Fostering Community at the Canterbury Street Lot

An Interactive Qualifying Project submitted to the faculty of Worcester Polytechnic Institute in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Degree of Bachelor Science.

The goal of this project was to foster a greater sense of community at the "Canterbury Street Lot," two city blocks in Cape Town with diverse and complex issues that play an important role in the lives of many homeless "street people." Located in District Six, this low income area was decimated by the forced removal of people by the apartheid state in the 1960s and 1970s. Today, a variety of people can be found using the lot for different purposes such as for informal parking, to wait for services provided by the adjacent soup kitchen, to earn money through a gardening program, or as a home. The street people who call the lot home collect donations from people who park there. They are often marginalized by the general public and lack a sense of belonging. We formed a partnership with a group of street people, including some who reside on the lot, following introductions by representatives from the project's sponsor, Khulisa Social Solutions. Through this collaboration, and engagements with people who frequent the lot, we designed and implemented a memory place and mural as a means to foster community in the area. This work brought about a shift in the social dynamics of the space and uncovered ideas for a formal proposal for the potential development of different areas of the Canterbury Street Lot.

This is an executive summary of a WPI Cape Town Project Centre project that is fully reported at: http://wp.wpi.edu/capetown/projects/p2015/khulisa/

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Significant Problems . . .

Homelessness is a worldwide issue. A 2005 global survey performed by the United Nations Commission on Human Rights found that an estimated 1 billion people worldwide did not have adequate housing and 100 million people were homeless. There are currently 7000 street people in Cape Town, South Africa, alone (Bernardo, 2015). As in many places, ordinances and policies towards the street people have a strong overtone inferring that the cause of their current situation is due to a personal moral failing (Du Toit, 2010). By harshly judging the less fortunate for living on the streets, people tend to scorn, ignore and treat these individuals as a problem. Many do so without even acknowledging the larger social, economic, political, and historical factors that have influenced the street people throughout their lives (Seltser & Miller, 1993).

Besides being treated differently from those who do not live on the streets, many "street people" also lack a sense of belonging. It is known that humans have a strong need to belong to something or someone (Baumeister & Leary, 2000). When people lose their home and most of their possessions, they often feel as if they had "lost themselves" and their identity (Boydell, Goering & Morrell-Bellai, 2000). According to Yvonne Vissing (1996, p. 75), "Without [belonging], both mental and social health suffers." Belonging becomes much more than having a home, and the consequences of feeling like one does not belong can have a tremendous impact, including demotivation and isolation.

Public spaces can play an important role in aiding to reestablish a sense of belonging. In Cape Town, while the street people sleep and live in public areas such as parks and parking lots, many still feel disconnected from the surrounding community. Many also fear being forgotten because opportunities for celebrating the lives of those with whom they have connected are limited. The majority cannot afford to have bury or remembrance ceremonies to celebrate the lives of those who have passed.

Inclusive public spaces can make effective changes in the way the street people feel and interact with the wider community providing comfortable and judgement-free zones, which aids their sense of belonging. These spaces also facilitate social interactions, income generation and serve as a place where members can develop social ties that bond the community together (Phillips, Dolesh & Vinluan, 2015). By bringing street people and other members of the community together, a more informed, accepting wider community can be encouraged.

. . . Create Great Opportunities

This project took place at the "Canterbury Street Lot" located in Cape Town's Central Business District, just inside an area formerly known as District Six. Historically, many people of diverse racial backgrounds lived in Dis-

trict Six. What is currently a vacant lot once served as a residential complex and a soap factory. During the apartheid era, however, residents of the area were forcibly removed by the South African government seeking to eliminate racially diverse areas. Buildings that once stood there, and in a much larger area, were bulldozed to the ground. The forced removals were a form of "structural dispossession" that included relocating entire communities, and oppressing people socially, educationally and economically (Grunebaum, 2010). On what is now a vacant lot, it is still possible to see the foundations of the houses that stood there decades ago and people in the area still cherish its memory as both a vibrant neighborhood and as a symbol

of oppression. Currently, the lot contains a supermarket store, Fruit & Veg City, in one corner. Along one side of Fruit & Veg is a vegetable garden leased by Khulisa Social Solutions (Khulisa), where street people work to grow food and earn an income. The lot also serves as the residence space for 10 street people, locally known as "street people," and as a source of income for the street people who collect donations from the approximately 200 drivers who park their cars in the area each day.

Besides those who live there, other street people also spend time sitting on the lot's grassy, rubble littered slopes waiting for a nearby soup kitchen, The Service Dining Rooms (SDR), to open.

This project intended to lay the groundwork for further development of the Canterbury Street Lot as a welcoming and inclusive space. We were asked by Khulisa and SDR to work with four co-developers from the street community

in order to gather input and give everyone the opportunity to participate in this initiative. In developing the lot, we hoped to create a safer and more inclusive environment that serves everyone and recognizes the street community's importance.

Understanding the Bigger Picture - Background Research

The issue of homelessness has been widely researched in different locales and from different perspectives. Street people face various problems every day, such as invisibility and a lack of a sense of belonging. According to Virginia Werner (2014, p. 17), "homelessness is a multifaceted problem, and factors beyond one's control often dictate circumstances." Those living on the streets often depend on the generosity of the greater community to survive.

As cities develop and continue to grow, the street population tends to live on public land. Some governments have tried to fight homelessness in public areas by keeping the space as uncomfortable as possible, believing it is easier to try to eradicate the "problem" rather than find sustainable solutions for street people (Rosenberger, 2014). However, studies have shown that public space development projects can have a great impact. In Nairobi and Mexico, festivals and social programs supported by the government aided community

growth (Project for Public Spaces, Inc., 2012). In Detroit, street vendors working on sidewalks and parking lots created new interactions, fostering community and establishing relationships, which helped re-establish a sense of belonging (Project for Public Spaces, Inc., 2012). The development of even small-scale urban initiatives, with the generosity of the greater community, can address some of the hardships of street life.

The innate need to belong can also be addressed by opening up public spaces such as green areas. Green spaces attract many different people by providing a comfortable and safe area where people can interact in a judgment-free zone. These areas tend to facilitate social interactions and create a sense of community as it serves as a meeting spot (Phillips, Dolesh & Vinluan, 2015). By encouraging these interactions and strengthening community bonds, the street population can feel like a part of the wider community, are less easily ignored, or simply seen as a problem that needs to be fixed (Manzo, 2006).

The street community also faces the challenge of commemorating and remembering their lives after death. Most people expect to be honored when they die in some fashion consistent with their social status and cultural values. However, most street people cannot afford to have a proper ceremony to celebrate the lives of those who passed away, and feel a loss of honour and remembrance. One way to provide the street community a place to celebrate the lives of their loved ones after they pass away is by creating a memory place. A memory place is an open public space that is connected to its environment and people's daily activities (Gurler and Ozer, 2015). Different from memorials, which focus on mourning someone's loss, the memory place attracts people from the surrounding community, provides a better under-

standing of the history and lives being remembered, and promotes social interaction. Providing a memory place for street people offers potential for improving their sense of belonging and dignity.

With our efforts directed at the Canterbury Street Lot, we worked with four local co-developers, our sponsors, our advisors, and additional partners to foster a larger sense of inclusiveness and acceptance towards those who live on the streets.

Mission: A Lot for Everyone

This project assisted Khulisa and the street community of the Canterbury Street Lot to establish a sense of involvement and acceptance towards street people by fostering development of the lot as a welcoming space in which all members of the community can interact. Working with the street people and the surrounding community, we achieved the following:

Objectives:

1. **CONNECT** with the street people, Khulisa and Service Dining Rooms to define the foundation of the project

2. **UNDERSTAND** the dynamics of the street people and the surrounding community

3. **COLLABORATE** with the community to design elements for implementation

4. **IMPLEMENT** initial physical changes to promote interest in the development of the lot

5. **ENVISION** the future development of the lot for Khulisa, the City of Cape Town, and other partners

Collaborating with the Community

Shared Action Learning (SAL) is a form of asset-based community development used to support collaboration used by the Worcester Polytechnic Institute (WPI) Cape Town Project Centre (Jiusto, Hersh & Taylor, 2012). To enhance the success of projects and provide a more community-centered approach, teams at the Centre work with a group of local residents. Our "co-developers," selected from the street community by Khulisa, provided valuable insights, their ideas and opinions, and participated in envisioning and enacting changes to the lot.

With SAL at the forefront of our methodology, we moved forward with each aspect of our project.

Process for Community Change

CONNECTING TO UNDERSTAND

Jesse Laitinen, our Khulisa sponsor liaison, introduced us to our four co-developers, graduates of Khulisa's pilot work program. Throughout the project, we worked to foster an amicable working relationship with not only our co-developers and sponsor liaison, but with all of the street people that frequent the Service Dining Rooms and Canterbury Street Lot community.

We attended the daily morning meetings of the "Streetscape" work program at SDR. This interaction allowed us to integrate ourselves within the street community in a non-invasive way, allowing for mutual acceptance. Our presence, the purpose of our project, and the nature of their invited voluntary collaboration was clearly explained to the street people with whom we interacted directly during the first meeting we attended.

Those who live and work on the lot maintain a distinct community. At first, our interactions with them were brief and superficial. Jesse, a familiar face for them, initially acted as a mediator. As the project progressed and our presence was recognized as part of the daily routine, our interactions became more comfortable and open. Through these interactions with the street community, we gained valuable insights about the needs and desires of the street people on the lot and at large.

GARDENS OF LIFE

Due to its complex history, ownership of the lot is in the process of being transferred from the City of Cape Town to the District Six Trust. This, as well as the history of District Six, is why no previous development of the space has occurred. Our mission was to garner community support for additions to the lot. Our co-developers wanted something big, noteworthy and lasting.

Through SAL, we were able to come up with a concept for a mural that was developed through collaboration between our co-developers, team, and a local artist.

"Gardens of Life" was chosen as the theme to represent the mural and memorial we created, as well as the already-existing garden used by the Streetscape program. The theme relates to a "new life" through new opportunities, including the garden employment program and a more inclusive

community at the Canterbury Street Lot.

The mural features a design created by Lenny, a member of the Streetscape program, inspired by the tree of life. This tree offers inspiration because of the cultural importance it has in Africa, supporting notions of connectedness and *Ubuntu*. The mural also features a poem written by one of our co-developers, Theresa, which further exemplifies the importance of the community's support for the future of the lot and more importantly, its people:

> *Without HOPE*
>
> *There is no today*
>
> *Without LOVE*
>
> *There is no community*
>
> *Without YOU*
>
> *We are nothing*

Painted on the sidewall of Fruit & Veg City next to the Streetscape garden, the intent of this public art piece was to obtain community support for the fu-ture development of initiatives for the street community, and promote positive interactions and acceptance.

A Community Day was held on Thursday Dec. 10th during which members of the Streetscape program, SDR, and the people who park and transit the lot added their handprints to the mural. This community day and the mural also sparked interest in Khulisa's Streetscape garden and the future development of the lot as people asked about its purpose, the employment of street people in the garden and the plans for selling the vegetables grown there.

The People's Garden Terrace

The idea for the People's Garden Terrace came from learning that the history of the lot, as a part of District Six, was important to the street people who live and stay in the area. Most street people do not have the money to pay for funerals and burials when someone dies. To address these two issues, we planned the People's Garden Terrace as a memory place directly across the street from SDR. Plans for this space were collaboratively created with our co-developers from the street community, resulting in a design that everyone understood and agreed upon. The memory place was constructed out of hollow retaining wall bricks. It features a plaque, explaining its purpose of both remembering the history of the forced removals from District Six and celebrating the lives of people on the streets. Benches that provide a space for reflection were constructed out of gabion boxes filled with bricks and rubble from the houses and buildings that once stood on the lot.

The hollow blocks were chosen purposefully so that flowers could be planted inside of them. Each flower was planted in remembrance of someone special.

During the final week of the project, a memorial service was held, and all members of the community (street people, people who park on the lot and local business operators) were invited. Ricky, SDR's programme manager, offered a memorial service to highlight our collaborative work with the street people despite our cultural, ethnic, and social differences. He emphasized the terrace's importance as a way to remember those from District Six as well as the passing of people, especially those from the street community. Overall, the event successfully invited all in the area to remember those who have passed and to interact with others in the region.

Planning for Future Development

At the end of our project, we presented a proposal to Khulisa with ideas of addi-

tional advancements for the lot. To gain input, we sought guidance from the residents of the lot. We also spoke with roughly 60 people who park on the lot daily, asking questions about potential changes, showing them a model of the lot and explaining our plans for the memory place and the mural. Discussions with our co-developers generated further ideas for the improvement of the lot. We used this collective information to develop a proposal with ideas for furthering the lot as an inclusive, income-generating, and welcoming space. The proposal was presented to Khulisa for them to discuss with various stakeholders for additional improvements that could be made on the lot in the future.

More Than a Physical Change

This project could not have happened without the help of those who understand and live on the streets, especially our co-developers Deon, Theresa, Achmat and Geraldine. Their input and knowledge was essential as they helped us connect with others in the area and the local community. One of our accomplishments during our time in Cape Town was the incorporation of the street people into the project using the Shared Action Learning approach.

Another important aspect of this project was the gaining of insights from the surrounding community. By conducting

informal interviews with those who park on the Canterbury Street Lot, we learned that the lack of organization, safety, and greenery in the space are main concerns. We also worked closely with Fruit & Veg, a local supermarket who had been previously working with Khulisa. Through this project, we helped the two organizations strengthen their partnership bond.

It was noted by members of the SDR community that our presence over the duration of this project had changed the atmosphere. Relations between those in the area had improved as we opened avenues for freer discussion between members of the community. We had brought a renewed sense of opportunity and left tangible additions to the area that can serve as inspirations for the street people and the local community to collaborate and strive for their dreams.

The members of the street community truly taught us to be more compassionate towards others. By hearing their personal stories and seeing the problems they face everyday we have become more understanding, accepting and welcoming towards street people. We certainly have gained an appreciation for all that we are lucky to have and learned how caring, kind, strong, innovative, connected, talented and skilled the street people are.

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