

Design Report:

Emthonjeni Urban Park: Utilising Landscape Narratives as an informant for decolonized landscape design approaches.

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Abstract

The City of Tshwane is largely devoid of formally provided Public Open Space for Afrocentric cultural activities related to nature and landscape – which at present often take place in rural landscapes. This has implications for identity making and feeling ‘at home’ in the city. The aim of this project is to create an urban park that gives the residents of Malusi informal settlement, (who are mostly from rural landscapes and urban settings outside of the highly urbanized province of Gauteng) a feeling of ‘home’ in the city. Simultaneously, the project aims to addressing the shortage of public spaces in the city, and specifically in informal peripheral areas, while also reinstating the City of Tshwane’s Nursery to a functional and meaningful landscape in the urban fabric.

The South African landscape, and people’s relationships to it, are deeply scarred by the abhorrent and discriminatory planning of the apartheid and colonial governing systems, evident in the 1913 Natives Land Act (27 of 1913) and the Development Trust and Land Act (18 of 1936). The forceful removal of people from the land has impacted how people now use and relate to spaces, especially in urban environments. Spatial inequality in South Africa, resulting from past laws and race based spatial planning, excluded the needs of Africans in urban areas and persists today. This means that even today most African urban residents stay the furthest from the city due to the inherited apartheid spatial planning patterns, where parks and other natural resource-related services remain limited in light of the high population levels in these areas. The impact of this, is that there are limited spaces, which truly represent African use of space, and which could support the daily, and lifetime needs of urban residents, especially in light of the fact that urbanization remains an upward trend in South Africa and will ultimately further change people’s relationship to the landscape.

The aim of the project is to use the concept of ‘biocultural diversity’ as a tool in designing public open space. Biocultural diversity is an approach that argues against the predominant worldview where culture and nature are in opposition, and instead promotes an argument that they are intertwined. The narratives, and experiences shared by participants in the research project undertaken earlier in the year, as well as the authors own personal understanding of African place-making and use, are used as informants to create an urban park where cultural activities can take place. The design approach also integrates current activities that are happening in an around the existing site, while upgrading the site to be a landscape that connects people from home through the provision of spaces to perform cultural activities, farm, and harvest medicinal plants, and to relate back nature.



Introduction

In their journal article titled ‘the legacy of the 1913 Natives Land Act for spatial planning’ Jeannie van Wyk stated that: “On 19 June 1913 the Natives Land Act 27 of 1913 was promulgated, signalling the commencement of legalised discriminatory land legislation in South Africa. By setting aside land for occupation and use by black people, the Act resulted in the unequal distribution of land between black and white people. Together with its sister Act, the Development Trust and Land Act 18 of 1936, the area allocated for black people comprised 13% of the land while the white population enjoyed the remaining 87% of the land, despite the fact that the white population was one fifth the size of the black population” (Van Wyk, 2013). This means that black people were forcefully removed from their ancestral land and therefore from their identity since land to black people is their identity (Lephaka, 2015). The identity of the colonised was lost because they were either removed from their ancestry heritage land, their traditional natural spaces were either destroyed or transformed in favour of Euro western garden culture (Shackleton & Gwedla, 2021). The transformation of natural environments by colonising parties also meant the introduction of alien plants for economic and or aesthetic purposes (Shackleton & Gwedla, 2021). A decolonial approach to designing public open space seeks to address these spatial injustices while centering to the concerns of the previously colonised, disenfranchised and marginalised.

Decolonization means many things to many people, for Frantz Fanon (2001), decolonization is a revolutionary process that involves simultaneously freeing and understanding the mind of the colonized. During the process of colonisation, the colonizer intentionally demonizes the knowledge, culture, and identities of their colonial subjects and forces the colonized to take on the culture and language of the colonizer, leaving the colonized nameless and rootless (Kgatla 2018). To address this inherited legacy for this process and to promote decolonisation in its place, the patterns of Eurocentric rationality and modernity should be critically considered (Mignolo, 2007). Raxworthy (2018) uses the work of Mignolo (2007), to argue that the process of decolonization requires “epistemic disobedience”, meaning need to decolonize the way they condition practitioners to think (Raxworthy, 2018). In the context of this study, this would mean that landscape designers and local authorities dealing with public parks and open spaces will need to confront the currently accepted processes of public open space provision (Shand & Breed, 2024). Thus, the need to reconsider the design informants currently applied by practitioners, and furthermore, the need to include community participants' input on this process. Epistemic disobedience includes questioning modern rationality and rethinking previously rejected and or discredited indigenous traditions, oral histories, and mythologies (Hamilton, 2002).

For Karina Landman & Kundani Makakavhule (2021), decolonization is a process of dismantling, contesting, and disrupting oppressive narratives and discourses that perpetuate colonial ideology. Landman & Makakavhule suggest a 3-step approach to decolonization, 1) remembering and recognition, 2) re-imagining and transcendence and 3) transformation and renewal. They further propose that decolonization does not have to be violent, and that decolonization must consider multiplicity and the coexistence of both stories of the colonized and the colonist (Landman & Makakavhule, 2021).

Of significance for this study is the argument that recognition is vital to decolonisation. Landscapes that continue to alienate their occupants will not foster true decolonisation.

In contrast for Frantz Fanon (2001), decolonization is a violent process and not a gentlemen's agreement, it's a complete eradication of the colonizer's sector and a banishing of the colonizer's world from the territory of the colonized.

A total breakdown of the urban condition in favour of Fanon's (2001) argument, would be disruptive and costly to a community still dealing with socio-economic turmoil, indicating that while decolonisation is necessary, it is perhaps prudent to find revolution in the development and adaptation of future urban developments...in keeping with the approach favoured by Landman & Makakavhule (2021).

The design uses Landman and Makakavhule's (2021) decolonial approach while combining the 3 design informants: DIT (research project) Narratives, community needs and surrounding context (See graphic below)



Figure 1: Design Informants (Author, 2024)

Project Brief

Site selection

A number of sites were initially considered for this project – with the primary criteria being a) that they exist in marginalised communities in the city, to which many people migrate, b) that they have an existing connection to natural resources and features (eg. rivers or ridges), and c) that they are in a place that people can access and utilize (See figure 1 and Table 1).

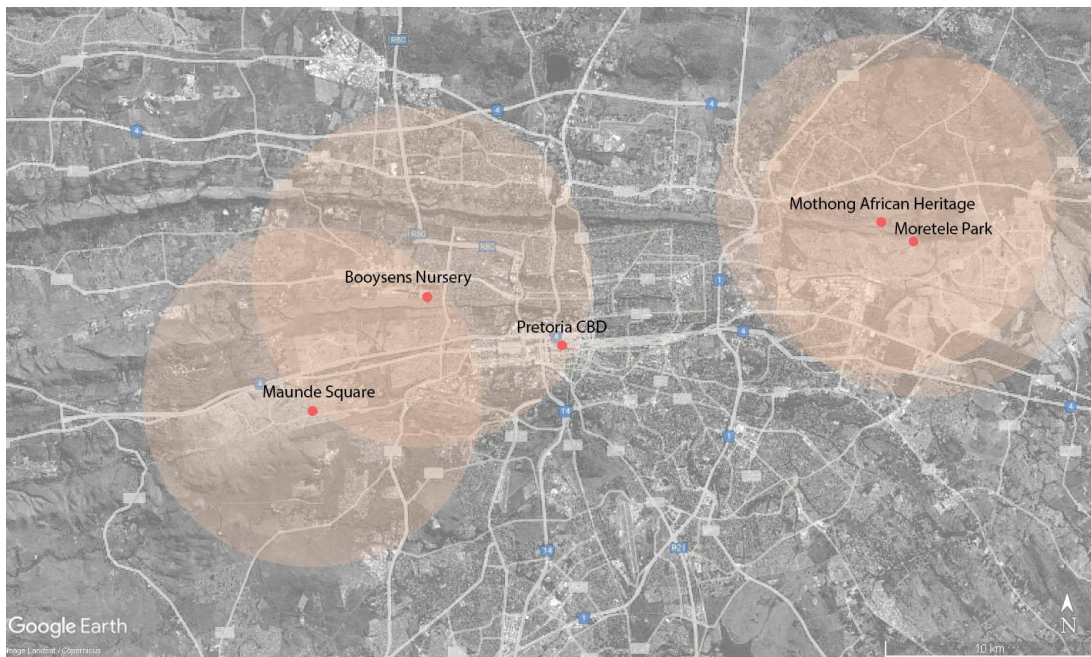


Figure 2: Possible sites for the project (Author, 2024)

Notes: Figure shows possible sites visited for the project and their 10KM radius from Pretoria CBD.

Colour Code	Meaning						
	TRUE						
	FALSE						

Site Name	Location	10 KM from the CBD	Accessibility (Users)	Urban-Setting	Link to DIT	User profile: Marginalised	Connects to a Natural Feature (River, Ridge)
Moretele Park	Mamelodi, Tshwane, GP						
Mothong African Heritage	Mamelodi, Tshwane, GP						
City of Tshwane Booyens Nursery	Malusi, Tshwane, GP						
Ga-Mothakga Resort	Atteridgeville, Tshwane, GP						

Table 1: Site Selection Criteria (Author, 2024)

The chosen site for the project is located in region 3 of the City of Tshwane, ± 10km from Pretoria CBD, towards the North East of the CBD. It is located within the Malusi Informal settlement which is also referred to as Malusi or Gomora. (Figure 2)

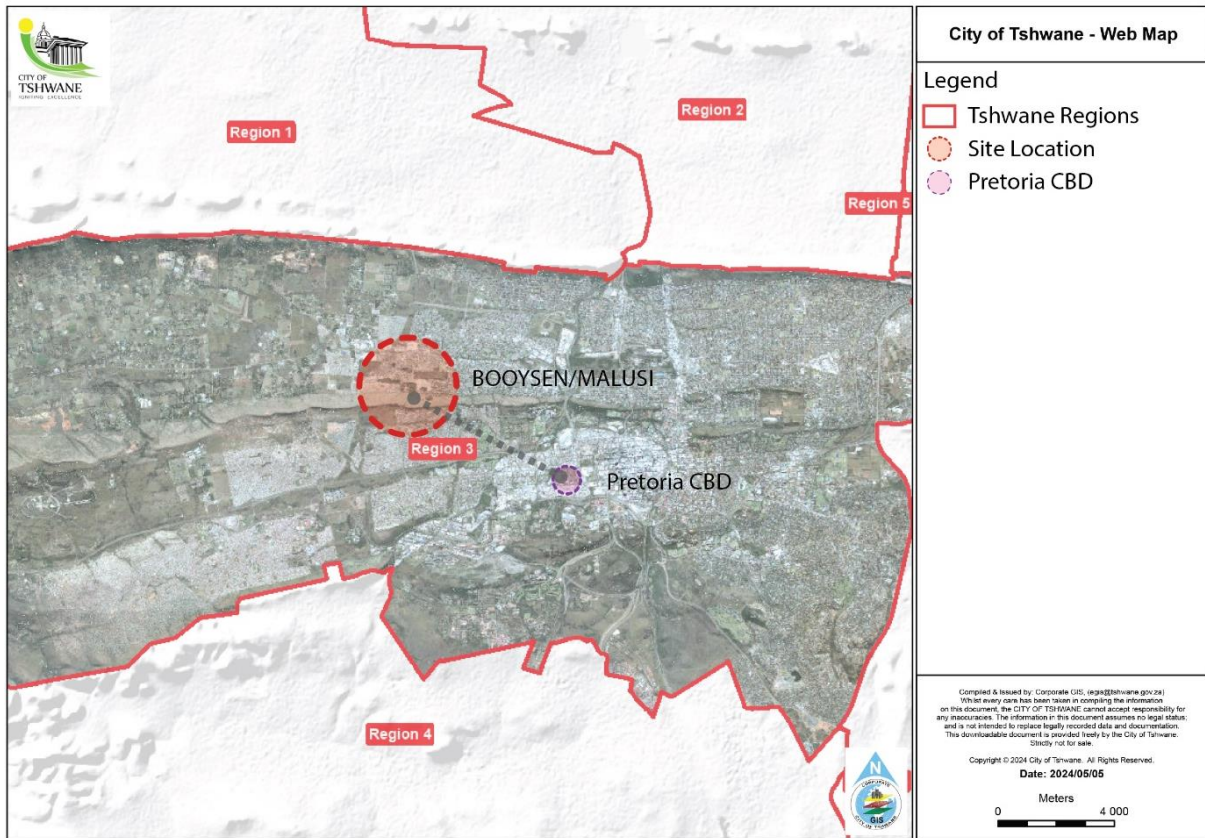


Figure 3: Site Location (Author, 2024)

Notes: Figure shows the chosen site withing the region 3 of the CoT.

The site is within Malusi informal settlement, which is an informal settlement on the western periphery of the CoT (See Figure 3).



Figure 4 : Malusi Informal Settlement (Author, 2024)

Notes: Figure shows the Nursery in the context of Malusi informal Settlement.

Contextualising the design problem

The vision of this project is to create a multifunctional 'Urban Park' – in the form of Mthonjeni Urban Park, in Malusi informal settlement. Although parks are fairly typical landscape typologies, that many designers have tackled before, and which seem to have a formulaic approach, the value of this particular project is that it will accommodate previously unaccommodated Afrocentric activities. This goal is to use design strategies and landscape design language in unique and representative configurations, to make those who work and live in the city feel at home, despite their roots in other parts of the country. Secondly, by proposing the development of cultural and productive landscapes in combination, this project highlights the value that such places can have for addressing spatial inequality in the City of Tshwane (CoT). The project will also include a Nursery, reinstating the functions of the previous nursery, which existed on site, while also re-imagining its value for the local community.

The settlement is home to residents who are from African descent and predominantly from the Mpumalanga and Limpopo provinces according to the community leader (Personal communications) interviewed during a site visit. As a focus area the Booyens Nursery, which is a CoT owned, but decommissioned nursery was selected as the project site. The nursery is a large open space between the settlement and the natural ridge to the south (See figure 4 and Figure 5), with degraded infrastructure, and alien invasive plants growing all over the site since its closure. The nursery was closed due to community protests from Malusi informal settlement residents protesting and regularly shutting down the nursery to demand basic services like water and electricity from the City of Tshwane. Despite the site not being officially operational, there is evidence of the Malusi residents using the site for cultural activities, community farming, recreational purposes, religious gatherings and play areas, see images below.

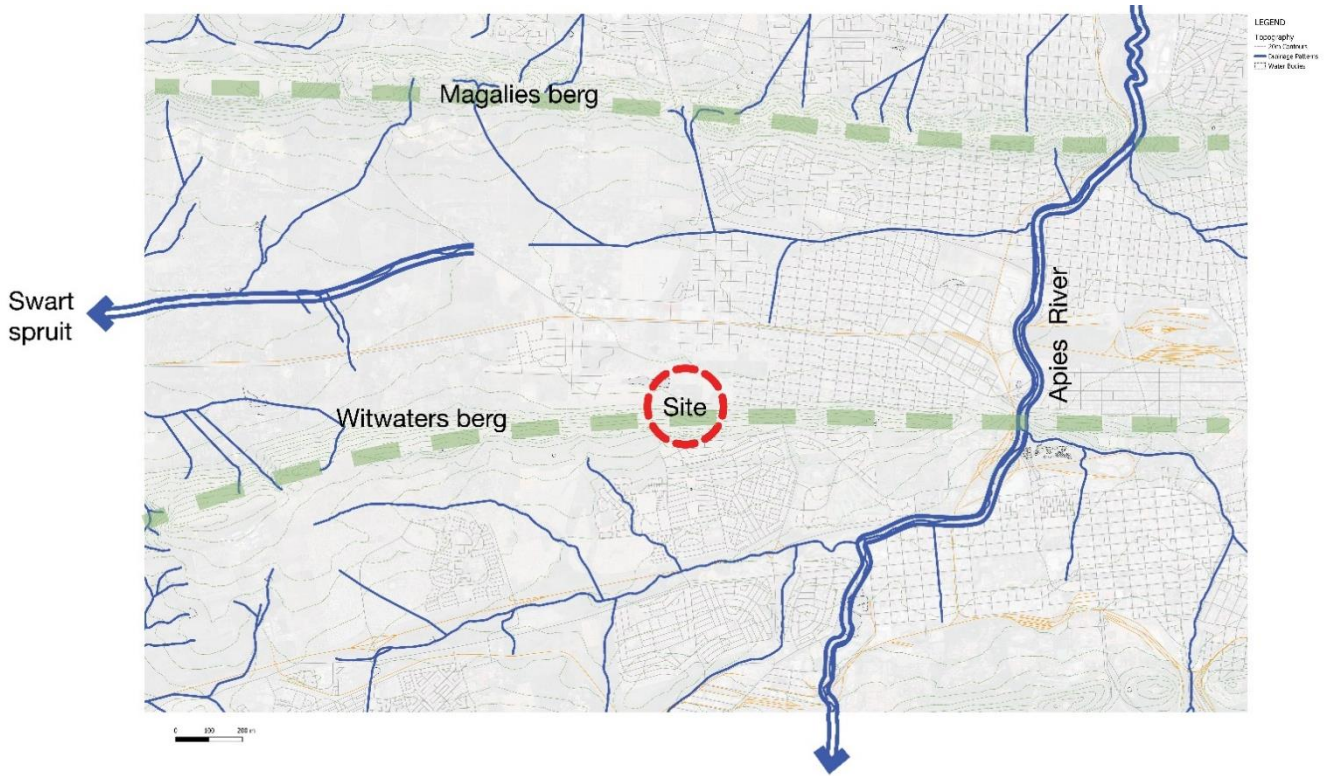


Figure 5: Malusi Informal Settlement (Author, 2024)

Notes: Figure shows the site in its hydrological context the site sits with in the west catchment area that drains to the Apies river, it's located on the northern side of the Witwaters-berg ridge.

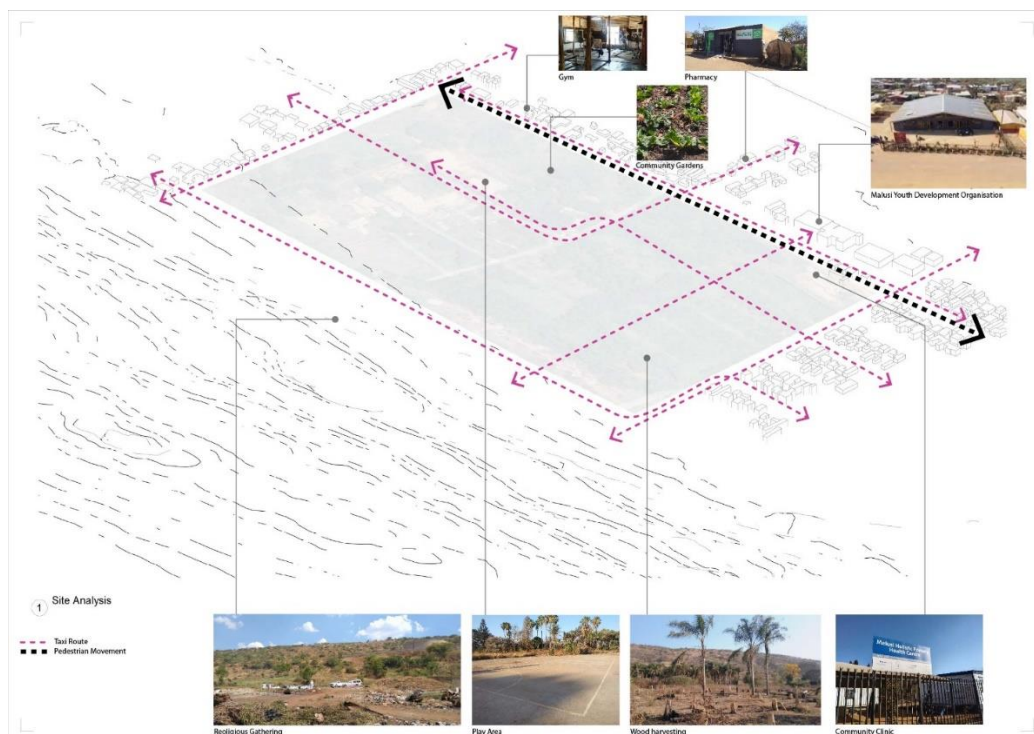


Figure 6: Malusi Informal Settlement (Author, 2024)

Notes: Figure shows movements in and around the site, the busiest route is the northern side where community facilities are located, routes through the site connects the community to facilities



IMG 1: Soil Collecting (Author, 2024)



IMG 2: Gathering Space (Author, 2024)



IMG 3: Deforestation (Author, 2024)



IMG 4: *Umnsinsi* (A, 2024)



IMG 5: Degraded Infra (Author, 2024)

The analysis is further supplemented by the 'Co-creating Wellness' surveys undertaken by Honours students in the Department of Architecture (Urban Citizenship, 2023). In this survey there is evidence of interest to transform the site to accommodate some of the activities observed on the pictures above was also expressed by community members through research that was done by the University of Pretoria during site analysis.

From a city-wide planning and political point of view, the design problem is contextualised by the following section. In its City of Tshwane District Development Model One Plan, the City of Tshwane acknowledged the following:

1. Too few people work.
2. The quality of school education for Black people is poor
- 3. Infrastructure is unequally located, inadequate and under-maintained**
- 4. Spatial divides hinder inclusive development**
5. The economy is unsustainable and resource intensive
6. The public health system cannot meet demand or sustain quality
- 7. Public services are unevenly distributed and often of poor quality**
8. Corruption levels are high
- 9. South Africa remains a divided society**

From the above we can see that the City of Tshwane recognises the inequality of public space distribution and from the few academic readings, the need to transform existing open public spaces to be relatable to the previously colonised.

Design Problem

Project Objectives

- To create a Public Open Space that gives people a feeling of being home away from home, in other words, to accommodate the many urban migrants living in the CoT, who are a) not formally catered for, and b) who may not be able to relate to the spaces in which they find themselves living.
- Address the inequality to open public space in the city.

Stakeholders + Users

1. **The City of Tshwane:** They are the owners of the site.
2. **Tshwane University of Technology:** A former student of this university shared how the horticulture and the Landscape Department used the land to train students in the nursery.
3. **Malusi/Gomora Community Leaders:** On my site visit, I encountered a community leader who was also part of the farming community, a religious leader whose church currently meets under a tree
4. **The Department of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries:** In 2021, about R1.2 billion was allocated to the agriculture and food sector budget to support smallholder farmers through various initiatives related to value addition. The Department of Agriculture, Forests and Fisheries budgeted about R5.6 billion between 2018 and 2021 to support 145,000 black commercial, subsistence and smallholder producers with production inputs and farm infrastructure.
5. **Department of Education:** R1,7 billion has been allocated to the Education Infrastructure Grant and R1,0 billion has been allocated to the National School Nutrition Programme Grant. A strong motivation can be made to persuade the department to fund part of this project since it is also an educational asset and it could provide nutritious food to learners.
6. **University of Pretoria:** They have extensive and recent data collected from site and they are connected to other possible stakeholders who could help with the project vision.
7. **Department of Higher Education:** Infrastructure budget can go towards this project towards students of institutions of higher learning who will be using the site for academic reasons.

Socio-ecological contextual analysis

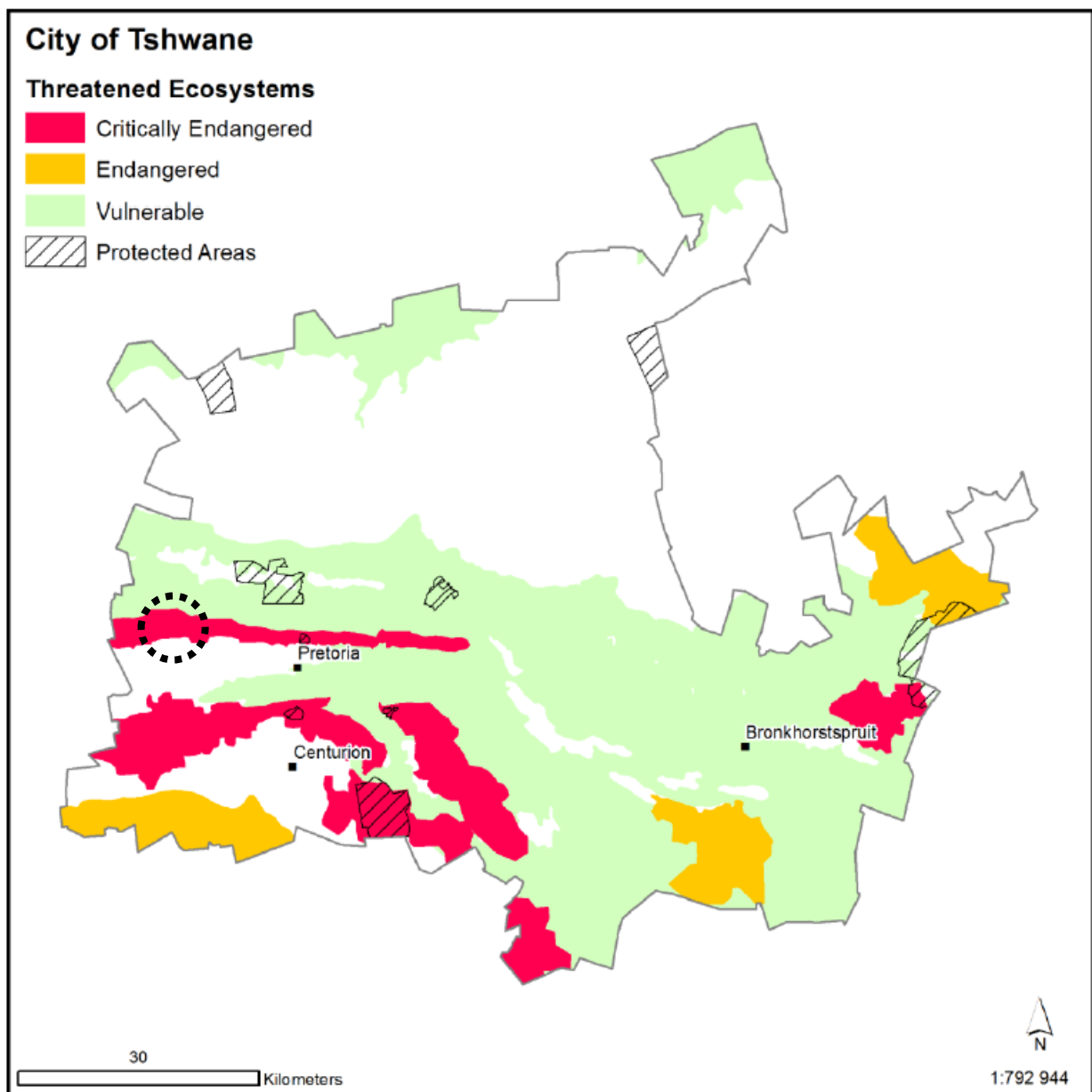


Figure 7: Bioregional Plan for the City of Tshwane – 2016

The site sits within a critically endangered and vulnerable ecosystem, as identified by the National Freshwater Ecosystem Priority Areas (NFEPA). The implication of this, is that it is a good opportunity to propose the Urban Park, which can buffer the encroachment of urban settlement on natural and critically endangered land, but in a way that is beneficial to the community.

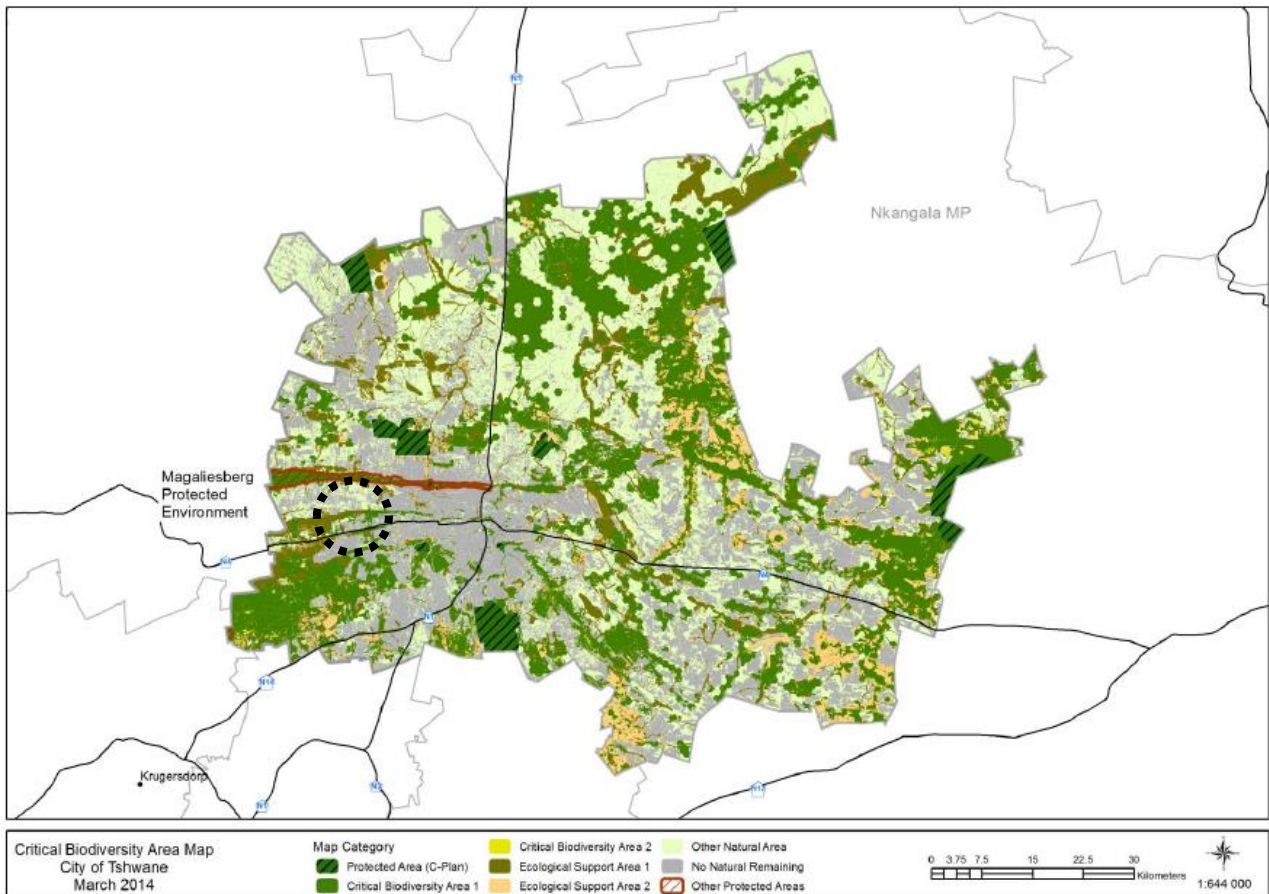


Figure 8: Critical biodiversity map (CoT, 2014)

The site sits on critical biodiversity areas, which the City of Tshwane has classified as CBA 1, this means that the City of Tshwane has protected these areas from being intensely developed, and instead becoming part of the urban ecological network of open spaces in the city but that they should remain natural rather.

DIT and DPD Links

During my DIT (Design Investigation Treatise) research, 15 people were interviewed, 10 men and 20 women. The research participants were over 18 years old and were of African descent. Due to time constraints and the type of qualitative reach being conducted, only 15 people could be interviewed in depth and this amount was deemed sufficient for a qualitative type of research. The research participants consisted primarily of people who grew up in the townships within the in the CoT, people who reside in the township but who come from the rural areas, and people who stay and or work within the City of Tshwane CBD. Some of these findings are briefly indicated below – to indicate the design informants incorporated into the design process for the current project. Later, it will be shown how they are applied to the design.

The aim of the research was to determine design informants that can be identified from the stories indigenous people tell, which reveal their aspirations for public open space in the city, that better supports their cultural needs and activities. The research recognised that public open space lacked these spaces because of two primary reasons, 1 Inherited colonial and apartheid special planning in urban spaces of South Africa including the CoT, 2 city authorities have overlooked these needs and aspirations.

For the decolonization of public space to take place, users of the public space need to relate their stories and allow a new story to emerge (Landman & Makakavhule, 2021).

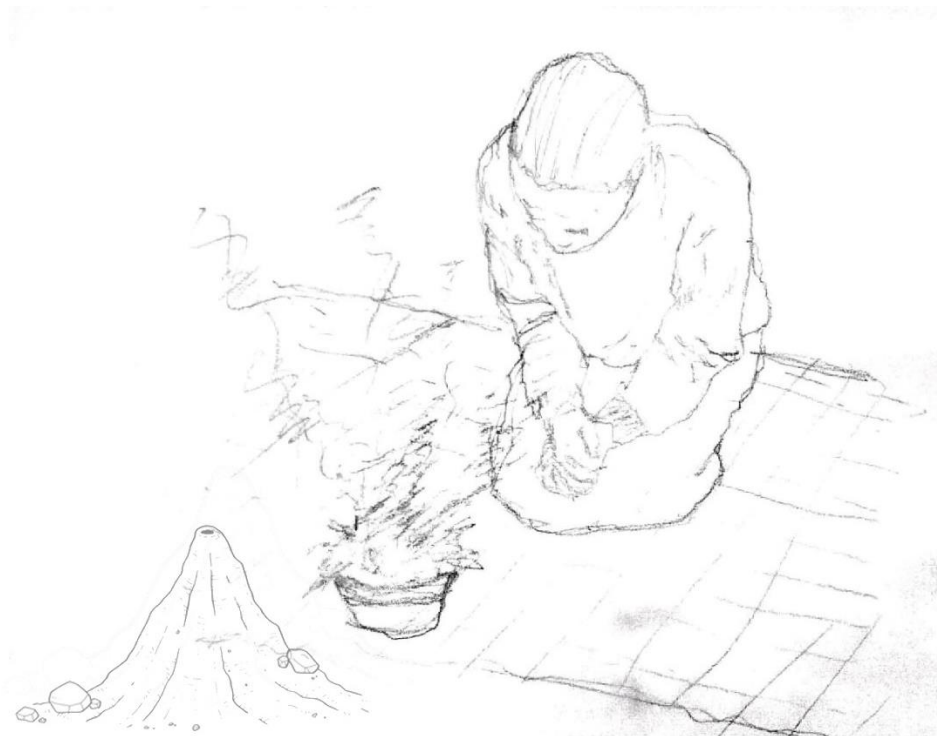


Figure 9: Talking to ancestors in an excluded natural environment via an ant heap or near a river (A, 2024)

“Sometimes I do visit the bushes, especially where there's like ant holes. Yeah, that is our way of connecting to the ancestors...Yeah. So I visit those- the bushes, but it's mostly the bushes and the rivers... only. I've never been to the mountains, though I wish to go sometime soon.”

(BP_07_2024, 2024)

One of the research participants relayed how tall natural bushes away from the noise, offer rooms and spaces to sit down and talk to ancestors, talking to ancestors could also be done near running water or rivers. This research participant mentioned how the park (Burgers Park) is an example of nature but because it lacked spaces to retreat from the crowd and communicate with ancestors, it didn't meet her spiritual needs and it didn't facilitate the connection to home, as she would have these spaces within reach at home.



Figure 10: Walker spruit in Magnolia Dell (A, 2024)

“I’m coming from a village place there in KZN. And so the place is very familiar, will be taking cows and then to drink there and even ourselves we go there for swimming whatever.” (MD_05_2024, 2024)

A research participant in Magnolia Dell spoke about how the Walkerspruit sparked childhood memories of taking cows for grazing, and drinking water, and how they used to play and swim in the river, they also said maybe the spring should be open and there should be a designated space for swimming at Magnolia Dell, they said this would connect them more to home and childhood memories. Rivers and mountains were common features that research participants cited as elements that reminded them of home.



Figure 11: Farming (A, 2024)

“My homes they have a huge yard, so they ploughed maze. There's guava trees, peach, mangoes, bananas and so forth, even potatoes...” (MS_05_2024, 2024)

Farming and community gardens were activities that research participants cited as reminding them of home and that the city life deprives them of spaces to do farming. Research participants also spoke of wild edible plants like Umviyo (*Vangueria infausta*), umngwenya (*Harpephyllum caffrum*) and other plants give him childhood memories of exploring and learning in nature.

DIT research revealed that the following elements of nature connected people to home:

- Rivers
- Mountains
- Farming
- Bushes
- Edible plants
- Medicinal Plants

These elements either supported their daily, spiritual and cultural needs. While many research participants did not mind the current park designs, they expressed that some elements like plants and functional water ways could be adjusted or included to give them a feeling of being at home in the CoT.

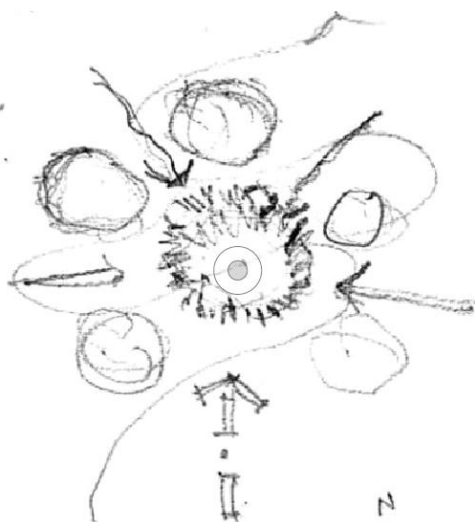
Project Outline (delineating the design brief)

The programme was inspired by DIT findings (briefly outlined above), community needs and context (site analysis).

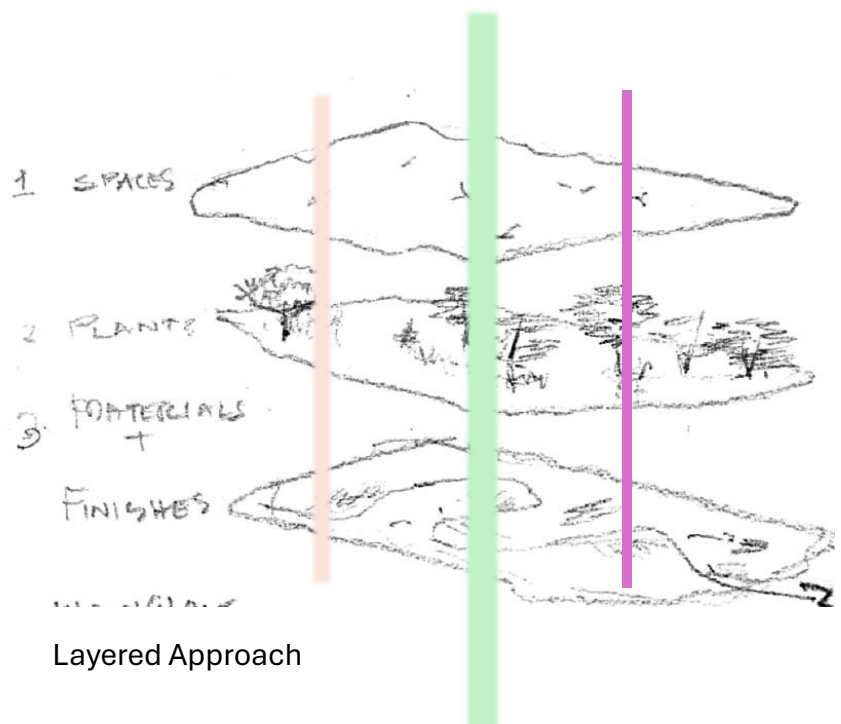
The Park will include the following:

- An amphitheatre multi-functional space with can be used for activities like, stick fighting, performance and storytelling, public lectures.
- Harvestable healing garden, where people can learn about indigenous heling herbs and harvest them if they wish too.
- Nursery with shade tunnels sorting tables and irrigation, to produce plants for the City of Tshwane while providing a hands-on leaning space for university students in the field of horticulture and landscape architecture.
- Community gardens for the community to farm their own food for commercial and personal use as they would back home where they would normally have big outdoor spaces.
- Small pockets of spaces surrounded by high bushes for people to meditate, speak with ancestors or connect with nature.
- A naturalistic but contemporary water feature for people to come and pray, talk with the ancestors, or just enjoy and relax.
- A couple of spaces under the tree for meeting, playing and or having time off from the hustle and bustle of the city
- Play area for children will not be just play equipment, the design of play structures and spaces will focus on kasi, and rural games.

Concept



Nguni Village



Layered Approach

The concept is inspired by the Nguni village layout as an ordering element, the central *leshaka* (sotho word for kraal), being the most important and valuable space that holds everything together, layering means different spaces align with the type of chosen plant species and materials.

Key concepts

Nature activities which normally occur in Rural Landscapes:



ho bolela le badimo



ukweluka



Ukungwenga



ukutheza

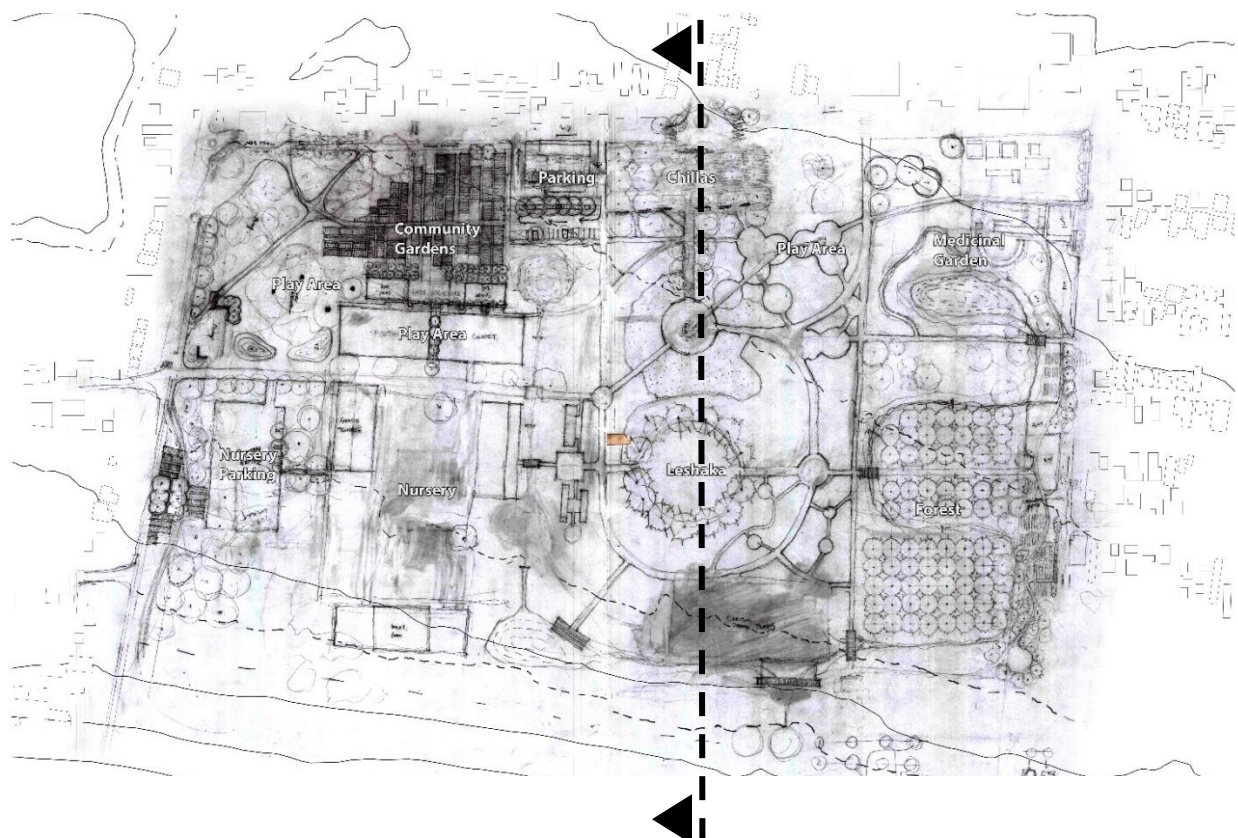


izinganekwane



ukulima

Sketch Plan





Section

Project justification

The Proposed project will not only be a benefit to the marginalised community of Tshwane, it has a benefit to the threatened ecoservices of the City of Tshwane. It will provide the City of Tshwane with much need plans through the Nursery, It will create a sense of being at home for those who came far, and It will be a long term investment for education and food nutrition in the City of Tshwane

Conclusion

The development of Emthonjeni Urban Park is very possible, but it does require careful design considerations, there will be a great benefit to the immediate and broader community of the City of Tshwane. The instability of the Malusi community in terms of service delivery protests and the city of Tshwane could be a threat to this project, however this can be prevented to community engagement in the design process, so that the community does not feel excluded but take ownership of the project. A decolonial approach to design is a complex but necessary process, for the benefit of communities and to deal with the injustices of the past.

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