

Green Apartheid Persists in Joburg

By Nosipho Mdletshe

04 September 2025

When we think about public spaces, we think of parks and museums, but there is much more to public spaces than that. According to the UN-Habitat, public spaces include streets, sidewalks, parks, playgrounds, etc. These are areas that are open and accessible to everyone, free to use, and not for profit. These spaces are important for social inclusion, community social cohesion, safety, and give communities a sense of belonging while catalysing neighbourliness.

Johannesburg has many public spaces under the care of the Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ). In theory, every resident should have access to clean and safe parks, sidewalks, and streets. In reality, however, access to these spaces is deeply unequal. The public spaces in some areas are well-maintained, while in others they are left in shambles.

On the one hand, parks in middle-class suburbs, for example, the Botanical Gardens in Emmarentia, Zoo Lake, and The Wilds in Houghton to name a few, are properly maintained and do play the role of public spaces. Here, middle-class families can relax, walk their dogs, and their children can play in these parks without worrying about their safety, as the spaces are secured and clean. The grass is cut, there is no litter, the toilets are functioning and clean, and security patrols the area to ensure people's safety.

On the other hand, the parks in many townships, paint an opposite picture, though under the same care of the JCPZ. Parks in townships such as Soweto, Eldorado Park, Alexandra, Orange Farm, among others, are neglected, the grass is left uncut, and there are no security officers in sight. Many of these parks have broken play equipment for children, and rubbish is not removed regularly. Quite frankly, many of these parks have become crime and drug hotspots. Since township communities are not organised and do not have resident associations, they rely on the City, but unfortunately, the City prioritises the middle class at the expense of working class communities.

While the City sets aside money each year for repairs and maintenance of roads, buildings, and parks, it is not clear how that money gets distributed between what JCPZ calls 'developed and underdeveloped parks'. The JCPZ admits, itself, that service and maintenance are not equal across the different parks. Parks such as the Botanical Gardens are regarded as 'flagship parks' and receive up to 48 maintenance cycles a year, while ordinary parks receive as few as three cycles a year. The design of the system itself, the allocation of budgets, further deepens the inequality across class lines.

This inequality is not new and is not specific to the City of Johannesburg only. According to Rhodes University scholars studying the legacy of colonial and apartheid imprints on Urban Greening in South Africa, the legacy of colonialism is still visible in the nature and the way public green spaces are distributed. The City of Johannesburg's green spaces

form a 'green apartheid' where wealthier, historically white suburbs, benefit from well-maintained, green, cared-for public spaces, while black townships are dry and not maintained. This pattern is consistent with findings from the South African Cities Network, which states that spatial inequality continues to define the urban landscape of South Africa, where infrastructure investment favours already well-off communities. Additionally, government initiatives like the Expanded Public Works Programme (EPWP), while intended to address some of these disparities through job creation in park maintenance and greening projects, have been criticised for their limited reach and inconsistent implementation in township areas.

Middle-class communities also have 'Friends of...' groups which hold the city accountable and force the city to keep their public spaces in good condition. Township areas, where poverty and unemployment are higher, are often apathetic. Because of these differences, maintenance and distribution continue to be skewed towards middle-class communities.

It is also important to note that public space quality directly correlates with community health outcomes. According to the World Health Organization, equitable access to clean, safe, and green public spaces contributes significantly to physical and mental health, especially for children and the elderly. Without safe areas to play, exercise, or relax, township residents face compounding challenges related to well-being and social development.

The reality is, public spaces in Johannesburg reflect broader socio-economic inequalities and continue to reinforce apartheid divisions, 31 years into democracy. Middle-class communities have public spaces that are lively and influence a good quality of life, while working-class communities, in a word, the majority of South Africans, are left with neglected spaces which are unsafe and unwelcoming, with no spaces for social cohesion or children's development. Township children are left to roam the dry streets, with nothing to do, arguably because this democratic government has decided it will not invest in public spaces for working-class communities.

In this city, public spaces are a luxury reserved for a few, but that should not be the case. Public spaces are essential for health and strengthening everyday community life. In Johannesburg, however, the conditions of public spaces reflect the city's inequality, with well-kept parks contrasting with the neglected ones in townships. While the City is not transparent by not sharing a clear budget allocation between 'developed and underdeveloped parks', the physical evidence of this imbalance is clearly visible through people's lived reality.

This article was submitted on 01 September 2025. You may republish this article, so long as you credit the authors and Karibu! Online (www.Karibu.org.za), and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article.