Human Geographies of Stellenbosch

Transforming Space,
Preserving Place?

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11. In the footsteps of street busker groups in Stellenbosch

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Introduction

A busker is a person sounding or playing a musical instrument, singing, reciting, performing, conjuring, juggling, puppeteering, miming, dancing or other kinds of entertainment, or doing any of those things concurrently in the street or other public place voluntarily in exchange for donations (Cox & Guaralda 2016; City of Cape Town 2017; Street Activity Policy 2011). Street busking gives people encouragement and ambitions to share their talent with the public. We use the term busker interchangeably with street performer. Buskers can be any gender, population or age group. Street performances are designed to exhibit cultural identities for the attention of different audiences, visitors or locals (Carlin 2014). The performances have a meaning of their own and are identified by diverse cultures.

Busking is a centuries-old tradition. During the Middle Ages in Europe, local traders invited entertainers or performers to their stores, plazas and public squares to attract pedestrians to support the vendors' businesses. The American busking tradition originated with several circuses that moved around from city to city, coast to coast. Performances such as comics, sword-swallowing, acrobatics and juggling that took place on street corners eventually became the foundation for modern-day American street culture (Busker Street Union 2016). Professional buskers are full-time street entertainers who derive their livelihood from their performances (Lief 2008). Buskers are generally considered part of the informal economy and busking is a survival strategy to secure a livelihood. As Meletakos (2012, s.p.) explains: "Some busk for that bit of extra cash, some treat it almost as a music industry entry-level job and for others, it's a means of survival." Busking brings entertainment to urban public spaces that is generally considered to be positive (Smith 2016). Busking is still in its infancy in South Africa.

The limited research however done internationally on buskers frames investigations in terms of the engagement of buskers in public spaces (Kushner & Brooks 2000; Lief 2008; Kozyr 2015; Marina 2016; Smith 2016). Research on buskers, street musicians or performers and their activities in a South African context is very scant. This chapter aims to help fill the void by reporting on an investigating of four street buskers in Stellenbosch.

After a brief review of the limited literature, the policy context of busking in Stellenbosch is discussed, followed by documenting four busker groups’ everyday experiences.

Busking in public spaces

In the context of Lefebvre’s (1991) notion of the right to the city, the design and use of public space should be to facilitate “... freedom of expression and incite a sense of spatial ownership” (Cox & Guaralda 2016, p.113). When most cities started to suburbanize en masse in the 1960s and 1970s urban planners recognized the danger of emptying traditional city centres. At the same time, street arts (among others busking) reappeared as an important form of urban arts. In the 1970s street arts moved away from the notion of public space as a functional space, instead regarding them as common places used by everyone. As a result, street arts “... gave new identities to old city centres, and as such, became tools of the urban regeneration process (Floch 2007, p.27).

Figure 11.1 Consumption ideologies of public space (Visconti, et al. 2010, p.516)

Urban music in general, according to Shabazz (2014), is a product of the socio-spatial variability of development and in essence therefore it is a product of geography. When conceptualizing urban space as a collective good, Visconti et al. (2010) do so in the context of confrontation and, sometimes, the alignment between artists’ and the public’s visions and practices about the use of cityscapes and the role played by street arts (Figure 11.1). This analytic framework also applies to buskers. To them there are two mutually exclusive ways of appraising public space, namely individualistic versus collectivistic. On the one hand individualistic appraisal implies subscription to the private appropriation of public space. In such public spaces the performers and/

or dwellers "... act as separate agents who claim personal entitlement to public space or who dispose of these public spaces according to market rules. Consequently, they consider public space as a personal property that is contested among the parties" (Visconti, et al. 2010, p.515). On the other hand, collectivistic appraisal acknowledges the sharing of public space in the common interest. Both groups aim to defend the collective ownership of public space while striving for its restitution to meaningful consumption (Visconti, et al. 2010). In this sense, public place consumption has been interpreted by Sherry (1998) as servicescapes. According to Carlin (2014, p.1): "The collaborative production by people, which is made up of walking, arriving, and hanging around and passing by, is the social organization of public space." It is argued that public space brings people together to allow and engage in social contact. In the case of street buskers, urban public space plays a significant role in the social activities they participate in. Different groups of people have specific professional interests in their activities and their interactions with others in the same spaces. Seen as an individualistic basis the act of performing in an open public space affects self-confidence and allows performers to develop a greater sense of self-reliance. It even leads "... to a better understanding and awareness of people and leading to greater compassion towards people, both towards the audience and towards other buskers" (Hanáková 2016, p.38).

Street performance is an essential part of a city's street culture that advances the adaptive use of public spaces. In Sydney, Australia, for example it was found that the strong tradition of busking contributes to a sense of place in the city where buskers make "... an important contribution to the cultural life of a city by reflecting styles, values and the issues of society at large" (Quilter & McNamara 2015, p.566). According to Quilter and McNamara (2015, p.541) busking not only "... adds colour and energy and enhances the urban mood; an antidote to, and welcome respite from, the routine, stress and intensity of urban transit" it also has negative characteristics, such as "... a blight on the urban soundscape." Busking can, for example become a nuisance that the public want to get rid of, simply because activities in public spaces are all subject to different rules and regulations (some informal) according to which buskers have to operate. An illuminating example is patrons eating at a restaurant who want to dine without any distractions, while others think it is acceptable to have street buskers 'share' their space (Quilter & McNamara 2015). The receptacle (a hat or any form of holder) placed in front of the busking group and the nature of the surrounding spaces where they perform are features that reflect what the buskers earn (Nicholas 2017). For many street performers, tourists are their target market and their main source of income. When audience members tip performers, they tip for the experiences. Because busking is a form of entertainment where a person can watch the entire performance and decide how much the experience is worth, tipping or not will significantly impact on how much money street buskers make. Therefore, "Busking lacks mechanisms to ensure payment by the audience in exchange for consumption of the product, and as such resembles a classic public good" (Kushner & Brooks 2000, pp.66).

In the late 20th and early 21st centuries there has been an observable international "... movement away from criminal law-based prohibition and discouragement of busking towards regulatory regimes that purport to simultaneously encourage and control busking" (Quilter & McNamara 2015, p.541). The primary controlling mechanism is

permits issued on payment of licence fees. In some extreme cases auditions restriction to certain locations, volume restrictions and duration limits are imposed. Hefty fines are issued for illegal busking (Quilter & McNamara 2015). Municipalities control the production and transmission of sound through by-laws that focus on noise and zoning which typically involve the regulating of public space (Stiegler 2017). For a review of the variety of approaches, strategies and regulations that cities around the world employ in order to manage street performing see The Busking Project (2017).

‘Regulating’ busking in Stellenbosch

Street buskers have not been a common feature of life in urban South Africa. However, over the last decade Stellenbosch has seen a slow-growing number of buskers performing in the streets, mainly in front of restaurants and occasionally on street corners. In summer, when tourism is at its peak, one could find up to seven buskers performing on any given night, but during winter the performances are determined by the weather and the number of performers dwindles to one or two. Most of the buskers operate from late afternoon until around 9p.m. and one of the groups only performs in the daytime. Given that Stellenbosch is a major tourism destination and a well-known university city, one would expect to see many more such performers. In view of the limited number of buskers operating in the city it is not surprising that this form of informal economic activity is not placed high on the policy and regulation agenda of the municipality. Because busking is more like a job than a hobby it is necessary to appreciate the rules that assist or impede a street performer.

According to the Acting Director of the Stellenbosch Municipality Events and Fleet Management, Law Enforcement and Protection Services, busking is not prohibited, but should be done with permission from the municipality. The Stellenbosch Municipality by-law on streets (Province of the Western Cape 2010, pp.905-906) stipulates that:

No person shall hold, organise, initiate, control or actively participate in a procession or gathering in a street or public place, or dance or sing or play a musical instrument, or do anything which is likely to cause a gathering of persons or disruption or obstruction of traffic in such street or public space except with the written permission of the municipality, and in accordance with the conditions prescribed by the municipality.

The application process for busking requires buskers to write a letter to the municipality asking for permission to engage in busking activities. There is no prescribed fee payable. This letter must include details about where performers want to busk, at what times and for how long. If they perform without following the official application procedure they will be regarded as illegal buskers, and will be given warnings, issued with fines or have their belongings confiscated. Confiscated instruments can be retrieved on payment of an impoundment fee of no less that R600 per day. When asked if the Municipality has received any complaints from restaurant owners or the general public, the acting director mentioned that they have received complaints about disturbances and from clients that feel harassed. Contrarily, there are those who ask why the buskers are chased away, as they provide amusement to patrons and tourists. Despite having

to obtain permission to perform in Stellenbosch, none of the four groups has official approval, so that all their street performances are technically illegal. Nonetheless, the law-enforcement officials turn a blind eye to the buskers because they generally do not fulfill the requirements of the application process. As one officer remarked:

As much as busking is illegal without permission from the municipality, we are still human. In recent years, the regulation of busking has become stricter, but we still see illegal busking taking place which makes these by-laws purposeless. This is an example of authorities turning a blind eye to the fact that buskers keep on busking without their permission."

(Law-enforcement official, Personal interview, 2017)

Portfolio of four Stellenbosch street-busker groups

The performances of four street-performing groups were documented. Field notes were made as we wanted to capture the public's reactions and actions, and their general behaviour towards the street performers. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the street buskers to find out about their daily lives and their performance strategies. Observing the buskers and engaging them in informal conversations took place over two months in 2018.

The Intshukumo Cultural Group

This is a group of Xhosa girls and boys ranging in age from 7 to 18 years. The group performs a range of activities from playing the djembe drum, doing drama, reciting poetry, playing music and dancing. Their performances are ideally authentic and aimed to attract the attention of passers-by. The group comes from the Enkanini Section of an informal settlement in Stellenbosch's township, Kayamandi. All the group members are still school-going youth and school attendance remains their priority over street busking which they do on weekends and during school holidays.

Since formation in October 2017, the group has performed anywhere they have had the chance to do so, whether in front of restaurants and galleries or in open spaces where people can see and hear them. One of the three group leaders asserted that the "... main aim of the group is to give back the cultural aspect, to reveal more of the different cultures and that morality is their first priority" (Interview, Intshukumo cultural group leader, August 2018) and he further noted that the positive outcome for the group is that the children "... learn mentorship and how to behave during the different age stages of life" (Intshukumo Cultural Group leader, personal interview, August 2018).

The group has faced several challenges since they started performing publicly. They have lost friends due to their success in the busking field, because of false accusations by their close friends and family, even the community of Kayamandi. When they started the community did not support them in any way because the latter believed that the group leaders used the group as a shield for exploiting the children to do their performances and then taking the monetary donations for themselves. The group recalled that the biggest single tip they had ever received was R900.

The group is clearly dedicated to their performances as they practice daily after school. The three leaders also play an important role in the children's lives by helping them with their homework during the practice sessions. The leaders take full responsibility for the children's well-being when they are in their care. The group intends to differentiate themselves from other buskers by registering as a non-profit organisation (NPO). The reason for seeking differentiation is to give the group credibility and to keep everything 'legitimate'. The group has a commendable practice whereby each member has a responsibility he or she is duty-bound to take care of. This makes it easier and more accessible for the group members to be informed about what is happening so that they do not miss any instructions or news.

Street Evolution

Street Evolution hails from Ocean View, Cape Town. The group's name is derived from busking being a form of street entertainment. Their performances range from guitar, trumpet and trombone music to doing vocal entertainment which is their preferred genre. The group comprises three members aged between 25 and 35, plus a member who helps out when one of the others is unavailable. The group has been together for two-and-a-half years. The members work part-time anywhere they get the opportunity to do so as they did not have fixed jobs. Whereas their intention with busking is to support their respective families, one group member felt that it is very difficult to get into the busking industry, not because of lack of talent due to not knowing how the business side works. He said: *Maar die mikpunt is ook maar om te versorg vir ons se klein families by die huis, want ons het nie 'n day job nie en none of us have qualifications. Meeste van ons het kinders en ons bid maar altyd vir daai geleentheid, daai breakthrough you know* (The aim is to support our small families at home, because we do not have a day job and none of us has qualifications. Most of us have children and we pray always for that opportunity, that breakthrough you know). He added that they take their music very seriously, "But first things first, we do what we do to survive." Members of the group also mentioned that during off-season periods, they sit at home or look for part-time jobs to support their families. They do, however, occasionally busk during out-of-season weekends in Stellenbosch and other places in Cape Town. Average income earned during the high season is around R1000 per day, but during low seasons they may make as little as R80 a day. Their daily target is R500 which they feel is enough to support their families on a daily basis.

A group member mentioned that they often face certain busking-related challenges. At 'work' they sometimes have to deal with audiences that do not like their performances, even that they get chased away leaving them without any income or with very little for the day. It is vital that buskers cultivate a good public image so that the public, their main source of income, will continue to reward them for their performances. Public spaces are supposed to bring people together to promote social contact, but unfortunately in Street Evolution's case, the opposite has occurred, with them being chased out of public spaces. On such occasions they get home and have to deal with their unhappy families that berate them for not making enough money to support the family. Another problem is that the group members cannot qualify for any loans or credit because their income is not fixed. A member summed up their dilemma as: "We come to perform at

our utmost best, but then there is always that one person who breaks our spirit, which is another big challenge that we are faced with.”

The Mystros

This is a minstrel group of three from an Afrikaans-speaking, coloured community called Delft in Cape Town. For their performances they always dress in bright colours and their singing is accompanied by their playing of musical instruments. They are all men aged between 27 and 55 years who have been buskers for ten years, so making them the longest existing busker group in Stellenbosch. Busking for many years has been the only source of income contributing towards their household livelihoods. Prior to busking, all the members had jobs that did not work out. They busk mainly to support their families and to overcome poverty. One of the members explained that: *Ons maak 'n lewe vir ons self deur busking want in Delft word ons vryheid van ons weggeneem.* (We make a living for ourselves through busking, because in Delft you can easily get stripped of your freedom). When asked why they choose to busk in Stellenbosch and not somewhere else to answer was that: *Stellenbosch se lewenswyse is pragtig en die plek is uniek op sy eie* (Stellenbosch's lifestyle is beautiful and the place is unique on its own). Their shinning dress code is important to them because it shows the public “that something is about to happen.” Their clothes get people's attention and they add to the popularity of their entertainment.

The Super African Acrobatics

This group originates in Tanzania but the members have been living in Delft, Cape Town, for almost five years. The members perform a variety of body-strengthening and body-contorting acts that are very entertaining but dangerous. Their performances are based on coordination, agility and balancing skills using each other as human structures on which they perform gymnastic routines such as somersaults and handstands. They also add a touch of comedy, starting off every act with a “Hello professor”. Their first performance was in 2013 in Tanzania. They migrated to South Africa where they had no contacts in or connections to the busking industry. They started to busk on weekends to gain exposure to South African audiences, but primarily to make a living. The group now travels abroad whenever they get the opportunity to perform at an international event. They have performed in Saudi Arabia and locally at the National Arts Festival in Grahamstown, the Hermanus Whale Festival and at several festivals in Bloemfontein. The group consists of five male members aged between 21 and 35. They are all the breadwinners of their households. They all rely on tips collected during their daily performances as their primary income sources. Box 11.1 provides a glimpse of them on a day in 2018.

Box 11.1 Observation narrative of the Super African Acrobatics

During their performance on Tuesday 24 July 2018, the researcher (Adams) observed and followed the group around while also asking them questions. They all met together on The Braak at 14:45 after travelling from Delft to Stellenbosch. They had lunch before they started to busk at 17:20 when patrons began to arrive at restaurants after work. They agree that their attire is important and people take note of their similar clothing which is usually black-grey-yellow-dotted.

As we walked from The Braak, passing Checkers in Mill Street, we moved down Dorp Street. The members were on the lookout for restaurants where there were people to entertain. The first restaurant where they performed was in front of The Hudson's Burger Joint at 17:30 because it was packed with students. Before they started their performance, one of the group members put a hat on the ground to collect donations. The students, passers-by and customers all seemed intrigued by the performances, but they just watched the performance as a distraction from their own personal conversations and nothing more. During the performance only a few students and passers-by put small change in the hat. As they saw people's attention turning away from their performance, they stopped and continued to walk down Dorp Street, where they performed in front of De Akker. During the performance there they received no interest at all which convinced them to leave. While they had been walking up Dorp Street one of them commented: "I'm afraid this is what most of our days look like during winter when there are less audiences to perform for." But, he went on to say: "There is no way out for us, this is our work." Nonetheless, he and the other members of the group are confident in their ability to support themselves and their families during the low-season periods.

The group's preferred busking spots are not in Stellenbosch but in Camps Bay. One member commented that "Camps Bay is the best place to perform in, because every day is high season, there's a lot of people and we make the most money there." When asked whether they ever get chased away from restaurants or challenges they have experienced while performing, they responded they do not get chased away because they already know where they may or may not perform.

Discussion

The word 'pitch' is the term buskers use to describe the location where they perform. Pitch is key to buskers' success because an act that might work at a specific place and time does not necessarily work in another. According to Gardair, Healey and Welton (2011, p.51): "Street performers use carefully designed interactions to: create their performance space, build their audience, and elicit payment. Two of the key transformations a performer must achieve are (1) to transform a public space into a distinctive performance place that passers-by acknowledge as such; and (2) to turn a crowd of passers-by into an audience." A direct relationship exists between geographical space and the specific time periods that street buskers perform because the appeal of the locations where the buskers perform can change throughout the day (Kushner & Brooks 2000). According to Cox and Gauralda (2016, p.121): "Buskers often get more interest at night because people are out to be entertained whereas people generally have an agenda throughout the day." Common pitches are often in public spaces where there are large numbers of pedestrian traffic but few distractions and little background noise. With the exception of the Intshukumo Cultural Group who perform at selected open spaces where they can gather a group of passers-by, the Stellenbosch busking scene is really confined to public spaces outside restaurants. Buskers also adjust their performances to encourage donations from potential customers (Lief 2008). As many of the patrons at restaurants in Stellenbosch are local residents or students, buskers are wise to adjust their performances. The field observations however showed that The Super African Acrobats and the Street Evolution musicians regularly adjusted their performances.

Buskers share the streets and open spaces with everyone making use of public spaces. Such sharing of public space can often be confrontational, so buskers need to always choose their pitches sensibly and be prepared to change location if for some reason their act is not suitable for that space on a given day or time. A pitch should be chosen so as to not cause noise or inconvenience to businesses or at shop entrances. Disapproval by inconvenienced crowds negatively affect buskers' acts. Buskers have their particular routes they follow daily to pitches. In most cases performers have fixed busking locations as they know where they are allowed or not allowed to busk. One of the groups reported the experience of being chased away on several occasions which forced them to change certain busking locations. Being chased away from pitches is distressing to buskers, especially when they know that there are audiences or tourists at the locations who are willing to reward them financially for their performances.

All the groups have access to human capital that is their skills and physical well-being to pursue their entertainment activities. However, when their physical health is compromised for example, if one or more of them are sick or injured, the group is unlikely to have a support network of people to call on. Such incidents can prevent them from pursuing their daily busking activity. Detrimental loss of income is the result. Social capital is the resources and relationships of trust that people use to pursue their livelihoods (Rakodi & Lloyd-Jones 2002). Social capital of the busker groups revolves around the relationships they have with one another. In one of the cases studied the group leader regularly pays for the whole group's transport costs, mostly from his own pocket. In another case the group members do pay their own transport costs but help each other out when money is lacking. Some of them live together to save expenses, so reflecting how "... one asset can be used in order to gain access to another" (Makhetha 2010, p.42).

The availability of money is a problem buskers face daily. Informal economic activities attract those who have "... limited opportunities for obtaining formal employment or prestigious business and minimizes chances of social exclusion and marginalization" (Timalsina 2011, pp.27). It is noteworthy that although it is usually poorer people who engage in informal activities, such as street performances, not all street buskers are poor. The potential for doing business differs vastly between those who perform to survive compared to those who perform to perform. All four groups investigated perform to earn a living. Three of the groups travel from Cape Town (as far as from Ocean View) to Stellenbosch, so large and unavoidable transport expenses to perform. The buskers do not have easy or assured access to financial capital because they have no certainty that they will busk every day due to situations such as poor weather, limited access to transport or other commitments restricting freedom of action. The participants were not asked how much they earn, but it was established that busking is their only source of income to support their families. One member of a group mentioned that he has four family members to support and that the group income is first divided among all the group members before getting his share as opposed to other members who only have themselves to support. Because the buskers are members of the informal economy the earning of a living is typically a daily trial. The restrictions of the Covid-19 lockdown on movement of people and the closure of restaurants for an indefinite period has had an

undoubtedly major impact on the livelihoods of the buskers. Although these restrictions were imposed at the end of the peak tourist season there were at least another two months to work before the start of the Western Cape's rainy winter season.

Conclusion

The chapter has explored the practices, experiences and motives of buskers in central Stellenbosch. The continued presence of busking in Stellenbosch demonstrates that buskers are largely accepted and appreciated. Notwithstanding the strict regulations applicable to busking (fortunately none of which have been officially applied) the buskers have been relatively unhindered in the use of Stellenbosch's public spaces outside restaurants as their main performance pitches.

Floch (2007, p.31) holds that a busking performance "may change the whole urban area; temporarily transform the use of the place and the relationship between the space and its inhabitants ... or contribute to their identities." The buskers in Stellenbosch do provide entertainment and at times their performances are thought-provoking experiences for the audiences. However, because the buskers move from one venue to another and not remain at one specific public space for long, it often results in the audiences' experience of the performances being watered down. Often after singing one song or doing one performance the buskers move on. Sometimes they would not even finish a song when it was apparent that no more tips were forthcoming.

Cape Town's Victoria & Alfred Waterfront hosted the country's first Busking Festival in October 2016. The festival has subsequently become an annual event. The festival where entry is free aims to recognize and showcase busking as an art form. Stellenbosch's tourism agency, ideally in collaboration with the municipality and private organizations could organize a similar event or create opportunities for the buskers to perform at the monthly street soirées during peak season and be part of the annual Stellenbosch Food and Wine Festival (see Chapter 13). The existing corps of buskers will, however, have to be convinced that they must improve and expand their acts into uninterrupted performances of at least 30 to 45 minutes duration as opposed to their present working strategy of very short shows culminating in rapid moves off to the next venue. Fixed locations as at a festival or soirée will demand adjustment to performances but would quite likely yield richer returns. The absence of a national buskers association shuts out any assistance to the buskers in a range of ways that other associations in the arts provide for their stakeholders.

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