura, 2003).

The way that open spaces are spatially arranged might also shape the relationship between the population and the surrounding open space, and the shared benefits that these areas offer (Thwaites et al., 2005). Patrick Mwendwa and Richard Giliba (2012) recommend a uniform distribution, in which

the size of the open space can adequately accommodate the surrounding population. Furthermore, distance between the place of residence and the closest open space will also determine the functionality of that space in the urban area. More regular park users are more likely to live close to these amenities (Mwendwa & Giliba, 2012). Other studies have suggested that there is a need for a network of several small connected open spaces that resembles a mosaic pattern rather than a large dedicated open space in an urban area. This suggestion makes sense in today's society because of the low availability of land to dedicate as green open space in most developed cities (Thwaites et al., 2005). Furthermore, a sustainable city is viewed as being compact, with a wide range of functions and multiplicity of uses, and as being able to accommodate a network of small open spaces. In the case of Central Park, it is suggested that the community would have benefited more from a network of many smaller parks than from this large one (Thwaites et al., 2005). Emily Talen (2010) believes that the spatial distribution of parks and other public amenities is a significant determinant of welfare and social justice. With regard to welfare, she points out that residents of lower-income neighbourhoods are more likely to walk greater distances to gain access to open spaces. However, the utilisation and ability to realise the potential of these public amenities by the local communities living in the vicinity of the park is limited due to negative perceptions, such as high crime rates in such areas (Talen, 2010).

Urban regeneration poses a solution to the problem of urban decay and can be realised through the implementation of effective planning methods. It is a process that generally follows periods of urban decay and decline in cities, and can be defined as "the redevelopment or rehabilitation of older parts of towns and cities, including their business areas" (Gibson & Langstaff, 1982: 12). Along with physical regeneration, it is also important that the attitude of the community also changes in a positive way (Thwaites et al., 2005). Another important aspect of urban regeneration, and central to the theme of this article, is to acknowledge the importance of green open spaces because they make cities more attractive and add to the aesthetic, historical and recreational value of the surrounding areas (Chiesura, 2003; Giliberti, 2013). Thus, Mwendwa and Giliba (2012) argue that policymakers should not ignore the role that open spaces play in urban areas. Furthermore, planning measures for open spaces should be included in the overall planning programmes of cities to provide for the population's needs (Enger, 2005; Zhang et al., 2012). By attracting more people and investment, open spaces have regenerative effects and enhance the economic value of urban areas.

There is also a lesson to be learned from urban regeneration in Birmingham. Because the regeneration of Birmingham was in

fact based on the development of a new city park, the Department for Transport, Local Government and Regions (2002) in the United Kingdom uses this example to illustrate how increasingly more cities are realising the potential of their parks and open spaces. Open spaces are said to have a “restorative potential” as components in the urban regeneration process that can satisfy a new urban lifestyle and sustain a liveable city (Thwaites et al., 2005). According to Anna Chiesura (2003), the idea of a more liveable city is increasingly being attached to the concept of green open space, the importance of providing adequate areas of open space and enabling the population to gain access to them.

4 Development and redevelopment of parks in Johannesburg

The Council for Scientific and Industrial Research or CSIR (2012) has published guidelines for the provision of social amenities and facilities in South Africa. These guidelines apply to different types of settlements that range from metropolitan areas and large cities to remote rural villages. The open space provision (including parks, sports facilities and cemeteries) in South African metropolitan areas is indicated as less than 0.5 hectare per 1,000 residents (CSIR, 2012). This is considerably lower than the international standard. According to the City of Johannesburg (2014), open spaces in the inner city are severely lacking in terms of the international standard of two hectares per 1,000 residents.

The Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA) was established in 2001, with its main priority being the regeneration of the inner city. It tends to invest in both high- and low-profile projects (Bethlehem, 2013), some of which are aimed at improving the public environment, including the inner-city parks. According to Monyane Mapetla (2006), the JDA is currently involved in managing the planning and development of the inner-city region projects and is thus a relevant stakeholder worthy of consideration. Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo was also established as a stakeholder in the City of Johannesburg in 2000, and is responsible for over two thousand parks in the municipality of Johannesburg. In accordance with the vision of the City of Johannesburg, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo aims to transform the city into a “green, clean, conserved and active world-class African city” (Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo, 2014).

Johannesburg is divided into seven regions; the inner city (the study area) is located in Region F, with nineteen wards and six parks (see Figure 3). The parks of Johannesburg are categorised as either flagship, developed or underdeveloped parks, and park maintenance is scheduled according to these categories.



Figure 4: The 2015 redevelopment of Alec Gorschel Park (photo: Nico Kotze).

However, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo does not keep to these recommended timetables and tends to clean up parks only when there is a demand for such services.

According to Ipeleng Dube (2014), senior manager for Region F at Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo, the parks in region F are classified on the basis of their characteristics, which determines their maintenance requirements and schedules. Flagship parks are regarded as “top” parks that require weekly maintenance. These are usually the larger parks in Johannesburg. Developed parks are usually community parks that require maintenance in a twenty-one-day maintenance cycle, and underdeveloped parks are maintained only once in a sixty-day cycle. The undeveloped parks are large open spaces mainly in older suburban or previously disadvantaged areas, as in Johannesburg South, which forms part of Region F. The challenges of maintaining the inner-city parks are unique compared to the rest of the city’s parks because the inner-city parks face several constraints. First, the situation in the inner city is such that both maintenance and security are required virtually on a daily basis. This causes complications in setting up schedules and keeping to them. Second, limited budgets and time constraints hinder proper maintenance. An additional factor is the lack of manpower and inadequate workforce skills. Dube estimates that, of her 140 staff members, only sixty-six are involved in maintenance-related work. This number is insufficient, considering that Region F includes the inner city as well as Johannesburg South and is home to around 230 parks, amounting to a total area of 6,288 hectares.

The ten parks in the inner city range in area from 2,800 m² (Tudhope Park in Berea) to 38,500 m² (Joubert Park in the CBD; see Table 1). Among these parks, only Joubert Park is classified as a flagship park with a seven-day maintenance schedule. The other nine parks are all classified as developed parks with

Table 1: Parks of inner-city Johannesburg.

Park	Location	Size (m ²)	Maintenance cycle (days)	Redevelopment cost (ZAR)
Joubert	CBD	38,500	7	1.5 million
Alec Gorschel	Berea	16,700	21	n.a.
J. Z. de Villiers	Berea	16,000	21	3.6 million
Mitchell	Berea	11,320	21	0.65 million
Nugget Street	Doornfontein	8,000	21	None
Attwell Gardens	CBD	8,000	21	4.5 million
End Street South	Doornfontein	7,700	21	10.4 million*
End Street North	Doornfontein	5,500	21	
Ernest Oppenheimer	CBD	3,300	21	n.a.
Tudhope	Berea	2,800	21	19,000

Note: * For both parks.

twenty-one-day maintenance schedules, thus being cleaned only once every three weeks. Of the ten parks in the study area, eight are fenced with gates locked at night to prevent vandalism. This defeats the function and purpose of these recreational areas because it denies residents free access to them. An official from Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo also admitted at an open meeting held in 2014 that the highest costs incurred in maintaining the parks in the city is repairing vandalised fences due to theft of their metal components, which are then sold as scrap metal.

The two largest parks in Johannesburg's inner city are Joubert Park and Alec Gorschel Park. Joubert Park is the oldest and largest park. It is located in the CBD of Johannesburg and dates back to 1906. From 2012 to 2014, ZAR 1.5 million (USD 1 = ZAR 15.4 as of February 2016) was allocated for improvements to the park. The park is fenced and has several gates that are locked at night. Being classified as a flagship park, it is cleaned once a week (see Table 1). The second-largest park is Alec Gorschel Park in the residential suburb of Berea. It is surrounded by a large number of apartment blocks, with a primary school and several secondary schools nearby. This park was improved during the 2001–2002 and 2007–2008 financial years. The first improvement was spearheaded by Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo, and the second by the JDA, which redeveloped the playground at a cost of under ZAR 20,000. Although the park is fenced off, it was noticed during site visits in 2014 that the perimeter fencing was breached at several points. As a developed park, Alec Gorschel Park is cleaned up only once every three weeks. The park was improved for the third time in 2015. To an observer, it would seem that large sums of money are being spent on improvements to these parks, but a lack of regular maintenance is causing the parks to lapse back into a state of disrepair. As can be seen in Figure 4, almost all of the vegetation has been removed from the park and it is being replaced by a hard, user-unfriendly paved area.

The two smallest parks in the inner city are Tudhope and Ernest Oppenheimer Parks. Tudhope Park is located in the residential area of Berea and was redeveloped more than a decade ago in the 2001–2002 financial year at a cost of ZAR 19,000. The park has poor facilities and consists of an open lawn and large trees, with paved walkways and a few benches and children's play facilities. This park is also categorised into the twenty-one-day maintenance schedule, which means that it scored poorly regarding litter. Ernest Oppenheimer Park, located in the CBD, was reopened in April 2011 after being redeveloped by the JDA. This park is fenced off with two entrances on opposite sides of the park. Ernest Oppenheimer Park is unique because it displays original sculptures and has been specifically identified as an integral part of Johannesburg's urban regeneration plans (see Figure 5). Some signs of decay are visible, with public toilets out of order and litter present during site visits.

Mitchell Park and Nugget Street Park, located in Berea and Doornfontein, are two medium-sized parks with the most and least facilities in the study area. Mitchell Park was improved during the 2001–2002 and 2012–2013 financial years at a cost of ZAR 650,000. Notwithstanding the money spent on improving the park, it is neglected and unkempt, with areas where the lawn has died and piles of litter. Nugget Street Park could be more readily described as an open space rather than as a park because there is no indication of any improvement. Both these parks are classified as developed parks.

The End Street North and End Street South Parks are located in Doornfontein. Both of these parks were redeveloped in 2009 by the JDA for the 2010 FIFA World Cup at a cost of ZAR 10 million. The two parks mainly consist of paved areas with a limited area covered by lawn and only a few large trees. Each park includes a playground and is fenced with gates. Although these two parks also fall into the twenty-one-day maintenance cycle, site visits showed the level of maintenance



Figure 5: Ernest Oppenheimer Park in the centre of the CBD (photo: Nico Kotze).



Figure 6: Playground at End Street South Park (photo: Nico Kotze).



Figure 7: Informal sales activities at Attwell Gardens Park (photo: Nico Kotze).



Figure 8: The litter problem at Attwell Gardens Park (photo: Nico Kotze).

to be relatively good. However, these parks are user-unfriendly because they predominately have hard paved areas (see Figure 6).

Attwell Gardens Park, located in the CBD of Johannesburg, is close to Park Station, the city's main railway station. The park was reopened in August 2011 after having been redeveloped by the JDA at a cost of ZAR 4.5 million. The park is mostly paved and fenced off, with a gate that is locked at night. It is surrounded by informal vendors (see Figure 7), a fruit and vegetable market, and a taxi rank. All of these activities tend to generate large volumes of waste. Because of the twenty-one-day maintenance cycle here, litter appears to be a serious problem, apparent during a number of site visits to the park (see Figure 8).

J. Z. de Villiers Park, one of the larger parks in the inner-city residential area of Berea, was initially improved during the 2001–2002 financial year by Johannesburg City Parks and

Zoo at a cost of ZAR 3.4 million. The second improvement by the JDA was during the 2007–2008 financial year at a cost of ZAR 20,000 for redeveloping the playground, the soccer field and the basketball court. Although the park is fenced, the boundary has been breached at several points and litter appears to be a serious problem.

5 Conclusion

Because they perform a variety of functions, the role that parks play in the everyday lives of urban residents should be regarded as both significant and positive. This highlights the importance of this study, which investigates the redevelopment of the inner-city parks of Johannesburg and ascertains whether they play any role in efforts to improve the decaying CBD of one of the largest cities in Africa. The process of urban renewal in Johannesburg has been in progress for more than twenty years now.

According to Winkler (2013: 310), however, “much of the literature on urban regeneration identifies 20 years as a sufficient ‘intensive period’ of public spending on regeneration for demonstrable and context-wide outcomes. Observers might then be inclined to ask: If so much time, money and energy has already been spent on regenerating the inner city of Johannesburg, why have outcomes resulted in isolated and fragmented pockets of ‘beautification’ that are scarcely noticeable amongst a mass of dereliction?”

This study found that Johannesburg has recognised the important role that parks and open-space amenities play in improving a city and in bringing benefits to the surrounding communities. For this reason, adequate provision has been made for parks and open spaces to be incorporated as vital components in inner-city regeneration plans. As such, parks and open spaces feature prominently in some of the more important regeneration strategies for the city, as in the case of the Inner City Regeneration Charter of 2007 and the Johannesburg Integrated Development Plan (2012–2016). As part of the regeneration of Johannesburg, several parks in the inner city have been redeveloped and improved. This study identified the most important stakeholders responsible for the redevelopment and upkeep of parks and open spaces as the City of Johannesburg, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo, and the JDA. However, it is important to take the perceived problematical relationships that exist between these organisations into account. Greater communication is necessary in order to clear up ambiguities in terms of the responsibilities held by the various stakeholders.

A further challenge that this study revealed is the shortage of resources required for redevelopments and, most importantly, for the successful upkeep of the amenities. Furthermore, the seven-day and twenty-one-day maintenances schedules of the inner-city parks are inadequate for an area with such a high population density. If these parks are not cleaned up more regularly, they will always look unkempt and remain unattractive and unfriendly to the public. Another problem relating to the inner-city parks is vandalism, which can only be addressed once the attitude of the residents towards these open spaces has changed. All of these constraints have contributed to the poor state of the parks and their amenities. The management of Johannesburg’s inner-city parks thus faces several challenges. The regional manager herself described the current state of the inner-city parks as unsatisfactory because the dynamics of the inner city pose unique challenges that have not been met. To improve conditions in the inner city, it is recommended that all of the relevant constraints be adequately addressed. Proper management should be implemented, sufficient resources

should be allocated for maintaining the parks and partnerships should be put in place to remedy the situation. Management strategies should therefore be properly revised and adapted.

Finally, even if money is spent on redeveloping the inner-city parks, as long as Johannesburg does not maintain these parks adequately they will never show any signs of improvement, nor will they change the negative perceptions of the popular press, residents and other observers of Johannesburg’s inner city.

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