For the residents of Soweto, a township of the city of Johannesburg, South Africa, public space has long been a locus of trauma. During the time of apartheid, the Black population was excluded from public spaces and the public sphere more generally. The effects of this exclusion are still felt. This denial of entitlement has translated into the people’s understandable disregard for public space, exemplified in the continued trashing, even 20 years after the end of apartheid, of the plot of land that was to become Ubuntu Park.

The residents explain the meaning of the word ubuntu as: “The people is the people because of other people.” Ubuntu defines our existence in the world as coexistence, rejecting individualism and affirming the traditional South African value of togetherness. Ubuntu Park was the result of one of the two participatory design experiments making up The Soweto Project, co-developed by myself, the students in the Design for the Living World class, and the communities we worked with over the course of two months in early 2014 at two locations in Soweto. In Orlando East, we and the local residents turned a former public space that had been used as a dumping ground into a community-organized public space (Ubuntu Park). In Noordgesig, we created two vegetable gardens at the primary school, an important step toward food security for the neighborhood. In both endeavors, we followed the principles of participatory design. During the process, the community assumes ownership of the work and develops it further on its own. This is the crucially important point: we don’t do quick public space interventions that end with the local residents having to deal with something they don’t really understand as their own or care to continue.

The design agenda proceeded through the following four steps:

1. Listening to the local residents before making any definite plan.
2. Involving the community in the decision-making and design processes.
3. Involving the community in the construction process.
4. Transferring responsibility for the developed project to the community in order to leave behind a sustainable work that benefits the local population in the long term.
In the Ubuntu Park project, local residents and the Design for the Living World students together cleaned up the dumping site and made a number of improvements: we built a platform stage, benches and tables, and braai stands. On March 9, 2014, the space was given the name Ubuntu Park.

The platform we built in Ubuntu Park is a relational object. Made of concrete, it was constructed by the students and local residents on the east side of the park. Four wooden pillars mark the platform area. For community events, a textile roof can be attached to the pillars to provide shade.

The construction of the platform stage and the cultural programming connected with it represent an example of place-making—a process through which a neighborhood recognizes itself and gains recognition from the broader community by creating a physical space for themselves. This is why the platform captured the imagination of the residents and, in a way, expresses the whole idea of Ubuntu Park. The platform was first used at the Soweto Street Festival, and there have been other cultural programs since. Recently, we heard that a teacher is using the stage regularly for dance practice, singing, and poetry readings. The parade was led by the Boys Brigade, a youth brass band from Noordgesig—a local initiative that keeps children away from the drug culture of the streets. Next in the parade came local residents, then a line of police cars, and even a car from the fire brigade, all of which seemed out of proportion on the narrow Orlando streets. The police and firefighters were there in an official capacity—this was required by the permissions process—but in an interesting twist, because of the packed streets, they went from being observers to being performers alongside the musicians and onlookers.

When we arrived at the new community park, the Boys Brigade walked onto the stage and played their music. This was followed by speeches, then music, dance, and poetry performances—by a traditional singer named David, the percussion ensemble Mosueo, the Kopano Dance Theatre, rappers Griffin of Milk Farm and Laurence King Bee of Galaxy Records, a poet named Alfred, and DJ Bonko, who rounded out the festival with electronic music. Heavy rain in the early afternoon prevented several scheduled performers from being there, but in a way this turned out for the best; in their absence, people from the community took the stage and claimed it as their own with their own performances. (Not everyone was included, however: young children unaccompanied by an adult were told they would have to go home at dusk.) That day, all of Ubuntu Park was alive with people socializing—braaing, dancing, talking with friends, or just being part of a special community event.

The power of a performative action is its mirroring capacity. When the residents looked at the festival, they saw an image of themselves that was one of openness, curiosity, happiness, playfulness, and strength. The mirror said: “This is who we are.” The image was the embodiment of a possibility, of a positive transition from the status quo of neglect fueled by an understandable disaffection.

The Soweto Street Festival was also a kind of transition ritual. This was a place with no name: a plot of land that had been
designed as a public space in the 1950s but never made it that far; an area people called “the space between Letshatsi Street and Herby Mdingi Street, next to Donkey Church,” defined only by the places around it, not by what it was in itself. After the Soweto Street Festival, it was a community-organized and operated public space.

But of course there was bureaucracy to deal with. We were able to get the numerous permits we needed for the Soweto Street Festival with the help of the arts and culture department of the City of Johannesburg. Getting the permits, however, was a lengthy and exhausting process, even though we felt we had not. This story indicates the degree to which government agencies remain dysfunctional and sclerotic, an unfortunate reality left over from the apartheid regime, when a culture of dependency left over from the apartheid era had not. This story shows how the necessary documents are now stored with the community and can be used as a template for organizing future festivals. That said, on the day of the festival, it turned out that the permits did not guarantee trouble-free relations with the authorities. Just before the festival began, a policeman showed up who told us that our permits were not valid. It turned out that, although we had followed all the rules and done everything on time, the responsible authorities had not. This story indicates the degree to which government agencies remain dysfunctional and sclerotic, an unfortunate reality left over from the apartheid regime, when a culture of dependence was created between the authorities and the population.

Ubuntu Park Belongs to a Social Agreement

Paulina, the principal of a local kindergarten and a member of the Ubuntu Park Committee, gave a speech at the opening of the Soweto Street Festival. She stepped onto the platform and proclaimed: “This is Ubuntu Park. Before, it was hell; now it is paradise.” That day the community understood that their position had changed, from one of inert dependence to one of self-organization. From that time on, the local residents began holding community meetings on their own, with a cordial invitation to us to attend, if we wished.

Ubuntu Park does not belong to anyone really. It belongs to a social agreement reached by the community. If for some reason the agreement collapses, the park would become a no-man’s-land again. As Giorgio Agamben writes in The Kingdom and the Glory, it is people who give meaning to an “empty throne.”

The transformation of a plot of land from a no-man’s-land into a community-organized public space offers a demonstration of this idea.

Without negotiations, there can be no agreement. The main question raised by the residents was whether Ubuntu Park would be a community space, which is what they desired, or a public space. They had reservations about the latter. How does the community protect itself against the public? The residents’ conditions ranged from fencing off and locking the space after dark to paying a security service to monitor the park. As far as they could tell, there weren’t many other choices. After numerous, never-ending conversations where everyone had something to say, they considered marking off the territory with a symbolic barrier: a fence about a metre high. Any option without a fence, they concluded, was no option at all. But through a slow process of discussion and reflection, the residents began to accept the fact that Ubuntu Park could never be an exclusive community space, protected and closed to outsiders, for the simple reason that people from other neighborhoods pass through that space all the time. In the end, they reached a consensus alluded to above: Ubuntu Park would be a community-organized public space, with all of the challenges that would entail going forward.
THE SOWETO PROJECT

MARJETICA POTRČ


JURISDICTIONS

START OF THE PROJECT

PROJECT IS COMPLETED

LINEAR THINKING = OBJECTIVE
IT’S PLANNING AHEAD
“BE OBJECTIVE TO GAIN EFFICIENCY”

THINKING IN OUTLIERS = SUBJECTIVE
“BE SUBJECTIVE TO ATTAIN RESULT”
BUT! RE-ROUTING TAKES MORE TIME

CULTURE & ART

MAIN QUESTION
ART DEPENDS ON CULTURE
ART IS A TOOL TO CHANGE CULTURE

CULTURE

ART = RELATIONAL OBJECT

ART MEDIATES OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH THE WORLD,
ARTIST = MEDIATOR
THE SOWETO PROJECT

Marjetica Potrč

Jurisdictions

The Story of Ubuntu Park

It's not enough to talk.
We need to get our hands dirty.
We cast away the trash.
We claim the space.
It is ours.

We are the people who care for the environment to help us.
We are not the enemy.
We are not the enemy.
We are the enemy.
We are the enemy.
We don't understand it.
It's not ours.
So we wish it.

Agreement means the future.

Ubuntu News!

The people are the people.
Because of other people.

Together, we make the platform.
Together, we shape the platform.
Together, we become a platform.
Together, we become a platform.
Together, we become a platform.

The future is in our hands.

We have learned that there is a future.
Something other than now.
We make agreements and bond memberships with those who see the long life of cities.

The future means the exchange of knowledge.

The story of Ubuntu Park.

It is not only ours.
Now that we have told it to you,
it is also yours.
Tell it to others.

Ubuntu is a nation.

Together, we make the platform.
Together, we become a platform.
Together, we become a platform.
Together, we become a platform.
Together, we become a platform.

The story of Ubuntu Park is a performative action.

On this land, we rescue ourselves in the public space.
We are one community.
We are performant.
We must also be performers.

Faulkner makes the human's land.
She says: "It was well, now, it is cheerful."