JEPPE: 'THE CHAOS PRECINCT' 

Johannesburg Inner City I 2011

Suburban malls on the other hand host retail activity on multiple levels with shops facing inwards. Parking and loading occur on site in parking lots and delivery zones, and are separated. Shoppers are shielded from all vehicular traffic and the designs aim to achieve 'orderliness, unity and beauty' in a controlled environment.

The characteristics of a typical building in Jeppe combine these elements in a unique way as medical offices have been converted into vertical shopping malls. Here retail and wholesale activity occurs simultaneously on multiple levels and up to six storeys above ground level. Shops face both outwards to the street and inwards onto multiple circulation spaces within the building. For potential traders, the area maximises choice by offering a diverse range of retail spaces.

In the Jeppe hybrid, the land use mix on the upper floors includes retail, commercial and manufacturing, and even churches. Storage occurs on the uppermost levels. Basements might host cars, but also storage facilities and even shops. And intense walking, loading and parking occur in the road reserve, alongside both formal and informal trading.
In an extreme display of agglomeration economics, multiple traders sell similar branded and unbranded goods. It is an unglamorous tapping into the psyche of a nation of spenders, where today's fashion is king.

The similarity of goods repeats in hawker stands that front onto the shops, as each trading space vies for the consumer footfall on the 3m-wide pavement. As a result, the press of pedestrians is then funneled into the 1.5f2m-wide pavement space not occupied by trader stalls and displays. At peak times shoppers, coffee sellers, trolley pushers and pedestrians move in both directions, while also stopping en-route to look or buy. At 3 abreast there are often human traffic jams. And it is not unusual for the negotiations for space to fail utterly for a moment as pedestrian traffic comes to a complete halt.

Nowhere is the sham of the terms 'formal' and 'informal' better demonstrated than in the many layers of legality and illegality, the intricacy of relationships between the traders, the modes of contracting and the allocation and use of space that govern Jeppe.

For neither the formality of a shop nor the supposed informality of a hawker coincides with whether the goods sold are more or less legal, whether taxes are paid, whether invoices are written or whether a relationship exists with the municipality.

This shopping experience is seemingly not 'the mall', except where it is - where street level shops have been converted into miniature malls. Here the usual mall trappings of overhead fluorescent lighting, white floor tiles, uniform shop fittings and the potential to linger, are offered by corridors that have been carved into the building's intestines - shops that are no deeper than the width of a shirt.

As if there can never be enough shops, trading space is subdivided on a weekly basis as one shop evolves into two or more. The frenzy for space has resulted in conversions into split-level shops. Even basement ramps have been transformed into lines of shops.

Respite from the mayhem at street level is found in coffee shops located on several floors. Here groups of mostly Ethiopian men relax, make deals, network, exchange news and arrange savings clubs.
And barbers, internet cafes and CD shops occupy compact spaces that share drywalls with curtaining shops, clothing shops, tailors and with stores selling Ethiopian spices, religious items, ceremonial clothing, and magazines with titles such as ESAU, an acronym for 'Ethiopian-South-African-Unity'.

The activities of trade, delivery, storage and stocktaking happen simultaneously rather than in sequence. Just as trade takes place at all hours so loo delivery is at a constant flow.

Monthly rentals of up 10 R2000 per square metre are being achieved in the most densely shopped parts of Jeppe, in comparison with those of about R140-180/m2 in the body of the inner city, or maximum rentals of R320/m2 in Soweto malls and R800/m2 in Sandton malls. In fact rentals in Jeppe rank amongst the highest retail rentals in the world.

The public environment can be inhospitable. Neither traders nor municipal entities pay much attention to pedestrian comfort in what is the most intensely walked area of the inner city.

Building conditions are variable. Robust trading and turnover and high rentals do not translate into investment in buildings. Lifts work intermittently, fire escapes are often blocked up, and there are numerous fire hazards. Despite its material and economic logic, the area is crowded, decaying, congested, and bursting at its seams. But Jeppe is now the throbbing heart of the city.

Back to Panel 1