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FEATURES

PORTFOLIO

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A proprietor peers through the grill of his product-filled spaza shop.

SPAZAS: INTRINSIC TO KASI LIFE

Spaza shops are enduring symbols of grit and creativity, but the recent food poisonings are changing their place in our collective unconscious

TEXT AND IMAGES BY SETUMO-THEBE MOHLOMI

The fingertips of tiny hands cling to the edge of a metal counter so that the child they belong to can hoist their eyes just high enough to view the wares for sale. Little fingers weave into the metal grate, physically hankering for what's displayed in the colourful room beyond. In townships across the country, spaza shops present neatly packed rows of cans, stacks of starches, eyefuls of soaps, temptations of sweets and snacks, curtains of insect and rodent repellents, and cigarette sections complete with tied-down lighters or stuck-on matchbox strikes.

Spaza shops are monuments to enduring through trying times. The gritty ethos that they symbolise has influenced how "the township" is spoken to and about. South African visual artists and musicians have frequently referenced the spaza retail experience and the place that these shops hold in the collective consciousness. These artworks allow us a peek beyond the shopfront, above the counter, into the social fibre that holds "the township" and South Africa together.

Apartheid spatial planning prioritised living quarters in townships at the cost of amenities. This meant that formal retail outlets in and around the township were few and far from residents' homes.

Spaza shops developed out of a need for basic amenities. Arguably because of the restrictions placed on gathering and social life in townships at the time, spaza shops became multigenerational spaces to gather, exchange and play — most commonly with cards, dice, board games and other forms of gambling, and later, with arcade games and pool tables.

Spaza shops and visits to them to collect family supplies are experiences engraved on the memories of millions of South African children.

QUICKLY, DON'T GALLIVANT

As a child, I was often sent to the closest and cheapest store to do errands at inopportune times, but it came with benefits.

Depending on how many colours you had in your national flag when you were growing up, the change you were allowed to pocket after completing your mission you could buy yourself some delights.

Cavity burrowing Fizz Pop lollipops, Smoothies sweets and Fizzers from sweet maker Beacon, the minty freshness of Wilson's Extra Strong and Cadbury Endearmints, jaw-numbing Champion Toffee (in the original black wrapping) and Cadbury's Eclairs, known as "Jackson 5s" were that era's favourites.

Spaza shops across the country were also responsible for genericising products — brand names became the colloquial terms for some types of products. For instance, in many South African households, Sunlight is the word for soap, Vaseline means petroleum jelly, Sta Soft means fabric softener and Colgate means toothpaste.

Some brand names have become common nouns that include reference to products repackaged from large containers at the spaza shop itself. AmaSimba and Nik Naks refer to the mouth-and-finger-colouring snacks that come in torso-high plastic tubes and are decanted into smaller bags for sale at the spaza.

Using little space to create visually appealing shop displays is a skill that's benefitted spaza shop owners, consumer brands and art production in our country alike. An interplay of authenticity ties them together in addressing and representing the needs and realities of township residents.

Spaza shops have influenced cultural production in South Africa in several recognisable ways, even for those removed from the township experience.

NOT OUR HANDWRITING

Historically, each spaza shop mural was a unique product that blurred the line between marketing and art. Initially, these murals were painted freehand, seldom employing stencils or established typologies, and used colours the owners liked or that the muralist had available.

In *The People's Typography*, Schalk Venter conflates informal settlements and townships so the reader can assume that the former term includes the latter. Venter gives academic attention to mural creation (not to be confused with graffiti) in townships. He defines "township typography" as "letterforms created in informal settlements, while it also underscores a stylistic formation that's spread past the physical confines of South African informal settlements".

A walk along the streets of Diepkloof, Soweto, today reveals a different picture. In brand-accurate colours, murals on spaza shop fronts and sides are often scaled reproductions of the logos, packaging and campaign slogans of products entrenched in townships for decades.

Now, mainstream advertising's use of spaces that were once reserved for "township style typography" has muted the uniqueness and originality of each shop with a brand-copying pastiche of spaza murals.

Mainstream South Africa's visual art crowd, including government entities that embrace the spaza shop mural as a form of public art warranting support and archiving, could change how public art is viewed and practised here. Established muralists could, for example, catalogue their unique typographies for use in commercial or artistic settings, or a combination of both.

In the sea of colourful shopfronts surrounding his store in Diepkloof, Thami Nzama's shop is an island of minimalism.

A sign announces "Thami Tuck Shop" in white block letters on a Coca-Cola red sign.

"If you allow people who don't compensate you to advertise on your shop," Nzama says, "you'll have a problem when you need to reverse things. It takes two 20-litre PVA buckets to take the signage off and they (the advertisers) are no longer involved at that point".

Motivated by financial decisions, as Nzama's decision is, the look of the largest street-facing wall of his spaza shop echoes South African visual artist Sam Nhlengethwa's lithograph, *Appointment at Spaza Shop*.

Part of his *Waiting* series, this work depicts a man standing with his bicycle in front of a shop with a plain, sky blue wall, a white sign that reads "Spaza" in black and red lettering, and a gated shop window. The man's hand on his waist could be a sign of impatience or irritation, but his deadpan face doesn't betray any emotion.

Nzama's patience is, similarly to Nhlengethwa's subject, stoically impassive. He's been running his spaza shop since 2008, when he started with a shipping container repurposed into a public phone booth.

In the time since, he's counted 11 different tenants of the brightly-coloured spaza shop opposite the road from his.

In Nzama's and Nhlengethwa's subjects, existence is stripped down to essentials, one that is lived by the former and depicted by the latter.

In the mid-1980s, visual artist Andrew Lindsay's practice involved making murals throughout the country. In 2001, Lindsay established Spaza Art Gallery (SAG) in Joburg, initially as a vehicle and platform for self-taught, rural artists to show their work in the city. The gallery's website declares, "It truly became a 'spaza' gallery in 2015, when the old gallery space was refashioned as an Airbnb property". Some people believe that a spaza shop must be attached to a residence to be "proper".

BLUETOOTH DEVICE IS CONNECTED

The gallery hosted a string of concerts, including the experimental recording of *Mushroom Hour Half Hour*, a once-off show by the revolving musical ensemble, SPAZA.

The group brought together jazz and experimental music heavyweights Siya Makuzeni on trombone and vocals, Ariel Zamonsky on bass, percussionist Gontse Makhene, Waldo Alexander on violin and João Orecchia on electronic effects. Their live recording at SAG features tracks that echo the spaza shop experience in title and cultural alignment.

Tracks on the SPAZA recording include the meditative opener *Magwinya, Mangola neWhite Liver*, the somewhat dystopian and menacing *Five Rand Airtime namaevereadv: 4000 degrees* and the cleansing *Stametta Spuit* at the end of the recording.

It's one of the functions of nostalgia to allow positive memories to fizzle to the top of our recollections of the past. But it's vital to remain critical of the spaza shop space as we explore its cultural significance across various mediums of cultural production.

SPAZA's *Tigerbalm nobuhlebakho (Interlude)* builds from a vocal tone, incorporates nondescript catcalling and response before a menacing male voice says Hey wena, voetsek / *ngiyak'bona ubuhle bakho*. This is quickly followed by a forceful *Ngiyak'shela, ngizok'shela*!, serving as a reminder that spaza shops are spaces where the prevalent sociopolitical milieu of their locations is reflected. They're not sanctuaries from the pressing prevalence of patriarchy in the communities where they operate.

In a thinly veiled indictment of intercultural relationships with foreign spaza shop owners, Maskandi music star Menzi sings *Usowazi wonke umzimba ka* my friend / *Thina siyazi ikhanda lodwa* (You are familiar with my friend's whole body / We only know his face/ That we view where we shop) on his single *My Friend*.

Spaza shops have also acted as an incubator for a particular subculture of hip-hop developed in the Western and the Eastern Cape in the early 2000s. They were places where artists and audiences would gather to hold acoustic improvised rap exchanges or cyphers. Rapper Uno was one of the trailblazers of hip-hop during this time.

"These corner shops weren't just places to run errands," Uno recalls. "Inevitably, they became vibrant social hubs where life happened. For us, they became makeshift stages for cyphers, where some of the hardest bars and deepest inspirations came to life."

Hip-hop piggybacked on the spaza shop, which was addressing a particular retail need, in order to address a need for spaces in which to create and enjoy art, particularly live performance, in the townships.

Uno, real name Unathi July, says, "Spaza hip-hop was born out of the creativity of kids from under-resourced areas, who used their mother tongue mixed with slang to vividly depict life in the hood".

The artist sees that era in his career as being formative for him as someone who has mainly rapped in English.

Spaza shops are part of daily in South Africa.

Freehand murals were part of spaza shops before more commercial imagery began to replace them.

Nik Naks painted on the wall of a spaza shop.

Sam Nhlengethwa's lithograph 'Appointment at Spaza Shop' can be read in many different ways.

Picture: SUPPLIED

This generation's memory of spaza shops will always be tarnished by the spectre of death looming not far from a delight that you, as a child, indulged in with your school friends."

"You'd hear someone like El Nino from Driemanskap (another trailblazing spaza hip-hop act) drop a verse that left you floored, and immediately your mind would race: 'I need to top that next time'". That cycle of inspiration and competition kept us all on our toes. The cyphers weren't just about rap, they were about finding a sense of belonging. Each session built our confidence and shaped our character. We came to understand that we weren't just rapping for fun; rather, we were laying the foundation for something bigger."

The recent spate of children's hospitalisations and deaths as a result of their having eaten food from spaza shops tears at the already worn social fibre that township residents from those areas have kept intact.

With it, irreparable damage has also been done to the place of spaza shops in the South African collective consciousness. This generation's memory of spaza shops will always be tarnished by the spectre of death looming not far from a delight that you, as a child, indulged in with your school friends.

The crisis throws into focus what the broader creative community places value on and how that appreciation is shown. Spaza shops continue to be iconographic symbols of township life in South Africa and elsewhere.

So pervasive and symbolic are they, that arts and craft markets in the country's big cities and beyond sell wares depicting or inspired by them, tour companies organise bespoke spaza shop tours and at the recent Back to the City hip-hop festival, Maglera Doe Boy's main stage installation was a spaza shop referencing his 2018 release *Bodega*.

There are many other examples in which the cultural sector references spaza shops. An attempt at self-correcting the current situation could see spaza shop owners and the government partner up with the private sector to use spaza-themed cultural artefacts and events to raise awareness around food safety. In art and music, spaza shops are symbols of resilience, empowerment, entrepreneurship, creativity and hope that contribute to our rich cultural tapestry.

Local flavour
A Kaizer Chiefs flag among the shacks in Plastic View. Soccer is a favourite pastime of many residents and supporting local teams can provide a sense of belonging to foreign workers
Picture: Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi

ANOTHER COUNTRY Woodlane Village, popularly known as Plastic View, is surrounded by upmarket housing estates but uses the bucket system and does not have running water or electricity.

With few amenities and even fewer rights, the largely foreign-born community of Plastic View, on the eastern outskirts of Pretoria, have carved out a living with off-the-books construction labour and domestic work. Then the lockdown hit. Words and pictures by **Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi**

On the edge of the edge

When Edmo Wilson was 23, he worked by day mixing cement, sand and water to make "daga" for permanent, protected structures on construction sites in Pretoria East. By night, the undocumented worker from Masvingo, Zimbabwe, was vulnerable and itinerant, sleeping under plastic shelters built to be inconspicuous to the mounted police and spotter planes that were used to raid squatters.

In the 14 years since then, Wilson has watched nature, golf, lifestyle, security and other estate variants transform the landscape of the southeastern flank of Pretoria.

The lives and livelihoods of many undocumented construction and domestic workers living and working there, however, remain as precarious as ever – perhaps now even more so.

"I was staying very close to this camp," Wilson says, pointing southwest, "but it was just outside the fence, by the hills there. It was just a bush. If they caught you, they take you to Lindela Repatriation Centre. We were not staying in a camp like this."

The 7mx7m stand where he and his wife, Nomsa Tsitsi Mbanje, share a shack is in a fenced 5ha settlement, Plastic View, that is home to an estimated 15,000 people with no access to running water or electricity. Covid-19 social distancing and lockdown regulations are near impossible to adhere to here.

Since 2017, Mbanje has been a community health-care worker at a clinic created and funded by the Moreletapark Gemeente church, Plastic View's neighbour. The lack of Covid-19 test kits means that neither positive nor negative cases can be confirmed.

"We haven't done tests at our clinic," she says. "Only screening. We haven't found a case so far."

Restrictions on movement have played a part in further loosening the tenuous access the invisible in Plastic View have to the South African health-care system.

"For the first two weeks of lockdown, many children were born in the shacks here. I have received three children here in my shack. Ambulances would take four to five hours to arrive. Often the child would have already been born by the time the ambulance arrives," says Mbanje.

"Before we had the clinic, people went to Pretorius Park Clinic where, if you didn't have papers, either asylum or passport, they don't help you. If a child didn't have a health road map document, they are not helped. Many people stopped going to Kanana Clinic. It helped and was better because they accepted everyone, but it is far and people would take the bus there in the morning and come back late."

During lockdown the Moreletapark Gemeente has also distributed food packages of maize meal, soy mince and fresh produce to people who have not enjoyed the same from the South African government.

A study recently published by Wits University's African Centre for Migration & Society (ACMS) found that 5.3% of South African residents – about 2-million people – of working age (15-64) were born outside of the country.

The study, based on Stats SA data collected between 2012 and 2017, found that "a foreign-born migrant with the same age, gender, and level of education, belonging to the same 'population group' and living in the same place as a South African, has a higher probability of being employed than a South African. But foreign-born migrants are also more likely to be employed in precarious work – or in the informal sector – than South Africans."

The binary documented/undocumented status for categorising foreign labour in SA has little meaning in Plastic View, where people say they exist on a spectrum, from having a passport with a valid work permit at one end to having neither at the other.

These invisible people speak of having different levels of access to and exclusion from the state's resources, depending on their legal status in the country.

ACMS researcher Dr Zaheera Jinnah wrote, in a research paper that uses migration and domestic work in SA as a case study, that "a form of negotiated precarity, defined as transactions which provide opportunities for survival but also render people vulnerable, can be a useful way to make sense of questions around (il)legality and (in)formality in the context of poorly protected work, insecure citizenship and social exclusion".

Husband and wife Dzingai "Tsvangirai" Dinako and Madeline Manyatsa – both of them with passports but no permits to work in SA – share a bedroom and kitchen. Dinako is tiling a third room, and the fourth is a chicken coop.

Manyatsa and her husband have been out of work since the lockdown began more than three months ago. He had worked on various construction sites and she at a Hillside Estate home 20 minutes' walk from her doorstep.

What before lockdown was a dual-income household that supported a 22-year-old first-year university student and two teenagers in Zimbabwe, is now a family dependent on their chicken business for survival.

In 2016, while working for a construction company, Dinako saw one of the managers selling chickens to his staff at month-end. "I asked him where he got his chicks. He laughed at me. I said that I wanted to start a business because I don't drink beer or anything. I just like soccer on Sundays. He told me, I bought them and used that room.

"I cleaned the coop and gave the chicks food in the mornings and when I came back from work. From 2016-2018 I used that room for layer chickens for eggs. I had 100 layer chickens. Everyone here at Plastic View used to buy eggs from me."

One day when he came back from work, Dinako noticed that the chickens were not eating the food he had given them. They soon became ill, and most died. He suspects someone jealous slipped poison into the coop. "Someone came at night and sprayed something that killed my chickens. On the first day I found 28 dead, on the second day 36. In three days 76 were dead. I took the dead chickens, put them in bags and went to go and burn them in the bush. My heart had to be like a man's."

He showed spirit and thought on his feet – like one of his favourite soccer players, jersey no 5, Mark Fish. "My wife and I decided to sell the layers and buy broiler chicks to sell for meat. These ones are quick to make money, they mature after six weeks.

Little is hopeful about the lives of people who share small spaces living precarious lives, eking out an existence during a global pandemic that has threatened their livelihoods and compounded their inability to access basic services and goods.

A fresh batch of fluffy yellow week-old broiler chicks might not be hope, but their high-pitched chirps certainly sound something akin to it. The indomitable Dinako and Manyatsa have invested in their fledgling business once more, hoping that in six weeks' time Plastic View residents will again have the means to buy live chickens from them.

Most Plastic View residents cite proximity to their places of work as a reason for wanting to stay there. Before the settlement was demarcated and granted the minimum basic services of water tanks, latrine toilets and refuse collection, men stayed in the area because they could not pay rent in townships and steep transport costs to get them to work and back.

The city on whose outskirts they cling is itself at its most precarious at the moment, on the cusp of a rapid rise in the Covid-19 infection rate.

More vulnerable than most, the people of Plastic View watch the gathering storm, aware that an accident of birth and the extent to which they have managed to navigate the bureaucracy for its precious documents, will determine their chances of access to basic, possibly life-saving, services.

Someone poisoned two previous broods of chickens, but Madeline Manyatsa and husband Dzingai 'Tsvangirai' Dinako are trying again.

Selina Letsoela runs the Plastic View creche, funded by NGO SA Cares for Life. It accommodates children who are not admitted into the public schooling system.

Community Leadership Committee chair Trevor Zvenyika keeps a small food garden behind the 7mx7m plot allotted to him by the City of Tshwane.

The South African flag flies in Plastic View, home to mostly foreign workers who live there without access to basic services such as health care, water and sanitation or unemployment insurance.

Plastic View's Community Leadership Committee, back row: Shadreck Dube, Trevor Zvenyika, Rethabile Tsilo, Joseph Mhlanga, Macdonald Kiyala and Petros Rantalane. Front row: Simon Morabane, Selina Letsoela, Benjamin Sithole, Gladys Tshamaano and Daniel Mlambo.

Community health worker Motake Moliso says HIV-positive women in Plastic View fear revealing their status to their partners because it might lead to eviction and ostracism.

billboard

MUSIC NEWS

07/27/2021

8 Things To Know About South Africa's Amapiano Genre: A Local's Guide to the Scene

BirthedinSouth Africa's Blacktownships inthecountry's Gauteng province, the Amapiano music movement borrows from the musical ancestry of the communities in which it was conceived.

By Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi +

South Africa's Amapiano Scene
Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi

There's something beyond the ribcage-rattling drums, heart-clutching harmonies, piano solos that speak the soul's language, haunting basslines and uplifting percussions that make an Amapiano party transcendental. There are other-worldly powers at play on a dancefloor flooded by Amapiano, all held together by feet dancing in unison. The music, liquor and communal reverie converge spiritually. It is an unspoken divinity.

Birthed in South Africa's Black townships in the country's Gauteng province, the Amapiano music movement borrows from the musical ancestry of the communities in which it was conceived. The name "Amapiano" merges the Zulu language's plural article, "ama" with the noun for a western musical instrument "piano." Roughly nine years after the genre's creation, even the name speaks to a coexistence of African and Western, established and contemporary, influences.

Amapiano's foundations are in Kwaito, music created in the '90s as South Africa transitioned into democracy. Afro and deep house, tech-house, jazz and folk are also immediately recognizable threads in the sound. What has emerged is a meeting of these influences with the creative, tech-savvy and DIY spirit of the country's youngest generations. Constantly evolving, Amapiano sometimes sounds like a dance (https://www.billboard.com/t/dance/) music with jazz sensibilities; it is often soulful with innovative electronic accents, but always fresh and pioneering.

Cassper Nyovest and DJ Sumbody
Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi

According to the New York Times, at the time of publication less than 4% of the South African population has been fully vaccinated. But venues that thrive on the popularity of Amapiano open and close in a seemingly infinite loop of rising infection rates, stringent lockdown restrictions being imposed as a result, and then lifted as infection rates fall, only to rise again. The pandemic lockdowns imposed in South Africa took effect as Amapiano producers and DJs were breaking out of their underground roots in taverns, pubs, lounges, small clubs and unlicensed liquor spots known as *shebeens.* All the better, maybe. These DJs and producers were starting to play peak time slots at events and festivals, and their music was beginning to enjoy airplay on regional and national radio stations. The closing of venues in the pandemic meant that TV stations like MTV Base, Channel O and other popular channels took notice of the movement and broadcast Amapiano sets, while Amapiano DJ sets also proliferated on Youtube.

While the pandemic may have stalled Amapiano's proliferation onto the global scene, the lag will likely prove to be only momentary given the genre's growing popularity on the internet.

Key Producers in the Amapiano Scene

Gaba Cannal has been making this music since before it was called "Amapiano." His catalogue stretches back to an era when DJs looking to spice up their sets would come to his home in Daveyton, a township east of Johannesburg, to collect his unreleased songs to play out in their sets. His journey has seen him release the single "Shona Le" on the recently released *Amapiano Now* compilation out via NTS Records, the newly minted label from the venerable London-based brand NTS.

Together, mainstrem DJ/producer Maphorisa and former underground Amapiano DJ/producer Kabza de Small go by Scorpion Kings. Theirs in a smooth Amapiano sound (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v79In7ROglk) with warm chords, sweet, prominent vocals and a pop sensibility. Even with a string of hits, their first ***Scorpion Kings*** EP (from 2019) stands out as their strongest project.

Pretoria is one of three South African capital cities, and the townships at its margins have a unique musical history and style. Nineteen-year-old Vigro Deep is at the forefront of harnessing the hard-hitting sound of Pretoria's townships. Different versions of his 2019 single, "Untold Stories," are on three of his projects, and each of them is still a dancefloor anthem.

What Makes Amapiano Distinct From Other Genres Popular in South Africa

Amapiano is the electronic music movement that gives the most accurate, recent portrait of South African music from the 1990s to now. The music's pace and tempo, keyboard solos, drums that sound as though they've been turned in on themselves, punctuating harmonies and lyrics encapsulate the Black experience in the country's townships. From the aspirational, like Samthing Soweto's desire to win the national lottery, to Lihleza's commanding breasts on men's faces. The Amapiano music movement's uniqueness is how all these elements are brought together, in this digital age.

Key Producers in the Amapiano Scene

De Mthuda's "John Wick," (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZNWeHjxXoBA) named after the action movie character played by Keanu Reeves, is the producer adding tech (house) to Amapiano via his signature jumping bass licks, reminiscent of Kwaito music. The "hooray" of Mr. JazziQ's "Woza" (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OSF8Wryv-hw) and many climaxes of Mozambican DJ Tarico's remix of "Yaba Buluku," (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6xWd-SpMo0Y) featuring Burna Boy, are also hits for all seasons.

Best Clubs For Amapiano (Public health permitting)

Soweto is South Africa's biggest and most populous township. It is a beacon of Black cultural creation and consumption. Zone 6 Venue in Soweto is owned by DJ/producer Black Coffee and, with an over 3,000-person capacity, is a mega venue by South African standards. Zone 6 Venue has staged legendary Amapiano events over the years, like the Hood vs. Burbs events, and includes stars like Kabza de Small, DJ Maphorisa, DJ Stokie and Focalistic on its roster of frequent acts. It features a high-end sound rig, multiple bars, even a (seldom-used) swimming pool.

Best Non-Club Venue For Amapiano (Public health permitting)

Lounges, pubs and restaurants are on par with clubs as places where the best Amapiano events happen. Also in Soweto, Disoufeng is more a musical institution that first opened in a residential neighborhood and has hosted events at the cutting edge of South African electronic dance music, expanding to a multi-stage venue and taking over an entire block in the process. When possible, music still blares from the venue and its revelers park their cars and their coolers full of drinks alongside neighbors' boundary walls. Ayepyep, the high-end lounge/restaurant franchise with two venues in Pretoria (and one recently opened in Cape Town), is also an essential feature of the Amapiano circuit. It is owned by the Monate Mpolaye hitmaker DJ Sumbody.

Best After Hours Party Spot (Public health permitting)

Taverns and shebeens (unlicensed liquor outlets) are a mainstay of South African townships. Most are run from the proprietor's garage or any other available space, offering cheap drinks, a sound system too powerful for the place, and hours that extend until the early morning. Picture wooden benches that seat eight each (at a squeeze), bars protected by iron mesh with a little space for the exchange of money and liquor, and walls adorned with price lists and promotional posters for typically locally produced bevs — beers like Black Label, ciders like Savanna and hard tack like Klipdrift brandy.

The Amapiano played at these venues surpasses what's played at licensed venues in creativity and originality. The sounds have the freedom to veer from radio-friendly hits into the territory of underground Amapiano songs by artists who haven't broken into the mainstream and still live and play in these types of venues. Taverns and shebeens cater to the tastes of the demographic that typically doesn't frequent clubs.

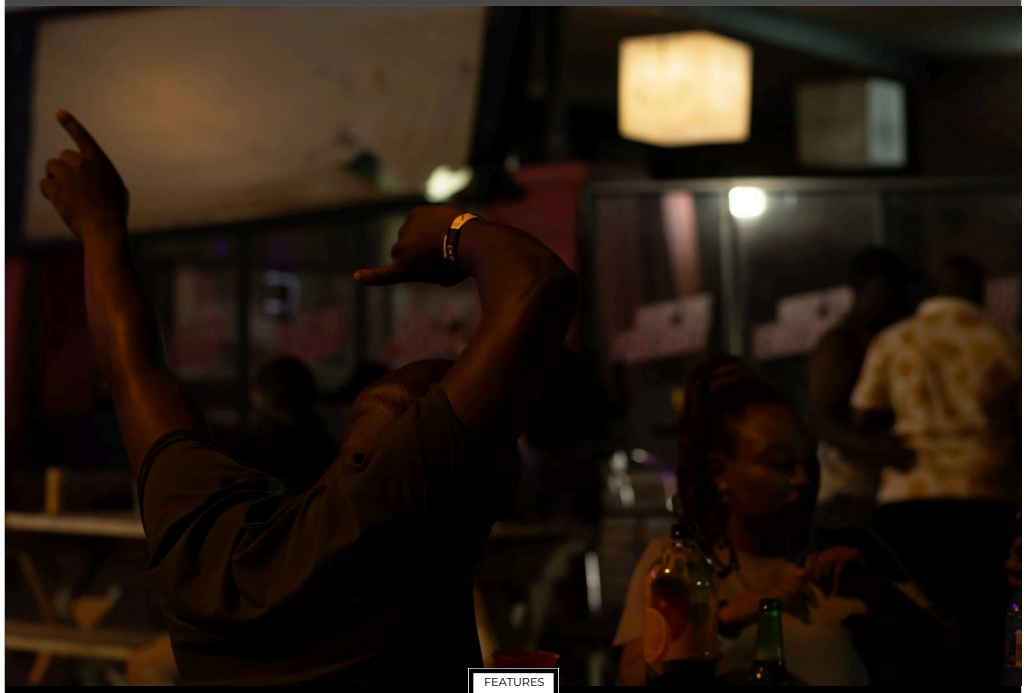
South Africa's Amapiano Scene
Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi

Best Amapiano Festival (Public health permitting)

There are two constants about Boxing Day in South Africa's Gauteng province – it will rain and Dinho Café will have the best line-up of nearly all of the summer festivals in the province. Hosted annually at Mamelodi township's Moretele Park, the one-day outdoor festival draws crowds of up to 5,000 (by official tally) mostly from around the province, features the particular year's most popular acts and always carries on through the rain.

One Thing People in the U.S. Should Understand About Amapiano

Amapiano music developed the way it did as a response to the South African music industry that excluded most independent artists from recording, performing and partaking in other opportunities. The first Amapiano songs were created on cracked software, distributed via messaging apps like WhatsApp and marketed by word of mouth and on social media. Amapiano's growth builds on decades of global interest for South African electronic dance music. Amapiano's transition from an underground sound popular in Black South African townships to a global force in electronic dance music, using digital distribution and marketing tools, holds lessons for other music scenes across the globe.



FEATURES

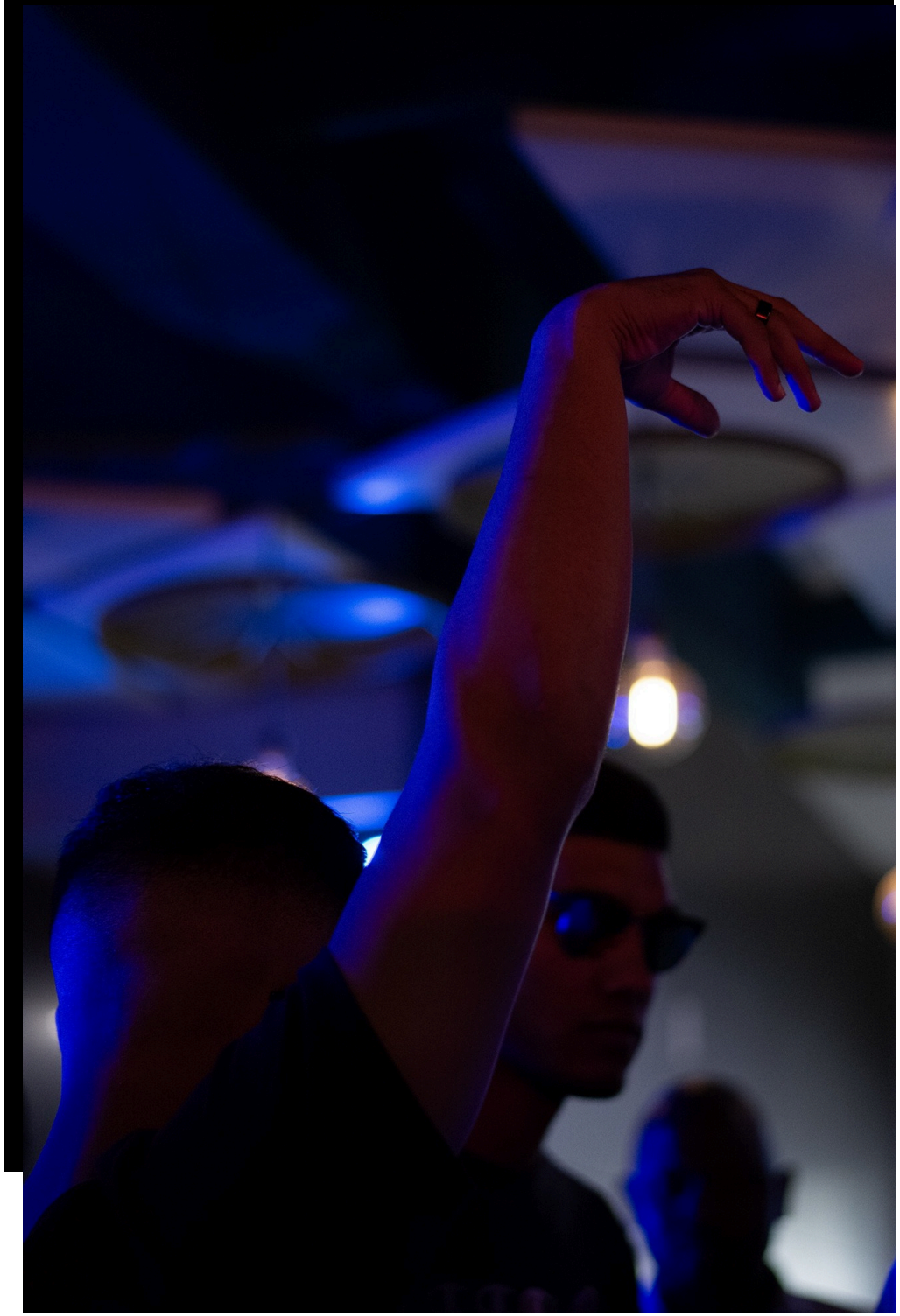
JOURNEY MUSIC: SOUTH AFRICA'S AFROTECH SOUND TRAVELS GLOBALLY AND TRANSPORTS SPIRITUALLY

AfroTech is a prominent dance music style in clubs around the world — but in its country of origin the genre's future hangs in the balance. Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi reports on the need to support creativity and spirituality within South Africa's scene

WORDS & PHOTOS: SETUMO-THEBE MOHLOMI | 6 DECEMBER 2023

Waving hands reach for the sky, or something beyond it; some with at palms quivering, others with balled sts punching; some with digits pointing upwards, other hands grabbing at what the owners of each extremity can sense, but can't quite put their ngers on.

Those are the scenes at a party playing AfroTech, the dance music style created by South African producers in the early 2010s which melds organic and digital sound elements without compromise from any of its sonic sources. But as converts to the sound increase in established and quickly-growing dance music territories globally, AfroTech faces a watershed moment in South Africa, where the combination of amapiano's dominance, industry players' lacklustre uptake, and sporadic new music releases by artists could cause the South African AfroTech scene to stagnate or even shrink.



Sonically, AfroTech is connected to Afro, Tribal and Ancestral house. Its base rhythms are constant, unrelenting, entrancing even — pulsating as though they were being beaten from a rawhide drum, wrung from steel or shaken from grain and stones. “The rhythm of it is particularly African,” says DJ and producer DESIREE, “this is brought about by the percussive elements; there are a lot of djembe drums, congas, different instruments that you would nd in traditional African music, that are infused with electronic or synthetic music.”

Layers upon layers of intricate electronic melodies build on the base rhythms in short, recurring and progressive patterns, creating tight aural weaves. Together, the rhythms, harmonies and synths summon a creative tension into existence that transports the listener. “It's music that takes you to a different space,” radio host, producer and DJ Supta says, “it literally takes you out of yourself.”

AfroTech evolving from Tribal house rings truest for DJ and promoter Perfecto Mlu. He says that “the Tribal [house] music scene became a window into making AfroTech what it is now. Tribal was something that we resonated with quite organically. It’s drum sounds that had been embedded in us forever.” This perspective in uences Perfecto’s sets and helps to determine the artists he books for the Key Music events he runs. Perfecto says that AfroTech borrows from techno, drops the BPM and adds elements that give it an African groove sensibility.

Afro house wunderkind Enoo Napa calls it “journey music”, eschewing the term “AfroTech” altogether in favour of a longer, historical view of dance music innovation in South Africa. “For me, it’s always been Afro house, which stems from deep house. People keep giving the music different names, I don’t know to t what agenda.” He acknowledges that to grow an audience for the current style of music he makes and plays, the term “AfroTech” sets the parameters of a particular sound, its artists and community. “But it does also take away from what already exists and wasn’t really given a chance to breathe, simmer, and let people take it for what it is,” he argues. “Just because we’ve added a new element to something, doesn’t mean that what was shouldn’t be anymore.”

A recurring theme of what makes South Africa unique in global dance music is the intermittently shifting line in the sand delineating innovation from invention in the country. Amapiano, South Africa’s biggest popular culture export this decade, does both. Amapiano music melds the in uences of music styles historically popular in South Africa like deep house, Gospel, Kwaito, diBacardi and others; it has also been sonically groundbreaking, innovating the use of the log drum, for example.

AfroTech is similar. It has a symbiotic relationship with older styles of dance music made and popularised in South Africa. Afro house and AfroTech have been mutually bene tial to each other, both contributing to and advancing from the dance music renaissance taking shape in South Africa. There has been more Afro house playlisting on the country’s bigget radio stations, most of which are native language stations that have both rural and urban listenerships. AfroTech gained a presence on terrestrial and satellite television during the COVID lockdowns and its growing circuit of dedicated AfroTech events thereafter has ensured that dance music punters have more choice in the types of events they attend.

AfroTech is also partly an invention of necessity, says Shimza, one of its pioneers. “We’ve added techno elements into our Afro [house] sound so that it translates into a market that would ordinarily not be able to relate to our music as is.” AfroTech’s growing popularity in Western and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, South-west Asia and other international territories is a testament to this original purpose. “We are trying to tap into that market and lure them into our sound. As they come in, they discover the real Afro [house] that we started with in South Africa.”

It goes further for Nigerian-German DJ and producer JAMIIE, who believes that the popularity of AfroTech somehow responds to global dance music currents for audiences in the Western and Eastern European and Middle Eastern countries where she most frequently plays. In her live and recorded sets, JAMIIE sees her role as a selector as partly educational. For her, it is important to introduce diehard techno fans to a broader palette of dance music styles that are alternative to, but also complement the hugely popular techno sets she is often nestled between at parties. “AfroTech is the answer to techno,” she says, noting how different types of AfroTech have offered an alternative to the prevailing dance music style where she lives and tours. “It has the same energy. AfroTech can be very dark, very deep. But it can also be vibey and uplifting. It really draws you into this hypnotic state.”

Instrumental AfroTech songs tend to be darker, marked by long menacing notes setting a backdrop for the electronic melodies to create drawn out, symphonic patterns. On some AfroTech songs, voices pierce through the taught tapestry, their presence simultaneously commanding and ethereal, sounding closer to invocation than singing. And the words, predominantly in isiZulu and isiXhosa indigenous South African languages, feel like incantations rather than lyrics.

Shimza, speaking generally, says: “We as Africans are people that are more rhythmic and we love singing, we love harmonies, we love music that speaks to the soul. I think those elements you nd mostly in AfroTech.”

On the aptly-named 'Prayer' by South African vocalist Lizwi, she delivers a Christian prayer in the Zulu language, alongside backing vocals that are stylistically in the African choral tradition but invoke African spiritual practice. She does all of this while straddling a straightforward AfroTech instrumental, complete with bells, appregiators and synths.

Spirituality in South Africa is complex and changing — a reality re ected in the music. Traditional African spiritual practice acknowledges the role one's ancestors play in one's current physical and spiritual conditions. In 2008, traditional healers were given full health practitioners status in South African law, which permitted registered healers to claim from private medical aid schemes. Although traditional medicine and African spiritual practice shouldn't be collapsed, it is signi cant that the number of practicing traditional healers in South Africa is now estimated at more than 200,000, which calculates to 1 in 300 South Africans. Another measure of the growing acceptance and exploration of traditional African spirituality in South African society is its contribution to popular culture. In the past ve years, reality TV shows featuring traditional healers as their stars have proliferated. One of the most popular, *Izangoma Zodumo*, follows young initiates through the tribulations of leading an "African" way of life in a largely Westernised country.

There is an increasing number of young Black South Africans who honour sacred spiritual callings from their ancestors in contemporary South Africa. It is also young South Africans driving the AfroTech sound, on streaming platforms and at gatherings that feel more akin to rituals than parties. AfroTech has immersed itself in this zeitgeist, and adopted spirituality as one of its core themes and topics.

"You cannot create AfroTech if you yourself are not spiritually connected to something in one way or another," says Supta. "During your creative process, it just comes naturally where you want to connect to the spiritual sense of things. AfroTech is more than just a genre. Even from the chords that are used, the sounds that are used, it connects to a spiritual realm."

"I look at it more like Gospel Tech," says Thandi Draai, whose near evangelical propagation of AfroTech in South Africa and abroad has seen her curate her second Africa Gets Physical compilation, slated for release on December 15 this year. "Nevermind the instruments, in the lyrical content, we're having conversations with God, we are asking for things from the higher power. I think that's what makes the lyrical content so powerful. It brings people together as we are all actually really praying for the same thing. Whatever your prayer is, you'll nd that in AfroTech. Most of our events feel like you're going to church, you're getting healed."

Thandi's voice becomes softer, she becomes pensive when she opens up about the growing global interest in AfroTech, compared to back home. "People take you more seriously when you're not in your own province and when you're not in your own country," she says "I've never met any AfroTech DJ or artist that makes a living within our country. For me to make my living, I need to go out of the country all the time."

Territories with advanced music infrastructures nancially support AfroTech artists, but the music's enduring existence is tied to the unique, dynamic creativity found in South Africa's dance scene. The South African zeitgeist has given AfroTech a relateable theme to respond to an increasingly spiritually curious and connected generation. Artists come home to heed a spiritual calling, with remittances brought back in the form of (mostly) artist-run festivals and events such as Kunye and Anywhere In Your City, helping to fuel a future for the music.

As it stands, South Africa is a scene in recovery. The whole world felt the effects of COVID, but infrastructurally advanced music territories have been able to recover stronger and faster than those in the Global South, where the damage is likely to remain more accute for longer periods. Typically, music sectors in the Global South are even more fragile and pass on that fragility to the people who work in them.

South Africa's COVID lockdowns were some of the most stringent in the world, at certain stages restricting not only movement but also the sale and purchase of liquor and tobacco products. These measures, of course, devastated the dance music scene as it had existed pre-COVID. But its resolve was indicated by the virtual parties coming to the fore during and after the lockdown periods, creating space for innovation - akin to how London's Afro-in ueced house scene diversi ed during COVID - which re ects the brimming potential found within.

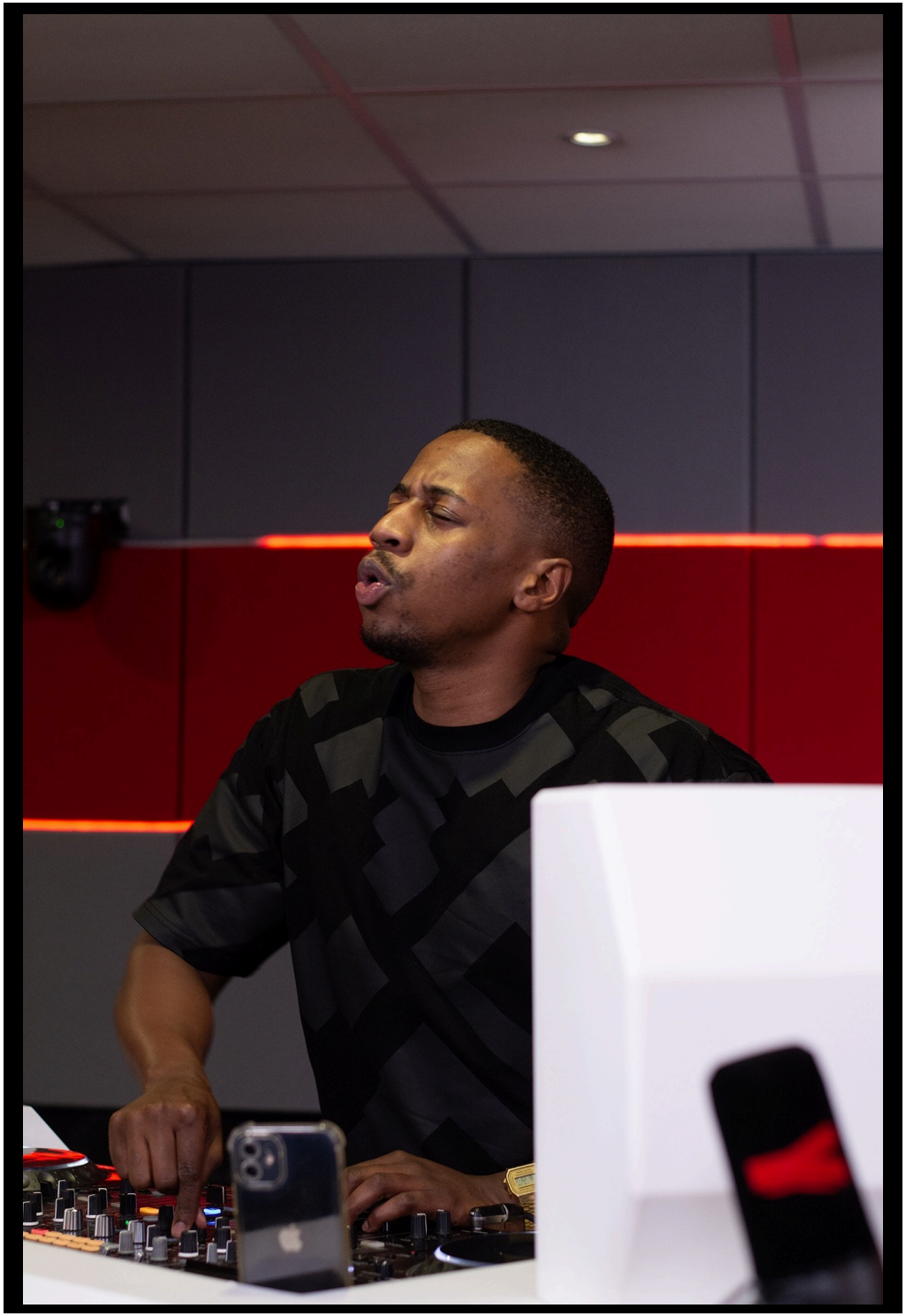
Lockdown House Party, a virtual, live DJ mixing event which is the brainchild of Shimza gained prominence during the COVID lockdowns. “When we got into lockdown and we couldn’t have those live events, the strategy was that we’re going to start this thing online and have an audience that will follow us every week,” he says. “We would invite our friends that love this music on a balcony at one of my o ces and we’d have a party and record that.”

This turned into a blessing for AfroTech, delivering sets by some of its most prominent producers and DJs - rst exclusively online, and then on the satellite TV *Channel O*, weekly. A larger population of South Africans had access to AfroTech more regularly for the period of Lockdown House Party’s airing on television. But now, with an events sector still recovering from the effects of COVID, only a handful of venues and events offer predominantly AfroTech line–ups. Major South African festivals regularly relegate AfroTech to smaller stages or cherry pick only a select few AfroTech DJs to include on line-ups. Shimza’s event series and record label Kunye is one of the few frequent and prominent AfroTech events taking place in South Africa, where the genre’s prominent DJs and producers can administer lavish, lengthy sets.

Anywhere in Your City (AYC), co-founded by Enoo Napa, is a recent addition to the Afro house/AfroTech calendar. Based in the coastal city of Durban where gqom music was invented and is still most popular, AYC held its third and biggest event to date in July, with a sold-out crowd of 8,000 people in attendance. “On a business scale, there’s still a lot that can be done for the sound,” says Enoo Napa, whose government name is Siphiwe Mkhize. “We have these huge festivals, but a very small Afro house stage. There is a large community out there, if you give them the right platform, the right stage, the right line-ups, they are going to come through because they identify [with] and are for the same music that we believe in.” The upcoming Anywhere In Your City Festival sheduled for December 16 is planned for one of the busiest weekends of the summer, taking place on the Day of Reconciliation, a major South African public holiday. The event is co-hosted by Enoo Napa and DJ Merlon at a park adjacent to one of the biggest sports stadia in Durban, and plans to accommodate 3,000 revellers.

The majority of events that prominently feature AfroTech in South Africa are the products of DJs and producers who have identi ed an existing audience’s need for platforms that showcase the sound. The business case is that the audience is growing; investing their own capital at this moment in AfroTech’s trajectory, without major label and promoter competition, brings a multitude of bene ts, including establishing themselves and their brands as pivotal champions of the style and its community.

AfroTech promoters outside of South Africa can support the dance music style by booking popular artists alongside newer artists to platform the next generation and contribute to a more sustainable ecosystem. A multi-layered scene tends to create dynamic creative tension between experiemetal interpretations and music with broad appeal. For audiences, a wider selection of music, events and merch ranging from mainstream to niche means that experiences and products can be created for different price points on the market. Audiences outside of South Africa can contribute in the same way, by supporting both new and established artists.



But in other ways, AfroTech demands that all audiences recognise and interogate their pre-conceived ideas about dance and electronic music from South Africa and the African continent at large. The way that amapiano has dominated mainstream music production, broadcast and consumption in South Africa, and become a signi cant cultural export for the country post-pandemic, should not skew the overall picture of South African dance. AfroTech artists often note the priotising of amapiano artists at record labels and on party line-ups, as well as the preference those artists receive for brand sponsorship and sync deals. Though Supta notes that AfroTech artists could also be more regular with releases and promoting their music to change this. “If you’re not releasing music [and] music videos as AfroTech DJs, [then] that’s why amapiano is going to cloud us from a commercial perspective. You watch *MTV Base* now, you’ll probably watch ve 'piano videos, if not six, back-to-back,” he says. “This thing of holding on to exclusives [unreleased music], locking music in, should be a thing of the past.”

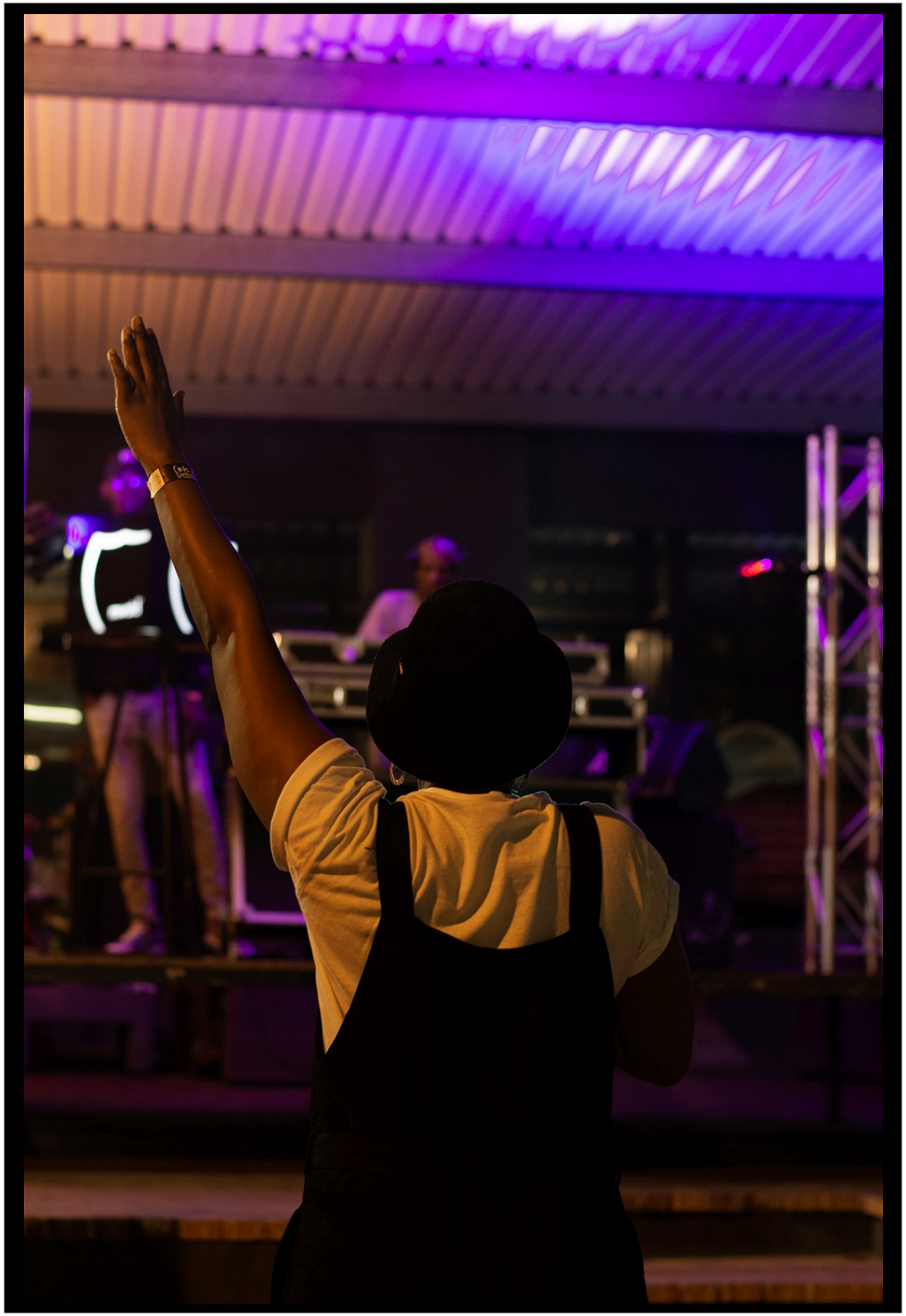
Needless to say, South Africa is a place of multifarious musical innovation and invention. Established and newer dance music styles in South Africa are an ecosystem all existing simultaneously. Amapiano trailblazer Kabza De Small's recent headline slot at the mainly AfroTech/Afro house event U'R, where he dipped into the genre, demontrates an overlap in styles and audiences that can go both ways. On the continent, more broadly, there is dance music innovation and invention demonstrated by, but not limited to, styles suc as Gengetone in East Africa, deep house in the North, and frankly, the West African take on amapiano. The continent is not lacking when it comes to quality and creativity in dance music..

The popularity of AfroTech outside of South Africa has meant that in the country of it birth it is rare to nd multiple AfroTech headline acts, except at dedicated AfroTech events. The artists are either touring abroad, the event line-ups in SA oversubscribed by amapiano DJs, or a combination of both and more factors.

Audiences inside and outside of South Africa must make room for multiple styles of dance music to co-exist collaboratively but self-su ciently in the country. A singular dominant style can icker and fade, whereas a deeper understanding of the spectrum of homegrown and imported dance music can enable all genres and communities to ourish in one of the biggest house music markets in the world.

AfroTech is important because it is experimental and speculative. It is in communion with Afro, Tribal, Ancestral and other styles of house music — a precious auditory glimpse into how the musical styles created and spurred on by Black people from the African continent, and reverberating beyond it, can interpret the current dance music world. AfroTech represents the myriad of potential futures electronic music altogether might one day have.

Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi is a writer and photographer, follow him on Twitter



NEW FRAME

Kick-starting kasi karate in South Africa

Black townships were awash with karate training halls in the 1970s, but they no longer exist. The masters who saw the martial art at its best in these dojos want to change that.

By Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi

12 Aug 2021

6 August 2021: David Nteso, 71, in the dojo he has run in Sharpeville for 50 years. A hanshi, or 'exemplary teacher', he has taught thousands of students in the past half-century. (Photograph by James Oatway)

Karate dojos are sanctums, spaces of pin-drop silence punctured by devastating guttural noises as limbs sweep in grand arcs. A dojo is a world unto itself, with its own rules, ethics and codes. But for a generation of Black karate practitioners, dojo walls were permeable; they could not secure refuge from an oppressive society. The racial discrimination against Black people, segregated and oppressed under apartheid, came into dojos with whoever walked in.

From the 1970s until the turn of the century, South African Black townships were awash with dojos. You couldn't practise a mae-geri (front kick) without striking a fellow karateka, which means a practitioner of karate in Japanese. Karate's spread in townships was buoyed by the Norris and Jean-Claude van Damme, among others, while "karate" became a catch-all for Eastern martial arts including taekwondo and kung fu.

The decline in township dojo networks and the number of Black karateka happened over decades. "The facilities in the 1960s and during the dark days [of apartheid] were extremely substandard for people of colour," says Sonny Pillay, a veteran who holds a black belt eighth dan grade and is president of Karate South Africa (KSA).

"It would be fair to say we were challenged on all fronts – facilities, technical ability … and the privileged few, who were in command in those days in the field, were not happy to impart their knowledge and skills to people of colour. Very few of them did. It all became a collective challenge. Some of us rose beyond those challenges and are here to tell the story."

Karate encompasses the pursuit of physical and spiritual self-mastery on the one hand, and competition as a sporting code on the other. Self-mastery through karate is an inward-facing exercise. The competitive aspect of karate pits individuals and groups against each other, and victory belongs to those who perform best according to a set of rules.

The frequently used "traditional" and "combat sport" categorisations of each type of karate lose the symbiosis that exists between the pursuit of self-mastery and competitive success. The internal stilling and focus required for competition, for example, can aid self-mastery. And without A karate dojo typically has one sensei who is a master of a particular karate style and teaches any number of students. He or she might elect one or more students as assistant teachers (sempai). High-ranking karateka have often broken away from their original styles to establish their own. The highest global karate memberships are to karate styles based in Okinawa in Japan, where karate practice was originally systemised into styles such as Goju-Ryu, Kyokushin and Shotokan.

Typically, a karateka wanting to establish a dojo would request membership to an organisation in one of the karate styles. These organisations elect chief instructors for the country and region to oversee training, teaching and grading on their behalf.

Typically, a karateka wanting to establish a dojo would request membership to an organisation in one of the karate styles. These organisations elect chief instructors for the country and region to oversee training, teaching and grading on their behalf.

The South African context

A martial arts practice that was available freely or at relatively low cost, organised bya network of formal and informal dojos, affiliations and structures, once thrived inSouth Africa. But no longer. The current state of karate in the country, especially inBlack townships, mirrors South Africa's grappling with the continuing effects of its harrowing past in a rapidly changing and modernising world.

The overwhelming majority of chief instructors in South African karate are white and male. The mechanisms of apartheid were applied from dojos to organisational executive committees, and karate's leadership has only recently had the prospect of meaningful racial and gender transformation.

"Normally, when a Japanese instructor would visit an organisation," Pillay recounts, "Black [people] were not allowed to form part of the training with the Japanese instructor. The white men would, after they were taught techniques, come and teach you part of the technique, not the complete technique."

Black belt seventh dan karate master Lucas Tau, 65, adds: "They took all these Japanese [masters] to white areas and they pampered them with a lot of money, knowing that the Black [people] don't have the money to do that. They didn't bring them to kasis. That is why all the powers were given to white [people]. They never made any championships in the rural areas or whatsoever. Their [organisational] strategy was one Black [person] and 10 white people."

Knowledge transfer and recognition of progress through periodic grading is an integral part of practising karate. During apartheid, preference in ranking, promotion and power structures at the dojo level were given to white karateka. Black belt eighth dan and KSA vice-president Sydney Hoaeane says this happened summarily and as a matter of course.

"A white man would join karate today. When you teach him as a senior, after some time he becomes your sempai, [then] your sensei, which was very unfair. Even if he did not know anything, because of the colour of his skin, they would make him your senior. We were treated like the second class."

At district, regional, provincial and national karate tournaments, Black karateka were unfairly adjudicated in kumite (fighting) and kata (sequence) events. For some Black kumite competitors, their go-to strategy was to win by knockout when facing a white opponent.

The stunted and sometimes altogether curtailed progress of Black karateka at dojos and tournaments is the main reason for a huge decline in participants in the sport. Tau, who runs a dojo from his home in Pretoria, says: "I was oppressed. I was the one who struggled with white [people]. Remember, Pretoria is where more oppression is, even now. All the powers were under them [white sensei]. We had to follow. That is why Black [people], most of the good guys, dropped off from karate. We are few who are still sticking to it. I still keep on."

Too little time and money

There is a growing range of activities to occupy leisure time for those fortunate enough to have it. "When I started to train, there was karate," says the head instructor of the largely independent, not-for-profit Kushido Karate Do style, Lawrence Milward-Bridges. "Now, there is karate, and various other martial arts, Net ix, gyms. What else could somebody be doing in that slice of time?"

And there is money to be made during that time. "Now karate is a business," says Tau, "where if you don't have [the means], you'll have the skill but you'll stay back. We used to pay R10 for monthly fees, R20 [to participate] in the championships. Now participation at district and provincial is about R250 and for national about R500. We used to buy karate suits for about R150. Now, World Karate Federation- approved karate suits are about R2 000.

"Remember, at home you want to eat, your mother is working at a kitchen, you don't have a father. That is why they drop [out]. The only thing [left] to do is go for nyaope and do all sorts of negative things."

A young karateka's development over a long period of time is expensive and parents are not always able to provide the necessary support, agrees sensei and KSA development officer Wiben Mabada. "You find that parents work for lower salaries, they cannot support their kids. In the townships, you find there's a kid who's good at karate, winning at district, provincial and national [levels]. But when they're supposed to go overseas, there's no support. Now karate is expensive. The time we were doing karate, we were paying R10."

In a bid to close the racial and class divides in South Africa's karate, various organisations – from different styles as well as the government – and individual sensei have tried to make changes to create more dojos in Black townships. But they have come up against the imposed structures of the sport, which have made it difficult for dojos to exist without recognised affiliation to a style's representative organisations.

15 August 2021: Sydney Hoaeane is the vice-president of Karate South Africa and runs a Shito- Ryu karate dojo in Soweto. (Photograph by Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi)

“A lot of informal dojos have disappeared because now there are very strict measures in place in karate for you to open up a dojo,” says Tau, who is also a development officer for KSA.

Yearly subscriptions, monthly tuition fees and transport to and from the dojo are only the base costs of being a karateka. The World Karate Federation, which spearheaded karate’s debut at this year’s Olympic Games in Tokyo, requires that karateka competing in tournaments it has sanctioned wear uniforms and protective gear approved by it.

“For karate, we don’t necessarily need equipment,” says Mabada, “but we need facilities in terms of the building where we teach. Back in those days, we never used mitts, we never really fought on tatamis [mats]. We fought on cement floors, it didn’t really matter where we were fighting. But guess what, full-contact [styles] are still doing it and they are [still] very popular.”

Hopes for the future

Karate is perceived as a martial art that is wise in its practices, fair in its responses, unbiased in its judgement of merit, and one that can be available to most. But the dojos where karate is practised in South Africa have historically not upheld these virtues.

For Tau, the work of revitalising karate begins in its past. “We have to revive those karateka who dropped [out] because of the apartheid regime,” he says.

But for Pillay, finance and facilities are vital, especially in areas with widespread poverty. “The challenges in townships, informal settlements, socioeconomically challenged areas are immense,” he says.

“There is no magic wand to wave those challenges away, that suddenly you’re going to get up one morning and all those challenges have disappeared. They are there for us to contend with. First and foremost is the issue of finance. It’s all bread-and- butter issues that are [potential participants’] priority, not sports.

“Therefore, sports federations need to come forward and provide facilities and provide the expertise. And that is what Karate South Africa has been trying to do. Our challenge, primarily, is finance.”

NEW FRAME

Arts project re-imagines the realities of Riverlea

Black townships were awash with karate training halls in the 1970s, but they no longer exist. The masters who saw the martial art at its best in these dojos want to change that.

By Setumo-Thebe Mohlomi

12 Aug 2021

Undated: A Riverlea resident carries a bunch of balloons down the street. (Photograph by Jason Ariefdien)

The railway track that runs east-west through Riverlea in the west of Johannesburg divides the township into the larger

"Riverlea proper" and Riverlea Extension. The railway also stitches Riverlea into a single entity. But along the line of sleepers and steel, apartheid-era social engineering festers through more than nomenclature in a neighbourhood that used to be exclusively for those categorised as coloured, where "proper" continues to imply social acceptability and Extension infers the underclass of a once discarded people.

The visible deprivation of many in Riverlea Extension swells from the two- and three-roomed houses, filtering into the small allotments that separate them and spilling out into the potholed and pockmarked tar roads. This contrasts starkly with the larger, walled and gated lots behind which mostly extended and renovated houses line the broad, well-tended streets that deem the larger section of Riverlea "proper".

A five-week pilot arts initiative, Re-Imagining Riverlea: A Participatory Arts Project, challenged 25 Riverlea residents to imagine alternate realities for their ruptured and under-resourced community, and to depict these through photographs and performance. With the lens and stage, however, project participants used the tools to heal from the wounds their home has caused, to baulk at their seemingly inexorable, ephemeral destinies in it and to break its norms.

The frequently used “traditional” and “combat sport” categorisations of each type of karate lose the symbiosis that exists between the pursuit of self-mastery and competitive success. The internal stilling and focus required for competition, for example, can aid self-mastery. And without A karate dojo typically has one sensei who is a master of a particular karate style and teaches any number of students. He or she might elect one or more students as assistant teachers (sempai). High-ranking karateka have often broken away from their original styles to establish their own. The highest global karate memberships are to karate styles based in Okinawa in Japan, where karate practice was originally systemised into styles such as Goju-Ryu, Kyokushin and Shotokan.

Old money, new sponsor

The Re-Imagining Riverlea project forms part of a larger programme across the provinces of Gauteng, Limpopo and Mpumalanga. New sponsor Barloworld Empowerment Foundation (BWEF) has partnered with 18 organisations to administer arts projects in earmarked communities. The outcomes of these artistic processes become the raw materials with which the foundation will fashion its five-year vision. This approach places the development imperative and agency squarely

with community members.

"There is a particular philosophical position we took that says that people are capable of changing what they need to change in their own communities. There is a lot of power that rests in a community. And where we wanted to hang this was on people's own organised power as evidenced by their own initiatives," said BWEF chief executive Sibongile Mkhabela.

Undated: Children play in the streets of Riverlea. (Photograph by Mercy Daniels)

In Riverlea, the BWEF partnered with the Market Theatre Laboratory and Market Photo Workshop, which administered applied theatre and photography programmes respectively. The photography segment comprised lessons on basic techniques, as well as more advanced composition and visual storytelling. Each of the 25 participants focused their photographic efforts on a single theme that they explored in their community.

The Market Theatre Laboratory used applied theatre methods to facilitate the creation of participants' individual and group performances about the lived and possible realities for themselves and their community. Although the initiative centred process over product, the showcase of works created impressed upon the viewers of photography and audience of performance how political the personal is.

Towards healing

A doek in ruling-party colours and featuring its emblem wraps 35 year-old Mercy Daniels' waist-length locks. Ill-fitting T-shirts distort President Cyril Ramaphosa's smiling face as she collects voters' names and details, pauses to allay the fears of some and tries to convince others to vote in the municipal by-election taking place in ward 68.

"At first, when I started taking pictures, it was wanting to know more about Riverlea because the community is home for me. As a social activist in the community, that's where my heart is," said Daniels of her participation in the photography project. "I started taking pics of the daycare I went to, the primary school, to crossing the bridge where I lost my brother. He was shot. He was a third-year law student at Wits.

Undated: The railway runs east-west through Riverlea in west Johannesburg, dividing the township into 'Riverlea proper' and Riverlea Extension. (Photograph by Roxanne Loux)

"It's the same bridge I travelled, as a kid, going to and when they would pick me up from daycare. That's where it hit hard that this is where one of my siblings passed away, this is where my mom had to pick him up.

"I've been staying in Riverlea for a very long time. My brother's been gone for decades, but I was not aware how sentimental that was to me, and not knowing that having to cross that bridge while I'm taking pictures was actually something of a healing process to me. Two of my siblings studied law, but when the one died, the other one dropped out."

Rising above reality

Violence is simultaneously language, currency and impediment for Riverlea residents. The gangs — whose members are fluent in it, and who exact it for dominance and often lose their lives to it — have been a long-standing feature of Riverlea's society.

In Chris van Wyk's 1960s upbringing in Riverlea, the Spaldings, Vikings and Fast Guns dominated his and what is today the neighbouring township of Westbury. Today's gangs, whose primary trades are in drugs and guns, have either stood the test of time or evolved from the extinction of others.

Montelee Joan Meyers, at 20 years old, is intimately familiar with the violent and fleeting nature

of gang life. She says that Riverlea is dominated by the long-standing Fast Guns and the Veradores.

"There are more gangs in Riverlea Extension because the suburb [Riverlea proper] has more rich kids. Certain sections are Veradore corners and other sections are Fast Gun corners. My brother is a Fast Gun so I'll greet Varadores, but I won't link with them because they might be sent to get to my brother through me, that's always a thing."

Undated: Tattoos on the body of a Riverlea resident. (Photograph by Montelee Meyers)

In an environment where life can be easily lost, a camera in the right hands can grant its subjects a sense of timelessness at best and a feeling of having existed at least. Meyers' photographic process gave her rare access to her subjects' desire for the camera's gaze. "Most of them would ask me, 'Montelee, please take me a picture. Take us a picture, we sitting here chilling.' I didn't even have to ask permission, the minute they saw a camera they asked for a picture."

Meyers' deeply personal movement performance saw her dressed in a flowing dress, blindingly white in the mid-afternoon sun in the Riverlea Recreation Centre's front courtyard. Low movements close to the ground built up as the performance progressed until she stood with her feet planted firmly, arms stretched out at either side and head tilted as far back as possible to give her face the full warmth of the sun. Her statement: I will not be forgotten, I will rise above this all.

Breaking the closet

And then, a pandemic.

Jason Ariefdien had been working for a solar power company for less than a month when the national Covid- 19 lockdown took effect on 26 March. The 30 year-old was retrenched soon after. The same fate befell his mother, Audrey Kingma, who worked for the same company.

"What we did," said Ariefdien, explaining the family's survival strategy, "we both still got paid that month so we took our salaries and we thought, 'My sister, her boyfriend and her child need to come to us for lockdown.' We had a decision to make, so I told my mother, 'Let's not pay rent, let's just buy food.' That's what we did."

The family had been living in Bergbron, a suburb in northern Johannesburg, moved to nearby Roosevelt, then to Albertsville and then to Riverlea all within the space of eight months. For Ariefdien and his family, relocation is a constant and Riverlea represents the last in a string of places they have occupied, unsure if they will settle there. It hadn't always been this way, though.

Growing up in a home where his younger sister's biological father abused him and his mother, Ariefdien remembers the day his itinerant life began. "My sister's father was hitting my mother. I was in grade 4 the day that I stopped him. He hit me and I flew against the cupboard. So, that's when my mother left him."

For his performance as part of the Re-Imagining Riverlea project, Ariefdien recited a poem in what he describes as a broken closet — an installation that critiques the disclosing of his sexual orientation to his family and to society when he was 16. "I started with being in the closet," he explains, "then coming out, then breaking the closet. I want to focus on breaking the closet because for me, the stupidest thing ever is to sit your parents down and tell them, 'I'm gay.' Why must we do that? Do straight people sit their parents down and say, 'I'm straight'? Even that in itself, that small little thing, sends a message to the gay community that there's something wrong with who you are. So that's what I want to break."

These ideas of the broken existing in dichotomy with completeness run through his photography as well. Ariefdien had an interest in the practice before participating in the project. Explaining what he aims to achieve by focusing on broken objects, he said, "What I've always held on to with my photography is broken things, because I think that you can find so much beauty in something that is broken. People just walk past that and they never see the beauty in these broken things.

"With the pictures that I take, through my images, people must think, 'Wow this is beautiful.

Oh, but it's broken.' And then subconsciously that's going to plant a mental seed in people's minds and when they look at themselves, because we're all broken and we hold on to that for some reason, one day they might just look at themselves and think, 'But I'm also beautiful, even though I'm broken.'" He invites us to think of aspects of living and being in less clear absolutes.

Undated: “I think that you can find so much beauty in something that is broken,” says Jason Ariefdien. (Photograph by Jason Ariefdien)

Anxious about the future

The Patriotic Alliance is announced as the winner in the ward 68 byelections a day after ballots were cast. On a platform of "coloured nationalism", the party has preyed on the fears of a constituency that says the current government has maintained if not worsened their collective lot compared with conditions under the apartheid regime.

This makes Daniels, the community activist, anxious about the future of her community, her home. Without access to the provincial purse strings that are firmly in the grip of the ANC, the area is not likely to enjoy much investment from the provincial government, she said.

The BWEF, which identified Riverlea as a potential area for future social investment, is purportedly unconcerned about what funds are currently being funnelled into development initiatives in this and other communities it has earmarked for intervention. With its banner of independence from the global Barloworld conglomerate waved highly and proudly, the BWEF's initial pilot project turns the power dynamic between the donor and the recipient on its head.

In the greater scheme of things, however, it is the profits of Barloworld's dubious business practices that have funded Reimagining Riverlea and subsequent projects as the BWEF was seedfunded through a 3% shareholding of Barloworld stocks. And so it is for Riverlea residents and others who might benefit from the foundation to determine the true cost of what and from whom they benefit. The "us" and the "them" are in what seems a zero-sum scramble for development funds.

The greatest strength of the project is in the art and articulations of Riverlea residents, the way both interpret the reality of existing in a space separated by a railway track that simultaneously reminds us of divisions that exist in South Africa at large, and of a human quest for wholeness.