

The Walkway Project: An Exploration of Informal Public Space Upgrading in Gugulethu, Cape Town

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Abstract : Safe and accessible public spaces are vital elements of our South African cities. Public spaces hold the potential to act as important, vibrant places for learning, exchange, and practice. Public walkways, however, are some of the most neglected and extremely dangerous public spaces experienced in the local neighborhood of Gugulethu in Cape Town. Walkways feel insignificant, being recognized as informal and undetermined or retain complex fragments of formal erven. They are generally out of sight connecting minor streets and informal settlements. Community residents refer to the walkways as unsafe and dirty spaces. Local authorities allocate minimal to no municipal budgets nor maintenance plans resulting in a lack of basic services, particularly lighting and green infrastructure. 'The Walkway Project' presents a series of urban stories collected from co-design workshops, emotional mapping exercises, and fieldwork, including urban walks and urban talks. The narrative interprets the socio-spatial practice and complexity of informal public space in Gugulethu, Cape Town. The Walkway Project research, interrelated to the Master of Urban Design teaching and design-research studio, has a strong focus on participatory and engaged learning and action research methodology within a deliberate pedagogy. A consolidated urban design implementation plan exposes the impact and challenges of waste and water, opening the debate on relevant local solutions for resilience and safety in Cape Town. A small and neglected passage connecting two streets, commonly referred to as iThemba Walkway, is presented as a case study to show-case strategic urban design intervention strategies for urban upgrading. The iThemba walkway is a community-driven project that demonstrates active and responsible co-design and participatory development opportunities. In March 2021, when visited on an urban walk, the public space was covered by rubble and solid waste. By April 2021, the community cleaned the walkway and created an accessible passage for the school children to pass. Numerous co-design workshops have taken place over the past year. The walkway has emerged as a public space upgrading project facilitated, motivated, and implemented by multiple local partners and residents. Social maps from urban walks and talks illustrate the transformation of iThemba Walkway into an inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable urban space, linked to Sustainable Development Goal number 11, sustainable cities and communities. The outcomes of the upgrading project facilitate a deeper understanding of co-design methods, urban upgrading processes, and monitoring of public space and informal urbanism.

Keywords : informal, public space, resilience, safety, upgrade, walkways

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