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Planners, blended (in)formality and a public interest of fragments

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ABSTRACT

Planners need to manage the plurality of everyday living conditions faced by monetary poor communities in South African cities. Here, we develop the concept of *blended (in)formality* to move beyond binary approaches which classify these communities as having either formal or informal status. Drawing on McFarlane's (2018, 2021) notion of *fragments*, we explore how formal planning and spontaneous unplanned urban interventions do not merely co-exist but work together. We formulate a *public interest of fragments* to demonstrate how communities can benefit from approaches to planning which employ a more fluid understanding of the interactions between the formal and informal.

Introduction

Cities are complex, diverse and increasingly spatially and socio-economically segregated. For Amin (2013), the essence of the urban condition is its plural and provisional character. As we try to grasp the multiple visible and invisible realities of the urban, they are 'always "slipping away" from us' (Simone, 2011, p. 356). Urban spaces are characterised both by formal, regulated, planned practices and by their more informal, spontaneous, grassroots and unplanned character. McFarlane (2018, 2021) argues that 'as cities grow, they become increasingly unequal and fragmented. Much of what lower-income residents deal with on a daily basis is fragments of stuff' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 3). In those countries labelled as the global south, these *fragments* are often related to poorly functioning urban infrastructures, with housing and basic services not meeting the needs of many citizens (McFarlane, 2021). While fragments are constitutive of the urban condition, little is known about how planners engage with them and the subsequent implications for both planning practice and research.

The arguments in this paper are underpinned by two, closely related concepts that we develop here: a *public interest of fragments* and *blended (in)formality*. To define the first

of these, we draw on McFarlane's work on urban fragments and extend this through a consideration of the public interest. Planners and planning are driven by a range of principles, not least notions of a greater good and the public interest. Although its meaning and application can be highly contested, the public interest involves a diverse and sometimes powerful range of actors seeking to enhance the general wellbeing of a population. These actors include those with the power of decision-making (elected state and local authorities' representatives) and those with the power to design and shape change (including planners and other built environment experts). As a principle, the public interest is entirely dependent on how it is *interpreted* rather than being statutorily linked to any constitutional rights or obligations.

In the context of the global south, discourses of public interest are entangled with the fragmented urbanism experienced by many of its citizens. We can therefore understand the activities of planners in South Africa and elsewhere as operating within a *public interest of fragments*. This can be thought of as a process of attempting to find ways to balance an aspiration of enhancing an ill-defined public interest against the realities of fragmented 'stuff' that acts to the detriment of that public interest for many citizens.

This brings us to our second core concept within the paper, that of *blended (in) formality*. We suggest here that blended (in)formality offers a way to interrogate the tension between the reality of urban fragments and the ideals of public interest. This is particularly important in the context of urban planning where research on policies and strategies directed toward the monetary poor has been surprisingly lacking in a consideration of the voices and opinions held by planners themselves. Indeed, research in this area is frequently underpinned by an assumption that planners play a negative role when dealing with the informal, presuming a desire to normalise and sanitise spaces (Rakodi, 1993, Tannerfeldt & Ljung, 2007, Kamete, 2009, Kamete, 2013). Such work depicts fragments as manifesting in a binary manner, in *either* formal *or* informal materialities. The result has been an overemphasis in research on questions of informality.

The reality in the global south and elsewhere is that formal and informal interact a great deal. A more helpful conceptualisation, therefore, is that the formal and informal are frequently blended. A good example of this kind of blended (in)formality from the South African case is where residents of newly built, subsidised state housing frequently choose to construct informal shacks in their back yards. These shacks form a source of income for the household which might otherwise struggle to afford its rent. They also provide much needed inexpensive accommodation for urban incomers and others unable to access secure housing. The implicit acceptance of backyard shacks by many South African planners is an acknowledgement that policy structures need to take a much more blended approach to understanding how the informal and the formal work together.

This paper therefore examines how urban planners adapt their practice to work around the blended realities of a fragmented city where formal and informal are intertwined and frequently co-dependent. As such, the paper addresses a significant research gap in the literature which tends to consider the informal in isolation and the role of planners as purely pursuing a goal of formalisation.

Our insights are derived from a 30-month research project examining the views of South African planners (Andres *et al.*, 2021, Andres *et al.*, 2020, Andres *et al.*,

2023, Denoon-Stevens *et al.*, 2022, Denoon-Stevens *et al.*, 2022, Jones *et al.*, 2021). We also draw on a secondary analysis of key issues in South African planning legislation which was undertaken as part of consultancy work by one of the authors. First, we examine how planning connects with both complexity and fragments, building our conceptualisation of *blended (in)formality* in the South African context. We then present the methodology before turning to our empirical discussion. Here we explore how planners navigate fragmented urbanism, before turning to examine the harsh realities of accounting for knowledge fragmentation. Finally, we interrogate the challenges that arise from working within *public interest of fragments*.

Planning, complexity and fragments

Kamete (2013, p. 641), reflecting on how critical urban theory scholars viewed planning, argued that it 'dominates urban spaces by means of subjugation and elimination. An integral part of the process is the defining of standards of normality and abnormality, appropriateness and inappropriateness'. This is, however, rather a narrow understanding of a sector which has evolved significantly in its approaches and practice over recent years. There is now an increasing recognition of fragmentation and contestation within planning and the need for more flexible standards. Accounting for informality in fact often rests upon negotiated solutions (Andres *et al.*, 2020). Such compromises can, however, lead to new regulations simply becoming a repackaging of existing practices, or progressive plans and practices becoming mere window-dressing with limited implementation. As a result, in common with planners worldwide (Taşan-Kok & Oranje, 2018), many South African planners are increasingly frustrated and disillusioned with the planning system (Denoon-Stevens *et al.*, 2022, Denoon-Stevens *et al.*, 2022).

In many countries particularly in the global south, planning systems suffer deep dysfunctions grounded in a lack of funding, the limited number of planners, limited mentoring capacities and lack of access to continuous professional development (CPD), as well as problems associated with corruption and clientelism (Andres *et al.*, 2021, Andres *et al.*, 2023). South African planners also highlight other challenges, including having to rely on international planning firms to deliver spatial planning. This is especially true in the promotion of visions of 'sustainable' new cities, which are deeply problematic in their lack of understanding of urban poverty, particularly the assumption that this can be solved through building shiny new skyscrapers (Watson, 2014, Côté-Roy & Moser, 2019). The combination of those dysfunctions contributes to difficulties in actually delivering transformative changes and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable. This also highlights the difficulties of managing fragments in urban settings that are complex, plural and 'provisional' (Amin, 2013).

Dealing with complexity is inherent to the planning profession and results in the production and fragmentation of space. Lefebvre (1991, p. 342) describes space as 'homogenous yet at the same time broken up into fragments'. This notion of fragmentation underlies McFarlane's (2018) idea of spatial fragments as products of capitalist production (McFarlane, 2018). Fragments as marginal, material bits and pieces are 'lived as individuals, social and political struggles' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 4). They testify to the severe discrepancies and inequalities that exist in cities. Fragment urbanism is thus

constructed as a political reading of cities, resonating with planning, both because of its political nature and its collaborative and inclusive purpose (Fainstein & Fainstein, 1971, Levy, 2016, Davidoff, 1965, Healey, 2003).

Fragment urbanism focuses on the socio-economic margins. It sheds light on the 'informal settlements of the urban global South, not because these are the only spaces where we might find fragments, but because here fragments are often vital elements in the experience and politics of urban life and the city' (McFarlane, 2018, p. 1008). There are 'generative spaces that can challenge or transform processes of fragmentation', embedded into 'political instantiations' which include various forms of 'maintenance, improvisation, incremental improvement' (McFarlane, 2018, p. 1012). Key here is how those fragments interact as part of what we are calling *blended (in)formality*, the hybrid of formal and informal statuses that characterise the living conditions of the monetary poor. Of particular importance here is how knowledge fragments, 'forms of knowledge and ways of knowing' (McFarlane, 2021) are understood by planners. Such knowledge fragments are constitutive of how communities live, cope and adapt when 'marginalized by dominant cultures, actors, groups and power relations . . . ' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 6). This resonates greatly with the South African situation where fragmentation is the everyday reality for many communities.

Fragmented cities and blended (in)formality in South Africa

For decades, planning in South Africa was used as the main instrument to deliver racial segregation through a clear division of spaces; hence planning became a major mechanism through which to produce urban fragments. While 'white' neighbourhoods were provided with the best living environments and facilities, 'black' communities were seen as temporary sojourners in the city. When permitted to be located in cities, these communities were situated in peripheral locations with only the most basic of amenities.

After the reforms of the early 1990s, planning nominally became an instrument of social and economic change, with the public interest redefined to serve the needs of a much wider group than had been the case under apartheid. This meant a focus on tackling the major socio-economic and political challenges grounded in dealing with the legacy of racial segregation. Planners have since faced numerous challenges including the spread of informal settlements and dealing with increasing poverty and demands for housing. At the same time, planners have been serving sometimes contradictory wider economic goals encompassing a neoliberal vision of transformative development (Andres *et al.*, 2020, Denoon-Stevens *et al.*, 2022, van Rooyen & Lemanski, 2020). Rapid urbanisation has meant that 'urban planning bases its interventionist strategies on the reasoning that change has to be rationally managed and that control is necessary in the "public interest"' (Kamete & Lindell, 2010, p. 911).

Contemporary spatial planning in South Africa has found itself at the forefront of attempts to overcome the physical legacy of apartheid while addressing structural inequality and endemic poverty. The clearest manifestation of this is in housing, with the South African government undertaking a massive drive to build public dwellings. In the period of 1994–2019, around 3.313 million housing units and 1.189 million serviced sites were provided (Africa Check, 2019). However, the focus on quantity has meant that such housing schemes have generally been built in locations where land was available and

cheap; this reinforced further fragmentation and segregation in a context of sustained dire living conditions. Blended (in)formality is the norm within such spaces. Of course, there are still extensive informal settlements in South Africa (8.1% of all households live in such areas). In 2021, however, more than 651,000 households lived in dwellings made of *informal* materials in backyards of *formal* houses (3.63% of all households), with a further 6.74% living in rooms or backyards of properties in varying states of semi-formality (more than 1.2 million households) (StatsSA, 2022). The backyard shack can thus be considered emblematic of blended (in)formality, where formal and informal co-exist and are frequently co-dependent (Brueckner *et al*., 2019).

Part of the explanation for blended (in)formality is economic, noting that unemployment in South Africa was a staggering 45.5% in the second quarter of 2022. For planning and in housing developments, high unemployment manifests itself in the use of housing units as livelihood spaces, with many households selling food from house-shops as well as renting out second (or more) dwellings in the property to bring in some form of income. These informal uses are reliant on the supply of electricity, water and sanitation that serve the formal property in which they are based (Brueckner *et al*., 2019).

Blended (in)formality can thus reinforce urban fragmentation. This has significant impacts on planners who need to manage the realities of urban spaces that are char-acterised by a combination of both informality and formality. This reality arises from coping and survival mechanisms but also emerges as a result of political and socio-economic dysfunctions. Informal conditions in South Africa can be further exacerbated due to a lack of title deeds (failure on the part of the state) but also when a dwelling is sold off using informal processes in order to get around the title deed conditions legally preventing the sale of the house for a period of eight years. Missing or defective title deeds or the non-registration of private properties (a very common issue in South Africa) means a lack of formal status or recognition of ownership (Andres *et al*., 2023). This affects households' daily survival: accessing loans is extremely difficult as the property cannot be used as a guarantee and running a formal economic activity requires approval from the property owner. As a result, people's ability to run businesses is constrained which leads to a situation of enforced informality where formality becomes an impossi-bility for entrepreneurs (Charman *et al*., 2013).

Blended (in)formality therefore constitutes the lived reality of the monetary poor within South Africa's fragment urbanism. As we discuss below, this leads to planners having to consider their practice within what we are calling a *public interest of fragments*. This requires navigating between acting for the public good and managing the reality of fragments formed through a blend of the formal and informal.

Methodology

This paper emerges from data collected through an ESRC/NRF funded project (2017–20) which examined the challenges faced by planning practitioners and educators in a rapidly transforming South Africa. We draw upon a survey of 219 respondents conducted in 2018 and from semi-structured interviews with 89 planners, of whom 36 were working in the public sector, 21 in the private sector, 13 in Higher Education and 19 having a mixed portfolio of activities. Both gender and race were taken into consideration in the sampling; 50 interviewees were white, 28 black and 11 of mixed or other ethnicity. The

cohort comprised 45 male and 44 female interviewees. All interview data were coded in NVivo using a combination of deductive (theory-led) and inductive (data-led) approaches. The coding was undertaken by one person to ensure consistency, following a framework put in place and sense-checked by the two project leads. A total of 38 theory-led codes were used, with a further 44 codes emerging during the data analysis. This dataset was subsequently supplemented by a review of planning legislation. This review particularly focused on the recently introduced municipal planning bylaws in South Africa and was undertaken as part of consultancy work conducted by one of the authors.

Strong themes identified in this analysis were the diversity and complexity of urban spaces, the difficulties encountered by planners, the planning profession managing often contradictory challenges, the nature of informality, and tensions between the formal and the informal. These issues are closely linked to wider questions of dealing with fragmentation and the living conditions of the monetary poor and what this means for planning practice. This led us to use the framing lens of fragmentation to examine the complexities of planners' daily activities, reflecting on the implications of this for our understanding of the public interest.

Planners and fragment urbanism

The realities of fragment urbanism underpin much of South Africa's planning practice. The transformation of the urban environment sees significant tensions between: planners highly committed to overturning the legacy of apartheid; new national policy frameworks aiming to give planning more power to address urban dysfunctions; and a recurrent state-led struggle to navigate between formality and informality. Informality is still portrayed as a *problem* that planning should *fix* via technical solutions (e.g. building more homes, changing licensing, regulations etc., Scheba & Turok, 2020). For the state, lowering its regulations to a level that the poor could comply with would involve recognising its inability to meet a standard of economic development that complies with formal requirements. As such, fragment urbanism emerges as a 'position that stays with the incomplete, power-laden multi-city, an urbanism that must work with "partial and adjusted insights" and the recognition that the "urban" is always plural and provisional' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 18). This challenges how planners approach both informality and blended (in)formality.

Planners often struggle to get a full grasp of the fragments and everyday living conditions of the monetary poor. They also encounter difficulties in appropriately navigating the complexity of the tensions between formal and informal dynamics. In effect, this challenge means recognising the inevitability that many people in the country will be living in informal dwellings for generations to come (Andres *et al.*, 2020, Andres *et al.*, 2023). More importantly, and in line with the nature of fragment urbanism, they see informality as a predominantly political problem hindering planners' abilities to fully engage with it:

> One failure in South Africa and [in] particular in [City 01] is related to political power. Who gets to vote and who gets the party funding is [controlled by] ratepayers [who] have way too much say in how the cities run. That's really mitigating against transformation and equity

and inclusion and economic ... development and it really pushes out informality where informality can play a really healthy role. (private sector, white, female, 08 February 2018)

Having said that, the results from our interviews suggested that a large proportion of planners, of all ages and racial backgrounds, try in their daily activity to challenge this political marginalisation of fragments and enable blended (in)formality to play its role. They are working towards understanding and being able to support the monetary poor and the dire socio-economic conditions that characterise their livelihoods. This is an implicit recognition of the role of urban fragments and blended (in)formality. For one of our interviewees, someone living in an informal setting is by essence 'Somebody who needs a roof over their head and wants to earn some money' (public sector, white, female, 28 March 2018). Such a statement reflects how planning connects with addressing individuals' basic rights. Another participant explained how informality is the result of a lack of options and nothing-to-lose situations:

> Informalities are very cut to the bone economics, it's about survival, and I think it responds to whatever [life] presents or whatever opportunities presents itself for greater survival. (public sector, white, male, 11 April 2018)

A significant number of our interviewees testified about the difficulties encountered when working in complex informal settings where blended (in)formality prevails. Such settings are highly changeable in nature which resonates with the plural nature of fragments being both material entities, forms of expression and types of knowledge (McFarlane, 2021). Such understanding is, however, essential particularly if more formal planning processes are envisaged. This relates to a highly pragmatic reading of how plural fragments compose such living and working settings.

> if you don't earmark any area for that informal trading, you will find they will operate in a residential area; they will operate in a sports ground. Wherever they see an open space or wherever they think this is best for them, they will do whatever they want to do. So, I think as planners we have to look at this. (public sector, black, female, 25 May 2018)

> We are learning a lot as to how certain cultures settle and what their needs are without anticipating what we think they want and where they want to stay. So that's mainly part of the African planning approaches, to understand different cultures and the informal set-up and people being happy within that set-up. We are trying to understand that and not really enforce a blueprint, top-down planning. So I think informality is informing planning, but I don't think formal planning is engaging enough with informality. (public sector, white, female, 06 April 2018)

In such a complex context, the role of planning is to try to help and accommodate those fluctuating needs and, by implication, to work through the diversity of fragments. This was summarised by one interviewee taking us back to Lefebvre's (1991) production of space and Harvey's interpretation of individuals' basic rights and needs going beyond using the resources of the city (Harvey, 2012). It also emerges from how fragments result from 'individuals, social and political struggles' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 4):

> To people who live in informal settlements, that's their homes, that's their pride and joy and I think that as planners we need to make informal settlements as liveable as we can and there's no reason why we can't do that. (public sector, black, male, 02 December 2018)

This quote highlights the importance of empathy and compassion within the duties and values of the planning profession. It feeds into the recognition that 'knowledge fragments can be provocations that demand recognition that the world is more than simply plural' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 6). It testifies to planners' engagement with addressing socio-economic inequalities rather than being complicit in their reproduction. Statements along these lines were particularly strong among early career planners. Many shared how they chose a planning career with the hope of delivering change, breaking the apartheid legacy and hence engaging with fragmented urban realities and thus to work *with* blended (in)formality. Such ambitions are, however, challenged by harsh political and economic conditions. The diversity of views on appropriate planning interventions for low-income housing, combined with limited ability or willingness to adequately interrogate the actions of the state (Charlton, 2018), often led to well-intentioned but ultimately harmful planning regulations and interventions.

The harsh realities of accounting for knowledge fragments

Fragments and hence settlements where blended (in)formality prevails are extremely complex and dynamic. They are made of both permanent and temporary arrangements, reflecting Simone's 'visible and invisible realities' (2011, p. 356). Getting to know and understand those (in)formal settlements is highly problematic for planners. Some we interviewed hypothesised that all planners should be required to spend time, each year, in such settings to fully understand how communities are living. For them, this understanding cannot be gained alone through traditional learning channels typical of planning education or practice. Indeed, knowledge (Taşan-Kok & Oranje, 2018) is key and still sparse. This gap primarily rests upon attention being focused on other urban questions and dominated by 'particular actors and their ways of seeing and narrativizing the world' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 78). To this are added crucial issues of time and resource scarcity.

Hence, while acknowledging and trying to engage with informality, South African planners clearly face significant challenges which go beyond the complexity of the living conditions of the monetary poor. These challenges relate to the nature of blended (in) formality and the ability of planning and planners to engage with the necessary adaptability and flexibility that is required (Andres *et al*., 2021). Fundamentally, planners face significant tensions between regulations they are supposed to be enforcing, formal processes and an impossible reality. This was acknowledged very strongly by two interviewees:

> We don't know how to plan with more flexible standards. The designing schemes have not been amended to take account of informality. (public sector, white, male, 116 March 2018)

> So, government gets swamped by the enormity of the problem that is identified . . . And then tries to do everything by the book and doesn't get anywhere you know and then wonders why . . . The country's whole system has been developed around that. (private sector, white, female, 08 February 2018)

Pragmatism here is key. Even if the money was available, there simply are not enough planners and professionals working in the built environment to deliver the demands of planning as mandated in South African planning legislation

(Andres *et al.*, 2020). Hence, there is insufficient capacity to reach an accepted interpretation of what is needed for those living in monetary poor conditions aside from recognising and enabling *blended (in)formality*. This goes back to the difficult account of knowledge fragments as they tend to be put on the side 'because of their position to or within a wider set of political, social, and cultural power-knowledge relations. Constructions of the urban whole involved a set of power relations that can exclude, subordinate or otherwise transform knowledge fragments' (McFarlane, 2021, p. 6).

> There is also a question of focus. In addition to addressing the needs of those living in informal housing, planners also work for a wealthier population that has different priorities, not least protecting property values in expensive white suburbs. (private sector, white, female, 16 April 2018)

Balancing priorities and tasks does not mean that planners disengage from acknowledging the living conditions of the poor. The difficulties are more complex and embedded in the inability of the South African system to be flexible enough for planners to find ways to tackle fragmentation and blended (in)formality. A planner reflected on this problem:

> I think we just try to force our rules or regulations onto them. I really think we need to look at them individually and say that this area actually needs more churches and this area needs more house-shops or whatever the case may be. Yeah, so, I don't think we really take them and their needs into account. (public sector, white, female, 23 March 2018)

Moving past a normative understanding of planning is a step towards tackling blended (in)formality. This involves changing the interpretation of what is informal and the relationship between planning and the informal, in other words recognising knowledge fragments more fully:

> the informal takes place without the benefit of technical input from planners or engineers, okay. So, because it's informal, it's failing. But if you could . . . recognise the informal and influence the way that the informal takes place as part of an incremental process to later become what you then term formal. (private sector, white, male, 04 April 2018)

There is a creative component in this process of working *with* blended (in)formality. Creativity and agility need to be considered as approaches to managing highly fragmented urban settings where the end goal is not formality. This requires recognition that informality only exists because of formal rules that create exclusion, and as a result of the state criminalising the basic survival strategies of the poor. Thus, to counteract those realities, rules need to have sufficient flexibility to adjust to the blended (in)formal realities of the monetary poor, as opposed to expecting these communities to somehow meet the unrealistic standards imposed by traditional planning regulations.

In such a context, blended (in)formal settings typically characterise 'generative spaces that can challenge or transform processes of fragmentation' (McFarlane, 2018, p. 1011). Embracing adaptation and fragments is key to triggering adequate responses to changing life circumstances:

> That's also linked to what we've been pushing, which is this incremental settlement approach saying, that you don't necessarily provide everything at once, you start with the basics. Like basic services, allow people to settle on the land over time, those areas can be

upgraded. That also fits with the adaptive approach, that you are able to do things more quickly because you're not planning everything and expecting everything to be done straight away. (private sector, black, male, 11 March 2018)

An illustration of this is the DIY water adaptation in Marikana, an informal settlement located outside of Potchefstroom (North West province), which demonstrates how fragments can be managed by communities when formal systems fail. Here, the community addressed their own needs in the absence of appropriate answers from planners or relevant authorities. A municipal planner described the communities' achievements as follows:

> Residents made their own water channels and own water systems because of the lack of provision by the authorities. So it's an informal settlement that is actually very much formalised, but they can't be formalised because of policy restrictions. So, yes, these people are located there and they are living there and they've got basically all the services that they need, but it's still informal. And for me our policies are not equipped to include that or it's an issue at the moment. You can't … In practice it's real and it's happening, but in policies it's not allowed. (public sector, white, female, 06 April 2018)

Marikana testifies to the political nature of fragments and how they rest upon citizens' revendicating their rights to access basic services (Victor, 2019). This case also highlights how an understanding of fragments penetrates mainstream thinking and can begin to be considered by decision-makers and planners as an acceptable solution. This outcome depends upon all sides acknowledging that where the system is broken, fragment urbanism is the only available approach. Unfortunately, such successful practices are still very limited and rigidity within the wider political agenda remains dominant. We turn now to what this means for interrogating what we call a *public interest of fragments*.

Discussion: can a public interest of fragments be created?

The daily reality for South African planners is of having to deal with a significantly under-resourced and partially broken planning system. This system struggles to engage with the diversity of urban problems, while being caught within competing political narratives and priorities. The result is a planning system that has to work within the realities of blended (in)formality even where this goes against the principles of planning policy.

Planning has long been recognised by the national government as a scarce skill; on average, South Africa has only around 10–15% of the planners it requires when compared to the UK or Australia. This shortage exacerbates the difficulties facing planners working with blended (in)formality and becomes particularly problematic when considering the relationship between planning and the public interest. As de Satgé and Watson (2018, p. 30) argue,

> … state-society engagement in planning processes … is shaped more often by a deep 'conflict of rationalities' between state and market, and impoverished urban communities, than by some kind of 'public interest' which could provide a starting point for participatory and consensus-seeking processes.

In conditions of urban, socio-economic and political fragmentation where formality constantly blends with informality, the result is a lack of a clear public *interest*. Instead, planners must work with different public *interests*, many of which come into tension.

It is within this framing that we argue for a *public interest of fragments*. This approach suggests that a form of common good can be achieved by finding ways to connect fragments and learning from them. Such an approach requires planners to embrace a much greater degree of adaptability when working with communities that have been failed by traditional rigid planning structures. Two questions thus arise: what does a public interest of fragments mean in practice and is it achievable?

An understanding of blended (in)formality has begun to feed into planning documents and spatial practices as part of the implementation of the Spatial Planning and Land Use Management Act (SPLUMA) since 2013. This act placed planners at the forefront of significant urban transformation. Its overarching goal has been to help achieve social and economic inclusion in planning and land use management practices and redress past imbalances. SPLUMA was seen by most of our interviewees as a significant step forward for South African planners, creating new hope (a word commonly used by our participants) for positive changes, particularly towards addressing socio-economic inequalities.

In essence, the act gives planners a legal framework which takes better account of fragments. As a result, cities such as Cape Town and Johannesburg in particular created more adaptable approaches toward the needs of those living in townships who face the realities of infrastructures and knowledges that exist in fragments. We argue that achieving the laudable goals within SPLUMA means moving toward a *public interest of fragments* which can positively impact individuals' capacity to survive. As one of our participants argued this requires:

> an appropriate designing category for informality which allows more flexible, and standard, and home-based enterprises. . . . So, that allows the notion of back yarding . . . . This speaks to the vulnerability of communities in informal settlements. People would much rather rent a backyard shack in a property within an established township, than to live in the precarious living conditions in informal settlements where crime and safety are of major concerns. (public sector, white, male, 116 March 2018)

Attempts to work within a public interest of fragments are, however, still extremely limited and are concentrated in cities with the highest number of planners and resources. A more recent assessment of SPLUMA unfortunately revealed significant perverse and unanticipated effects that may negatively alter planning practices. In the local implementation of SPLUMA, it appears that many new planning regulations repealed more flexible forms of regulation in some low-income areas (Annexure F schemes), which, ironically, were implemented in the apartheid era. In some cases, this has meant *increasing* restrictions on non-residential uses of dwellings. By reducing flexibility, such local regulation makes it harder to deliver spatial planning that works with the constraints of blended (in)formality. This, in turn, makes it harder to deliver on a public interest that works *with* the reality of fragmented urbanism.

While there is a call for greater flexibility here, it is important not to mistake the need to work *with* fragments, as saying that fragments themselves are a manifestation of the public good. Indeed, attempts to support *blended (in)formality* have at times led to

detrimental effects. These are becoming highly visible in the case of land use planning for commercial spaces and the (informal) food chain. There is, therefore, a dark side to blending attempts, where formal organisations use the discourse of informality to bypass formal regulations, frequently harming the poor in the process (Scheba and Turok, 2020). This is particularly prevalent in the house shop (spaza) sector. In the past, such businesses were owner-operated, but today act as retail outlets for formal warehouses and wholesalers. Because the spaza sector remains largely informal, the employees of such businesses have limited protection under South African labour law, and in some documented cases, the conditions have sufficiently degraded to the extent that they are classified as slavery (PLAAS, 2019). Another area where (in)formality often results in exploitation is land ownership. Here, the reliance on informal transfers of formal properties results in blurred processes and understandings of ownership, with powerful individuals manipulating the system to their benefit. In these types of cases, we see a failure of the *public interest of fragments*, with blended (in)formality having detrimental impacts on the most vulnerable.

It is clear that informality cannot be accepted as a legitimate solution, as by definition, those living in informality are outside of the protection of the law. Instead, to help create a *public interest of fragments*, adaptable planning regulations need to be adopted which accommodate the survival strategies of the monetary poor alongside what is counted as the formal. This goes hand in hand with ensuring that dark practices, such as exploitation in the spaza sector, remain outside of the law, being seen not as informal, but criminal. Here the *public interest of fragments* is intrinsically entangled with basic rights, not simply related to planning matters.

Issues of land (blurred) ownership are particularly difficult to disentangle, given the conflation of formal, local and customary practices of ownership. There are often two, and sometimes three sets of land management processes in South Africa. For example, an informal dwelling can, despite its informality, fall within the purview of formal land management processes, but still be subject to local arrangements – which some would deem informal. The same point can be made for adaptable forms of planning, upon which a *public interest of fragments* can be constructed. These need to tie into a wider process of creating adaptable tenure laws. Accounting for such is the only way to move from current incremental and localised attempts to deliver a *public interest of fragments* to seeing this approach applied more widely, informing planning practice, planning research and planning education at the national and international scale.

Conclusion

Drawing on the voices of planners themselves, this paper has reflected on how planning accounts for, and struggles to work with, the plurality and diversity of fragments that constitute South African cities. It has focused on revealing the realities of *blended (in) formality* which shape the everyday living conditions of monetary poor communities. This goes beyond previous, largely binary, approaches that focused on either formality or informality. In doing so, we have conceptualised a *public interest of fragments* which recognises that blended (in)formality will not change in the short term, with planners needing to find ways to maximise public good by working with the situation as it exists rather than fantasies of a fully formalised system. We have demonstrated how such an

approach to public interest is already being applied by planners in some limited circumstances, but note the barriers facing attempts at wider adoption.

The challenges that South African planners face are of course highly contextualised to the post-apartheid realities of that country. Nonetheless, they also fully resonate with two core aspects of international planning practice: its political nature and its constant need to navigate within very complex environments, where planners advocate, negotiate and compromise on an everyday basis. Working in complex environments in the context of *blended (in)informality* involves facing blurred boundaries between what is acceptable and less acceptable. Those blurred boundaries apply to spaces and their material components (townships, houses etc.) but are also highly subjective, embedded into planners' own professional values. They are also political and denote how powers and rights are translated in the way the built environment is produced and used.

McFarlane's (2018) concepts of fragments, fragment knowledge and fragment urbanism have been crucial in allowing us to reflect on how survival drives actions, adaptations and practices. This testifies to how groups of individuals struggle, trying to claim their resources and rights out of space and how planners respond to this, including through blended (in)formality. We have argued here that planners often deeply care about those living in such settings, which contrasts with the frequent positioning of planners as being complicit in furthering socio-inequalities. It is clear that the combination of survival needs, socio-economic and political contexts, along with the perverse and unexpected consequences of the latest land use regulations, means that South African planners are working in highly complex and fragmented contexts. Approaches that take account of blended (in)formality are thus essential and will likely become more prevalent given the stubborn persistence of poverty and the potential for new shocks inherent to the post-pandemic context.

How should planners adapt their practice to serve the public interest, given the context of fragment urbanism? Blended (in)formality results from the combination of formal planning strategies and informal processes of alternative-substitute place-making (Andres *et al.*, 2021). This combination enables individuals and communities to shape their living environment, cope and survive, while encouraging planners to move from thinking of the formal and informal as a simple binary. As a regulatory approach, this would align with the realities facing poorer communities while not considering informality as an ideal, nor a (politically) accepted condition.

The role of planners as negotiators and advocates, asks the profession to balance the rights of divergent voices and interests, in regulatory contexts driven by efficiency and pragmatism. Adaptability here is key, not only in everyday practice but also as a way of *representing* the profession on a daily basis. Such an ethos, and the need to be agile and adaptable, is closely aligned with the idea of a public interest of fragments that we have developed through this paper. Thus, an understanding of what constitutes the public interest can be created in a way that is more inclusive of the lived realities experienced by many poorer communities.

Building on this point, further research is needed to examine how such a public interest of fragments can inform planning debates and planning education. Similarly, there is a need to explore its implication for planning policy and practice globally,

particularly through more meaningful engagement with the realities of blended (in) formality. Such an approach would allow us to engage more fully with the path-dependent and intersectional diversities of living conditions for many urban dwellers. This has significant implications for both the future of cities and the planning profession itself.

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