

A Tale of Two Cities: Bridging Socio-Spatial Divides in Cape Town, South Africa

Miranda Spessot ('15)

Few cities demonstrate the power of urban planning in shaping society as starkly as Cape Town in South Africa. For decades, spatial planning served as an oppressive tool of the apartheid government in ordering, segregating, and controlling populations based on a specified racial hierarchy. During this period, countless residents were relocated to peripheral townships with utilitarian housing, limited services, and few points of entry. Apartheid's spatial legacies remain deeply entrenched in Cape Town, a city carved into a sprawling patchwork of fragmented communities that reflect economic and racial differences. Despite these divisions, Cape Town was named the 2014 World Design Capital, a biannual award that celebrates cities that have used design as a tool to improve social, cultural, and economic life. Once a top-down device to impose order and control, urban design and planning are now being used to undo the vestiges of apartheid, empower residents, and unify the City.

In May 2015, I had the opportunity to travel to Cape Town to better understand how physical design and public engagement processes can promote democracy and inclusivity in marginalized areas. I wanted to examine planners' roles in bridging physical and social divides as well as potential strategies for making planning processes more accessible to citizens. Through site visits and interviews I explored two case studies, Langa Quarter and the Harare Pedestrian Route.

Langa Quarter

As Cape Town's oldest black township, Langa followed the formula for design as a peripheral 'bedroom community' intended to house workers who were employed in the central city. Langa has remained underdeveloped, isolated from adjacent neighbourhoods by highway and rail corridors. Recognizing the potential of this historic area, the non-profit organization iKhaya le Langa, led by social innovator Tony Elvin, is working to realize its vision of the 'Langa Quarter', a vibrant cultural precinct filled with jazz, art, and food, that will attract Capetonians and tourists alike, while providing economic opportunities for local residents.

Still in the early stages of implementation, the initiative has already experienced a number of successes. iKhaya le Langa adapted an old primary school into a 'community hub', complete with meeting spaces, a café, and free Wi-Fi. The centre also provides facilities and training to help entrepreneurs further their business. Economic opportunities have been created for residents in the form of a homestay network and gallery homes. To promote more small-scale businesses, iKhaya le Langa partnered with the City of Cape Town's Spatial Planning department to proactively widen the scope of permitted zoning on behalf of local landowners. Land use permissions were expanded to allow for mixed-uses and small businesses such as restaurants and guesthouses. The timing of my visit was quite serendipitous, as the City had approved the proactive zoning for the precinct only the day before! This approval marks an essential step to realizing the vision for the precinct, as it allows entrepreneurs to obtain the licenses needed to attract outside investment and saves individual property owners from having to navigate the complex approval process. iKhaya le Langa's success thus far can be attributed to their asset-based approach that considered Langa's existing qualities as a starting point for development, their ability to leverage public and private sector partnerships, the time invested in understanding the culture of the community, and the extensive involvement of local residents.



A row of colourful homes also acts as an art gallery.



The iKhaya le Langa hub provides quality space for community use.

Violence Prevention Through Urban Upgrading – Harare Pedestrian Route

I also studied the Harare Pedestrian Route, part of the Violence Prevention Through Urban Upgrading Program (VPUU) in Khayelitsha. Originally planned as a township of 200,000 people, Khayelitsha's population now exceeds one million and the township is known for high rates of crime and unemployment. VPUU emerged in 2006 as a partnership

among the German Development Bank, the Municipality, a group of professional architects and urban designers, and the Khayelitsha Development Forum, which includes non-profits, churches, and local councillors.

The project began with background research and community-based mapping of crime locations to identify priority areas for intervention. Strategic investments created high quality public spaces and community facilities along a walking route leading from the train station into the neighbourhood of Harare. The Harare Pedestrian Route features paved walkways, pedestrian lighting, planters, low walls that provide seating, decorated trash bins, and live-work units with small shops at grade to generate activity and homes above to provide ‘eyes on the street’. Essential institutions like schools and a library were also constructed. The creation of high quality, aesthetically pleasing spaces has dramatically improved living conditions for residents, while programming and events have enhanced the sense of community. Crime has also dropped by as much as 40% since the changes were made.

The program’s investment in people has been equally important. Locals assisted with construction and many are employed in the management of public facilities. An important first step was building trust with the community to ensure that residents felt a sense of ownership over the project. The breadth of involvement was also essential, and VPUU engaged residents and business owners across all demographics, youth, mothers, seniors, etc., through transparent outreach programmes. The early involvement of the community allowed for the identification of key issues and prioritization of interventions.



Harare Library, one of the new public facilities in Khayelitsha.



The start of the route by the train station includes spaces for traders.

Reflection

Although there are many ongoing efforts to improve conditions in Cape Town’s townships, there is still much progress to be made to effectively integrate these areas into the physical, economic, and social fabric of the City. For the most part, townships remain economically depressed with limited employment opportunities and few activities to attract those from outside of the community. Indeed, many Capetonians continue to avoid these areas for fear of crime.

Both Langa Quarter and VPUU have achieved success and sustainability by complementing investments in public amenities with investments in people. Planners’ main roles have been helping stakeholders navigate the City’s highly technical land use development processes and facilitating community engagement. These cases highlight the importance of building local capacity, generating economic opportunities, and providing flexible, high quality public spaces in the regeneration of communities. As Canadian municipalities endeavour to revitalize many low-income neighbourhoods, these cases can offer insights on collaboration and community mobilization.

I am incredibly grateful to have had the opportunity to explore this inspiring corner of the world and would like to extend my thanks to the School of Urban and Regional Planning for making this trip possible.



Sunset view of central Cape Town from Lion’s Head.