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Defining Sustainable Placemaking in Spatial Planning: Lessons from a South African Case Study

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Abstract: This study explores the concept of sustainable placemaking from a spatial planning perspective, focusing on Marabastad, a township in South Africa. Drawing on the New Urban Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals, this research seeks to understand how placemaking can contribute to the creation of liveable, resilient, and sustainable human settlements. Through a review of the placemaking literature and a case study, this study examines the evolution of placemaking towards sustainability and its application in diverse cultural, geographic, and socio-economic contexts. The findings reveal the importance of creating and enhancing places that are environmentally responsible, socially inclusive, economically viable, and culturally meaningful. The Marabastad case study illustrates the challenges and possibilities of sustainable placemaking in a multicultural and urbanising community. Economic interventions (e.g., tourism promotion and community markets), social interventions (e.g., education and community events), and environmental interventions (e.g., infrastructure upgrades and preservation of cultural sites) are proposed to address the complex challenges faced by Marabastad. This study emphasises the role of spatial planners in advancing theories and practises of sustainable placemaking, highlighting the need for context-specific approaches to promote inclusive and resilient urban environments.

Keywords: sustainable placemaking; urban development; spatial planning; South Africa; qualitative research; case study research



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1. Introduction and Background

International policy propagates the importance of sustainable places in urban contexts in the future. The UN's New Urban Agenda (NUA) [1] recognises the importance of public space and placemaking in the development of future cities in the next twenty years [2] (p. 420). Similarly, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [3] are global goals that aim to address various social, economic, and environmental challenges, including those related to urban development [4] (p. 29). It is particularly Goal 11, which focuses on making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable places, that is relevant for placemaking [1] (p. x). According to Keith et al. [5] (p. 115), the NUA and the SDGs mutually reinforce a framework for sustainable urban places in the future. Placemaking as a tool for sustainability builds on this foundation (framework) laid by the NUA and SDGs.

A scope of the placemaking literature reveals that placemaking entails the transition from an unfamiliar space to a familiar place [6–8] that is made possible through collective or individual efforts by people with an interest in the specific area [9,10]. However, while academic scholarship of placemaking spans over four decades, the term 'sustainable placemaking' is a relatively recent term in the literature (available for download in the English language) and is becoming more prevalent in the placemaking literature. The works of Karacor [11] and Beza and Hernández-García [12] are some examples. Karacor [11] explored and defined sustainable placemaking in the context of social sustainability and

community-based participation. Karacor's [11] work explored how placemaking, with a focus on public spaces and community involvement, can contribute to social cohesion and address social problems in urban areas. Beza and Hernández-García [12] explored the relationship between placemaking and "sustainability citizenship" (actions of societal members that contribute to the creation of sustainable urban settings—often with little regard to formal urban planning regulations [12] (pp. 192–193)) in an informal settlement in Bogotá, Colombia. Their main findings indicated that both placemaking and sustainability citizenship are process-driven approaches to place creation through active participation of citizens. Active participation empowers citizens with skill to create environmentally and socially sustainable public spaces, challenging traditional planning methods.

The general consensus on what sustainable placemaking entails revolves around creating and enhancing places that are environmentally responsible [13] (p. 337), socially inclusive [11,12], economically viable [14–16], and culturally meaningful [17] (p. 437). Despite this growing interest and adoption of sustainable placemaking interventions, there remains a gap in understanding how contextual differences, including cultural, geographic, and socio-economic factors, influence the conceptualisation and implementation of such interventions. The significant gap between literature from the Global South (GS) and Global North (GN) can be explained by the different perspectives and priorities in placemaking [18]. The Global South literature focuses on social change [19], democratic intervention [20], and empowerment of experts [21], while the Global North literature emphasises intrinsic values [22], symbolism [23], and the physical end-product of design strategies [24].

South Africa's status as one of the most culturally diverse countries in the world, often referred to as the "Rainbow Nation" [25,26], may well be of value to reflect on how to make sustainable places by considering contextual differences and diversity. The fact that South Africa has a higher rate of urbanisation (67.85%) than Mauritius, the most developed nation in Africa, which has a rate of 40.78%, complicates the backdrop for placemaking research [27]. It is expected that urban areas are increasingly becoming cultural melting pots, where people from diverse cultural, social, and economic backgrounds will continuously share spaces to interact [28–30]. Public spaces in urban areas play a crucial role in facilitating these interactions and promoting social cohesion and economic opportunities. Access to opportunities for interaction (socially and economically) contributes to the development of resilient and inclusive urban environments [31,32]. Overall, when guided by principles that prioritise economic diversity, resource optimisation, social cohesion, adaptive planning, community empowerment, and the preservation of natural and cultural assets, the making of new places for socio-economic and cultural interaction can be a catalyst for spatial resilience and sustainability [33].

From a spatial planning perspective, planners may contribute to theories on placemaking by conducting research (especially in the Global South), exploring new perspectives, analysing contextual factors, highlighting the role of empowerment, and sharing case studies and best practises. Their contributions help expand knowledge and understanding in the field of placemaking and inform future planning and development efforts. Although placemaking is not the sole jurisdiction of spatial planners, it constitutes a central area of interest [34] (p. 8). This emphasis is corroborated by the inclusion of placemaking as one of the core competencies in the South African Council for Planners' (SACPLAN) guidelines [35] (pp. 23–24). In this paper, the concept of sustainable placemaking is explored within a township context in South Africa. This community, Marabastad (not to be confused with Marabastad, a business area to the west of the city centre of Pretoria, Gauteng Province, South Africa, that shares the same name; see Figure 1 below), Kroonstad (in the Free State Province), offers a unique case due to its minimal political resistance during historical involuntary relocations (Apartheid), yet still experiencing significant socio-economic, spatial, and cultural upheavals—with the aftermath still being visible 30 years onward. The main question is: what role can placemaking play to promote the creation of liveable, resilient, and sustainable human settlements in a South African context? The aim to understand the theoretical evolution of placemaking towards sustainability as a foundation for this paper.

Building on theory, the second phase is informed by the exploration of a case study that is an example of forced removals in pre-democratic South Africa.

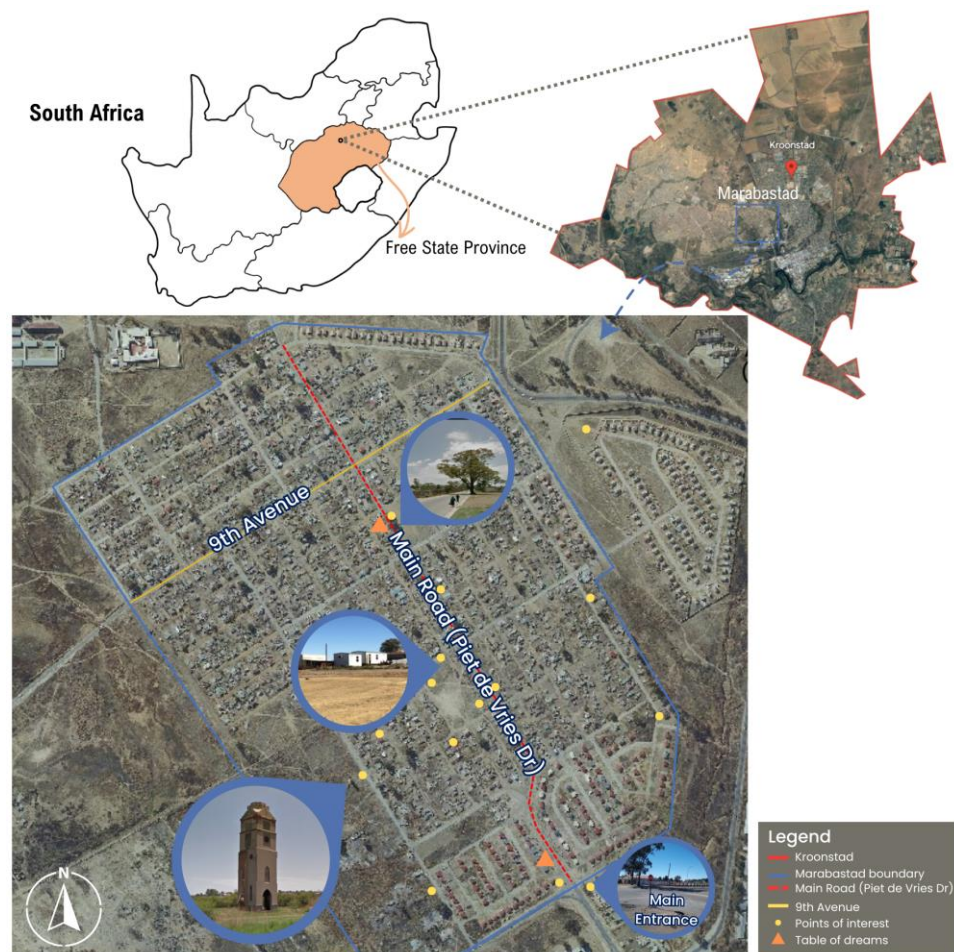


Figure 1. Locality map of Marabastad, Kroonstad (South Africa) (adapted from Google Earth).

2. Theory

Interwoven in the placemaking literature, sustainable placemaking builds on existing theoretical underpinning, focusing on the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of placemaking as a means to develop an understanding of a workable definition for sustainable placemaking.

2.1. Conceptualising Placemaking

Placemaking is a concept that transcends academic boundaries. A number of disciplines, including social science, art, education, music, tourism, and spatial and design disciplines, have theorised about it [15,36–38]. The task of formulating a general definition of placemaking is challenging, despite its potential usefulness across multiple disciplines [15].

At its heart, the process of placemaking strives to encourage transformative change in peoples' daily live-in spaces [39,40]. Change agents of the process range from individuals, households, and communities that uses the space on a daily basis to organisations and groups with an interest in the area [41]. Due to the range of interested change agents, the process of re-imagining the space is often collaborative in nature [42] (p. 2). Re-imagination may include interventions aimed at renovating, upgrading, and/or maintaining local lived spaces [43,44]. These interventions are geared to repurpose the subject space and create a more attractive function. An attractive function may include activities that contribute to the

uniqueness of the setting. The uniqueness of the setting is informed by site-specific characteristics like community-based arts, historical elements, and social interaction [45] (p. 74).

2.2. Sustainable Placemaking

In order to define sustainable placemaking in spatial planning, the following section elaborates on the three dimensions of strong sustainability, namely the economic and social dimensions nested within the environmental dimension (Figure 2).

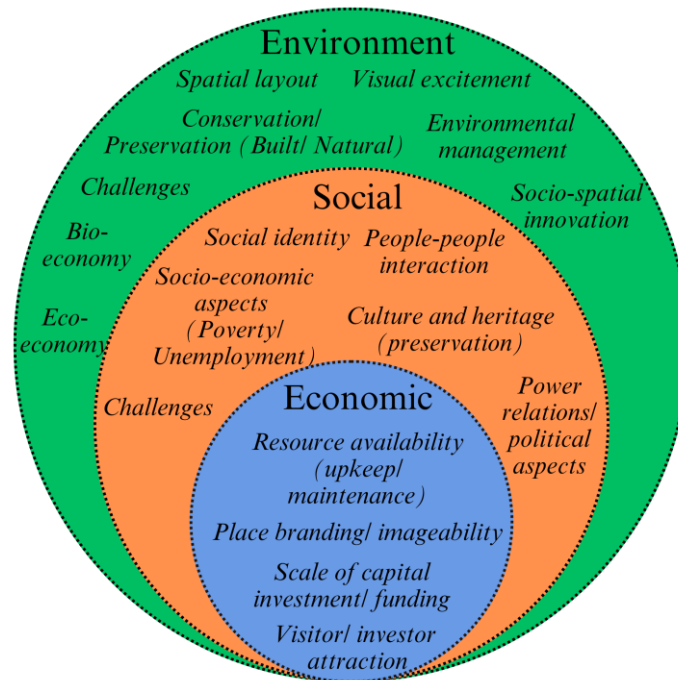


Figure 2. Dimensions of strong sustainable placemaking (source: authors' own construction).

2.2.1. Economic Dimension of Placemaking

The synthesis of the global literature on the economic dimension of placemaking reveals some key trends and perspectives. In the GN, Shibley's [46] initial exploration centred on investments and cost-effective strategies in placemaking, a theme later expanded by McCann [47] to encompass economic development challenges and the imperative of attracting tourists [15]. Tourism emerges as a linchpin in the GN literature, exemplified by Durmaz et al.'s [48] illustration of movie sets attracting visitors. The role of imageability, heightened through city branding initiatives [49,50], is underscored. Coaffee's [51] insights into challenges, such as maintenance requirements and external economic pressures affecting site user visits, contribute to a holistic understanding of GN placemaking dynamics.

The GS literature, initially introduced by Wu [52], interlaces economic development in placemaking with challenges, emphasising inward investment and real estate development. According to Jirón et al. [53], the main challenges revolve around the insufficient funds required for the development and upkeep of visitor-attractive venues. Concurrently, in South Africa, more recent studies [54] confirmed the economic difficulties, including limited funding for small-scale local efforts. The use of substitute building materials and fundraising are suggested solutions.

Sustainability and resilience emerge as pivotal considerations in placemaking across all contexts. Strategies include the incorporation of memorable physical interventions, social context, empowered citizenry, intangible connection, and urban sustainability, contributing to the branding of places [55,56]. These elements, alongside fundraising and the utilisation of alternative building materials, signify concerted efforts to address economic challenges, as outlined in the literature.

The synthesis of the global literature underscores the multifaceted nature of the economic dimension of placemaking, with commonalities and distinctions offering valuable insights for sustainable and resilient urban development. The discourse emphasises the importance of strategic investments, effective branding, and community engagement in shaping the future trajectory of placemaking projects on a global scale.

2.2.2. Social Dimension (Includes Power Relations/Political Aspects)

Studying the international literature on placemaking's social dimension reveals complex viewpoints, especially when distinguishing between studies from the GN and GS.

Placemaking studies in the GN emphasise the importance of social justice in decision-making processes, where policy direction and democratic formations are critical components in achieving equity. This entails including heritage informants that shape social identity, i.e., customs, traditions, political background, etc., into the decision-making process [19,23]. The literature also acknowledges societal issues that impact the placemaking trajectory, such as inequality in race and income [47,57]. A change is noted after 2010, as placemaking develops into a communal activity that enables people to actively participate in skill-sharing and learning [37,58,59]. As a focal point, social integration (people–people interaction) promotes inclusive urban community-building techniques that put an emphasis on inviting spaces and safety [24,60].

In the GS, the literature initially theorises on the social dimension, emphasising cultural elements, challenges, and upliftment interventions. Cultural elements are the tangible and intangible components of a community's identity and heritage, such as customs, rituals, artwork, language, historical sites, and other characteristics that set that community apart [61,62]). Challenges refer to obstacles or negative conditions that affect a community's well-being or impede the growth and development of a place, such as political unrest, economic inequality, discrimination, poverty, and past injustices [20,63,64]. While upliftment interventions aimed at improving the social, economic, or cultural conditions of a community, which involve actions that contribute to the betterment of the community's overall well-being [53]. In the context of the placemaking literature, understanding cultural elements helps shape strategies that preserve and celebrate the unique identity of a place [65,66]. Recognising challenges is essential for addressing and mitigating negative factors that may impact social sustainability [11]. Upliftment initiatives, on the other hand, are proactive measures aimed at fostering positive change and improvement within a community, aligning with the goals of placemaking to create vibrant, inclusive, and sustainable places [67]. The post-2010 GS literature aligns with the GN by promoting people-friendly places, influenced by cultural values and preferences.

In South Africa, a distinctive emphasis on political aspects emerges, addressing power imbalances rooted in historical contexts like colonialism and Apartheid [68–70]. Placemaking is posited as a tool for restorative justice [70], advocating for a bottom-up decision-making approach [71] and active community involvement [54,72]. Moreover, the literature underscores the role of placemaking in mitigating social challenges and fostering empowerment through collaborative processes, emphasising the importance of respect for diversity [54,72]. The collective insights suggest that an inclusive and socially just approach to placemaking contributes significantly to social sustainability [73], offering a platform for diverse stakeholders [74,75] and fostering resilient, empowered, and culturally rich communities [18].

2.2.3. Environmental Dimension (Focus on Physical Aspects)

In the realm of academic discourse, the exploration of the environmental (physical) dimension of placemaking has unfolded distinctively across the GN and GS. Originating in the GN as early as 1979 with Burgess [23], the focus on physical interventions evolved, encompassing visual excitement through elements like landscaping, facades, and squares [65,76]. Post-2000, the emphasis shifted to spatial arrangement, considering scale, layout, and functionality [47], while challenges such as land use restrictions and

urban fragmentation are acknowledged [77]. In tandem, the GS embarks on this exploration post-2000 [52], with a particular focus on development, redevelopment, and spatial considerations, intertwined with legal challenges faced by placemaking initiatives [78].

Turning to environmental management, the mid-2000s literature in the GN delves into the multifaceted role of placemaking. This includes fostering urban resilience, climate change mitigation, and sustainability initiatives, i.e., cleaning activities [60,79]. Green planning, infrastructural interventions, and sustainability measures are integral components of this discourse [65]. Conversely, the GS, post-2010, accentuates recycling strategies for sustainability [80], addressing environmental concerns such as pollution and carbon-intensive development. Initiatives promoting environmentally friendly places are explored [20].

Zooming in on South Africa, the post-2006 literature scrutinises tangible characteristics, planning, and design interventions, with an emphasis on indigenous design and redevelopment initiatives [54,72,81]. Spatial restrictions (e.g., limited accessibility as control measure, considerable distance away from socio-economic opportunities, inferior housing in homogenous landscapes and land-use as buffer zones (industrial areas, open space etc.)) and subsequent fragmentation, rooted in the aftermath of Apartheid city design, manifest in neighbourhood isolation based on racial and class differences [82,83]. Concurrently, environmental management discourse post-2008 in South Africa focuses on challenges like pollution and urban decay [84]. Placemaking emerges as a crucial tool for sustainability, incorporating green initiatives and the conservation/preservation of built and natural resources [70,81]. This comprehensive synthesis provides a nuanced understanding of the academic developments surrounding the physical dimension of placemaking and its instrumental role in environmental management across diverse global and regional contexts.

2.2.4. Interrelatedness of Placemaking Dimensions

With reference to Figure 2, some overlap is found in the placemaking literature regarding the economic and social dimensions within the environmental dimension.

The interrelatedness of the economic and social dimensions within the environmental (physical) dimension of placemaking is evident in both theoretical frameworks and practical applications. Placemaking initiatives that engage and empower local communities (social dimension) often lead to more sustainable economic development [85] (p. 1931). Empowered communities are better positioned to actively participate in economic activities, shape local policies, and drive initiatives that align with their needs and cultural identity [86] (p. 3).

Preserving and including cultural elements and heritage in placemaking (social dimension) can contribute to the economic viability of a place [87] (p. 820). Cultural attractions often draw visitors and tourists, supporting local businesses and stimulating economic growth [15]. This integration ensures that economic development aligns with and respects the social and cultural fabric of the community. This interconnectedness extends further as aesthetic enhancements (physical dimension) and spatial arrangements contribute to the economic vitality of spaces, with tourism and city branding initiatives becoming integral components [49] (p. 54). The visually appealing and well-designed physical environment not only attracts economic activities but also fosters a strong place identity [45] (p. 74).

In South Africa, socio-spatial innovation acquires a profound context-specific perspective [69,88]. Post-Apartheid, an emphasis on indigenous design and redevelopment represents a nuanced response to historical injustices, aligning with social innovation principles [54,72,81].

The delicate interplay between people and their environment is key for effective placemaking. Recognising social justice in decision-making processes is critical to placemaking initiatives in the GN [23,47]. Incorporating heritage informants and addressing societal issues through collaboration demonstrates a dedication to understanding and improving people–place interactions [57,89]. The South African literature explores political elements in socio-spatial innovation as a means to address past power inequalities and move towards a more inclusive society [70]. Placemaking is positioned as an enabling tool for active com-

munity involvement and bottom-up decision-making, profoundly impacting people–place interactions in the post-Apartheid context [71,73].

Overall, sustainable placemaking emerges as a holistic approach that integrates economic, social, and environmental considerations to create inclusive, resilient, and culturally rich communities. By recognising the interrelatedness of these dimensions and adopting a multidisciplinary approach, policymakers, planners, and practitioners can effectively address the complex challenges and opportunities inherent in urban development, ultimately shaping sustainable and equitable places for future generations.

3. Research Methodology

An overview of the approach, design, participants, data gathering methods, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethics used is intended to be outlined in this third section (Figure 3).

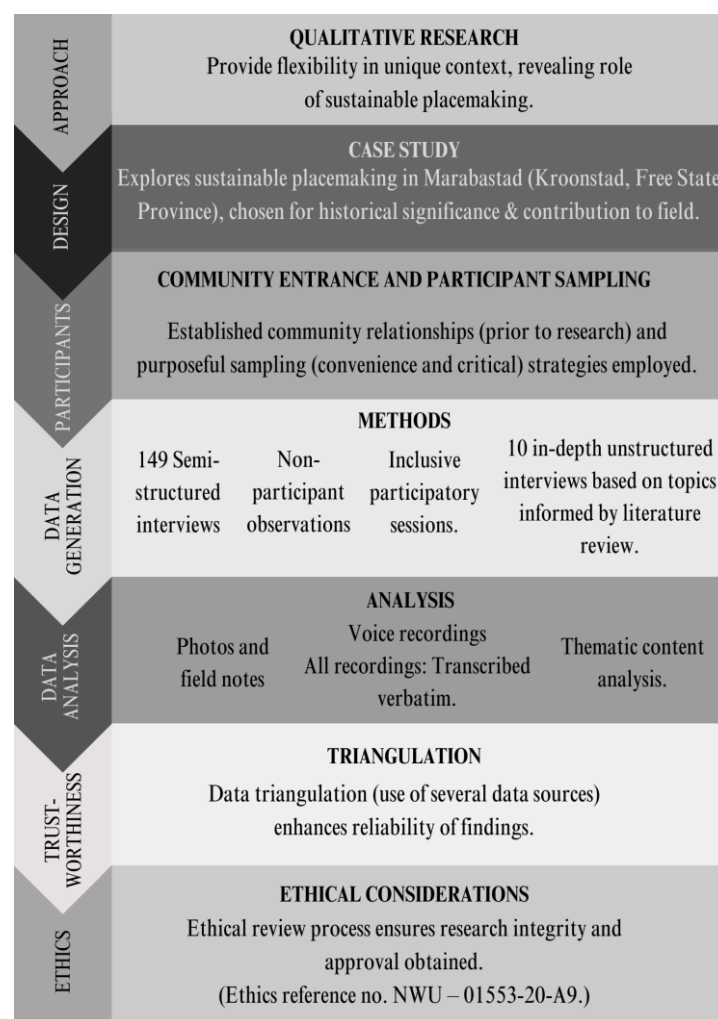


Figure 3. Research methodology (source: authors' own construction).

3.1. Approach

A qualitative approach was chosen for its flexibility in an emergent research design within a unique natural context, using diverse research methods [90,91]. Qualitative research, highlighted by Kumar [92] (p. 18), serves as a catalyst for revealing the role of sustainable placemaking in a local setting. Understanding this role contributes to a comprehensive depiction of sustainable placemaking as a tool to shape resilient communities, achievable through the utilisation of various data sources [93,94].

3.2. Design

This study employs a case study approach to investigate the conceptualisation of sustainable placemaking within a South African context, with a specific focus on Marabastad in Kroonstad, Free State Province (see Figure 1 for a locality map). The selection of Marabastad as the case study site is guided by its potential to make a distinctive contribution to the field of study, drawing upon principles outlined by Yin [95], Merriam [96], and Stake [97]. Marabastad's historical significance lies in its disruption as a local place during pre-democratic South Africa, characterised by the forced removal and relocation of its community. This unique case represents a lesser-known example of urban Black political protest and resistance in the latter half of the twentieth century. The study posits that the exploration of Marabastad's history and subsequent restoration through sustainability considerations can significantly contribute to the spatial planning field in South Africa.

Aligned with the theoretical framework of the study, Marabastad serves as the primary unit of analysis, illustrating the dimensions of sustainable placemaking—economic, social, and environmental. By examining these dimensions within the context of Marabastad, this research aims to provide insights into the complexities of sustainable urban development and contribute to theoretical advancements in the field of spatial planning.

3.3. Participants: Community Entrance and Sampling

This study builds on established relationships with the local community from previous visits, facilitating engagement and trust. It forms part of a broader exploration of Marabastad, emphasising the community's significance.

Purposeful sampling was selected as the overarching sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling is useful when the aim is to understand a phenomenon found in a specific location, individual, or group [98–101]. Two types of purposeful sampling deemed appropriate were convenience (semi-structured interviews and inclusive participatory sessions) and critical sampling (in-depth unstructured interviews). Participants were selected based on their reachability and interaction with the setting.

3.4. Data Generation Methods

Four research methods were chosen for the case study, each contributing distinct advantages to the exploration of sustainable placemaking in Marabastad (see Table 1). Semi-structured interviews offer flexibility and depth in understanding experiences and perspectives. Non-participant observations provide supplementary data, offering behavioural insights and visual documentation of the spatial frame. Inclusive participatory sessions foster collaboration and capture a shared vision, while unstructured face-to-face individual interviews with key informants bring necessary expertise and in-depth exploration informed by prior theoretical and empirical studies. The combination of these methods ensures a comprehensive understanding of sustainable placemaking dimensions in Marabastad.

Table 1. Research methods: appropriateness and application in Marabastad.

Method	Appropriateness	Application in Marabastad
Semi-Structured Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Adaptability for exploring intricate, context-specific spatial, social, and economic dynamics [102]. Various participants provide unique insights about a similar context. Qualitative data as means to capture local, diverse perspectives and experiences [103]. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A total of 149 brief interviews at key locations in the area—5–10 min. Participant profile: 91 male and 58 female participants, predominantly aged 30–34, with the exception of 9 participants who were over 60 years old. Questions aimed at understanding participants' experiences, perspectives, and future visions: How do you experience this area? Would you mind telling me more about this experience? and What would you like to see here in future? Data preservation, with prior interviewee consent, through the use of voice or video recordings and field notes.

Table 1. Cont.

Method	Appropriateness	Application in Marabastad
Non-Participant Observation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Developing objective understanding of people–place interactions [104,105]—insights into daily interactions and behaviours in the setting. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Non-participant observation made by fifteen fieldworkers (15 min intervals). Same locations as interviews to capture ongoing interactions.
Inclusive Participatory Sessions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourages inclusivity, respect toward diversity and collaboration [37] (p. 106). Audio–visual data for comprehensive overview of participants’ visions. Develop a shared vision for the future of Marabastad [106]. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Two stations (entrance and gathering point): Each station had a table, two chairs, large papers titled “This is my ‘dream’ for Marabastad in future. . .”, a locality map with the current location (indicated with red dot) and yellow stickers (to indicate possible intervention sites), and stationery for drawings by participants (coloured markers and pens). Participant profile: 32 participants (22 male and 10 female participants—aged between 30 and 34—one participant above 60).
Unstructured Interviews	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Motivates spontaneous sharing of perspectives and experiences [107] (p. 129) by key informants with local Marabastad knowledge. Exploration of social, economic, physical, and personal aspects 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ten in-depth interviews (25–105 min) with key informants (); nine out of the ten participants were male, aged between 41 and 78. Selected participants: community leaders with pre-democratic relationship with area, government officials (Moghaka Local Municipality), an urban and regional planner with historical involvement with the formalisation of Marabastad and a key author on Marabastad’s cultural and political background. Flash cards: Conversation topics (developed based on a literature review on “placemaking” (see [18]): social interactions, the Marabastad culture, political aspects, economic environment, physical environment and personal experience) printed on cards for unstructured guidance.

3.5. Data Analysis

All verbal prompts were recorded, transcribed verbatim, and analysed using thematic analysis (TA). TA allows textual data to be categorised, analysed, and interpreted to identify patterns and trends, forming overarching themes and subthemes [108] (p. 742).

3.6. Trustworthiness

Although this research presents the outcome of a single case study, data triangulation is made possible by the use of several data sources. The process of triangulation improves the overall reliability of the data generated and its capacity to shed light on the research question [107,109,110]. Therefore, the information gathered from this single case has the potential to influence sustainable placemaking theory in spatial planning within the context of South Africa.

3.7. Ethical Considerations

The research proposal and ethical risk assessment underwent review by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Natural and Agricultural Sciences (FNASREC) at North-West University (NWU). The evaluation indicated minimal associated risk, leading to approval from the North-West University Senate Committee for Research Ethics (NWU-SCRE) under ethics reference no. NWU—01553-20-A9.

4. Presenting the Case: Marabastad, Kroonstad, Free State Province, South Africa

This fourth section outlines the historical, geographical, and institutional context of the case study.

4.1. Historical Context: Background of Human Settlement Development in South Africa

In the past, human settlements in South Africa were organised based on social and economic functions, heavily influenced by the Apartheid ideology. The Apartheid Group

Areas Act (Act no 41 of 1950) [111] played a critical role in shaping the spatial landscape by segregating residential areas according to race and income, resulting in significant socio-spatial imbalances [112]. This legislation forced numerous communities to relocate to bland and uniform urban environments [70] (p. 44).

Despite the demise of Apartheid in 1994, its enduring impact is evident in the persisting socio-spatial and economic disparities within local communities [72]. The post-Apartheid era has witnessed a concerted effort to re-imagine the socio-political, spatial, and economic landscape as an integrated environment [113]. However, the scars of Apartheid continue to linger, highlighting the enduring challenges faced by South African communities in their pursuit of a more cohesive and equitable living environment.

4.2. Geographical Context: Introducing Marabastad (Kroonstad)

This case study focuses on Marabastad, situated within the Moqhaka Local Municipality, as depicted in Figure 1 (orientation map of Marabastad, Kroonstad).

Kroonstad, attaining municipal status in 1875 [114], witnessed the settlement of African families in Central Kroonstad around 1880 (“A location” in Figure 4). Subsequently, by the early 1900s, non-white residents were relocated northward [115] (Moloi, 2012). Marabastad, referred to as “B location” (point 2—Figure 4), experienced substantial growth between 1920 and 1930, housing a diverse population of Black (Basotho, isiXhosa, and Sesotho groups) and Coloured or Mixed-Race residents.



Figure 4. Research context and surrounding neighbourhoods (Adapted from Google Earth).

The Group Areas Act of 1950 [111], implemented in 1950, enforced racial segregation, reshaping neighbourhoods. Coloured residents were forcibly removed from Marabastad

and Cairo in 1957, leading to the development of new neighbourhoods such as Seisoville, Phomolong, and Brent Park (points 4, 5, and 6—Figure 4) [115] (p. 50).

Notably, by 1968, Marabastad residents who relocated to Brent Park chose to demolish their homes instead of accepting government compensation [116] (p. 141). The late 1970s saw the departure of the last Coloured households from Marabastad, with Constantia developed as a Black Group Area in the mid-1970s (point 7—Figure 4). Subsequently, between 1984 and 1991, buildings in old Marabastad were either partially or completely demolished [117].

Post-democracy, Marabastad underwent a challenging redevelopment and formalisation process using re-blocking techniques to reshape its layout. This process was described as challenging due to the high number of returnees in search of accommodation, resulting in land ownership disputes [118] (p. 108). This research context highlights the potential of sustainable placemaking to act as a possible stage for the rebuilding of a resilient urban community in a South African setting.

4.3. Institutional Context: Moqhaka Local Municipality Spatial Development Framework 2019/2020

The South African Government at all levels use Spatial Development Frameworks (SDFs) as strategic planning instruments to direct spatial development. These frameworks facilitate spatial coherence, integrate sector strategies, influence decisions, and interpret government visions. SDFs address past inequities, identify risks, and prioritise investments; they also involve public participation and adherence to overarching principles. Local development objectives, infrastructure, land use, and implementation tactics are all outlined in municipal SDFs [33] (pp. 25–34). The Moqhaka Spatial Development Framework 2019/2020 [118], which describes the institutional setting of Marabastad, reflects a historical trajectory that is deeply embedded in the legislative landscape of South Africa. Influenced by laws that discriminated against people, such as the Apartheid Group Areas Act of 1950 [111], Marabastad had extensive urban planning and formalisation. As mentioned in the SDF [118] (p. 15), Marabastad still has administrative challenges due to its past, such as unlawful fencing and numbering practises, even after entering the post-Apartheid era in 1994.

The SDF also highlights ongoing urban planning and infrastructure projects that are meant to improve accessibility and manage environmental issues in Marabastad. One example of how attempts to integrate Marabastad into the larger urban fabric are prioritised is the re-alignment of Smaldeel Road, which aims to improve connectivity between Marabastad and surrounding neighbourhoods (points 2, 3, 4, 6 and 7 in Figure 4), the industrial sector, and the CBD; see Figure 5 [118] (p. 13). A dedication to maintaining Marabastad's cultural and historical legacy in the face of urban growth is also demonstrated by conservation initiatives including the restoration of wetlands and the preservation of heritage sites such as the Reverent Mahabane House [118] (p. 78). Through its legislative and infrastructural interventions, the institutional context outlined in the SDF reflects a multifaceted approach to addressing the socio-economic and spatial challenges facing Marabastad within the broader context of South Africa's urban development trajectory.

Land use types in Marabastad are mainly residential, with business-related zoned properties; see Figure 5. Additionally, there are multiple erven zones for educational purposes. An industrial core is located to the south of Marabastad. Only one property is zoned as "Parks" to serve the recreational needs of the larger community. Other green spaces are non-developable parks.

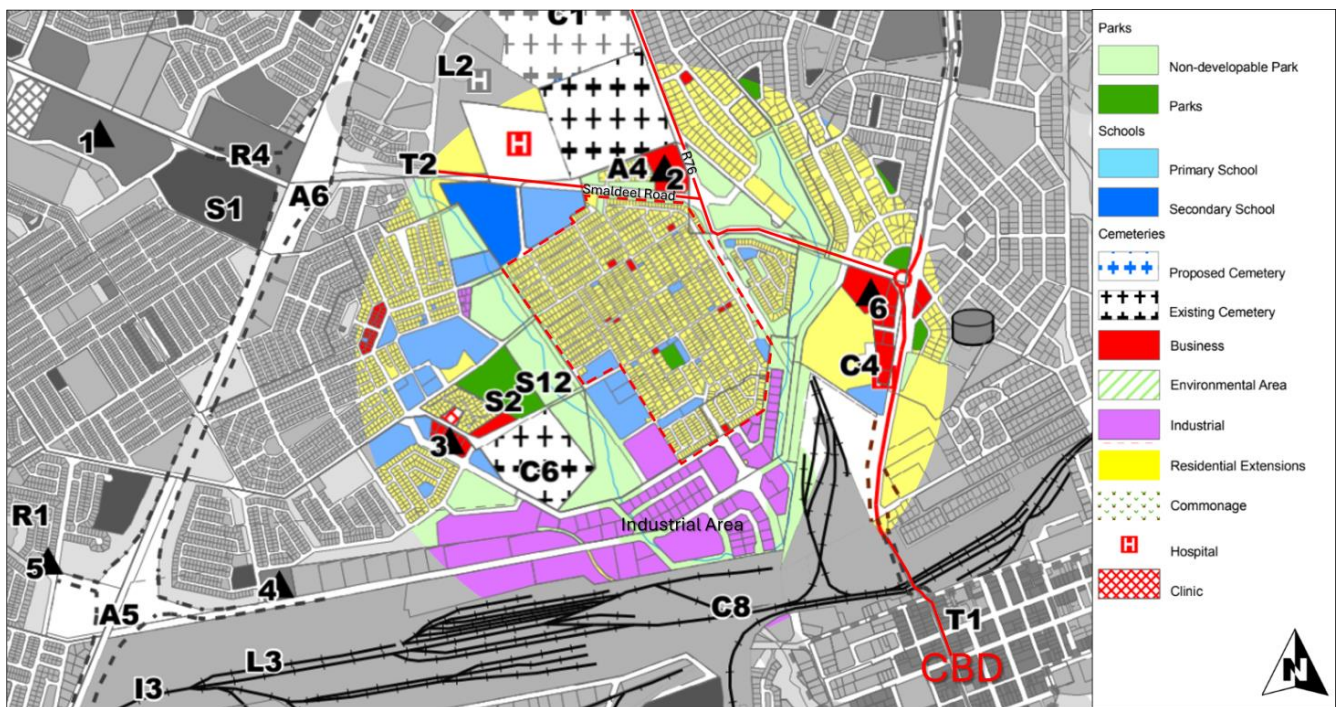


Figure 5. Zoning map of Marabastad (adapted from Figure No. 14B [118]).

5. Findings: Towards Sustainable Placemaking in Marabastad

Themes and subthemes emerged from data obtained for this research study. This paper focuses on the themes and subthemes related to the potential of Marabastad to become a unique, sustainable place. Table 2 provides an integrative overview of the main themes and subthemes.

Table 2. Integrative overview of findings.

Theme	Subtheme	Summary
Understanding the Context of Marabastad—Participants’ Perspective	Economic evolution and social dynamics	Marabastad’s economic background reflects prosperity, decline, and contemporary challenges influenced by historical laws and forced removals. Cultural resilience endures despite societal turmoil. Environmental context shaped by Apartheid’s spatial planning persists today.
	Cultural identity and community resilience	Marabastad’s social fabric remains resilient despite economic challenges, fostering a unique cultural nexus. Historical scars persist, but the community thrives through sports, education, and community events.
	Environmental and spatial character	Apartheid’s legacy of spatial disparities shaped Marabastad’s environment. Present-day challenges include dilapidated buildings, limited green spaces, and pollution, perpetuating social inequities.

Table 2. Cont.

Theme	Subtheme	Summary
Challenges in Marabastad—An Integrated Perspective	Economic realities	High unemployment rates, expensive public transport, and utility struggles characterise Marabastad’s economic challenges. Skilled workers leaving exacerbates economic hardship.
	Social challenges in environmental context	Historical forced removals and property disputes create social tensions. Environmental degradation compounds societal issues.
	Environmental challenges	Dilapidated infrastructure, pollution, and limited green spaces hinder community well-being. Residents express concerns about cleanliness and sanitation.
Interventions for Sustainable Placemaking in Marabastad	Economic interventions	Participants advocate for tourism promotion, urban agriculture, and community markets to boost the local economy. Skill development and collaboration are emphasised for economic revitalisation.
	Social interventions	Education, community cooperation, and cultural events are proposed to foster social cohesion. Combatting crime and substance abuse requires community solidarity and youth engagement.
	Environmental interventions	Infrastructure upgrades, preservation of culturally significant sites, and pollution reduction efforts are proposed to enhance Marabastad’s physical environment. Community engagement initiatives empower residents to take ownership of their surroundings.

5.1. First Theme: Understanding the Context of Marabastad—Participants’ Perspective

Marabastad’s background of economic fluctuations and social transformations intertwines with its historical, geographical, and institutional contexts, shaping its current township landscape. The following section delves deeper into the economic evolution and social dynamics (subtheme 1.1.), cultural identity and community resilience (subtheme 1.2.), and environmental and spatial character (subtheme 1.3.) (see Table 2).

Subtheme 1.1. Economic evolution and social dynamics

Marabastad’s complex social dynamics are reflected in its economic evolution, characterised by initial prosperity, subsequent decline, and contemporary challenges. During its peak, vibrant local businesses thrived, promoting self-sufficiency and communal harmony (“People in Marabastad were not buying, mostly were not buying from town. We had everything here. People were supporting themselves”—Participant 4). However, societal turmoil and economic downturns were sparked by the introduction of Apartheid’s discriminatory laws—the Group Areas Act (Act no 41 of 1950) [111]—and forced relocations (“The economy of the area started crumbling, it went down”—Participant 9).

Today, Marabastad grapples with pervasive poverty and unemployment, indicative of its economic fragility (“Economic environment in the area, you could say it starts from high and then it just drops. . . to the point that today”—Participant 9).

Subtheme 1.2. Cultural identity and community resilience

Despite economic challenges, Marabastad’s social fabric remains resilient, strengthened by its unique cultural heritage and communal solidarity. Apartheid’s legacy of forced removals inflicted profound wounds on families and communities (“It was a sad moment because we have to lose our families. . . that family thing were broken and that society were broken”—Participant 7), yet Marabastad’s spirit endures. The post-Apartheid era witnessed a resurgence of community cohesion, albeit amid cultural transformation and demographic

changes (“They [original Marabastad inhabitants] were sharing so many things, religion, education. . . today there’s nothing like that”—Participant 4). Today, Marabastad fosters a unique cultural nexus, bridging old and new traditions through sports, education, religion, and community events (“Marabastad was a place of schools, sports, the entertainment, we have our togetherness”—Participant 2).

Subtheme 1.3. Environmental and spatial character

The environmental and spatial character of Marabastad can be understood by exploring three distinct moments.

Moment one: Spatial development under Apartheid—The Apartheid government orchestrated the relocation of communities based on race, leading to profound spatial disparities enforced by legislation. The relocation was deemed necessary for the development of an industrial node to act as a buffer zone between the Black and white neighbourhoods: “. . .the removal of Marabastad, the white one were saying that that place of Marabastad is gonna be a factory. . . So then, the Marabastad were nearer to the town. Most of us, they took us to Constantia” (Participant 7). This not only perpetuated social inequities but also engendered ecological imbalances, with insufficient attention given to environmental considerations in the planning process. Participant 10 underscored the rudimentary environmental planning evident in the initial layout (“Because the greater part of Maokeng, the black residential area, is very inaccessible. Which was again, a function of Apartheid planning”).

Moment two: With the democratic turn in South Africa, plans to develop the industrial node were revoked. However, families were already relocated, and multiple buildings were partially or entirely demolished. As Marabastad was predominantly abandoned at the time (“Because he [Marabastad] stood open for so long”—Participant 10), people from surrounding farms and settlements flocked to these vacant properties. Participant 5 highlighted the influx of rural migrants, exacerbating environmental strain through unplanned urban sprawl and associated challenges such as inadequate waste management and pollution (“Since the lifting of these influx control regulation [legislative change]. . .the people coming from farms. . . they now move into the township”).

Moment three: Formalisation challenges—Despite efforts at formalisation, persistent land ownership disputes and conflicting heritage claims (But my ancestors stayed here—Participant 6) have impeded effective environmental management. Participant 7 articulated frustrations surrounding unresolved ownership issues, which continue to hamper comprehensive environmental planning and preservation efforts (“It’s so bad to come and chase a person who is also looking for . . .his own house, on your structure or in your yard.”).

5.2. Second Theme: Challenges in Marabastad—An Integrated Perspective

Marabastad faces complex challenges that intersect across economic, social, and environmental dimensions. High unemployment rates, social tensions, and environmental degradation hinder community resilience and well-being.

Subtheme 2.1. Economic realities

Marabastad’s residents’ face harsh economic realities, characterised by high rates of unemployment and pervasive poverty. Residents navigate challenges such as expensive public transport and the struggle to afford essential utility services. One participant poignantly captures the economic struggle, stating, “Just don’t consider taxis. Unless we have money for transport, that’s when we consider taxis” (Point 6). Additionally, skilled workers often seek opportunities elsewhere, perpetuating the cycle of economic hardship. As one participant observes, “The young people who would finish school, they would leave and go to work at other places and end up living there” (Participant 9).

Subtheme 2.2. Social challenges within the environmental context

The social fabric of Marabastad bears the scars of its history, marked by forced removals and enduring tensions over property ownership and cultural identity. Participants

reflect on the profound impact of forced removals, with one lamenting, “It was a sad moment. . .we lose this attachment of Marabastad. . .that family thing were broken and that society were broken” (Participant 7). Present-day social dynamics are fraught with conflict, as disputes over property ownership persist. A resident recounts, “They [original Marabastad inhabitants] say it’s their place. . .so the people, they were not here, so we [new inhabitant] moved in. Afterwards those people came, they say this [reference to property] is my grandpa’s place” (Point 15).

Subtheme 2.3. Environmental challenges

The environmental context of Marabastad echoes the other dimensions (economic and social) as it is shaped by historical events—removals and demolition of buildings—and present-day neglect (“. . .it’s an old place. . .when our grandmothers were removed here. . .all this place was supposed to be dismantled”—Point 9); see Figure 6. Dilapidated buildings and limited green spaces contribute to a poor aesthetic experience and hinder community well-being; see Figure 6. Participants express dismay over the state of infrastructure (“Because the [old] sewer system is starting to cause problems.”—Participant 6) and aesthetics, with one describing the area as “seriously ugly” (Point 15). Pollution exacerbates environmental degradation, posing health risks and detracting from overall quality of life. Residents voice concerns about cleanliness and sanitation, with one emphasising, “Dirty, filthy, dirty. . .it is neglected in the township” (Participant 6).

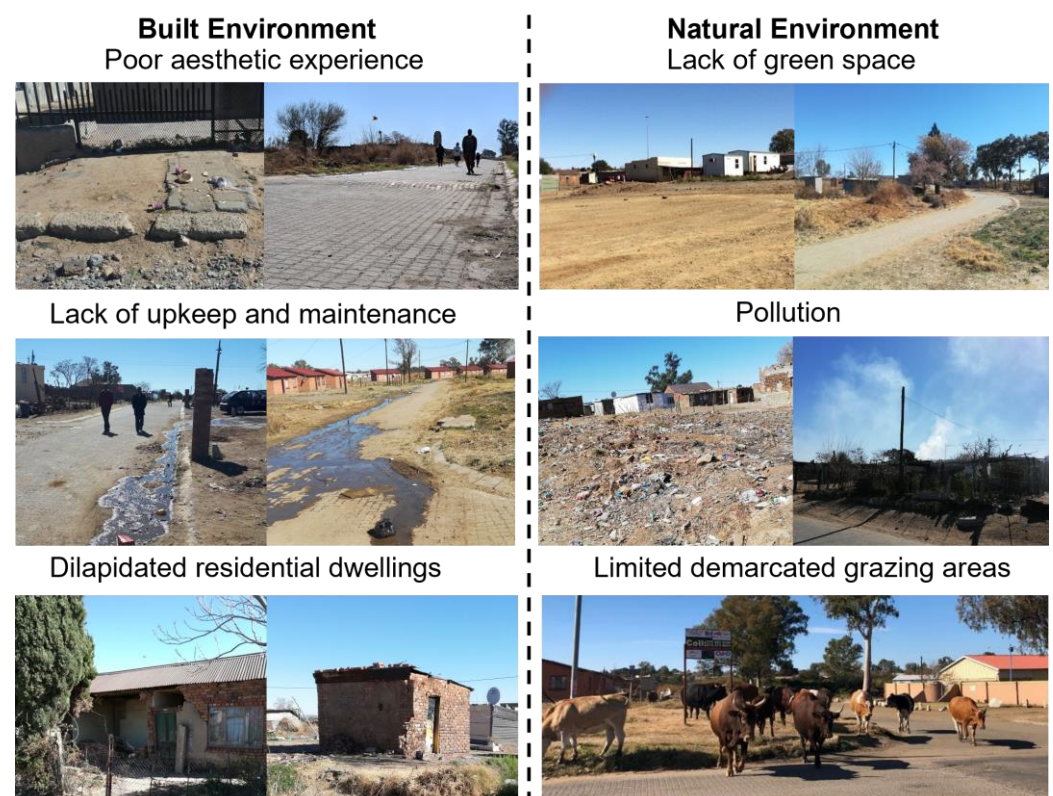


Figure 6. Challenges in the built (left) and natural (right) environment of Marabastad (source: photographs by observations fieldworkers).

5.3. Third Theme: Integrated Perspective on Interventions for Sustainable Placemaking in Marabastad

To promote sustainable placemaking, Marabastad—a historically significant, albeit economically and socially challenged, area—needs a variety of interventions. This integrated perspective recognises the interconnected nature of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions and the necessity for comprehensive solutions. This third theme

explores participant-proposed interventions, emphasising the social and economic aspects in the context of the physical environment.

Subtheme 3.1. Economic interventions

Participants underscored the importance of enhancing existing local businesses and introducing measures to stimulate the local economy. Marabastad boasts local enterprises such as traditional beer brewing, informal street vending, and small-scale entrepreneurship. One participant vividly described this economic activity, stating, “We’re selling our people those beers, sorghum beers” (Participant 7). However, interventions are needed to amplify economic opportunities. Suggestions range from promoting tourism to fostering small-scale urban agriculture and supporting large-scale enterprises.

Participants envision tourism as a catalyst for economic growth, emphasising the need for guided tours and historical narratives to attract visitors. Reflecting on this, one participant remarked, “If you have people who are coming, tourists coming to the townships. . . you’ll need people with vehicles who’ll take people around. You’ll need tour guides who’ll talk to the history of the area” (Participant 9).

Additionally, initiatives like urban vegetable gardens (“. . . at the back of their yard we have to give them a [vegetable] seed”—Participant 7) and community markets (“Maybe a strong community market, where everyone can come together”—Participant 10) aim to empower residents and stimulate economic activity at the grassroots level. The emphasis on skill development and collaboration underscores a bottom-up approach to economic revitalisation, nurturing local talents and fostering self-sufficiency.

Subtheme 3.2. Social interventions

Social challenges in Marabastad call for interventions aimed at reshaping the community fabric and fostering a sense of belonging. Education emerges as a powerful tool for social change, with calls for the establishment of preschools and crèches to lay a foundation for a brighter future. Several participants emphasised the importance of education, with one stating, “Nothing beats an education” (Participant 15).

Combatting crime and substance abuse requires a communal stance, emphasising community solidarity and youth engagement. Collaborative decision-making processes are advocated as a means to address challenges collectively, promoting inclusivity and mutual support. Reflecting on this, one participant highlighted the importance of community cooperation, stating, “. . . the people of here at Marabastad, we must communicate and do something, maybe. . . something can happen” (Participant 1).

Social events serve as avenues for community bonding and cultural celebration, reinforcing a renewed sense of identity and pride. Commemorating cultural inheritance and celebrating historical sites are seen as ways to revive and honour Marabastad’s unique identity. One participant expressed this sentiment, saying, “Our culture is dying. When culture is dying, you know the nation is also dying. You have to bring it together. . . you have to revive the culture of Marabastad” (Participant 7).

Subtheme 3.3. Environmental interventions

Improving Marabastad’s physical environment is essential for sustainable placemaking. Infrastructure upgrades, including housing, roads, and utility services, are crucial for enhancing liveability and well-being. One participant expressed a desire for better housing, stating, “My dream for Marabastad is to have decent houses and better living” (Participant 9, Station 2). Community engagement initiatives, such as communal gardening and the development of public spaces, empower residents to take ownership of their environment (“This can be a park, a community park or something like that. For recreational purposes.”—Participant 2, Station 2; “A lot of work will have to be done to establish spaces that is green and open. . . a market or a community-focused centre, something like an open-air theatre that may be utilised multi-functionally”—Participant 10).

The preservation of culturally significant sites honours Marabastad’s heritage and fosters a sense of identity. Suggestions included transforming historical sites into muse-

ums to showcase the rich cultural heritage of the community (“Mahabane was also an ANC leader. Now his house... still stands in Main Street”—Participant 5; “Those old, almost brownish... houses are built from rocks... tidy up the inside, reinforce the inside and... people can go there and see: this is how those houses looked like, in those years”—Participant 6; and “Ninth Avenue, which was a strong connection route. Remember, when these people were relocated, that Ninth Avenue was literally the only connection route they had to get back to their people”—Participant 10).

Environmental management efforts focus on pollution reduction and raising awareness about the importance of cleanliness and hygiene. Addressing economic and social disparities requires improved accessibility and connectivity, emphasising the need for local economic opportunities and essential social amenities within Marabastad.

6. Discussion

Sustainable placemaking is conceptualised as a multidimensional approach that encompasses the economic and social dimensions within the environmental context (physical dimension) to (re)create and maintain vibrant and liveable places.

The contemporary understanding of sustainable placemaking transcends mere aesthetics, embracing a holistic perspective that fosters community well-being, cultural richness, sustainability, and economic vitality. It is seen as a means to develop a workable definition for sustainable placemaking that goes beyond disciplinary boundaries and has potential usefulness across multiple disciplines.

The exploration of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of Marabastad through the lens of sustainable placemaking revealed a complex network of historical perspectives and experiences, present-day challenges, and interventions suggestions by the community. In line with this paper’s main question and aim, Figure 7 serves as a visual representation of the theoretical framework and empirical findings discussed in this paper, illustrating how placemaking initiatives contribute to the creation of liveable, resilient, and sustainable human settlements within the South African context.

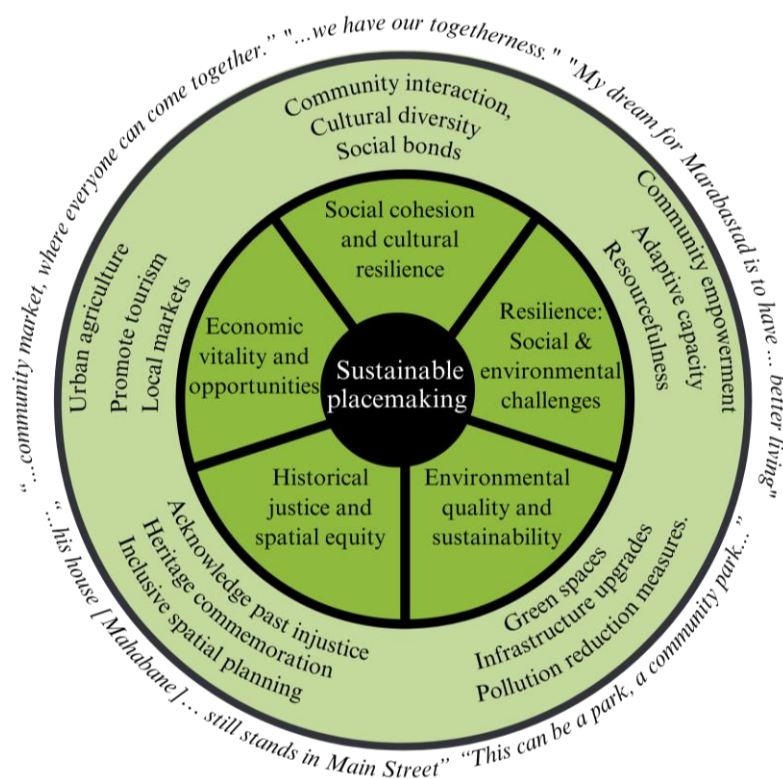


Figure 7. Sustainable placemaking in Marabastad.

Successful placemaking initiatives are possible through active collaboration among various change agents. Change agents may include spatial planners, local community (community engagement), government authorities, Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs), and the private sector.

Spatial Planners: Planners play a crucial role in facilitating, implementing, and overseeing placemaking interventions within communities [34]. They can help coordinate efforts, propose strategies, and ensure that the interventions are aligned with the specific needs and context of the community [18].

Local Community (Community engagement): The local community are key change agents who should actively participate in the decision-making process regarding placemaking interventions. Active involvement can ensure that interventions are culturally responsive, sustainable, and address the community's economic and social needs [37,57,89].

Government Authorities: Local government bodies and policymakers have the authority to enact policies that support sustainable placemaking initiatives. As change agents, local authorities can provide resources, regulations, and incentives to enable the successful implementation of interventions aimed at creating liveable and resilient human settlements [33,118].

Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs): NGOs focusing on community development and sustainable practises can also play a significant role in supporting placemaking interventions. Such organisations can offer expertise, funding, and technical assistance to ensure the long-term success and impact of the interventions [15].

Private Sector: Private businesses and investors have the potential to contribute to placemaking through funding or implementing projects that align with Sustainable Development Goals. Their involvement can drive economic revitalisation and create opportunities for local livelihoods within the community [47,54].

Five lessons for change agents emerge from the exploration of the theoretical evolution of placemaking towards sustainability and the examination of the Marabastad case study:

1. Promoting economic vitality and livelihood opportunities

Interventions to make places sustainable can stimulate economic vitality and create livelihood opportunities within human settlements. Marabastad participants advocate for economic revitalisation through tourism promotion, urban agriculture, and community markets. By leveraging local assets, such as cultural heritage and entrepreneurial spirit, placemaking interventions can empower residents economically and contribute to the sustainable development of the community.

2. Fostering social cohesion and cultural resilience

Placemaking interventions can serve as catalysts for fostering social cohesion and preserving cultural resilience within communities. In Marabastad, despite economic challenges and historical scars of forced removals, the community demonstrates remarkable resilience through shared cultural practises, community events, and sports activities. By facilitating spaces for community interaction and cultural expression, placemaking interventions can strengthen social bonds and foster a sense of belonging among residents.

3. Enhancing resilience to social and environmental challenges

The resilience of human settlements to social and environmental challenges can be enhanced through the process of placemaking, thereby contributing to their long-term sustainability. Insights gathered from the Marabastad case study suggest that interventions should focus on education, community collaboration, and infrastructure upgrades, aiming to build social and environmental resilience. By fostering adaptive capacity, community cohesion, and resourcefulness, placemaking initiatives can help communities withstand and recover from shocks and stresses, thereby promoting sustainable development.

4. Improving environmental quality and sustainability

Placemaking interventions can contribute to improving environmental quality and advancing sustainability goals within human settlements. Environmental challenges such

as dilapidated infrastructure and limited green spaces in Marabastad hinder community well-being. Sustainable, environmentally focused interventions include infrastructure upgrades, pollution reduction measures, and preservation of culturally significant sites. These interventions can enhance the physical environment and promote ecological resilience. Additionally, community engagement initiatives empower residents to take ownership of their surroundings and participate in environmental management efforts.

5. Historical justice and spatial equity

Placemaking initiatives have the potential to address historical injustices and promote spatial equity within post-Apartheid South Africa. Marabastad serves as a poignant example of the enduring impact of forced removals and spatial segregation during the Apartheid era. Placemaking interventions that acknowledge and commemorate the community's history, preserve cultural heritage sites, and promote inclusive spatial planning can contribute to healing historical wounds and promoting spatial justice within the built environment.

These five lessons need to be 'translated' into relevant policy as a move towards an implementation plan. Policymakers and other relevant change agents therefore need to reflect on the integration hereof in the forthcoming revision of the 2019-SDF.

7. Conclusions

The exploration of sustainable placemaking within the South African context, using the case study of Marabastad in Kroonstad, sheds light on the complexities and opportunities inherent in creating resilient and sustainable human settlements. As international policy frameworks such as the New Urban Agenda (NUA) [1] and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) [3] emphasise the importance of inclusive, safe, and sustainable cities, the concept of sustainable placemaking emerges as a critical tool for achieving these objectives.

Drawing upon insights from the placemaking literature, it is evident that sustainable placemaking entails more than just creating aesthetically pleasing environments; it requires a comprehensive approach that considers economic viability, social inclusivity, cultural significance, and environmental responsibility. The case of Marabastad exemplifies the multifaceted nature of sustainable placemaking, where historical, geographical, and socio-economic factors intersect to shape the community's dynamics.

By addressing the gap in understanding how contextual differences influence the conceptualisation and implementation of sustainable placemaking interventions, this study contributes to the broader debate on urban development and resilience. The recognition of South Africa's cultural diversity and urbanisation challenges highlights the need for context-specific approaches to placemaking that prioritise economic opportunities, social cohesion, and environmental sustainability.

From a spatial planning perspective, planners play a crucial role in advancing theories of placemaking by conducting research, exploring new perspectives, and sharing insights. The inclusion of placemaking as a core competency in professional guidelines by SACPLAN [35] reflects its central importance in shaping the built environment and promoting community well-being. The lessons and proposals from this paper can effectively be included in the SDF revision, with specific reference to the *Implementation Plan* in the SDF.

Moving forward, future research should continue to explore sustainable placemaking practises in diverse contexts, with a particular focus on the Global South. By learning from case studies such as Marabastad and engaging with local communities, planners and policymakers can develop strategies, frameworks, and precinct plans that promote the creation of liveable, resilient, and sustainable human settlements for all residents.

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Institutional Review Board Statement: The North-West University (NWU) follows a formal process and strict protocol regarding all research studies where human participants are involved. In this case the steps that were followed include (i) submission of the original study (PhD, where the primary data was collected) to a Scientific Committee, (ii) Completing of online ethics training for all researchers and supervisors that are part of the research, (iii) a code of conduct signed by all researchers and supervisors that are part of the research, (iii) classification of the level of ethics (in this case low risk) including mitigation measures that were followed in terms of ethics (consent letters from participants), (iv) submission of all the documents listed in (i)–(iv) to the Scientific Committee of the Faculty for Natural and Agricultural Sciences. Formal ethics clearance was received for which a unique number was assigned (NWU-01553-20-a9/ Date: 01/02/2020).

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Data Availability Statement: The original contributions presented in the study are included in the article, further inquiries can be directed to the corresponding author.

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