When suggesting ways on how to upgrade the public spaces in Duncan Village it is important to have a good knowledge about the city structure in which the public spaces are a part. Are there qualities in the existing structure to build upon and are there weaknesses to be redressed?

**City structure – three neighborhoods**

The topographical feature of Duncan Village is one of its main characteristics. The undulating form creates a varied and stunning landscape with natural landmarks and sightlines, but the extreme variations in the terrain also creates barriers both within the area and towards adjacent neighborhoods. A hillside facing Ziphunzana Highway gives a dramatic impression but also minimizes the visibility into Duncan Village. The only places where there is a possibility to get a clear view over larger parts of the township are where the river valleys of Amalinda and Mzonyana run into the area.

Due to the river valleys Duncan Village is clearly divided into three separate neighbourhoods. The river banks and their steep valleys have created three heights, which constitute the three neighbourhoods. These are further divided by Douglas Smit Highway, the main road, which runs centrally through the area and across the two valleys.

The three neighbourhoods have different characters due to the way the dwellings in them have been structured. Formal and informal settlements exist in all of the areas but there is a large variation in density and design and also in the way public life is conducted in them. We will in our work separate the three neighbourhoods by naming them Duncan Village West, Central and East.
steeps and flood areas

topography
Duncan Village West is the neighbourhood in Duncan Village with the largest proportion of formal dwellings. It is also less dense than the other neighbourhoods with some land still undeveloped offering public spaces for recreation, urban agriculture and playgrounds.

The neighbourhood does not have the same vivid street life as seen in other parts of the township. We believe there are two main reasons for this. Firstly the residents in the formal areas are able to spend more time in the private sphere having more spacious homes and gardens. Secondly there are less dwellings facing Douglas Smit Highway resulting in less interaction between the residents along the street. Instead a cemetery, a school ground and a sports field, all enclosed with fences, partly frame Douglas Smit Highway and form a barrier within the area. This separates the neighbourhood into two dwelling areas of which the southern one is far denser. The barrier mentioned, as well as the river valley in the south, also leads to few connections towards the adjacent dwelling area Buffalo Flats.

Street vendors are less visible than in the other parts of Duncan Village and those existing are mainly situated along Douglas Smit Highway in close proximity to Buffalo Flats Shopping Centre.

**Characteristics**
- Barriers
- Largest amount of open land
- Mostly formal houses
- Well structured street net
Formal residential area north of Douglas Smit Highway
Formal housing area with one-family houses built on larger, individual plots.

Residential area south of Douglas Smit Highway
Formal housing area where informal constructions have been developed on land available, e.g. at riverbeds. Backyard shacks are common on the formal building sites.
duncan village central

The whole of Duncan Village Central is situated on a distinctive height between the two river valleys of Mzonyana and Amalinda. The valleys set the borders for the area, either very steep or more gently sloping, creating barriers towards the surrounding neighbourhoods. The main connection to the other areas is Douglas Smit Highway.

Duncan Village Central is the heart of Duncan Village with high densities and intense movement of people. It has a mix of informal and formal housing settlements. The densities of the informal areas are very high while they vary within the formal areas, from low density single family housing to densely build one floor blocks of flats. Most parts of the riverbanks are occupied by informal dwellings creating unsafe living environments due to often occurring floods.

Except a former burial ground at the river bed in the south, mainly used for cultivation, and some larger spaces within school grounds not accessible for all residents, there are few open public spaces in the area. Therefore most public life takes place along Douglas Smit Highway, at Jabavu node, the former centre in Duncan Village, and in other streets within the housing units. Especially Douglas Smit Highway has a very vivid street life with a lot of informal housing and commercial activities facing the street and creating an intimate streetscape. Jabavu node has some existing formal public- and commercial facilities even though street vendors contribute with most activities in the area.

**Characteristics**
- Vivid street life
- Mix of formal and informal houses.
- Contrast between high and low density
- Few open spaces
- Barriers created by river valleys
Toilet City
Formal single-family low cost housing area. The area has been equipped with infrastructure since the 1980s when there was an attempted renewal of the area, but built with houses first in 2002 as a result of the governmental Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP).

C-Section
Congested unregurarely shaped informal dwelling area.

Formal housing area nort of Douglas Smit Highway
Spacious housing area with medium sized single-family houses.

Jabavu Node
Former city centre of Duncan Village demolished during riots in the 1980s. Existing formal structures are a post office, the Red Cross, a clinic and smaller shops. Street vendors are highly active in the area.

D-Hostel
Dense formal housing area provided by the apartheid government for black migrants working in East London. The area is surrounded by informal settlements of which many are situated in risk of flooding.

Formal housing area south of Douglas Smit Highway
Dense housing area with smaller single-family units.
Duncan Village East has a mix of formal and informal structures with continuous high density throughout the area. The largest open space in the neighborhood is an old cemetery at the river bank north of Douglas Smit Highway. Part from this there are no open public spaces except a playground which next to it has a small area cultivated by residents living nearby. The riverbeds are to a large extent occupied by informal dwellings.

Douglas Smit Highway is the main space for public life in Duncan Village East even though there are major variations in intensity of street life throughout the neighborhood, with more intense activity in the western part. The streetscape of Douglas Smit Highway also changes character from being wide and undefined in the east while narrowing and becoming more intimate towards Duncan Village Central.

Most of the public and commercial facilities are also situated along Douglas Smit Highway. At the east entrance of the area is a gas station and a small shopping centre. Further west are surgeries, smaller shops, car repairs and the Community Hall. Street vendors are active throughout the street, especially in the western part of the area from the intersection of Mzonyana Road/Douglas Smit Highway to the Community Hall. A church situated on the highest point of Duncan Village Proper, an informal housing area north of Douglas Smit Highway, functions as a landmark not only for the neighborhood but for Duncan Village as a whole.

**Characteristics**
- High density
- Few open spaces
- Commercial activity and vivid public life
- Mix of formal and informal building structures
- Variations in street life and streetscape
Duncan Village Proper
Dense shack development surrounding a smaller area of formal houses. Active public life in the dirt roads lingering through the settlement. Open spaces are lacking. Contains a site for an architectural competition announced by the Swedish International Development Association (SIDA).

B-Hostel
A former hostel area with room for men working in the East London Central Business District. Highly congested with often up to two families sharing one room and a great deal of the everyday activities taking place outdoors. The area is surrounded by a huge amount of shack constructions which many lie directly on the Amalinda riverbed.

Mixed residential area
Dense dwelling area with a varied mix of smaller formal one-family houses and informal structures.

Formal residential area
Formal dwelling area with smaller single-family units.
Most dwellings seen in Duncan Village are detached freestanding, one storey, single family houses or informal dwellings in temporary materials. Multi storey buildings are very unusual. The only example of a formal multi storey house is an apartment building built as a concept model in an attempt to illustrate the idea of this type of dwelling in the area.

The formal dwellings in Duncan Village are either individually built by the residents themselves or obtained through the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP). The area called Toilet City, which is the only RDP-project in Duncan Village, is built according to the "one house – one erf" principle with 40 m² single family houses in a low density. The houses in Toilet City are set out in a conventional grid pattern giving a very strict impression compared to the rest of Duncan Village. The houses are not placed in such a way that they form courtyards or create a varied streetscape. There is no clear hierarchy between the different streets making it difficult to orientate in the area and as trees and other defining elements are lacking, the streetscape is vague and undefined.

The formal, individually built, houses in Duncan Village have in most cases larger plots than the RDP-houses. The areas with these houses tend to have a clear hierarchy in street pattern, making it easier to orientate oneself in them. The buildings are not grouped or clustered to form joint courtyards but their placement forms an interesting and varied streetscape. Many of the gardens have been planted with higher vegetation adding to defining the streets.

A very common occurrence in Duncan Village is the backyard shack. That is when owners of formal houses let out a space in their backyard for shack constructions put up by tenants, giving these dwelling areas a much denser appearance. By letting out land plot owners can earn some extra money, while the residents of the shacks do not need to build on illegal land. This type of building can also function as an extension of the formal private home.

Most of what is referred to as shack areas is informal housing areas built on public land. They are in most parts of Duncan Village extremely congested, and because there is little land available to build upon, they continuously become denser. During our inventories in Duncan Village we could see new shack constructions appear every day. Many of them are built on steeps slopes and on land in risk of flooding. A reoccurring problem in Duncan Village is people and houses being washed away during heavy rains. The high densities also cause fires spreading quickly within the areas.

Since it is not legal to build on public land the shacks are often constructed at night time. When a shack is provided with a roof it is difficult for the municipality to tear it down because of the bureaucratic regulations. Due to the lack of material available and limited amount of time to build the shacks they are usually in very poor condition without insulation, proper floors or roofs. Common construction materials are cardboard, timber, plastic and aluminium or whatever is found in the surroundings or for sale at the scrap yard.

Because of the high population density the streets in the shack areas are very lively. The residents do not have enough space to conduct the everyday activities in the privacy of their homes and the streets therefore function as extensions of the private sphere.

With the redevelopment program the plan is to replace the shack development with multi storey buildings. The detailed design of the houses has not been decided at the time of our project but will probably consist of buildings in two or three stories which will form some type of courtyards that are to be shared by the residents. The highest densities will primarily be along the Douglas Smit Highway where the idea is to have a mixed-use development.

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22 Reconstruction and development program (RDP). Government financed houses for the poor.
23 erf = plot (sv. tomt)
24 Foster, R. interview 5/10-2004
25 Kaiser, R. discussion 20/9-2004
shack construction, duncan village central

formal dwelling, duncan village west

informal constructions at riverbed, duncan village central

unusual two storey shack construction, duncan village proper

example of rdp-houses, cato manor durban
public space

With the exception of the streets, formally planned and designed public spaces are today close to non-existing in Duncan Village. Due to the overcrowding and the lack of land available most areas intended as public space have been occupied by informal constructions. Some spaces for common use have spontaneously developed within informal constructions and are thereby in a sense privatized.

The streets are the main public spaces in Duncan Village and are used as children playgrounds, sport grounds, spaces for markets, workshops, for public celebrations and other communal activities. There is no space that has a clear status as a focal gathering point, such as a square, even though we have noticed larger concentrations of people at certain points along the streets, for example at smaller informal markets.

The busy street scenes visible in Duncan Village seem to have arisen from the fact that people are making a living in, or in connection to, the streets. We have also seen that many of the residents are performing their everyday activities such as cooking, washing and eating along the streets. The public room seem to be used as an extension of the private dwelling when not having enough space at home, in a sense as an urban living room.

There are not many large green areas for public recreational purposes in Duncan Village. Those that are existent are a cemetery in Duncan Village West and a former burial ground in Duncan Village Central. The latter is suggested by the municipality to be developed into a memorial park. Duncan Village West has the largest amount of open land but not many people are seen using these spaces. Along the rivers are also large green areas, but these are often inaccessible due to the terrain with brushy vegetation and steep slopes. Smaller areas that are left between informal constructions on the river banks are used for cultivation by the people living there, as well as left over space in street verges.

douglas smit highway

Most of the streets in Duncan Village have a vivid street life, especially in the west and central parts of the area, but is most evident at Douglas Smit Highway. The street runs centrally through Duncan Village and even though there is no clear formal gathering point in the area we have seen that Douglas Smit Highway plays the leading role in where public activities are conducted and where people meet. Most of the other streets in Duncan Village are connect to Douglas Smit Highway and it is therefore highly accessible for all of the residents.

Douglas Smit Highway is in many parts too extensively dimensioned as it is designed to carry a lot of traffic, a function that now has been taken over by the Ziphunzana Bypass running north of Duncan Village. Today Douglas Smit Highway does not cater for its name since it is shared both by pedestrians and motor traffic.

Douglas Smit Highway has sidewalks on both side of the street but these are narrow and without proper pedestrian crossings. High light poles are set up with long distances between them and there are no trees or other elements that define the streetscape or give shadow. Proper stops for minibus taxis are lacking, creating a close to chaotic traffic situation.

As Douglas Smit Highway is the main street in Duncan Village and the link which connects the three neighbourhoods, the street among others used by scholars walking to and from school. The lack of proper crossings, traffic lights and proper bus stops therefore makes the journey to and from school unsafe for many children in Duncan Village.

commercial activities

There are four areas with formal commercial activities in Duncan Village, all of them situated in connection to Douglas Smit Highway, but at the same time located in the periphery away from the largest concentrations of residential settlements. The proper commercial establishment in Duncan Village have little public life around them and seem to lack customers while there is a lot of activity around the informal commercial developments which are predominate through the whole of Duncan Village. Perhaps the reason is that formal commercial activities for many years were forbidden and do not yet feel like a natural part of the urban structure.

The informal commercial activities mainly consist of small shops called Spazas, market stands, Shebeens (informal taverns set up in people’s private homes), workshops such as car repairs, timber yards as well as many hairdressers.

The Spazas and markets stands are located at strategic places mainly along parts of Douglas Smit Highway where there is an intense movement of people. That is at intersections, outside public facilities as schools, and in connection to the main dense living areas. Even though the informal trading looks temporary, with goods put up on tables or on the ground along the side of the road, it appears to have an organized system. The reason is that the same traders are always seen at the same spots.

We found out that many of the residents choose to shop at the larger markets in East London because of a better range of goods offered and at lower prices than in the formal shops and Spazas in Duncan Village. Many young people go to Vincent Park, the major shopping centre in East London, but mainly for leisure activities such as going to the movies.

26 Buffalo City Municipality (2004)
27 Mjushelo, V. interview 10/11-2004