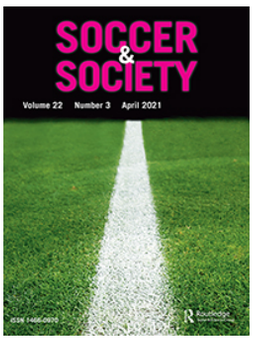

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The genesis of a football field: urban football in Soweto, South Africa

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ABSTRACT

The township of Soweto is formally a part of the Johannesburg Metropole and is home to an estimated 1.3 million people. While this famous high-density suburb has served as a subject for a broad spectrum of social-scientific enquiries, anthropological perspectives on grassroots football in the township have not yet been offered. Using a grounded methodological approach and drawing on extended ethnography, this article argues that football grounds are dependent not only on the materials they are constructed from but also on the social relations forming them. The point of departure of this article, empirically and analytically, is a football ground that both unfolds and disappears in the course of an afternoon. I argue that the forming and framing of the football facility develops through boundaries of meaning that convey key messages regarding identity and community in the township.

Introduction

A game of football does not require much. A few players that agree to the same rules, some kind of ball and a place to play – a football field that does not have to be marked, levelled, rectangular, or grass-covered. Football grounds can range from large commercialized stadiums that comply with international standards to paved inner city streets. What then is the common denominator among all these football grounds? Are there any key elements that define a place of football? This article aims to provide some insight into these questions, and I see no better starting point than telling the story of the genesis of a football field.

In the township of Soweto on the outskirts of Johannesburg in South Africa, football is played in a variety of grounds; many of the playing grounds are flexible in character and improvised on demand. At least this rings true for the grounds that are used for casual games and informal kick-arounds amongst friends. In a densely populated township like Soweto, the luxurious option of having numerous open areas purely designated for the game of football is mostly out of reach. In this township, football simply cannot permanently occupy a large area of public space. Therefore, football grounds must be improvised. The point of departure of this article is a football ground that has a cyclical lifespan. The game and the ground are both created and dissolved within a two-hour period; both are resurrected every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday just to disappear again on the evening of their birth. Observing this phenomenon, this article sets out to answer the following questions: How is a local football ground created? What is its genesis?

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In the introduction to a recent special issue of Soccer & Society, O'Gorman argues in favour of the necessity of developing a research agenda in junior and youth grassroots football culture.[1] Although this special issue addresses a wide spectrum of interesting subjects in the field of grassroots football, O'Gorman acknowledges that there is still very little empirical and theoretical knowledge on grassroots football, globally, in the social sciences.[2] In this article, I intend to help fill the lacuna through perspectives on grassroots football that is understood as an important leisure activity for the young adult population. By drawing heavily on ethnographic material, I aim to shed light on how a small group of young men create a rather modest and fleeting sporting facility. The overall objective is to focus on what constitutes a football ground by attempting to capture a defining moment and documenting the process of how a football ground comes to life. Although, this analytical exercise can be executed rather sufficiently in a purely theoretical landscape, substantiating the analytical and theoretical constructions with empirical evidence provides an important contribution, both for the understanding of global grassroots football and for adjusting existing perspectives on football grounds. By permitting the empirical findings to guide the analysis, this article aims to advance existing understanding of the essentials of a sporting facility from a thoroughly grounded perspective.

Approaches to football grounds

Before attending to the empirical material presented, it is only natural to examine the relevant social scientific literature devoted to the study of sporting facilities. The study of sporting places is not an overlooked theme in sociology and anthropology. Rather, the spaces and places of sport are part of the geographically inspired field of research. In an effort to summarize the current research agenda, Giulianotti outlines the range of sociological topics that deal with the spatial aspects of sports by addressing four major areas of inquiry.[3] The first area deals with sporting spaces, emotional attachments and meaning.[4] The second area addresses issues regarding the political economy of sporting landscapes, while the third and fourth area raise questions that explore the postmodern aspects of sporting arenas, sporting spaces and social control.[5] While insights from all these areas may prove fruitful in terms of the objective of this article, the research that analyses social and cultural meaning related to spaces and places of sport most closely associates with understanding the emergence of grassroots football grounds. Bale pioneered pivotal work in sports geography from the 1980 s onwards and provided significant contributions to the understanding of how sporting facilities relate to identity and society.[6] However, Bale often focused on established arenas or larger stadiums, devoting less attention to the small-scale football grounds where grassroots football plays out, thereby leaving an important thematic area unattended.

Further, through anthropological work on football in Argentina, Archetti connected urban and rough playing surfaces, the *potreros*, where young boys learn the craft of the Argentinian style of football, with national narratives of masculine identity.[7] Although Archetti described the *potreros* as territories where freedom and creativity are experienced, he did not further discuss spatial dimensions; thus, insights into the creation of the grounds has never been fully obtained.[8] Further, Wise's work on everyday sporting practices in the Dominican Republic addressed the issue of local sporting fields to portray how they can be utilized in different ways as well as provide the foundation for meaningful expression of identity and community.[9] However, the work attends to how sporting spaces are experienced and imagined rather than dealing explicitly with the empirical creation of sporting grounds. On the other hand, Baller based her article on empirical findings that reveal how vacant spots in Dakar are transformed into football fields by the urban population, thereby becoming spaces of self-representation in the public sphere.[10] Baller found that young people appropriate 'empty' spaces by turning them into sporting sites that facilitate the production of sociability, identities and imaginations.[11] However, the article placed a stronger emphasis on what creating a football field leads to in terms of relational production instead of focusing on what creates the football field.

For the purpose of this article, Tangen's work provides useful insights into the constitutional elements of sporting facilities.[12] Theoretically breaking down sporting facilities, Tangen claimed to have found their essence in that sporting grounds are embedded with silent expectations that communicate that there is a right and a wrong way to bodily perform a sport at a given facility.[13] From Tangen's viewpoint, the sporting facility is a materialized expectation of sport.[14] He argued that the creation of a sporting facility first begins with a distinction that communicates the dichotomy that 'this is sport' and 'that is everything else', which implies a necessary dependency between facility and sociality. Further, the inside of a facility is marked in opposition to the outside, with the communicated intention that 'sport must be played here'.[15] As Tangen emphasized, this marking is both temporary and imaginary and grows out of the same mechanics that distinguish sport as a separate societal phenomenon before it eventually materializes into something physical – a sporting facility.[16] I find resonance in Tangen's work when it comes to the understanding of the creation of sporting facilities; however, Tangen only provides a theoretical construction and, thus, an empirical contribution attempting to capture a defining moment is clearly relevant to provide the theories with the friction necessary for further development.

From the ground up

This study employs a qualitative research approach based on participant observation. The empirical material analysed in this paper is produced from ethnographic fieldtrips conducted in 2009, 2015 and 2016. I conducted participant observation in several of the 30 public housing townships that together constitute Soweto, but I limit the concrete empirical descriptions to the events occurring next to a busy intersection between the two neighbouring areas of Orlando and Diepkloof.[17] More specifically, I concentrate on the late afternoon football sessions that I was part of there. Although this may appear like a somewhat narrow out-take, the ambition is to exemplify phenomena that have been reoccurring through a long fieldwork process and the examples represent a broader reality than the specific particularities shown here.

The anthropological methodology emphasizes prolonged fieldwork, a search for disconfirming observations and an attentiveness to context.[18] These research tactics secure a solid foundation for analysis through observation, context and participative role relationships that go beyond the scope of this paper yet still facilitate analytical conclusions. When choosing to focus the analysis on empirical findings from one specific football ground and the events that occurred there, I not only reveal one facet of township football but also provide insight on the constitution of a sporting facility that has applicability beyond the particular context.[19]

Creating a football ground

The ground that this article is based on never appeared like a ground at all when my informants first introduced me to it. If you observe it, it bears none of the usual characteristics of a football field. No sidelines, no goalposts, no grass, no levelling. It is just a place with rusty sand, patches of hard ground and rocks scattered everywhere. Multiple power cables originate from the nearby power plant and are spread out over the ground, approximately 15 metres in the air. These cables are held up by a high metal pole placed close to the centre of the field of play. This ground is located close to the corner of a four-way road junction, where there is frequent movement of public transport on one of the roads. This leads to quite a few people walking diagonally over the ground. It is simply the fastest route between their homes in Orlando and the public taxies along the road.

It was early wintertime in the period when I attended the training sessions. The sun would set early and by the time a sufficient number of players for two teams had met up, it was usually already rather dark. The sessions began by us kicking the ball around a bit while talking, until we agreed that it was time to begin play properly. Then, one of the players would usually announce that all must jog in line, one after another. The first player in the line would then take a sharp right turn and the next

one would take a left turn. This would continue until the group was divided into two halves, thereby creating opposing teams.

Two road maintenance cones on the ground functioned as our goalposts. We placed the cones opposite each other at a distance adjusted according to the number of players who were participating in the training. No attempts were made to mark the sidelines. Since we required some light, we put down the goal cones relatively close to a working streetlight that was erected on one side of the road alongside. This cast a dim light that helped us see properly. The proximity to the road meant that the ball would occasionally roll out onto the street, between passing cars, usually causing the game to pause. On the opposite side of the ground, there were no clear material obstacles to slow the game down, so the field of play was stretched out as far as the ball would roll.

Informal football in Soweto

There is a need for some clarification at this point. What is the relevance of this particular kind of informal playing space in the multitude of Soweto's different football grounds? Footballing facilities in the township range from top international stadiums to informal grounds such as this one; in between these, there are school playgrounds and more formally regulated pitches. Then, the question that comes up is why does this article focus on the ground in question? Firstly, the informal playing space is indicative of a general underdevelopment of sporting facilities in South African townships. Even though the country hosted the FIFA World Cup in 2010, the mega event did little to improve the conditions of grassroots football, since the overall focus of the government was on larger economical perspectives, like branding South Africa as a safe destination for financial investment and tourism, instead of focusing on developing the game at the grassroot level.[20] This is not to say that the 2010 World Cup did not boost a wide series of sport-for-development programmes, ranging from FIFA projects to government-run schemes and community-based initiatives; however, numerous projects had a short lifespan.[21] Of course, these projects could prove to have a long-term positive effect on the development of the game at the grassroots level; however, as Cornelissen notes, the developmental objectives were vaguely conceptualized and continued to change right from the outset, which leaves the long-term outcome of the World Cup's legacy to be highly uncertain.[22]

Secondly, this article's focus on a highly informal playing space is also grounded in historical contexts. Before the Second World War, African workers in the cities had almost no access to sporting facilities, and black sport generally suffered from neglect.[23] Football's popularity grew in the interwar period, but that did coincide with an increase in the number of available sporting facilities.[24] Therefore, the lack of playing spaces forced footballers to develop and practice their skills in spaces that were not proper footballing facilities – in narrow streets, uneven spaces or any accessible open field.[25] The development of footballing skills in these cramped spaces in townships fostered a playing style which valued tight ball control, individualism, toughness and improvisation as opposed to qualities such as team effort, creating spaces, field vision and movement without the ball[26]; the former style remains a playing style that is apparent in townships even today. In the apartheid era, which formally began in 1948, the general neglect of sports turned into structural exclusion, with the authorities constantly limiting black players' access to playing fields and supressing sports in black townships.[27] However, this did not hinder the development of football into becoming a leading expression of black urban culture.[28] Broadly speaking, football in South Africa transformed from being a sport that was exported from the British Empire in the late nineteenth century to a symbol of a unique urban Africanized identity that developed despite the lack of access to sporting grounds.[29] Subsequently, football began playing a larger role in the resistance against apartheid and in the struggle for freedom and democracy. The epicentre of both football and civil resistance in South Africa was located in the township of Soweto.[30]

The type of football ground that this article describes has historical significance and is also an arena for the expression of an urban African identity. While Vidacs argued that researching

sporting practices can be a prism for understanding the cultural, social, political and historical processes underlying the sporting practice, this article seeks to simultaneously use empirical specifics as grounds for a more generalized insight into grassroots facilities.[31]

The ground and the people

The description of the football ground above roughly sketches a material outline of the football facility. However, a description of the scenery does not simultaneously explain how and why the ground was established. An explanation of the ground demands more than merely an account of what it looks like; thus, in order to understand the constitution of the football facility, there is a need to emphasize the relationship among the people who are central to its formation. In order to ensure this, I include a story from a specific training session, written up from field notes, which intends to steer the perspective towards the core of a ground's genesis.

> 'As I tie my boots to get ready, one of my fellow players nudges me with his elbow, as he teasingly points to a third player rubbing lotion on his feet before he puts on his socks and football shoes. I catch on and call out to the lotion-rubbing player that I think he goes a bit overboard to succumb to witchcraft before a friendly training. The guys laugh on the remark. The player laughs as well, but simultaneously acts like he is offended and tells me to get lost, all while smiling at me. We are a bit behind today, so when we actually get the game started, the moon is bright and clear above us. Behind the one goal-cone, there is a field of garbage. The public renovation employees are on strike, which implies that households are dumping their garbage in open spaces around the township. I am deeply concentrated on the game. The darkness makes it difficult for me to recognize my team members, who are all wearing different shirts. I break a glass bottle with my heel while attempting to stop an opponent. He moves swiftly. He knows how to stay balanced better than I do. This is because of the hard surface; I do not trust it. It is unpredictable. It makes the ball move seemingly impulsively when I want to handle it with control. The other players do not mind this issue as they have the technique to overcome it. From time to time, people on their way home walk diagonally over the ground. They are not given any attention. We play around them. At one instance, a pass is heading straight towards a young man crossing the field. He elegantly jumps over the ball. We pay him no mind. Not even the guy who has jacked up his car on the premises hinders us. He lies under it, presumably to fix a motor problem. We try, not always successfully, to play around him and his car as well.
>
> Suddenly, an incident occurs. A man who is not part of the game, who is just walking across the field, finds himself caught in a situation where two players duel over the ball. He casually kicks the ball slightly, makes a comment and keeps on walking. Two of the players react instantly: 'FOOTSECK, WENA!' and 'ZUGA AMAGROUND!' they yell. It means, 'Get out! Leave, leave the ground'. Some more comments are exchanged between the two parties and some manly bodily peacocking is portrayed by one of our players; however, the conflict dies down quickly enough. We play for another hour before we pack up and leave the ground the way we found it'.

Material and meaningful boundaries

Several aspects can be extrapolated from the above empirical vignette, but the one that is most central to this discussion is the issue of boundaries. There are boundaries that exist that separate who is part of the game and who is not, which distinguishes between the insiders and outsiders. The passing man who gets into a conflict with two of our players breaches this boundary. He disrupts the understanding that everyone else in the proximity appear to respect and understand. He interferes with the agreed-upon situation that there is an enclosed group here that is involved in an activity and that outsiders must understand and respect the boundaries that are drawn up by this group. The passer-by is trespassing this boundary by kicking the ball, which sparks a collective reaction. His behaviour is considered provocative and disruptive to what we, the group of footballers, are doing.

If we were to imagine the breaching of a game's boundaries at a more established footballing facility, say a top-level game at a grand stadium, the mere crossing of the chalked sidelines would bring the game to a standstill. The troublesome element would have to be escorted out of the ground

before the game would resume. We also experienced disruption in our small training session and the disruption had to be sorted out before we could continue; however, it was not the trespassing of the physical ground that paused our game. In contrast to top-level matches, the social space that we created – the football game – does not coincide with the spatial layout we call the football ground. People walking on the ground, the mechanic fixing his car, the man who skips over the ball all breach the physical confinements of the intended ground, but they are not simultaneously breaching the boundaries of the game.

In his work on sporting facilities, Tangen emphasized that the materials are loaded with expectations of bodily performance. The markings of the football field, the big stadiums or the sticks marking the golf course – Tangen's own examples – are boundaries of meaning.[32] The boundaries are constituted of silent expectations and communicate who must be active and how this is to be done, thereby conveying inclusion and exclusion.[33] This understanding of a sport facility ascribes meaning to materials. The boundaries of meaning have their home, so to speak, in the physical boundaries of the sporting facility. The sidelines of a football ground function both as the physical lines of inclusion/exclusion and as the bearers of meaning. However, a facility of this stature is in a rather developed state. It has undergone a process where the physical boundaries, materials, and the boundaries of meaning have become somewhat homogenous, almost overlapping. This happens because the physical boundaries of a sporting facility and the actors' practicing sport mutually constitute each other. The actors perform sport at a facility because it *facilitates* that performance; simultaneously, the performance at a given facility reinforces the material boundaries.[34] In the case of our ground, it is different. The ground cannot be identified through its materials. We are not visually able to pinpoint where the ground ends and the surrounding environment begins. The people who are not participating in the game do not recognize, or may not acknowledge, the ground at all; however, it is obviously not a football ground without boundaries because these boundaries quite clearly have the potential for being breached. The boundaries do exist and are apparent when penetrated, but they are not visually observable as an objective thing since they are not rooted in the spatial and material layout of the ground. The boundaries come from somewhere else. One might argue that these boundaries are not yet manifested in the materials; however, that would imply that all football grounds eventually evolve along the same evolutionary line – from vacant plots to fully formed stadiums. In reality, they do not, and this football ground will most likely never develop into a permanent and institutionalized place for football with corresponding amenities.

At this point, the central argument of this article is that the origination of a football ground comes prior to any material establishment. The ground is erected without the need for strict material surroundings and the necessary boundaries are instead drawn up of meaning. However, this meaning does not suddenly appear on the ground; rather, it has its roots in social processes that precede the training itself. Therefore, in the next section of the paper, I examine what *meaning* comprises and how it is created.

The creation of boundaries

The creation of necessary boundaries around the inside group comes from establishing a group that can be referred to as 'us'. This process has a foundation in the sharing of the same intention – that is, to meet up and be part of a football game. This may appear banal, but the creation of the football ground has to begin with the intention of participating in a joint project – playing football. Without the intention of a project such as this, there can be no ground, as it simply would not exist without footballers playing a game. Therefore, the football ground must be understood as a social phenomenon or a social act, and like all social acts, it is not accidentally caused but very much intended.[35]

The process of creating a group of footballers, which is necessary for the creation of the facility, is not only limited to the time actually spent on the ground. On the contrary, the unity of the insider group is created through social action both before and after the actual training session. In particular,

banter, joking and teasing comes across as an important aspect of drawing a boundary around the group and, thus, leaving everyone else on the outside. The group of men playing football is consolidated through social mechanisms that highlight the differences among members and make a mockery of whatever they may be. This is of particular importance in this empirical case, since the group comprises diverse members. Apart from being black men (with me being the only exception), there were a few unifying traits that grouped us together. There were participants from Zimbabwe, Ghana, Lesotho and South Africa. The players did not share the same language or tribal background, and there was a noticeable difference in their personal income and employment levels. A few have permanent jobs while others are involved in more survivalist activities. Nevertheless, there was a sense of togetherness and a wish to create a sense of belonging.[36]

I used some space above to elaborate on the incident where I was involved in some friendly accusations of witchcraft. In the described context, it was a joke, but like most jokes, it has some truth to it. To clarify, the player was not actually indulging in witchcraft, he was merely applying Vaseline on his feet; however, the reality is that witchcraft is common and widespread in Soweto.[37] Banter and joking brings a private and traditional belief to the forefront so that we can together laugh at it in public, thereby drawing up a boundary around us.

The same goes for the arrangement used to divide the group into two opposing teams immediately before the playing commences. When we form a line after each other, we often call it a 'Shangaani line', which is a likening to how family members of Shangaan heritage supposedly walk around the township in line after each other according to their hierarchical position in the family. The joke here is on Shangaan people for their allegedly strong connection to rural and traditional culture and for their reluctance to adjust to the urban life of modern Soweto. Another specific incident follows the same pattern. During training, one of my teammates wanted to give me a quick command to run whilst we were playing. In the heat of the moment, my teammate struggled to decide which language he should address me in. He ended up shouting: 'Gaan! Gaan!' an Afrikaans command that means 'Go!'. The other players who overheard this found it hysterical. The incident was even repeated in our social media group later that same evening. The humour here lies in the confused player desperately attempting to communicate with a northern European man by resorting to a language most commonly spoken by white South Africans. It was funny because it made the player come across as slightly ignorant and naïve for believing that Afrikaans could be a universal medium of communication. He was teased thoroughly for this mistake, just like all of us were periodically the objects of someone's jokes.

The bantering about the modern and the traditional and the rural and the urban is an informal means of incorporating group members. By navigating and understanding the rhetorical landscape, one expresses an understanding of life and identity in the township, which is constituted of a multitude of ethnic, cultural and economic backgrounds. As Douglas notes, an utterance alone rarely takes the joke form by itself but has to be understood in the context of the total social situation.[38] Communicating that one comprehends and accepts the social situation is an important demarcating factor for the creation of a group of insiders. If you can dish out a joke and take one with the same smile, you fulfil a central criteria for being a part of the group of footballers that practices at the ground three nights a week. It is about establishing a singular group that shares an intention, a project and a perception. This group indulges in the same project and plays a vital part in the creation of the football ground.

In an article on pick-up football in Johannesburg, Worby argues in favour of the importance of understanding the role of grassroots football in urban social life.[39] Worby explores how informal football in the city articulates urban social freedom removed from the everyday reality of restraints.[40] In a context limited by violence, apartheid history, ethnicity and poverty, pick-up football provides an arena for experimentation with social imagination and enables the projection of unbounded social futures.[41] The insight provided by Worby bears relevance to the creation of the football ground due to the prospect of a dissolution of the everyday constraints potentially offered by the creation of a footballing space.[42] The aspect that I emphasize here is that while the creation of

the ground depends on a group's unified project, the group is comprised of individuals seeking a temporary social freedom. Therefore, the ground's genesis has its roots in the actors' mutual desire and ambition for an arena that opposes a social context that is experienced as limiting in some manner. Empirically, these sentiments are expressed through the players who understand the training sessions as providing some sort of desired break. For example, several players often came to the ground to train directly from their jobs in the city, and complained that they underwent stress to be able to attend. A few even had to change from their formal attire to their sporting gear in the backseat of their car to save time. Yet, these players prioritized the training sessions as a valuable arena for an opportunity to unwind. One of my informants provided fitting comments in this regard. After a challenging day of car trouble, strenuous moneymaking activity and various family challenges, he remarked that when he noticed that it was time for football, he dropped everything. 'I see that it's past five. I go do what I love', the informant said. Other players came to the training without football shoes and training gear, escaping from an everyday of scraping to get by. On a few afternoons, a former top player – whose alcohol habit had led to his downfall – also joined play.

Although the reason for coming to training differs from individual to individual, the football activity generally provides a temporary relief or suspension from a constraining reality for all the participants. However, it does no escape me that certain players only consider their participation in training as an entertaining leisure activity. Yet, this does not deny the argument that football provides an escape from the mundane everyday for a small window of time. As Huizinga famously noted, play is characterized by its freedom as well as by its opposition to the ordinary, and this perspective holds true for the afternoon kick-about as well.[43]

In order to understand the genesis of the football ground, it is necessary to attempt to trace its origin. The above section describes the social dynamics of creating an 'inside group' and how the members of such a group seek the same temporary space comprising a social framework that opposes ordinary restrictions. What I am arguing is that a football ground begins here, with people looking for a secluded personal arena, which generates a social context that separates the group from everyone else. This again is essential for the creation of the football ground. The social process creates boundaries that carry meaning, where the meaning consists of the actors' intention of indulging in less restricting social imaginaries. However, even though this analytical perspective holds true, it forces us to understand the football ground as a purely abstracted space; however, in both emic and empirical terms, it is a physically concrete entity. In the following section of this article, I bridge the gap between the understanding of the football ground as an abstracted space and the empirical reality that is the facility. By examining how the created boundaries of meaning relate to physical materials, the ambition is to challenge *space* as a category for understanding the genesis of a football ground.

The ground and space

Since I argue that materials are of less importance in the creation of a football ground, am I simultaneously advocating that the ground exists in a pure space removed or differentiated from the ecological environment?[44] Unfortunately, the concept of *space* is not a clearly defined term but rather a geographical topic of debate approached differently by different scientists.[45] Therefore, in this article, the use of the word *space* calls for a clarification regarding what I am attempting to capture here, and I find that Tilley's phenomenologically inspired geography deals with the concept in a manner that can enlighten the genesis of the football ground in question.[46] According to Tilley, space is not an tangible autonomous reality but is something created through social relations and natural and cultural objects.[47] It is not fixed or separated from humans but is always in a state of becoming – produced and achieved by the actors who relate to it.[48] Tilley argued that space requires human activity – an agency – and that space is always experienced as constantly changing.[49] These perspectives resonate with Lefebvre's writings on the term 'social space'.[50] Lefebvre regarded social space not as a static concept removed from humanity but rather

a relational achievement created by, as well as producing, human action.[51] In a similar manner, Tilley advocated that we must regard space as a medium for action as opposed to a container.[52] Spaces are not empty things to be filled with action but, rather, they make action itself possible.[53]

These perspectives on the concept of space certainly ring true in the empirical material presented. Without action, which is the football game, there would be no football ground. The ground is in a dynamic state, characterized by its temporality and dependent on the social relations that produce it for the two-hour training session. This understanding of the football ground highlights space as a subjective dimension which cannot be comprehended in isolation from the intention of the social actors involved in the collective project.[54] In the case of our football ground, all those who play there share an understanding of what this space is. For us, it is a football ground. For the people passing by, it is merely a footpath. For the man under the car, it may be considered a garage. Space is never only one thing, since the meaning of space depends on who in fact is experiencing it; everyone perceives, experiences and creates space differently.

Can I then conclude that the genesis of the football ground is the generation of space? It certainly ticks all the boxes and makes sense analytically, but there is also a problem therein. The concept runs the risk of being too much of an abstract and analytical construct and is far removed from the emic and empirical reality of Soweto football.[55] As I have argued, the football ground is not comprehensible only by its materials, or what it is made of, since you cannot touch, see or sense its expansion; however, simultaneously, the football ground is more than something that is subjectively imagined as existing only as a social construct among the footballers who are playing.[56]

The football ground surely does not exist in some kind of vacuum, unbound from material conditions. It is part of the world of materials, the materials that we necessarily relate to when playing on the ground. Football is a kinetic bodily involvement with the physical world; in our case, the football ground consists of broken glass, the high pole, garbage and darkness – just to mention a few features. Then again, these features are not fundamental for the ground's constitution. Instead, we transgress the material conditions with our intention of playing football. The physical realities are no match for our project, and the materials – whatever they may be – are absorbed by the idea of the football ground. Never in conflict and always, instead, a part of the dynamic and flexible football facility. Tilley's perspectives on space successfully bridge the separation between the conceptual and the physical, yet a somewhat unreleased potential is apparent when Tilley's analysis is up against the empirical results in this article.[57] Although Tilley emphasizes that space is not an autonomous reality but, rather, exclusively relational and created by social relations and various objects, he does not provide insight into *how* this actually happens.[58] The creation of the football ground has its origin in the relationship between social space and the material field; however, to investigate this process, there is a need for a supplementary perspective. Østerberg's theories of socio-materiality offer a possible solution. Østerberg's theorizing on how human action interacts with material surroundings provides insight into how a football ground comes to life.[59] The concept of socio-materiality approaches human life and society as both the product and producer of material surroundings and emphasizes the contingent relationship between human agency and materiality.[60] For Østerberg, human intention could be interpreted as projects designed to model our surroundings.[61] Through these projects, we decide what our surroundings mean and create situations from them.[62] However, our projects do not always lead to successful situations, because the surroundings or the context may oppose or restrict the facilitation of the intention. For example, if we hurt our knee on the corner of a table when crossing a room, it can be considered an interrupted situation. Then, we experience what Østerberg calls the 'facticity' of our surroundings.[63] When human projects encounter materiality as reluctant, facticity is experienced.[64] On the other hand, when the project and situation are perfectly aligned, facticity is not noticeable but transgressed. It is only when a situation is broken that we come to recognize its facticity.[65] In our case of the creation of the football ground, it becomes a situation because the project transgresses the facticity and fittingly models the surroundings. My informants' understanding of what a football ground is differs from how football facilities are more generally

recognized. This is how a football ground can be generated – created as a situation from our project, overstepping the facticity. The idea of the football ground is not limited by an image of chalked-out lines and two goalposts. Had that been the case, our project would have met its facticity rather quickly. Instead, the project, our intention, involves a football ground that is generous, loose and unfixed. The various physical materials in place do not hinder the idea of the ground. Rather, the wide understanding of football grounds incorporates every potentially disturbing physical feature in such a manner that encountering the facticity of the situation remains circumvented.

Conclusion

In this article, I attempted to identify what constitutes a football ground by shedding light on the process of its genesis. The focus on the grassroots game and its facilities offer the possibility of adopting a thoroughly grounded approach, both empirically and analytically. I devoted attention to a football ground that is stripped of all the usual characteristics of a sporting facility and, rather, exists on essentials. It does not have any permanency in terms of the plot of land where it is located, as it unfolds and disappears when needed. The ground never occupies land but co-exists with all other activity that occurs there. It is the social actors who create the football ground and it exists only for them for a limited period in time. By drawing up boundaries of meaning and grouping into insiders and outsiders, the football players create a project from an intention, which then spreads out to become a football ground. The football ground is not dependent on physical conditions but, rather, absorbs the materials, whatever they may be, that become part of the project.

The findings presented here do not aim to refute prior research on the spaces and places of sport. Rather, this article supplements existing research by offering new perspectives on what defines a sporting facility and by providing insight into the creation of a football ground. Further, the article aims to provide the established theoretical constructions with the necessary empirical grounding. On a more general note, I argue that approaching grassroots football facilities and its activity from the ground-up can offer valuable insight into the cultural, contextual and local significance of sport.

Notes

1. O'Gorman J. 'Introduction'.
2. Ibid., 794–5.
3. Giulianotti, *Sport: A Critical Sociology*, 135–6.
4. Ibid., 135.
5. Ibid., 135-6.
6. Bale, 'In the Shadow of the Stadium'; Bale, 'The Changing Face of Football'; Bale, *Sport, Space and the City*; Bale, *Sports Geography*; Bale & Vertinsky, *Sites of Sport*; and Wise, 'Geographical Approaches'.
7. Archetti, *Masculinities*, 180-1; Giulianotti, *Sport: A Critical Sociology*, 138.
8. Archetti, *Masculinities*, 181.
9. Wise, 'Transcending Imaginations'; Wise, 'Layers of the Landscape'; and Wise, 'Maintaining Dominican Identity'.
10. Baller, 'Transforming Urban Landscapes'.
11. Ibid.
12. Tangen, 'Embedded Expectations'; Tangen, 'Making the Space'; Tangen, 'Forholdet Mellom Sosiale Rom'; Tangen, 'Observing Sport Participation'; Tangen, 'Materiality, Meaning and Power'.
13. Ibid.
14. Tangen, 'Embedded Expectations', 10.
15. Tangen, 'Making the Space', 31.
16. Ibid.
17. Krige, 'Inequality and Class', 226.
18. Stewart, *The Ethnographer's Method*, 17.
19. Dyck & Hognestad, 'Anthropological Perspectives'. See this reference for a discussion on anthropology's ability to address broader questions of how sport is socially situated and experienced.
20. Alegi, 'The Political Economy of Mega-Stadiums and the Underdevelopment of Grassroots Football in South Africa'; Alegi, 'A Nation to Be Reckoned With'; Manzo, 'Visualising Modernity'.

21. Cornelissen, Bob & Stewart, 'Towards Redefining the Concept of Legacy in Relation to Sport Mega-events', 314.
22. Cornelissen, 'More than a Sporting Chance?', 526–27; Cornelissen, Bob & Stewart, 'Towards Redefining the Concept of Legacy in Relation to Sport Mega-events'.
23. Alegi, *Laduma*, 28, 57.
24. Ibid, 57.
25. Alegi, *Laduma*, 57; and Nauright, *Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa*, 114.
26. Alegi, *Laduma*, 57–58; and Jeffrey, 'Street Rivalry and Patron-managers'.
27. Alegi, *Laduma.*
28. Ibid.
29. Alegi, *Laduma*; Jeffrey, 'Street Rivalry and Patron-managers'; Nauright, *Sport, Cultures and Identities in South Africa*.
30. Mamdani, *Citizen and Subject*, 21; Alegi, *Laduma*, 2–3; Nauright, *Bhola Lethu*. See Booth, 'Hitting Apartheid for Six?' and Booth, *The Race Game* for an analysis on apartheid and sport politics.
31. Vidacs, 'Through the Prism of Sports'.
32. Tangen, 'Embedded Expectations', 12.
33. Tangen, 'Forholdet Mellom Sosiale rom'; Tangen, 'Observing Sport Participation'; and Tangen, 'Materiality, Meaning and Power'.
34. Østerberg, 'Det Sosio-materielle Handlingsfelt'.
35. Barth, 'Introduction', 3.
36. See Steinbrink, 'The Role of Amateur Football in Circular Migration Systems in South Africa' for further arguments on grassroots football's ability to create togetherness and cooperation.
37. Ashforth, 'Of Secrecy and the Commonplace'.
38. Douglas, 'The Social Control of Cognition', 363.
39. Worby, 'The Play of Race'.
40. Ibid.
41. Ibid., 121.
42. Ibid.
43. Huizinga, 'Nature and Significance of Play', 42–3.
44. Tangen, 'Making the Space'.
45. Hubbard & Kitchin, 'Key Thinkers on Space and Place'.
46. Tilley, 'Space, Place, Landscape and Perception'.
47. Ibid., 17.
48. Ibid.
49. Ibid., 10-3.
50. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*.
51. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 33,73,169–70; Simonsen, 'The Production of Space'; and Wissel, 'Taking the Bus', 1066.
52. Tilley, 'Space, Place, Landscape and Perception', 10.
53. Lefebvre, *The Production of Space*, 73.
54. Tilley, 'Space, Place, Landscape and Perception', 11.
55. Ingold, 'Against Space'; Lorimer, 'Tim Ingold'.
56. Ingold, 'Materials against Materiality', 30; Ingold, 'Part 1′, 17.
57. Tilley, 'Space, Place, Landscape and Perception'.
58. Ibid., 17.
59. Østerberg, 'Det Sosio-materielle Handlingsfelt'; Østerberg, *Arkitektur og sosiologi*; and Østerberg, 'De Store Tætsteders Materialitet'.
60. Østerberg, *Arkitektur og Sosiologi*.
61. Østerberg, 'Det Sosio-materielle Handlingsfelt', 66.
62. Ibid., 66–7.
63. Ibid., 67.
64. Østerberg, *Arkitektur og Sosiologi*, 10.
65. Østerberg, 'Det Sosio-materielle Handlingsfelt'.

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