

Philippi Village mural helping to build trust and hope in a fractured community

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UCT's Graduate School of Business Bertha Centre has partnered with key stakeholders in the community of Philippi to turn the building of a wall - a potentially divisive and exclusionary measure - into a first step towards building social cohesion and trust.



When the management of Philippi Village, a mixed-use entrepreneurial development zone servicing Nyanga, Gugulethu, Mitchell's Plain and Khayelitsha, wanted to build a wall to provide security for its tenants, it could have been seen as an exclusionary and divisive measure by the rest of the community. Instead, thanks to an innovative and creative approach – the wall has become a symbol of hope and inclusivity.

“We want to have a trust-based relationship with the community, especially our immediate neighbours, as that relationship impacts the success of what we do inside the Village and this project has taken us a little closer towards this goal – even though challenges still exist,” says Bulelwa Makalima-Ngewana, Interim Director at the Bertha Centre for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (Bertha Centre) at the UCT Graduate School of Business (GSB). “Through the building of the wall and the mural project that emerged we have had a chance to discover each other and work in unity.”

The Bertha Centre – an anchor tenant in Philippi Village, and one of the key drivers of the initiative – together with Philippi Village, wants to create economic opportunity for communities that are excluded from mainstream economic development. It offers affordable retail space and business support services, via the UCT GSB Solution Space, Silulo Ulutho Technologies, and Business Activator – as well as a local library – to local entrepreneurs, organisations, foundations and members of the community.

However, until very recently, many locals were not sure what the development was for, or how it could benefit them.

“Many people living within one kilometre of this space didn't know what it was for,” says Sinazo Peters a community leader who lives in the adjacent Siyangena informal settlement and participated in the wall mural project. “Now there is better understanding, and they feel free to come here and access these services.”

“We’ve been exploring ways to break down the barriers between Philippi Village and the communities it wants to serve,” says William George, a representative of the Philippi Village Board. This led to the establishment of a stakeholder engagement strategy for Philippi Village to get to know its neighbours better, to understand their concerns, introduce Philippi Village to the community and find ways of supporting each other going forward.

“The decision was taken to undertake a community-driven mural project to act as narrator of the relationship between stakeholders and give the community a genuine way to connect the various spaces available at Philippi Village,” he adds. “Ultimately, this was an opportunity to use the wall, amphitheatre and social zone as an instrument for social cohesion and trust building.”



Facilitators, Bertha Centre changemakers – young leaders from surrounding communities – and graffiti artists reached out to the local community through a series of workshops. From the 8th to the 21st of January more than 200 stories were written down, drawn, sung and spoken, which were then co-designed into a mural for the wall. The artists painted outlines of the design which the community filled in – transforming it into a vibrant reflection of their experiences and hopes for the future of Philippi.

The resulting mural tells the story of a fictional character named Thembi, a young woman who is the personification of Philippi, and follows her development, struggles and dreams.

Bongiwe Namba, a community facilitator, describes the process as one of “unity and bringing people together with respect and fairness.” She adds that initially there was some scepticism from the community, but this was overcome when they gained a better understanding of what the Village can offer them.

“Thembi shows what Philippi means to us,” adds Sinazo Peters, who facilitated the story-telling process, “We all have different experiences and different views of this place we were born in.”

Lulama Coto, also a community leader in Siyangena feels the project has helped build the relationship between the Village and the community. He says, “the most important thing is that the relationship is good now. I have high hopes for the year ahead, we are willing to work together.”

The mural painting culminated in a celebratory day of song, poetry and dance on Monday 21st January. Fergus Turner, Bertha Scholar, Community Activator at the Bertha Centre, and founder of The Hive, who facilitated the community performances for the ceremony says, “I have been inspired and motivated by this, it’s extraordinary to see the level of engagement. A creative process that leaves behind something to celebrate has a lasting impact, it holds the memory of the narrative and helps keep the momentum of this project going.”

And the narrative of community engagement doesn't end with the mural. There is a community-organised social purpose festival planned at the Village for Youth Day later this year. Turner explains that the Bertha Centre Changemakers would coordinate and organise the festival as part of a six-month youth development process that sees the festival as an opportunity to develop the local creative economy while offering opportunities for youth to take ownership of the Philippi Village narrative and continued development.

"This project is a start of a series of interventions that the Bertha Centre and the UCT GSB are planning to work on with the community, especially with young people. These will include a planned youth day festival and continuous interaction with the group of changemakers we are working with. These activities highlight the opportunities and the challenges of both Philippi Village and the Philippi community and its context – and these are challenges that can't be tackled in isolation," says Makalima-Ngewana.

"If we leverage our collective strength, we will see a greater positive impact in Philippi. We want to change negative perceptions about Philippi without being naïve about the real challenges that face the community on a daily basis."

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