

# GOOD HOOD STORIES

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New road layout connects homes and improves access in Phola Park

## Phola Park's upgrading paves the way for new opportunities

[KuGompo City]

Until 2026, the residents of the Phola Park informal settlement faced significant difficulties accessing their homes. Informal, often muddy walking paths zigzagged precariously across the sloped terrain.

The absence of a formal road network severely restricted access for essential services, including emergency vehicles and minibus taxis. This lack of infrastructure led to a range of severe problems: minor fires posed a serious risk often spreading quickly, as emergency services could not reach affected structures, exposed and illegal electricity connections posed a risk to life, and poor drainage systems contributed to an unhealthy living environment for the community.

Although multiple informal settlement upgrading plans had previously been approved by the Buffalo City Municipality, implementation stalled due to a lack of detailed layouts and disagreements between municipal departments over engineering standards. Following years of delays after the Informal Settlement Strategy by local NGO AFESIS, residents

of Phola Park visited the office of the NGO urging action in their community.

This action yielded success. Inspired by a project in Cape Town that municipal officials learned about through an exchange, the Buffalo City Municipality, AFESIS, and the community collaborated to implement a "re-blocking" process. This initiative involved the spatial rearrangement of homes within the informal settlement to create a structured internal road network, facilitating access for services. Crucially, this strategy successfully upgraded the settlement in situ, significantly reducing the number of homes that needed to be relocated.

For the residents, the impact is both tangible and symbolic. The new roads substantially improve daily mobility, primarily for walking since many residents do not own cars, and signify the municipality's commitment to incremental upgrading over displacement. Local resident Xoliswa Magcobela highlights the practical change: "If you were coming from town, a vehicle could not enter with your groceries. You had to stop the taxi at the main road,

and ask for assistance from people nearby to help you carry your groceries to your house." She adds, "Now, when you go around you have no worries and walk with ease. We used to struggle having to move wearing heavy gumboots, even with our fragile knees and bones we had to drag our feet whilst wearing gumboots."

Besides improving residents' mobility, an immediate and significant benefit of the new roads is improved access for emergency and service delivery vehicles, including fire trucks, ambulances and police vehicles. Shortly after the roads were graded, a fire truck was able to enter Phola Park for the first time to extinguish a blaze. "Now that the roads are done, [...] everything is very simple [...] If you have someone who's sick at home, we just call the ambulance, and the ambulance can come through" says Zikhona Ndukwana, resident and the leader of the Project Steering Committee who represents the community's interests.

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# The New Urban Agenda in action

## Community-driven urban initiatives from South Africa's neighbourhoods



**KAYLA HANNA BROWN**  
Programme Manager: Inclusive Cities  
South African Cities Network

The narrative of South African cities has been dominated by a single story: one of challenge, of service delivery backlogs, and of spatial inequality. While these realities are not to be ignored, they can sometimes overshadow the quiet, determined, and innovative work happening in our neighbourhoods.

It is with this conviction that we present the fourth season of Good Hood Stories. Having produced three previous seasons that shifted the focus to positive urban practice, Season 4, produced in partnership with the Department of Human Settlements (DHS), takes on a critical task: demonstrating that the lofty goals of the Integrated Urban Development Framework (IUDF) and the New Urban Agenda (NUA) are not just policy documents for national government, but are living blueprints being built from the ground up by communities, civil society, and local government.

This season's films focus on four exemplary projects, selected from case studies submitted for the New Urban Agenda Country Report. They highlight a crucial truth: sustainable human settlements are not created in isolation. They are forged through partnerships, cre-

ativity, and, most importantly, community ownership. The first film tells the story of the Reblocking Pilot Project in Phola Park Informal Settlement, Buffalo City Municipality. Here, we see the IUDF's call for "integrated and proactive informal settlement upgrading" brought to life. Through a partnership between the municipality and the NGO Afesis, this project demonstrates a move away from top-down planning. Instead, it embraces co-production, working with residents to reblock the settlement, creating safer, more dignified pathways and open spaces that allow for basic service provision.

The second film takes us to Cape Town, weaving together three smaller projects into a powerful narrative on Place-Making Strategies for Safe Neighbourhoods. Featuring the iThemba Walkway in Gugulethu, the creation of dignified green spaces in Tafelsig, and the LightUp initiative in Khayelitsha, this film encapsulates the New Urban Agenda's commitment to "safe, accessible, and inclusive public spaces."

What connects these three projects is their embodiment of active citizenry. They are not projects done to communities, but projects driven by them. They

“The future of South African cities is not a distant dream; it is being written, right now, by the communities who refuse to wait for change.

demonstrate that safety is not just about physical infrastructure but about reclaiming public space. When residents co-design a walkway or light up a dark corridor, they are not just beautifying their environment; they are asserting their right to the city. They are localising the NUA's vision of a city where everyone, regardless of their background, can participate in urban life with dignity and security.

As a network dedicated to supporting South African cities, our role in Good Hood Stories extends beyond filmmaking. The process itself is a form of advocacy. The two short films, the Good Hood Newspaper, and the poster series we have produced are tools for engagement. They will be showcased at the World Urban Forum 13 (WUF13) in Baku, selling the story of South African innovation on an international stage.

The stories in Season 4 are proof that the IUDF and NUA are not abstract concepts. They are realised when a municipality trusts an NGO to facilitate community-led reblocking. They are realised when residents take it upon themselves to light up a public space, making it safer for their children. They are realised in the partnerships we build, the lessons we share, and the inspiration we spark.

The challenges our cities face are significant, but so is the ingenuity within them. As we move forward, we must continue to invest in and elevate these local examples. The Good Hood Stories remind us that the future of South African cities is not a distant dream; it is being written, right now, by the communities who refuse to wait for change and instead, become the architects of it. We invite you to watch, share, and be inspired by these stories.



From mud to paved streets: new pathways connect homes and ease daily movement In Phola Park, KuGompo City



"Informal Settlement Reblocking – KuGompo City" – Collage by Our Future Cities

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The new roads have also significantly enhanced the residents' sense of dignity. Previously, cultural practices such as funeral ceremonies, which frequently extend into the streets, were greatly impeded. Now, with improved access, hearses can directly reach individual homes, eliminating the need for families to carry coffins through the previously narrow pathways.

The project has created the necessary conditions for increment improvements in service delivery. During the road construction process, engineers identified a high water table linked to inadequate plumbing and informal water connections. The newly established access corridors now provide the space and foundation for the safe installation of electricity poles, water reticulation and sanitation infrastructure. Engagements with the Electricity Department are under way to begin formal electrification.

The Phola Park re-blocking project has delivered more than just physical infrastructure; it has also fostered stronger community participation and local economic inclusion. The entire re-blocking process was founded on extensive engagement and participatory planning, with the Project Steering Committee representing residents throughout the planning and implementation phases. Crucially, the physical relocation of structures was carried out by community members employed through the Expanded Public Works Programme, which generated local income and secured community buy-in.

Beyond community benefits, the project tackled long-standing institutional obstacles, presenting a viable path forward. By creating a compliant road network within a settlement that lacked formal planning, re-blocking offered a practical solution. This was instrumental in enabling municipal departments to coordinate and unlock essential funding via the Urban Settlements Development Grant.

As a pilot project within Buffalo City, Phola Park demonstrates the effectiveness of structured partnerships—between communities, technical facilitators, and municipal departments—in delivering real improvements within informal settlements. With the internal layout now successfully established, the municipality is now considering replicating this innovative approach in other settlements within the Scenery Park area.

The Phola Park experience ultimately shows that rigid formal city regulations and policies around road engineering standards are often not directly replicable or effective in informal settlement contexts. Instead, they require adaptation and modification through engagement with the community and consideration of local conditions.



Upgraded roads and walkways enhance connectivity and access throughout the community.

## Q&amp;A

In conversation with reblocking project champion:  
**MDUDUZI NTONGANA**

[KuGompo City, Phola Park]

**You currently work for AFESIS but can you share more about your journey that led you to your current role.**

My journey began very early in my life. Growing up in East London, I became aware at a young age of the disparities between people living in marginalised communities and informal settlements and my own experience of having a roof over my head. That contrast always stayed with me and planted a desire to make a difference, even though I did not yet know how. When I reached Grade 11, I vividly remember studying settlement patterns in Geography and becoming fascinated by the way cities and communities are formed. I was particularly interested in urban morphology and began exploring what I could study at university. That was when I discovered Urban and Regional Planning, specifically at the University of Witwatersrand. My first encounter with Afesis was in 2019 as a student while working on my Honours research titled “Exploring the nature of Self-Help Housing mechanisms used for the implementation of low-cost housing policies in South Africa.” Afesis played an important role in that research by assisting with interviews and connecting me to other NGOs across the country. Through that process, I was exposed to their work and even had the opportunity to observe one of their workshops. My professional journey began just before the COVID-19 lockdowns when I joined the 1-to-1 Agency of Engagement in Johannesburg as a socio-economic researcher. However, when the lockdown began shortly afterwards, I had to return to East London. Back home, I joined Tshani Consulting, a private town planning firm in the city and one of the most respected in the province. That experience played a crucial role in shaping me as a professional town planner. I gained exposure to spatial planning, land use management, human settlements planning, and policy development. Starting in a junior role, I was quickly trusted with greater responsibility and began working on more complex policies and projects. The technical skills, policy experience, and professional networks I gained there eventually positioned me well for a transition into the NGO sector. Two years later, I joined Afesis in April 2022, and it has now been almost four years of deeply meaningful work for me.

**What do you enjoy most about working directly with communities?**

What I enjoy most is that it gives real meaning to the work beyond the desk. Planning can sometimes feel technical, but being in communities reminds me why it matters. I often say my work is not about planning for people, but planning with them. I love listening to community members' stories on their struggles, resilience, and how they navigate life in informal settlements. Sometimes for me the best moments



In conversation with Mduduzi Ntongana

are just spending time with people, talking informally about the project or anything they have in mind, or just being available to answer questions and help them find solutions.

**Which skills and traits do you think are key for making these engagements with communities effective and lasting?**

Technical expertise is important, but the real impact comes from being able to simplify complex ideas and communicate them clearly, speaking to people in the language they feel most comfortable with. Active listening, patience, empathy, transparency, and honesty are essential, and it's important not to over-promise, as communities value your word and trust. Above all, approaching your work with a mindset of doing your best to make things happen and creating real change in people's lives means a lot to community members and this fundamentally builds trust.

**This was your first Re-blocking project. What has been the biggest challenge you faced in the process?**

Since this is a pilot project, one of the first challenges was helping municipal departments understand what informal settlement upgrading is, and specifically, what the re-blocking approach entailed. Even when the concept was clear, getting different departments to actively support the project was another hurdle in getting it off the ground. BCMM Human Settlements, with support from Settlement Planning, led the project within the municipality, but real progress towards implementation only happened after we went “door-to-door,” meeting each department individually over the course of a year. Interdepartmental meetings were hard to coordinate at first, but once each department understood its role and how it could contribute, they became fully supportive and committed to executing what was needed on their end. For example, the Geomatics Department ensured that the Tachy Survey and land

pegging for the road layout were completed. For me, this was again a lesson in persistence. Bureaucracy can be slow, and waiting for things to “just happen” doesn't work — you have to actively push, build relationships, and take the time to explain, listen, and collaborate for implementation to happen. Now, having learned what's needed to get everyone on board, we're confident that future re-blocking projects will be implemented much more efficiently and effectively.

**What advice would you give to others who would like to follow in your footsteps?**

If your goal is to work in development and planning, it is important to remember that behind every policy, map, or housing project are real people and real lives. Technical knowledge is essential, but empathy and humility are equally important. Never underestimate the value of listening to communities. The people who live in these spaces often understand their challenges deeply and can contribute meaningfully to the solutions. When communities feel a sense of ownership over a project, the outcomes are usually stronger and more sustainable. Most importantly, invest time not only in planning but also in implementation.

Many great ideas and plans exist on paper, but real impact happens when you dedicate time and effort to turning those ideas into real improvements on the ground through actionable items. Another important lesson I've learned in my career is the value of building relationships. Networking is often an underestimated skill for planners, but it can unlock many doors. For projects in human settlements to succeed, they often require coordinated responses from multiple departments within a municipality and communities. Building relationships across these departments helps ensure that when implementation needs to happen, you already have the connections and trust in place to move things forward.

# A new public space agenda for South African cities is needed!

As South Africa creeps towards the 2026 local elections, the political noise machine will soon be running at full tilt, churning out the same old gripes: potholes, shoddy service, and weak councils. And while, yes, those things absolutely matter, we often get stuck in a kind of abstract, bureaucratic chatter, missing the point of how local government actually registers in the messiness of our daily lives.

What stands out from the latest season of Good Hood Stories is the profound influence of the common and often unnoticed spaces right outside our doors—an influence that the public debate routinely sidelines. The four featured interventions—Phola Park Reblocking in Buffalo City, iThemba Walkways in Gugulethu, LightUp in Khayelitsha, and PAINT in Mitchells Plain—are small in scale, but they illuminate a colossal blind spot. Each one targets the kind of neighbourhood infrastructure that always seems to slip through the cracks: lost between departments, forgotten in budget meetings, and never quite making it onto standard planning checklists. Our urban policy in South Africa still views housing through a woefully simple lens, operating as if handing over a physical structure is the same as creating a home or building a resilient neighbourhood.

Phola Park Reblocking is a case in point. The reorganisation was about carving out a basic road network to make room for services. Before the reblocking, residents navigated muddy, constricted pathways, and emergency or service vehicles were routinely blocked. The true impact wasn't the creation of a tidy, official layout, but the establishment of the foundational public structure the settlement desperately needed to function. These new roads became walking paths, service routes, emergency access points, and a base for future services like sanitation and lighting. The project also exposed a core tension in South African urban development. Rules designed for conventional suburban areas often clash violently with the reality of dense informal settlements. Here, strictly following mandated road width requirements would have meant exponentially more people losing their homes. What emerged was a vital, smarter compromise: roads were introduced, but through continuous negotiation between the city and residents, allowing for flexible widths that limited displacement while still dramatically improving the settlement's function.

Gugulethu offers a similar narrative. The iThemba Walkways project focuses on the narrow lanes between houses—spaces created during the apartheid era but since left to become neglected, unsafe, and often choked with refuse. People rely on these spaces every single day, yet they are almost never treated as a proper component of the public realm. iThemba begins with a simple, practical truth: these lanes

matter because they are the conduits for pedestrian life, they are where kids play, where neighbours meet, and their state dictates how the entire area operates. Through a collaborative design process, the project has reclaimed a key walkway and, over four years, has been instrumental in identifying 20 more walkways in Gugulethu, forcing a wider focus on creating safer, more welcoming neighbourhood spaces.

LightUp in Khayelitsha tackles this issue through illumination. In areas like Site C, the massive, towering high-mast lights have long been seen as the primary solution for safety in informal settlements. But residents understand that these lights often leave the most crucial spaces in the dark: the paths where people walk, access communal taps and toilets, and move between structures after nightfall. By installing solar lighting on and around homes, LightUp has boosted visibility precisely in the spaces between dwellings, a change particularly vital for the safety of women and girls.

“South Africa must move beyond the idea of a city made up simply of houses and start thinking in terms of a city made up of neighbourhoods.”

PAINT in Mitchells Plain, initiated by local resident Michael Bell, addresses another overlooked facet of neighbourhood life. In Tafelsig, an area still grappling with gang violence in 2025, gang tags are far more than mere graffiti. They are loud, visual declarations of territorial control, fear, and abandonment. PAINT pushes back by replacing these markings with vibrant murals and public art, completing 27 murals over almost a decade and reclaiming walls along key routes like AZ Berman Drive. This fundamentally shifts how public space looks and, more importantly, how it feels.

Taken together, these projects suggest that South Africa consistently under-appreciates the community led and less tangible details that define a neighbourhood: ease of access, safety of a walking route, upkeep of a shared boundary, and whether the public realm fosters any sense of belonging or care. This points to a far more practical policy framework than the standard political conversation about service delivery.

First, the spaces between houses need formal policy and budget recognition. South Africa should consider a dedicated national fund for neighbourhood placemaking: small-scale public space improvements that fall below the threshold of major capital projects but can still change daily life in meaningful ways. This



RASHIQ FATAAR  
CEO  
Our Future Cities

could include safer walkways and local paths, better lighting, public art, edge repairs, seating, shade and the upgrading of small shared spaces. Germany offers one useful precedent, where neighbourhood-level funds such as Stadtteufonds and Verfügungsfonds support small community and public-private projects through accessible local grant mechanisms. These interventions may be modest in cost, but they can have a disproportionate effect on safety, dignity and community life.

Second, cities must implement simple, well-managed grant mechanisms for the resident leaders, civic groups, NGOs, artists, and neighbourhood collectives who are already driving this work on the ground. These projects prove that relatively modest amounts of money can catalyze massive local change. Third, municipalities need less-risky avenues for experimentation and learning. We too often default to avoiding innovation because the political and administrative costs of attempting something differently are perceived as too high. Yet, one clear lesson from these projects is that standard approaches often fail. Departments should be given safer pathways to pilot alternatives, whether that's decentralised solar lighting instead of yet another high-mast solution, or a new method for upgrading a pedestrian pathway.

The larger point is this: South Africa must move beyond the idea of a city made up simply of houses and start thinking in terms of a city made up of neighbourhoods. Streets, pavements, paths, lanes and the wider public realm are not secondary to housing delivery. They are essential urban structures that make daily life safer, more workable and more dignified. This matters especially where households are large and private living space is small, because in such contexts public space often functions as an extension of the home. Seen in that light, improving public space is not cosmetic. It is an intervention in social justice.

That is the lens we must maintain as the election campaign accelerates. The true measure of local government isn't just its capacity to announce a delivery milestone, but its ability to help create neighbourhoods that simply work better for the people who live in them, every single day.



Painted walls and walkways in Tafelsig reclaim the streets

## Q&A

In conversation with PAINT'S project champion:  
**MICHAEL BELL**

[Cape Town, Mitchell's Plain]

**PAINT Communities is not your full-time job, you also work full-time in public service. Can you share a bit about your career journey?**

After school I wanted to study Graphic Design, but being a public servant was something I always wanted to be. Witnessing all the injustices around me, I wanted to effect positive change in my community and the world at large.

**What is your personal inspiration to start the PAINT project?**

In 2008 I was brutally attacked in a park not far from my home. I was left for dead, but by the grace of God I survived the ordeal. I had two choices, move on or make a difference. I used the experience of the ordeal to effect change in my community. Instead of harboring hatred and rage I chose to embrace. I looked at the open spaces in my community realized there is a need to develop it so that people can utilize it for its intended purpose.

**What does being an artist mean to you?**

Being an artist means to transform walls into works of art in terms of our mural projects. Personally, it's about using my imagination, my skill and my emotion to create something truly amazing and meaningful that others can appreciate. It is about bringing my ideas to life in such a way that people can see the works differently.

**Can you share your experience about the first mural?**

Absolutely, I was obviously very excited because the wall had vile graffiti on it and seeing how we were able to transform it into something beautiful and colorful, was truly amazing.

**Which mural is your favourite?**

I love all the murals because of the bright colors, but my favorite one is the Poseidon mural that addresses the issue of marine preservation. Also, because I love the ocean.

**What advice would you give to other artists and placemakers who are thinking about starting a project like this?**

It has to be your passion and you must love what you do. Obviously, you will make mistakes, but that is part of the journey. Start small and be patient. It's not about changing the world, it's about effecting change where you are – in your street, in your community.

**What is your dream for your neighbourhood?**

To turn it into the most colorful neighborhood in South Africa and create the very first street art gallery right here in Tafelsig.



In conversation with Michael Bell

# PLACEMAKING FOR SAFER COMMUNITIES CAPE TOWN



PAINT MITCHELL'S PLAIN



ITHEMBA WALKWAY GUGULETHU



LIGHT UP KHAYELITSHA



"Placemaking for safer communities – Cape Town" – Collage by Our Future Cities

# Placemaking for safer communities

[Cape Town]

## Paint and art is changing Tafelsig in Mitchell's Plain

From Tafelsig, a neighbourhood within Cape Town's sprawling Mitchell's Plain, the Atlantic Ocean is only a stone's throw away. This may sound idyllic. However, the community was born from the violence and injustice of apartheid – whole communities were forcibly removed from the well located central city areas to a large flat sandy area, between the Wolfgat Nature Reserve and the N2 freeway, with the promise of a better life. But over decades since its birth in the 60s it has struggled with insufficient infrastructure, a lack of public investment, gangsterism, and substance abuse. Even today, gang tags and litter line the street walls of Tafelsig which form psychological boundary markers designed to intimidate residents and warn off rivals. They also act as daily reminders of the systemic problems facing the community.

Michael Bell, a resident, artist and public official, had a different idea for what he wanted his community to look and feel like. Without official permission or support, Michael picked up a paintbrush and some cans of paint on his own dime and along with some residents and friends began to change his neighbourhood, wall by wall. What began as a single act of defiance against decay has steadily grown into a broader, community-driven transformation. The project directly challenges the visual language of crime. By creating large-scale murals and artworks over these tags, the initiative disrupts that coded system of fear. "In terms of safety and security, it does play a big role and make a difference [...] – people are



Collective effort transforms shared spaces and unites the community

free to walk, even at night now, with the lights being on thanks to the city", Michael Bell notes.

Thus far, the initiative has delivered 27 murals across Tafelsig, with two currently in progress, of which 500 metres along AZ Berman Drive form one part of the broader transformation. Some of these works commemorate national holidays such as Mandela Day and Women's Day, embedding moments of reflection and celebration into the community's visual landscape. The impact has extended beyond public walls, with colour brought into private homes along the route where residents could not afford paint, demonstrating care that reaches beyond the public realm. Beyond the murals, the project has introduced colour to walkways and painted a local bus shelter, demonstrating a broader commitment to the surrounding environment.

Rooted in a broader vision for the neighbourhood, the project has contributed to meaningful improvements in public space and safety. An informal corner space has been upgraded with a tree and benches, creating a welcoming gathering point for the community. Bell has also advocated for pedestrian safety along AZ Berman Drive, a high-risk, high-speed route cutting through Mitchells Plain that students cross daily, by engaging with the City on potential interventions. Ongoing communication with the ward councillor and municipal officials has further addressed issues such as faulty street lighting along AZ Berman Drive, often requiring persistent follow-ups to ensure action is taken.

The PAINT initiative invests directly in local talent, using funding from ArtBridge to pay artists from the community and pairing experienced muralists with younger graffiti writers. Young artists gain hands-on experience in technique, project planning and collaboration, while schoolchildren are invited to contribute to selected sections, turning spectators

into active participants. As initiator and mural artist Michael Bell explains, "Our biggest goal is to create a street art gallery where people can come and appreciate the art, but also just enjoy the space. Then we would like, you know, tourists coming, student groups coming." In this way, the project transforms space into place, positioning community-building at the heart of its artistic practice.

The choice of bright white backgrounds for many of the murals was intentional. Tafelsig's streets are poorly lit at night, and the white paint reflects available light, subtly brightening entire stretches of road. The result is both aesthetic and practical. Routes that once felt unsafe after sunset are now more navigable. Children walking to school in the early hours move along routes that feel less intimidating. Beyond reclaiming walls, the project enhances the dignity and pride of local residents. For decades, the dominant visual narrative of Mitchell's Plain has been one of danger and deterioration. The Open Air Gallery reframes the neighbourhood as a site of culture and talent. Walls become canvases and streets become exhibition spaces. This shift is especially powerful for local youth, who grow up seeing their environment treated not as a backdrop for violence but as a platform for beauty.

Where vandalism once signalled abandonment, vibrant colour now signals care. The transformation speaks to a simple but powerful principle: visible neglect encourages further neglect. By replacing low-quality graffiti with high-quality public art, the murals communicate that the space matters. The impact is tangible. The walls, once silent carriers of threat, have become conversation pieces. Familiar walking routes feel different. The presence of colour and detail slows people down, inviting attention instead of avoidance. Over time, this steady return of ordinary, visible community life begins to reshape how the space is experienced.



Local artist prefix66 at work



Local team installs lights, empowering residents to manage their own safety

## LightUp project shining light and hope in Khayelitsha

As the sun sets over Khayelitsha, daily life shifts indoors. The narrow pathways between homes, ablution blocks and informal businesses, vital spaces during the day, become high-risk environments after dark. With limited lighting, many residents retreat inside, avoiding movement unless absolutely necessary.

In an attempt to address safety, the City installed high-mast lights, some rising nearly 40 metres into the air. Standing like watchtowers, they cast harsh light across the settlement, reflecting off corrugated metal roofs while leaving deep shadows in the tight passages where people actually walk and live. These “dark zones” — the spaces between structures — remain poorly lit and often feel unsafe.



Alleyway lit for residents after dark

In these conditions, fear shapes everyday decisions. Women and children, often the most vulnerable, report avoiding trips to communal toilets at night, sometimes resorting to using buckets inside crowded homes. Children have little room to play, local shops are inaccessible, and those leaving and returning from long days at work before dawn and after dusk are left to navigate a poorly lit maze.

“We got scared when we had to go out to fetch water, when we had to go out to the shop,” one resident shared. Yet it was precisely these challenges that sparked a different approach. LightUp emerged from a PhD research project led by Stephanie Briers, exploring how small, decentralised solar lights could improve safety and everyday life. Instead of relying on large infrastructure, the project installed compact solar lights directly onto the facades of homes in the PJS settlement — placing light where people actually move.

What began as research has grown into a community-driven initiative, now supported by People’s Environmental Planning (PEP). Through workshops and co-design processes, residents identified priority pathways, safety hotspots and areas of economic activity, shaping where lights should be placed to maximise impact. This combination of academic insight and strong local leadership gives residents a sense of ownership over both the infrastructure and its outcomes.

As PEP Co-Founder Noah Schermbucker explains, “You can’t just translate the infrastructure of the formal world onto an informal settlement, one of our biggest challenges is to figure out forms of alternatives.”

Since its pilot phase, LightUp has installed more than 1,300 solar lights across Khayelitsha, reaching over 8,000 residents. The initiative has expanded into areas including Masikhule, QQ-Ireland, QA Section and NN Section, with plans to grow further. The impacts

are tangible. Improved lighting has brought activity back to lanes and courtyards after dark, allowing residents to move more freely, whether visiting neighbours, accessing toilets, or returning home from work. “One key impact people are highlighting is ‘safety for everyone’, but most importantly for vulnerable groups like women and children,” says Dolly Mdzanga.

Ownership is central to the model. Lights are allocated to households, who take responsibility for their care, supported by anti-theft fittings. Some residents have been trained as installers and maintenance technicians, creating local skills and income opportunities. At around 10%, theft and vandalism rates have remained below expectations, owing largely to the strong community stewardship of the project.

Beyond safety, lighting supports economic activity and social life. Informal traders can operate for longer hours, residents can travel more confidently, and previously unused spaces have become places to gather. As one young resident put it simply: playing soccer at night is now possible.

Despite its success, funding remains a major challenge. Each solar light, typically a 10–20W LED unit, costs between R1,500 and R2,000, and the project currently relies largely on donor support. Organisers envision a more sustainable future through diversified funding, including government partnerships and community-based business models that enable residents to sell, install and manage systems themselves.

LightUp offers a bright example of how small, placed interventions can transform everyday life. By rethinking how infrastructure is delivered, and who shapes it, the project is helping to restore something fundamental: the ability to move, gather and feel safe after dark.

# Q&A

In conversation with LightUp’s project champion:  
**VICTORIA DOLLY MDZANGA-FANAPHI**

[Cape Town, Khayelitsha]



In conversation with Victoria Dolly Mdzanga-Fanaphi

### Can you tell us about your background and how that led you to working at PEP?

My name is Victoria Fanaphi, my educational background is Politics, I studied Public Administration at CPUT eighteen years ago and I’m passionate about community development that is led by community partners. I have worked for a Non-profit organisation called People’s Environmental Planning (PEP) since 2016 – LightUp is a programme within PEP that advocates for more effective public lighting in informal settlements through executing and studying the impact of wall-mounted solar public lighting. This project was a concept through a PHD research on lighting by Stephanie Brier, which started in PJS area in Khayelitsha. And since its conception Light Up has successfully implemented several projects in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, and through this project many lives have been impacted and transformed and its growing.

### What are the ingredients of success for the project’s success thus far?

First and foremost, PEP as an organisation has principles that have been time-tested. Principle number one is building strong partnerships. PEP recognises forming strong and efficient partnerships with communities, municipalities, CBOs, other NGOs, as well as with a range of professionals and social movements is key for our successful project development. I’ve worked in the spaces where people’s power was taken away, which has shown that forming partnerships is increasingly becoming the solution for the many complex issues that communities are facing. I have also learnt that effective community partnerships, however, can hardly be built overnight, they are produced over time and through thoughtful deliberation, hence most nonprofit organizations pay more attention to partnerships. Our second principle is working with “organised communities” – this one for us

people’s not solution-driven organisation, PEP will let people decide for themselves.

### My favourite moment from working with the community on LightUp.

My favourite moment would always be when community partners take a leading role in driving change in their community. The second one is when all stakeholders work together in one accord, having reached an understanding towards a developmental goal. This is always very hard to get to, but with more community engagement it becomes possible.

### What is your dream or aspiration for what the LightUp project could achieve in future?

The dream for us is to see the government replicating these kinds of projects in locations where it’s needed most. Secondly, the government partnering with the NGOs to explore new ideas, especially alternative energies for local communities. And lastly, to take this project to rural areas.

### What advice would you give to others who would like to follow in your footsteps?

The number one lesson from my point of view is “don’t do anything for the community without them”. It has become evident that giving people the opportunity to talk about their own community formally and informally is an excellent starting point from which to build relationships. Lastly, as an organisation we learn by doing and it’s highly likely to make mistakes, but we must acknowledge them and learn from them to continuously improve our outputs and processes. We are a learning organisation that reflects on what we did wrong and what we did right.



Outdoor spaces open for gathering and social activities

# Q&A

In conversation with iThemba Walkway's project champion:  
**XOLILE NDZOYI**

[Cape Town, Gugulethu]

**Can you tell us about your background?**

I'm Xolile Ndzoyi, an active South African citizen and change-maker from Gugulethu, and I see my community not as a problem to solve but as a place rich with everyday culture — music, food, street braais, shebeens, and memories layered into every corner since the 1960s. As the Walkway Project Coordinator for the iThemba Walkways project, I've been working since 2021 to champion co-designed upgrades to Gugulethu's walkways together with residents. For more than 20 years I've also been involved in youth development and broader community development, always looking for ways to strengthen our neighbourhoods. I also love travelling across South Africa and the world — learning from different places, empowering myself, and building networks that can bring new ideas and opportunities back to my community.

**What drives your commitment and passion for fostering positive change in Gugulethu?**

What drives me is Gugulethu's own pulse — igugulethu, "our pride." Growing up where streets double as living rooms and shebeens spill into sidewalks, you learn that safety and dignity aren't delivered from above; they're negotiated daily by neighbors, vendors, kids heading to school. That's the thread through my community in general running workshops with residents and street committees, pushing City departments to see walkways as more than concrete: they're corridors for women and children to move without fear, archives of memory after forced removals. I stay at it because spatial justice is personal. Every upgraded passage, every co-designed corner, reclaims apartheid's fragmented layout for collective life — reducing the risk of violence, creating climate-resilient infrastructure, and honoring the Gugulethu historical legacy. The passion comes from residents themselves. When a grandmother points out where light is needed, when youth sketch dream routes — Gugulethu teaches you that change works only if it's authored here, by us.

**Is there a common misconception or little-known fact about Gugulethu that you wish more people understood?**

People reduce Gugulethu to crime stats or a "township problem," but the fact we live is that it's a dense ecology of care: every street has its own everyday culture, jazz history, food networks, and mutual-aid routines that predate NGOs. A little-known thing: Gugulethu's walkways and corners were already informal safety systems with neighbors watching stoops and vendors acting as eyes on the street. Our upgrades with iThemba Walkway didn't invent safety, we amplified what residents already practiced. The misconception is that we need saving; the truth is we need space — light, drainage, recognition, auditing — so our own pride



In conversation with Xolile Ndzoyi

(iGugulethu) can govern itself. That shift from a deficit mindset is what fuels our work.

**What makes the relationship and partnership with Dr. Katie Ewing work well?**

It works because Kate (Dr Kathryn Ewing) enters iThemba Walkway as a guest, not an occupier. She understands that she was invited by me, and we set the brief together with residents, other stakeholders, and street committees. Her urban-design accuracy meets Gugulethu's everyday knowledge: she translates resident sketches. We share a spatial-justice lens (safe passages for women and children, climate-resilient nodes), and she credits local agents, meaning decisions loop back to Gugulethu, not to a campus. That mutual accountability of her strategic tools at our speed turns research into built walkways rather than reports. That bond with Kate deepened because she's been circling Gugulethu in different development forms long before iThemba Walkway: participatory Urban Design projects across Nyanga-Gugs, work on climate/SDG resilience, and a practice that treats residents as co-authors. Her history here means she already knows which area holds memory, which sectors of society animate corners, and how to move. That experience shortens trust-building; her expertise translates our needs into fundable, maintainable details that keeps our initiatives moving forward.

**What are the next projects you hope to undertake, either within your neighborhood or expanding beyond?**

Next-up: consolidate iThemba's network — turn the 24 resident-identified walkways into a joined green spine with better stormwater, wayfinding, and micro-public spaces for vendors and youth play, anchored by different stakeholders and street committees so maintenance stays local. I'm pushing the City to couple walkways with early-childhood routes and women's safety audits after dark — scaling what worked on iThemba. Beyond Gugulethu, I'm in talks

with peers in Khayelitsha and Philippi and other areas to share a "walkway playbook" grounded in vernacular practice.

**What is your ultimate dream or aspiration for Gugulethu?**

A township where the streets, walkways, and vacant lots are clean, green, and owned by the community not by illegal dumpers. I picture kids playing beside murals and vegetable gardens instead of piles of trash, neighbors running tool-libraries and repair workshops, and the municipality partnering with local volunteers so services arrive before a crisis erupts. Waste would be sorted and recycled locally, creating economic opportunities, while schools teach environmental stewardship as a daily habit. In short, Gugulethu becomes a model of self-reliance and pride — proof that when residents and leaders act together, a township can turn a health hazard into a healthy, thriving neighborhood.



Murals bring The Walkway to Life

## Gugulethu residents reclaim lanes as community public spaces

The Cape Town suburb of Gugulethu was intentionally designed according to the Apartheid suburban model. This design resulted in long, isolated blocks and disconnected segments or "islands," with these 6m wide, 50m long lanes originally designated as service alleys, which have since been repurposed as walkways.

Over time, in part due to their complicated zoning and neglect, they became dumping grounds and notorious as crime hotspots, with many such lanes being closed off by officials across the city of Cape Town.

During the COVID-19 lockdown, a resident and local leader, Xolile, decided to take matters into his own hands. With an idea in mind, he sent a simple WhatsApp video of the state of the walkway connecting to Nobantu Primary School in Gugulethu's Ward 39 to Dr Kathryn Ewing, a researcher at the University of Cape Town. "Xolile sent me this video of the walkway covered in rubble and all sorts of old copper wires and TV, burnt TVs, and all sorts of things. It's evidence of environmental injustice happening in Gugulethu. To me, that is a call to action," reflected Dr Ewing.

Together, they hatched a plan to transform the space and called it iThemba Walkway, iThemba meaning "Beacons of Hope". First and foremost, they needed a blank canvas. In April of 2021, a community clean-up took place. Bag after bag of waste was removed, a sigh of relief as slowly the weight of neglect that confronted the community on a daily basis was lifted.

With a clean walkway now revealed, some would have dusted off their hands and called it a day. But for Xolile and Katie, this was just the start. Without waiting for permission, they set out on their goal.

Through co-design workshops, the community of students and residents had the opportunity to



Community comes together to transform the walkway

voice and shape their ideas. Murals, memory walls, inspirational quotes, and a projection wall, were some of the results.

Since the opening of iThemba Walkway, the space has not only been used daily as a safe walking route and impromptu playground by the schoolchildren and residents of the community, but has been the stage for many community gatherings. However, achieving this change in the narrative of the space needed more than just infrastructure refurbishment. "A lot of it is not necessarily the upgrading of it, it's the activation of it. Movie nights, Christmas lights, festival events, on public holidays, rugby viewing, all of those things is how you change those spaces." explains Dr Ewing. This community investment is what determined the success of iThemba. Xolile recounts a telling moment: a tradition had emerged — stringing Christmas lights up in the walkway. However, after one particularly windy night, the lights had blown down. The next morning, the local children were distraught, crying out to the committee that vandals were to blame. While their culprit was not quite right, their sincere concern showed they now viewed the infrastructure as theirs to protect.

Seeing the potential for these forgotten walkways, the team behind iThemba has set their sights on a

bigger picture. After working with the community to identify other walkways in Gugulethu, they got to work yet again, with the second site transformed in just 6 months (a fraction of the time of the first). Now having a streamlined model, the goal is to systematically upgrade the remaining 24 walkways connecting to the Lotus River Canal, creating a green grid across Gugulethu.

Xolile has identified that this issue is not unique to Gugulethu. Beyond this neighbourhood, a deep rethink is also taking place by the City of Cape Town. The project successfully halted the City's plans to close off walkways (a strategy heavily used in Mitchells Plain). By inviting the Mayor and MMCs to walk the site in August, the partners demonstrated that upgrading is a viable alternative to closure. The City is now looking to iThemba as a blueprint, installing official LED lights at the new site after seeing the community's work.

Xolile and Katie's hopes are for townships across South Africa, from Soweto to Mamelodi and Mdantsane, which also have these apartheid-era walkways, to become public spaces owned by the communities. Xolile's vision is to launch a national study tour to share the iThemba blueprint, turning these scars into networks of safe passage, into roots of community.



Education meets public space



The walkway as a community hub



Art, knowledge, and community turn path into place

## PROJECT TEAM

### THANK YOU TO THE TEAMS OF:

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### WITH SPECIAL THANKS TO:

Mduduzi Ntongana - Afesis  
 Ronald Eglin - Afesis  
 Michael Bell – PAINT  
 Victoria Dolly Mdzanga-Fanaphi – PEP, LightUp  
 Xolile Ndzoyi – iThemba Walkways  
 Dr. Kathryn Ewing – iThemba Walkways

### CONTRIBUTORS:

Kayla Hanna Brown  
 Rashiq Fataar  
 Bradyn Hopking  
 Matthew Griffith

### THANK YOU TO THE COMMUNITIES OF:

Phola Park  
 Mitchells Plain  
 Khayelitsha  
 Gugulethu

### RESEARCH & EDITING:

Kayla Hanna Brown  
 Rashiq Fataar  
 Marion Lee Rabie  
 Jan Essling

### DESIGN:

Jan Essling

### PROJECT BY:



### IN PARTNERSHIP WITH:



### PRODUCED BY:

