

The Soweto Project

Marjetica Potrč

Cleaning the park. Photograph by Marjetica Potrč.



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.



Photograph by Radoš Vjaklija.

Ubuntu Park

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 with children as after-school activities. The stage has become a symbol for a new appreciation of the local culture and affirmation of the community's identity. The platform was built with no permit on a no-man's-land that existed beyond the enforcement of municipal regulations. In this vacuum, the

non-space became a site of possibilities, where the community could imagine a new kind of community-organized public space.

The Soweto Street Festival

On March 9, 2014, the communities of Orlando East and Noordgesig hosted the Soweto Street Festival. The festival parade started at the Noordgesig Primary School and ended at Ubuntu Park, where we celebrated the local culture with music, dance performances, 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





The Soweto Street Festival. Photograph by Terry Kurgan.

designed as a public space in the 1950s but never made it that far; an area people called “the space between Letsatsi 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 were being given special treatment as privileged foreigners and so had an easier experience than local residents would have had. 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



Paulina, the kindergarten principal, speaks at the opening of the Soweto Street Festival. Photograph by Marjetica Potrč.

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 Details

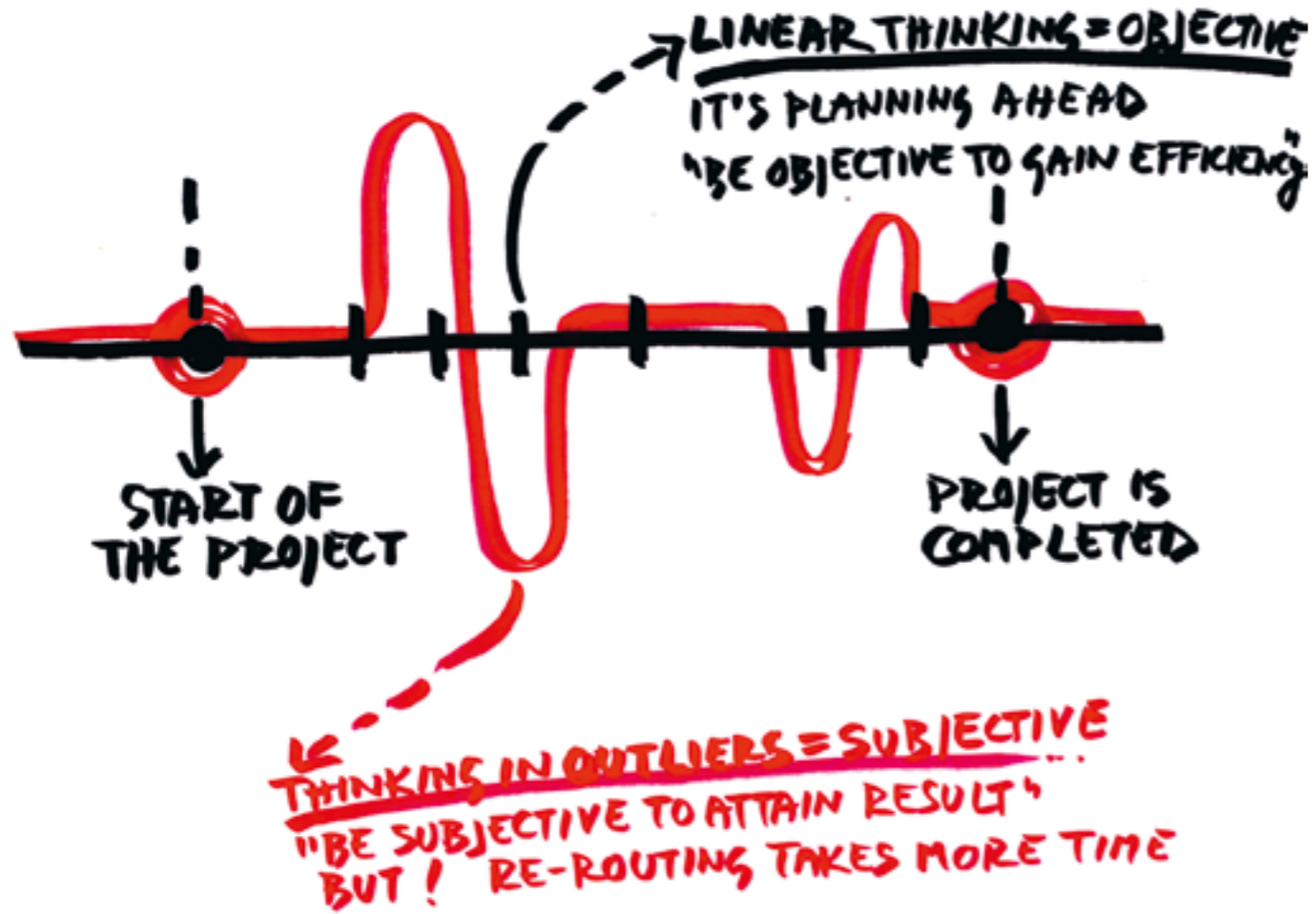
Done in conjunction with Nine Urban Biotopes (9UB): Negotiating the Future of Urban Living (www.urban-biotopes.net).

Date of project: January 15–March 31, 2014
Locations: Orlando East and Noordgesig, Soweto, Johannesburg

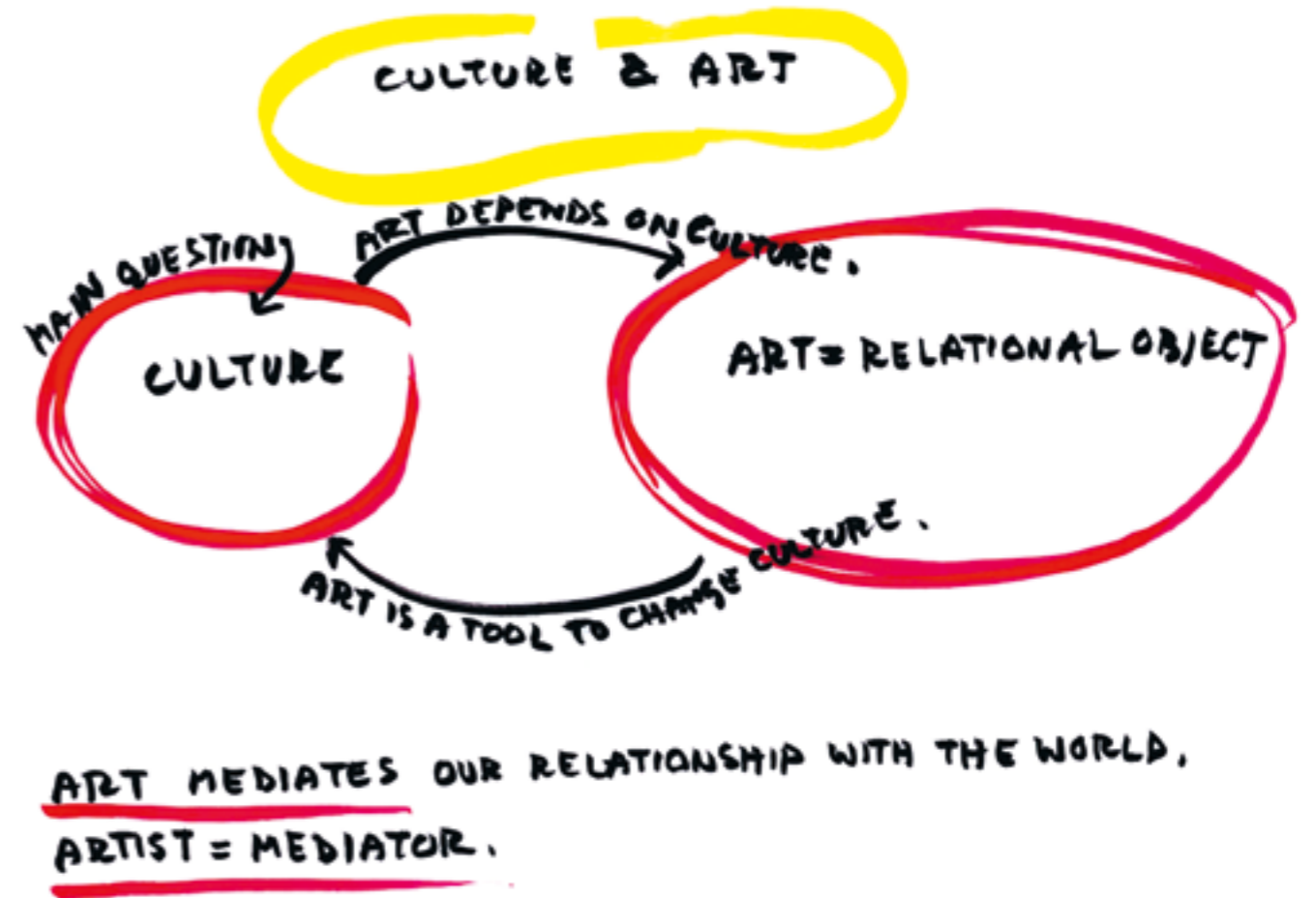
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A project by the Design for the Living World class of the University of Fine Arts/Hochschule für Bildende Künste (HFBK) Hamburg in collaboration with: The residents of Soweto, urban dialogues (www.urbandialogues.de), Goethe-Institut South Africa (www.goethe.de/ins/za/joh/enindex.htm), morethanshelters (www.morethanshelters.org), and PlanAct Johannesburg (www.planact.org.za).

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Notes on Participatory Design, no. 7, 2011. Courtesy of Marjetica Potrč.



Notes on Participatory Design, no. 16, 2011. Courtesy of Marjetica Potrč.

**THE STORY OF
UBUNTU PARK**



IN OUR NEIGHBORHOOD,
RIGHT WHERE WE LIVE,
THERE'S A NO-MAN'S LAND.
IT IS DANGEROUS AND FILTHY,
A LAND WITHOUT A NAME.
FOR TOO LONG WE HAVE SUFFERED
THE TORMENT OF INACTION.



**PUBLIC SPACE IS
TRAUMA**

WE THE PEOPLE WAIT
FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO HELP US,
BUT NOTHING HAPPENS.
MEANWHILE
WE ARE KEPT OUT
OF THE PUBLIC SPACE.
WE DON'T UNDERSTAND IT,
IT'S NOT OURS.
SO WE TRASH IT.

**CLEANING IS
A RITUAL OF TRANSITION**



IT'S NOT ENOUGH TO TALK.
WE NEED TO GET OUR HANDS DIRTY.
WE CART AWAY THE TRASH.
WE CLEAN UP THE SPACE.
WE CLAIM IT.
IT IS OURS.

**THE PLATFORM IS
A RELATIONAL OBJECT**



TOGETHER, WE BUILD THE PLATFORM.
THIS IS PLACE-PLACING!
ANY GROUP THAT WANTS TO BE
RECOGNIZED IN SOCIETY,
HAS TO CLAIM A PHYSICAL SPACE.
SPACE MATTERS!

**THE SOWETO STREET FESTIVAL IS
A PERFORMATIVE ACTION**



ON THIS DAY,
WE RECOGNIZE OURSELVES
IN THE MIRROR IMAGE.
WE ARE STRONG COMMUNITY.
WE ARE PERFORMERS.
WE MUST ALSO BE PERFORMED
BY BUILDING OUR CITY.

**UBUNTU IS A
NAME**



PAULINA NAMES THE NO-MAN'S LAND.
SHE SAYS:
"THIS IS UBUNTU PARK.
BEFORE, IT WAS HELL.
NOW, IT IS PARADISE."

The Story of Ubuntu Park, 2014. Courtesy of Marjetica Potrč and
Galerie Nordenhake, Berlin/Stockholm.



UBUNTU MEANS:

WE ARE NOT A DYSFUNCTIONAL CROWD!
WE FORMED A COMMITTEE
AND TOGETHER WE AGREE ON
HOW WE'LL TAKE CARE OF UBUNTU PARK.
WHAT IS MORE -
THIS SPACE IS NOW A PLACE.

**AGREEMENT MEANS
THE FUTURE**



WE HAVE LEARNED THAT THERE IS
A FUTURE.
SOMETHING OTHER THAN NOW.
WE MAKE AGREEMENTS AND
BUILD PARTNERSHIPS WITH THOSE
WHO SEE THE LONG LIFE OF CITIES.



**THE FUTURE IS IN
OUR HANDS**

WE MADE IT!
AND WE KNOW THAT WE CAN GROW.
THIS IS OUR PROPOSAL FOR A CITY
WITH A FUTURE!
SMALL COMMUNITIES LIKE OURS
-THE UBUNTU PARK COMMUNITY-
ARE THE CORNERSTONE OF A CITY BUILT
NOT FROM ABOVE BUT FROM BELOW.
WE ARE FREE
OF THE BURDEN OF DEPENDENCE.
THIS FEELS GOOD AND RIGHT.
UBUNTU PARK IS
A COMMUNITY-ORGANIZED PUBLIC SPACE.

**THE FUTURE MEANS
THE EXCHANGE OF KNOWLEDGE**



THE STORY OF UBUNTU PARK
IS NOT ONLY OURS.
NOW THAT WE HAVE TOLD IT TO YOU,
IT IS ALSO YOURS.
TELL IT TO OTHERS.