

Unlearning by Doing: Research Pedagogies Through Hands-on Projects in Stjwetla, Johannesburg

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Abstract

This article examines the pedagogical and methodological potentials of "learning by doing" and "unlearning by doing" through a design-build initiative developed in Stjwetla, an informal settlement in Johannesburg. Grounded in hands-on, community-driven processes, the Safety Shelters project brought together local residents, students, and city practitioners to co-produce small-scale structures addressing everyday safety challenges. The article is structured around the project's progression: it begins with contextual and methodological reflections, moves through collaborative workshops and mapping exercises, and concludes with critical insights on positionality, reciprocity, and decolonial pedagogy. Drawing from educational theory, it advocates for spatial practices that unsettle institutional norms and privilege situated, experiential knowledge. Ultimately, the article underscores the importance of unlearning entrenched assumptions and advancing engaged, reflective, and adaptive pedagogies in contested urban environments.

Keywords: Critical Pedagogy, Decolonial Urbanism, Participatory Design-Build, Informal Settlements, Situated Learning

Introduction

"There will be no second shelter until I get my money". This statement was delivered by the site supervisor at the conclusion of a community meeting involving local leadership as part of the Safety Shelter initiative, in Stjwetla, an informal settlement situated on the western bank of the Jukskei River, opposite Extension 7 on the Far East Bank of Alexandra in Johannesburg's northern suburbs. The group meeting, aimed at addressing grievances related to compensation and recognition, had formally ended before the supervisor's ultimatum – either comply with his demands for additional financial compensation, or face an indefinite halt of the project.

This moment encapsulates the complexities inherent in participatory and hands-on research in contested urban settlements, and highlights the socio-political dynamics frequently encountered in collaborative interventions. The particular meeting had been convened to distribute gift vouchers as gestures of acknowledgment to the neighbourhood's leadership who had expressed feelings of underappreciation and undercompensation for their contributions in enabling our participatory research in this area. Far from an isolated incident, this scenario represented one among numerous episodes faced during the project's progression, exposing the deep-rooted challenges of participatory practices within the lived realities of this informal urban context.

This article examines these challenges through reflections derived from a postdoctoral research as part of the Kelvin-Alexandra-Frankenwald City Studio, a collaborative, interdisciplinary initiative led by the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES) in the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand [1]. In particular, it reflects upon a collaborative and participatory design-build initiative involving the local community in the informal settlement of Stjwetla.

The project partnered with the Urban Safety Reference Group (USRG), a practice-based learning platform for city practitioners involved in community safety functions. The USRG was particularly interested in the project's emphasis on collaborative safety governance – specifically, how cities, universities, and local actors can work together to improve safety [2]. As the City Studio team, our role involved coordinating hands-on workshops and small-scale, site-specific interventions, engaging students, local residents, builders, and external stakeholders. This paper critically examines the pedagogical challenges and potentials of such "making" methodologies – approaches prioritising experiential learning and active participation in addressing complex spatial realities.

Coming to Stjwetla as an outsider from Europe raised additional dimensions of complexity, foregrounding issues around positionality, legitimacy, and expectations. Previous experiences and initial warnings about the difficulties of working in such a context deepened my commitment, viewing each obstacle as an integral part of constructing meaningful contributions. This involved unlearning conventional methods and rethinking my approach, allowing the practice and research to evolve organically from the lived experiences and conditions of the informal settlement itself.

This article therefore seeks to contribute to the understanding of the evolving roles and responsibilities of architects, spatial practitioners, and researchers within contested urban environments in South Africa and globally. It emphasises how immersive,

participatory approaches can facilitate deeper and more authentic engagements with communities, despite their challenges, and ultimately more impactful and inclusive urban research practices.



Figure 1 - Safety Shelter strategically placed at key gateway into Stjwetla, identified as 'crime hotspot' by local leadership and the K Stjwetla Patrollers. This shelter, in the Southern side, is positioned in a high-traffic area near the bank of the Jukskei River, adjacent to Florence Moposho Bridge and Street, connecting to Old Alexandra, Extension 7, Sandton, and beyond (Credit: Michael Tinapi).



Figure 2 - The shelter located on the Northern side is placed along a key pedestrian route connecting Stjwetla to Marlboro Station, Kelvin, Linbro Park, and the wider city of Johannesburg (Credit: Leon Krige).

Stjwetla: Context and Site Location for Safety Shelters

Uniquely situated adjacent to affluent neighborhoods, Stjwetla sharply contrasts with the historically peripheral and isolated placement typical of informal settlements shaped by pre-apartheid and apartheid spatial planning (HUCHZERMEYER, forthcoming: 1). This proximity intensifies land pressures, resulting in high population density and ongoing brick-and-mortar densification, exacerbating housing precarity and socio-spatial inequalities (HUCHZERMEYER, forthcoming: 1).

Stjwetla emerged from unauthorized land occupations, actively confronting entrenched spatial injustices and exclusionary urban planning practices that historically marginalized black African populations. The settlement grapples with numerous challenges, including frequent flooding, inadequate sanitation and clean water access, deficient waste management, and notably high crime rates. Despite these severe hardships, residents demonstrate remarkable resilience, in the face of limited state intervention and support.

Stjwetla embodies Johannesburg's profound socio-economic disparities, highlighting the urgent need for responsive and inclusive urban interventions. Marie Huchzermeyer emphasizes that effectively addressing precarity in settlements like Stjwetla requires acknowledgment of systemic injustices deeply entrenched in neoliberal governance and historical spatial planning practices (HUCHZERMEYER, forthcoming: 1–2). Consequently, community-driven solutions must actively empower residents through meaningful participation, rooted in their lived experiences and situated knowledges.

In response to these complex dynamics, the Safety Shelters initiative was developed collaboratively within the City Studio, adopting a gradual, community-driven process focused specifically on local safety. This initiative evolved organically, starting with K Stjwetla Patrollers facilitating exploratory visits by Wits University students and researchers throughout 2023 and 2024 [3]. At the formal launch of the City Studio at Marlboro Station in May 2024, the patrollers requested essential equipment, including high-visibility jackets, and two-way radios, emphasizing their desire for enhanced community recognition and operational capacity (Safety Shelter Practice Note, 2025).



Figure 3 - On 22th May 2024, the City Studio launch event was held at the Gautrain Marlboro Station, bringing together Wits University staff and students alongside external stakeholders. The event introduced the collaborative initiative aimed at exploring the socio-spatial dynamics within a 3km radius of Gautrain Marlboro Station (Credit: Chante Schatz).

These initial conversations were further expanded during the Urban Fare event also held at Marlboro Gautrain Station [4]. Discussions during this event underscored the potential of installing physical shelters to serve as operational bases, significantly improving patrollers' visibility, safety, and legitimacy, particularly during night shifts.



Figure 4 - Within the garage space where the City Studio launch event took place, an exhibition of research and students' studio work was displayed, as well as space for engagement, short presentations and local voices, an interactive 'urban café', and an interactive activity to gather suggestions and expectations from the audience regarding the potential impact of the City Studio. Safety emerged as one of the key concerns raised by the participants (Credit: Bola Oguntade).

Between November 2024 and March 2025, collaborative dialogues involving the Stjwetla Leadership Committee, the patrollers, and the USRG, led to the identification of two strategic shelter locations based on movement patterns and crime hotspots. One shelter was established near Florence Moposho Street at Stjwetla's southern end, while the other was placed at an abandoned vendor stall in the area known as Maponyaville, adjacent to Marlboro Gautrain Station. These locations serve as critical entry and exit points - 'gateways' - for daily commuters navigating in and out of Stjwetla, strategically chosen to enhance patroller visibility and effectively address community safety concerns.

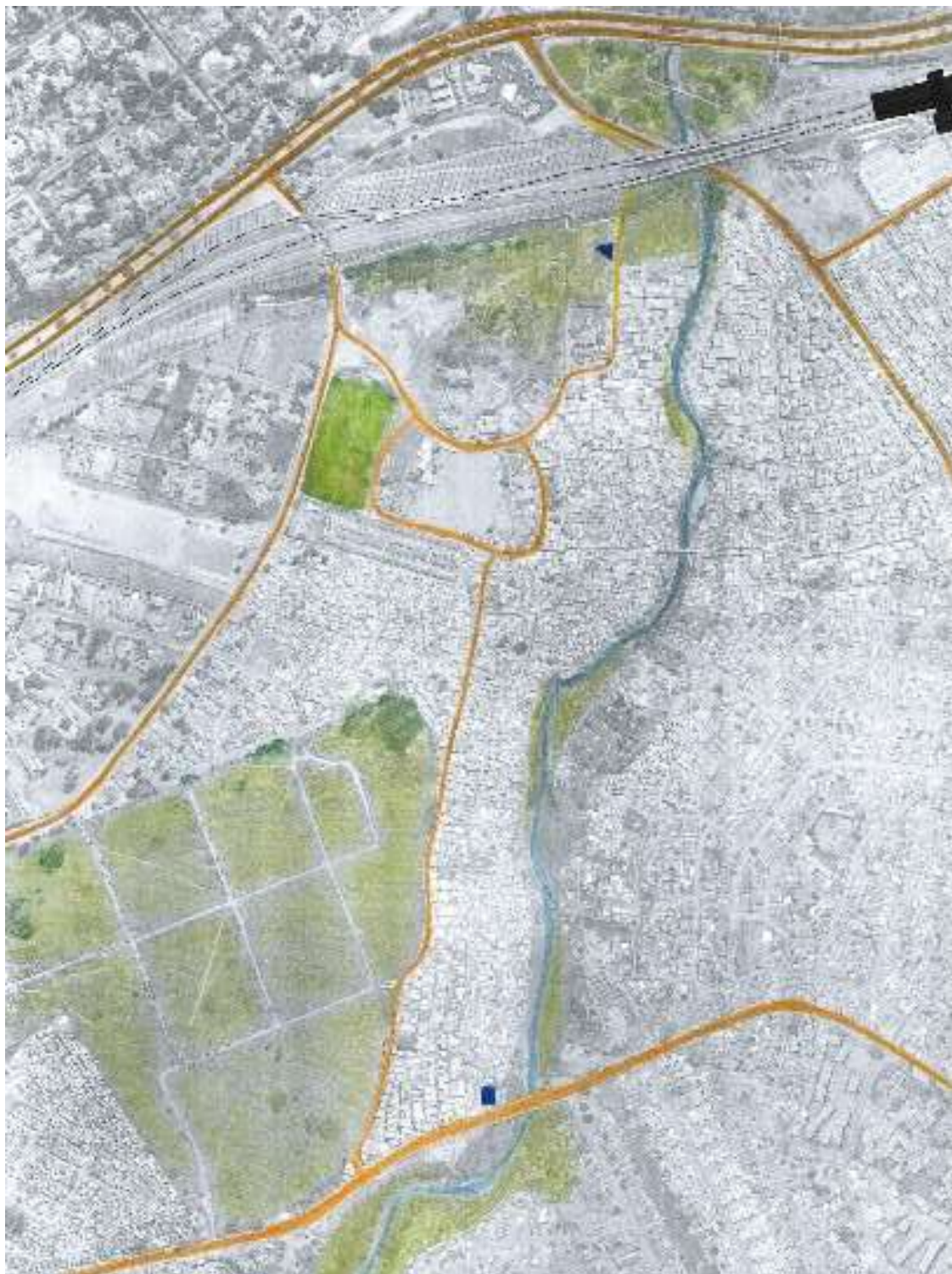


Figure 5 - Site plan of Stjwetla and surroundings, including the location of the two safety shelters. This is a location where socio-spatial inequality and land market exclusion collide with extreme environmental risks, such as flooding and high levels of pollution (Credit: Paulo Moreira).

Participatory Workshops as Platforms for Learning

Since the initial stages of engagement in Stjwetla, the project adopted a learning-through-making approach. Rather than viewing the community as a passive object of observation, the goal was to establish collaborative platforms where researcher, students and community members can become co-producers of knowledge and action [5]. This resonates with what Oldfield (2023) describes as “partnerships of high stakes and high hopes”, in which collective building becomes a vehicle for reciprocal learning, rather than merely generating research outputs (OLDFIELD, 2023: 142).

The first participatory activity took the form of a hands-on workshop, centred around the collaborative construction of a temporary structure designed and built by students at the School of Architecture and Planning, local artisans from Stjwetla, and the Alexandra Water Warriors (AWW), a grassroots initiative actively involved in cleaning and restoring the Jukskei River [6]. The AWW provided reclaimed materials collected from the riverbanks and also shared invaluable local knowledge about the area's environmental and social dynamics.



Figure 6 - Over three days (3-5/09/2024), a group of students, AWW members, and local artisans from Stjwetla activated the courtyard of the John Moffat building, at the School of Architecture and Planning (SoAP), Wits University (Credit: Paulo Moreira).



Figure 7 - During the workshop, participants transformed over 300 tins and dozens of plastic bottles into a series of unique shading patterns (Credit: Paulo Moreira).

The structure, initially assembled at the courtyard of the John Moffat building on campus and later relocated to the community garden in Stjwetla, served as more than merely a shelter. It embodied alternative narratives about Johannesburg's urban peripheries, transforming waste into resources, environmental degradation into opportunities for collaboration, and building practices into pedagogical experiences. As Oldfield describes, “teaching was grounded in the city, (...) its materialities and creativities.” The hands-on workshop “infused the city and ordinary people into the classroom” (OLDFIELD, 2023: 4). Thus, it functioned simultaneously as a physical and educational structure, allowing students direct engagement with issues such as informality, self-building, environmental justice, and spatial negotiation.

In parallel, a Collective Mapping Workshop was organised to explore relational geographies and reveal situated understandings of spatial relationships among fragmented sites across the study area: Alexandra, Extension 7, Frankenwald, Kelvin, Linbro Park, Marlboro, and Stjwetla. Drawing on established traditions of participatory mapping, the workshop facilitated participants’ articulation of subjective and collective spatial experiences, critically challenging the reductive representations characteristic of formal cartography.



Figure 8 – The Collective Mapping Workshop allowed the main urban, social, and economic characteristics of the area to be identified, breaking away from the rigour associated with technical cartography and offering more exploratory, interpretative visions of reality. On the 19th October 2024, the first collective mapping workshop took place in Stjwetla, involving residents of the study site, with assistance by Wits students (Credit: Paulo Moreira).



Figure 9 – On the 15th November 2024, the second collective mapping workshop took place at the Alexandra Water Warriors' (AWW) headquarters (Credit: Paulo Moreira).

Goonewardena argues that “mapping is politically charged mediation between our everyday life consciousness and the general structures of the world we inhabit” (GOONEWARDENA, 2023: 9). In this case, the mapping sessions articulated apparently invisible socio-spatial links, including informal pathways, places of conflict, and communal activity hubs. The mapping sessions thus made visible previously unnoticed socio-spatial connections, including informal pathways, areas of conflict, and spaces of communal activity. Mapping went beyond technical representation; it emerged as a medium for storytelling and collective reflection. Saarinen vividly captures this potential by emphasizing how “mapping the everyday” can expose the “juxtaposition of body, space, and the banal, often overlooked journey of our everyday lives” (SAARINEN, 2023: 12).

This reflective process prompted dialogues about histories of displacement, mobility patterns, informal economies, and the dual character of the river as both a resource and a source of environmental threat. Additionally, the exercise helped identify crime hotspots, confirming the locations for the installation of the safety shelters. Further enriching the process, the mapping workshop operated as a performative device (SCHOONDERBEEK, 2023), reshaping participants' perceptions and repositioning them as active agents capable of critically representing and interrogating their spatial realities.

Insights generated by these initial workshops became foundational for the subsequent design and implementation of the safety shelters. While they significantly influenced the shelters' location and material characteristics, the workshops did not fully uncover underlying tensions such as contested land claims and community divisions. Recognising these subtle dynamics more clearly at an earlier stage could have provided valuable insights, better preparing the team to understand and navigate the complexities of the local context.

Nevertheless, the workshops significantly strengthened relationships with local artisans and stakeholders such as the Alexandra Water Warriors. Through the act of collaborative construction itself, a spirit of mutual learning and exchange became central to the project's pedagogical approach. This collaborative ethos exemplifies the principles of engaged urban pedagogy as articulated by Natarajan and Short (2023), wherein knowledge is continually shaped through community dialogue, negotiation, and shared action. Thus, participatory workshops like these demonstrate how urban pedagogies can critically question and reframe entrenched assumptions about planning and design, particularly in contexts shaped by historical dispossession and contemporary socio-spatial inequalities.

Learning by Doing” as Critical Pedagogy

Real-world contexts, market by complexity and uncertainty, demand forms of engagement that transcend traditional academic boundaries, favouring experiential learning and the co-production of knowledge between academics and communities (KINCHELOE et al, 2017; WINKLER, 2013). Within the City Studio, the establishment of a hands-on learning environment, rooted in direct engagement, aligned naturally with critical pedagogy. This educational framework explicitly acknowledges the inherently political nature of education, advocating for the empowerment of marginalised

communities and the promotion of critical consciousness among learners (FREIRE, 1970; KINCHELOE et al, 2017).

The "learning by doing" methodology adopted in the City Studio draws on several influential educational theorists. John Dewey's foundational work, "Experience and Education" (1938), posits that meaningful education emerges from active participation combined with reflective practice. Dewey emphasizes genuine learning experiences must engage learners critically with real-world uncertainty, stating education should function as "development within, by, and for experience" (DEWEY, 1938: 28).

Building upon these principles, Donald Schön, in *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), advanced the concept of "reflection-in-action". He highlighted how professionals and researchers continuously refine their knowledge through iterative cycles of action and reflection, particularly when navigating the complexity and uncertainty of practice. Schön contrasted between the "hard ground", where practitioners apply standardized techniques with the "swampy lowlands", where situations are complex and resist straightforward technical solutions (SCHÖN, 1983: 42).

The idea that practice is inherently a learning process is reinforced by John Forester in *The Deliberative Practitioner* (1999), where he situated planning practice within a political and democratic framework. Forester further extends educational discourse into the realm of professional practice by emphasising deliberative democracy, effective communication, and the importance of diverse perspectives – principles directly aligned with critical pedagogy. These principles informed the City Studio's methodology, promoting collaborative problem-solving strategies sensitive to local power dynamics and community-specific contexts.

This approach is further reinforced by Lev Vygotsky's (1978) theory of social learning and guided participation, which highlights how meaningful learning occurs within socially mediated contexts. Central to Vygotsky's theory is the concept of the "zone of proximal development", defined as the space where learners surpass their individual capabilities through social interaction and collaboration (PARKER, 1979: 956). This principle guided the participatory workshops described above, enabling participants to achieve a deeper understanding and acquire skills that would have been difficult to attain individually, effectively putting Vygotsky's theory into practice.

Additionally, David Kolb's (1984) experiential learning cycle – concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualisation, and active experimentation – also provided a structural model reflecting the iterative nature of our projects. Kolb argues that effective experiential learning requires environments that encourage active engagement, critical reflection, and the integration of insights into practice. This concept is directly applicable to the safety shelters project, both in Stjwetla and at Wits University, in which the physical construction process and the student workshop also provided spaces conducive to dialogue, experimentation and reflection.

Central to the "learning by doing" methodological framework is the influential work of Nabeel Hamdi, who underscores the transformative potential of small-scale, community-driven urban interventions. He emphasizes that sustainable urban change arises when residents are directly involved in shaping their environments, recognizing modest actions as powerful drivers of significant long-term impacts (HAMDİ, 2010: xv). Similar to Schön,

Hamdi views errors and improvisations not as obstacles but as vital elements of meaningful learning and adaptive urban practice (HAMDI, 2010: 87).

Hamdi's notion of "working backwards to go forwards" prioritizes practical tasks rooted in local knowledge and resources, progressively building towards systemic changes (HAMDI, 2010: 73). In *Small Change* (2004), Hamdi argues that interventions must begin with what already exists - local knowledge, structures, and resources - ensuring relevance, realism, and local acceptance. Small-scale initiatives provide tangible, immediate benefits, building trust and momentum within communities. This incremental and responsive strategy closely aligned with our collaborative work in Stjwetla, where initial small-scale actions laid the groundwork for broader community impact.

Collectively, the insights from Dewey, Schön, Forester, Vygotsky, Kolb, and Hamdi underpin our "learning by doing" approach. These frameworks underscore the value of initiating tangible interventions at the community scale as foundational steps toward broader, systemic urban transformation. However, our experiences in Stjwetla also revealed that applying these theoretical frameworks in practice is challenging, requiring sustained engagement and critical reflection to navigate local power dynamics effectively.



Figure 10 - In February and March 2025, a small team of four local artisans and builders worked to construct the Northern shelter, with a triangular shape (Credit: Michael Tinapi).

Unlearning as Decolonial Pedagogy

While the concept of 'learning by doing' offers valuable insights, it may not sufficiently address the socio-spatial and historical complexities prevalent in post-apartheid South Africa and broader postcolonial contexts. In such settings, "unlearning" emerges as a pivotal pedagogical practice, critically interrogating and challenging entrenched academic, professional, and theoretical frameworks.

This approach is especially pertinent for meaningfully engaging with environments such as Stjwetla, which inherently challenge conventional assumptions and institutional structures. Decolonial pedagogy fundamentally promotes a critical re-examination of knowledge production and educational frameworks, questioning dominant narratives while actively embracing diverse ways of knowing. Within this context, "unlearning" becomes integral, embodying the active disruption of conventional academic practices to foster new forms of engagement and understanding. This article specifically advances an "unlearning by doing" methodology, integrating practical research approaches with architectural discourse, urban theory, and decolonial praxis. (BENNETT; COMBRINCK, 2016; PORTER, 2010)

The foundational work of bell hooks, particularly "Teaching to Transgress" (1994), provides a powerful critique of conventional academia, emphasizing education as a practice of freedom rather than mere knowledge transmission. hooks critiques educational institutions for reinforcing domination and inequality, arguing that true education should liberate and empower learners through critical consciousness. Her perspective significantly influences the framework of this research, particularly in challenging traditional academic methodologies and promoting a more inclusive, engaged approach.

While hooks critiques from within academia, Ivan Illich pushes further with his radical critique of educational institutions in "Deschooling Society" (1971) calling for complete detachment from institutionalized learning systems. Illich's broader and more abstract critique contrasts with the grounded and spatially engaged methodologies proposed by Swati Chattopadhyay (2012). Chattopadhyay emphasizes on-the-ground practices like mapping, surveys, and immersive engagements, critiquing the limitations of archival and literary methods. This practical grounding aligns strongly with the approach adopted by the City Studio, emphasizing situated, experiential learning and the visibility of subaltern spatial practices.

Building on these foundational critiques, further scholarship expands the concept of unlearning into distinct yet interconnected domains. Within urban theory, for instance, Mary Lawhon et al. (2021) critique the northern-centric biases and colonial legacies deeply embedded within contemporary scholarship. They call for an authentic engagement with 'southern' knowledges and urge broader accountability in knowledge production processes. Their stance extends Illich's critique beyond institutional structures, addressing biases within disciplinary knowledge itself, a position that resonates closely with the City Studio's commitment to embedding practical research directly within contested urban environments such as Stjwetla.

This critical examination of methodologies is further intensified by scholars such as Boer Cueva et al. (2023), who advocate for radical epistemic "disobedience" within international relations scholarship. By urging the abandonment of extractive research methodologies and neo-colonial paradigms, they bridge theory and practice through explicit calls for experimental and transformative praxis. Such radical methodological shifts echo the City Studio's iterative, participatory, and collaborative practices, which continually reassess and challenge conventional research frameworks.

Complementing these critiques, Libby Porter (2010) directly addresses colonial planning cultures, highlighting the ethical imperative to decolonize planning by recognizing indigenous spatial rights and practices. Porter bridges theoretical insights with practical applications, advocating a transformative reorientation of planners towards genuine community engagement. This perspective aligns seamlessly with the City Studio's approach, emphasizing hands-on, collaborative projects that actively foreground community voices and critically challenge traditional planning methodologies.

The concept of 'resistant texts' introduced by Tanja Winkler (2017) complements and expands upon Porter's insights, emphasizing detachment from dominant Western narratives and asserting the legitimacy of endogenous knowledge systems. Winkler's concept of epistemic disobedience further aligns with Boer Cueva et al.'s radical epistemological stance and reinforces the City Studio's commitment to adaptive, responsive, and community-driven methodologies. This interwoven critique highlights the essential nature of contextually informed and participatory approaches to counter conventional academic paradigms.

Critical pedagogy, as articulated by Kincheloe et al (2017), deepens this dialogue by emphasizing the transformative potential inherent in collaborative and dialogical methodologies for fostering critical consciousness. This theoretical perspective aligns well with the City Studio's practice, which places mutual respect, trust, and active community engagement at its core to disrupt and transform traditional power dynamics (NUMANS et al, 2019).

Further enriching this discourse, the philosophy of Ubuntu, as elaborated by indigenous scholars such as Ramose (2002) and Mkhize (2008), offers an ethical framework uniquely suited to the Southern African context. Seehawer (2018: 456) advocates for Ubuntu epistemologies as foundational in decolonizing academic practices, highlighting relational approaches critical for addressing spatial and institutional segregation. Ubuntu's emphasis on community, mutual respect, and relationality inherently supports decolonial methodologies by prioritizing collective well-being, communal knowledge production, and collaborative participation. Thus, Ubuntu provides a crucial ethical foundation for the City Studio, reinforcing its commitment to decolonial research and practice.

In summary, the concept of unlearning within decolonial pedagogy is inherently multidimensional, critically reflecting on colonial frameworks, challenging established academic practices, and emphasizing subaltern and endogenous knowledge systems. By integrating practical, community-engaged methodologies with critical theoretical frameworks from hooks, Illich, Chattopadhyay, Lawhon, Boer Cueva, Porter, Winkler, Seehawer, and others, the projects developed within the City Studio advance an "unlearning by doing" approach. This approach continuously shapes knowledge

production and learning through iterative cycles of making, unmaking, and remaking within the specific context of Stjwetla and surroundings, offering a robust critique and alternative to conventional educational and academic paradigms.



Figure 11 – The roof of the northern shelter incorporates the lids from the same drums used in the southern structure, demonstrating the possibility of reusing 100% of the material with zero waste. The actual shelter is triangular in form, with an unwall platform with three benches creating a space for gathering, encouraging dialogue and social interaction (Credit: Leon Krige).

Navigating Institutional Constraints

Engaging deeply with the safety shelter project required meticulous preparation, extensive collaboration with diverse suppliers and stakeholders in Stjwetla and surroundings, and effective mobilisation of student involvement for the summer school workshop. This intricate process demanded ongoing renegotiation of strategies in response to evolving community needs and the complex interplay of local power dynamics.

However, the procedural frameworks and bureaucratic structures at the University of the Witwatersrand often complicated rather than facilitated these engagements, particularly due to institutional policies governing research and community engagement. The institution's emphasis on scholarly rigor frequently limited the spontaneity and adaptability crucial for responsive community-based research.

Before engaging in community-based activities, obtaining ethics clearance was mandatory, requiring detailed documentation and significant advance planning. While this process created constraints, it also served an essential function in safeguarding against academic exploitation and ensuring fairness and accountability to research

participants. Thus, ethics clearance procedures present a complex duality - balancing the need for flexible and responsive community engagement with the critical imperative of ethical oversight and participant protection - highlighting tensions that are important for ongoing debate (WINKLER; DUMINY, 2014: 627) [7]. These formalized and often rigid institutional requirements constrained the flexibility necessary for context-sensitive and adaptive activities. This aligns with Lawhon et al's (2020: 124) critique of institutional rigidity, highlighting how formal procedural demands can undermine the nuanced and responsive nature essential for effective engaged urban research.

Funding presented an additional critical challenge. Typically, postdoctoral fellowships and related funding mechanisms prioritize traditional academic outputs, rarely accommodating practical, community-focused activities such as construction, materials procurement, and the remuneration of local artisans [8]. Moreover, even when securing funds, the procurement processes at Wits University mandated sourcing from formal registered vendors, complicating the intention to acquire materials and labour from local informal sources that do not issue formal invoices. These institutional procedures required considerable reframing of the project approach to align with existing administrative frameworks. Despite these challenges, resources were eventually acquired, facilitating valuable exchanges. This experience echoes Numans et al (2019: 428), who highlight tensions between rigid institutional funding priorities and the practical needs inherent in participatory, multi-stakeholder research.

Although limited, funding sources such as small bursaries and grants were instrumental in conducting foundational activities such as hands-on prototyping and collective mapping workshops, significantly reinforcing experiential learning [9]. Even modest funding supported the initial development of relationships that later matured into more substantial partnerships, notably through larger City Studio initiatives enabling engagements closer to the community.

Additional institutional restrictions, particularly related to safety policies during fieldwork, created substantial barriers to students' direct involvement in community construction activities. To solve these limitations pragmatically, artisans from Stjwetla were invited onto the university campus. This solution, though less ideal in terms of direct community immersion, validated and highlighted artisans' expertise, thereby enhancing their dignity and social agency within formal academic contexts, aligning with critical pedagogical principles outlined by Kincheloe et al. (2024). Nevertheless, the university's stringent access restrictions, notably stringent ID verification processes and the guarded entry points into campus, posed additional challenges. Such restrictive campus access policies, though justified from an urban safety point of view, revealed deeply entrenched institutional segregation, reflecting broader structural inequities. Although Sengupta (2012: 140) discusses these dynamics in the context of Indian cities, highlighting how institutions reinforce urban segregation through spatial and material controls, similar patterns are observable in the South African context, showing systemic socio-economic marginalization. Winkler (2017) further emphasizes the persistent epistemological and structural coloniality within South African universities, calling for decolonial methodologies that embrace and prioritize local knowledge systems. While the university's security procedures might appear detached from these broader debates, feedback from the artisans confirmed their sense of "not belonging" on campus, highlighting the need for critical reflection within the university. However, the broader institutional priorities of Wits, like many universities globally, are increasingly oriented

towards enhancing rankings and pursuing social impact through innovation and measurable outcomes, often overlooking the nuanced requirements of grassroots community engagement (OLDFIELD, 2023: 14; NATARAJAN; SHORT, 2023: 5).

In summary, navigating institutional constraints at Wits University involved addressing challenges related to ethics approvals, aligning funding structures with community needs, balancing safety with authentic engagement, and confronting entrenched spatial segregation. Meeting these challenges required continuous negotiation, adaptability, and strategic reframing. Nevertheless, the process was far from straightforward, marked by ongoing uncertainties and complexities that sometimes hindered the broader objectives of meaningful community engagement and mutual learning, underscoring the practical difficulties inherent in community-engaged academic projects by critically engaging with institutional rigidity, urban segregation, and community empowerment.

Negotiating Informality and Local Power Dynamics

Community-level challenges became particularly evident during the participatory design-build initiative in Stjwetla. Funding from a multi-stakeholder programme convened by the South African Cities Network (SACN) enabled the implementation of two safety shelters, building upon methodologies developed in earlier prototyping and mapping workshops. However, involving external stakeholders introduced complexities into the existing community-university relationship, particularly due to institutional constraints and funding regulations. The funding conditions were notably stringent, requiring local labour to be voluntary, compensated exclusively through vouchers redeemable at local retail shops. Given the very high unemployment rate in Stjwetla, local expectations that the project would create tangible employment opportunities were legitimate, necessitating continuous negotiation.

Uniquely, the funding body took an active role in engaging alongside the City Studio team in navigating these community expectations, which demanded sensitive mediation to balance contrasting perspectives and divergent objectives (WINKLER; DUMINY, 2014: 123). Such negotiations sometimes created uncomfortable positionalities, requiring participants to actively unlearn assumptions and acknowledge that "subjective understandings of 'greater equity' and 'socio-spatial justice' vary significantly depending on the situated context" (idem). Furthermore, Jansen (2019) argues that engaging with knowledge production in such contexts is inherently political, highlighting the necessity for transparent communication and clear initial agreements. Oldfield (2023) similarly emphasizes that effective community-university partnerships require ongoing dialogue and adaptability, which proved essential in navigating the local complexities faced in Stjwetla.

Despite detailed budgets required during funding applications, a variety of unforeseen costs arose during project execution, creating significant implementation challenges but also opportunities to unlearn and learn afresh. While the City Studio aimed to strengthen connections between the university and local groups, a clearer recognition of early warning signs between expectations and actual feasibility could have alleviated much of the stress and tension caused to the community members who were committed to facilitating the initiative on their side (BESSUSSI; BROWNILL, 2023: 129-130). Due to

our own inadequate reading of the context and our ambitions to make a positive impact, there was a notable disparity between available compensations and the significant labour and effort required, particularly given the stringent technical compliance demanded from local residents. Recognizing and reflecting on this gap became an essential part of our process of unlearning, prompting us to critically reassess assumptions and approaches throughout the initiative.

In particular, the policy of compensating participants with gift vouchers rather than cash limited interest among local builders, suppliers, and service providers, occasionally leading to participants selling vouchers at discounted rates for cash. Regular discussions were thus essential to manage community expectations and mitigate frustration, underscoring both the challenges and potentials inherent in navigating formal institutional mechanisms within informal economic contexts (ROY, 2005: 149) [10].

Spatial politics and community relations further complicated the initiative. Last-minute changes occurred frequently, exemplified by local leadership reallocating the project site to a location previously used as a waste dump, thus requiring additional resources to clear debris and prepare the terrain [11]. Such sudden alterations proved to be a defining characteristic in this informal context, highlighting the volatility and need for improvisation inherent in informal settlements (WINKLER, 2013: 221). This constant and urgent adaptation inevitably limited the amount of time dedicated to consolidating decisions and physical interventions on-site.



Figure 12 - In November and December 2024, a team of ten local artisans and builders worked to construct the southern shelter using recycled materials where possible (Credit: Paulo Moreira).

As construction began, latent community tensions surfaced more explicitly. A previously uninvolved group of six to seven residents asserted claims and control over resources, such as charging disproportionately high fees for electricity and water usage at the construction site - despite their informal access to these utilities - while others contested ownership of the site itself. The appointment of a local site supervisor intensified existing tensions. This supervisor, initially opposing to the site allocation, was strategically or diplomatically incorporated into the project by local leaders to reduce dissent. Although we initially clarified that no dedicated budget existed for this role, the supervisor later demanded unexpected and disproportionate compensation, heightening interpersonal conflicts and financial strain. These events prompted us to unlearn assumptions about the critical importance of clearly establishing initial agreements and maintaining transparent communication throughout participatory processes (WINKLER, 2013: 219).

In February 2025, two months after construction completion, new yet seemingly related tensions emerged, culminating in pronounced conflict. A resident who had frequently visited the construction site began an unauthorized extension of their residence adjacent to the safety shelter, prompting significant local opposition and highlighting further complexities in local dynamics. Accusations arose that this resident had been compensated for their role in the construction of the Safety Shelter, intensifying community disputes and prompting us to unlearn simplistic assumptions about participation, equity, and local power dynamics in shaping project outcomes (WINKLER; DUMINY, 2014: 124). In response, community leaders negotiated additional communal space, relocating chemical toilets adjacent to the newly constructed shelter. This relocation triggered further disputes, leading to a group of residents demanding their removal from near the newly completed shelter. Two weeks later, partly due to damage inflicted on some toilet cabins by protesting residents, the managing company removed the toilets entirely [12]. While it is possible that the safety shelter inadvertently triggered these tensions, residents' overall attitudes toward the shelter have not indicated such a direct connection.

The second shelter was placed in a less contested and less intensively utilized area adjacent to a quieter part of the settlement. Explicit discussions were held with local leadership to collectively reflect upon and proactively address the dynamics and challenges encountered during the first shelter's construction, aiming to prevent their recurrence. A smaller team of local representatives and artisans, primarily those who positively contributed previously, was engaged, resulting in a more stable and cooperative environment with supportive neighbours who required no compensation.

These incidents illustrate how spatial interventions can become deeply entangled in broader local socio-political conflicts. They underscore critical community-level challenges inherent in participatory projects, including balancing institutional requirements with community interests and addressing complex local power dynamics (WINKLER; DUMINY, 2014: 123-124; NATARAJAN; SHORT, 2023: 130). Community ownership, trust-building, and transparent communication remain essential for effective engagement and sustainable outcomes, reinforcing that participation and co-production are inherently challenging processes that require continuous reflection, questioning, and a willingness to unlearn established assumptions.



Figure 13 – The impactful roof structure of the Southern shed, made from repurposed 44-gallon drums, draws attention while creating pleasant shade. The space is used by the K Stjwetla Patrollers and the community in general (Credit: Leon Krige).

Conclusion: For an Engaged Pedagogy

The pursuit of engaged urban pedagogy through participatory and reflective practices in Stjwetla has revealed important insights, yet also exposed substantial uncertainties and complexities. The challenges encountered during this collaborative project highlighted the necessity of adaptability, flexibility, and spontaneity. However, these experiences also made evident how limited our understanding remains regarding the deeper dynamics, decision-making processes, and spatial politics within the community.

While direct engagement with materials and construction processes proved valuable as a research method and pedagogical strategy - enabling students, and researcher to collaborate with community members - it also surfaced critical limitations. These included not only our incomplete grasp of local complexities but also the significant gaps in trust that remain between researcher and residents. Reflecting on this underscores Winkler's (2017: 2) argument that educational frameworks must actively 'unlearn' inherited biases, explicitly recognizing the privileged position occupied by white scholars, and approach resistant community texts as legitimate sources of knowledge rather than impediments to development.

The challenges encountered reinforced the need for greater reflexivity and humility, emphasizing an openness to uncertainty, and acknowledging our ongoing hesitation and puzzlement as integral to participatory research. Rather than presenting participatory

methods as straightforward or idealistic, we explicitly address our limited grasp of community dynamics and spatial politics, recognizing uncertainty as a fundamental part of the learning process (NATARAJAN; SHORT, 2023: 27). The notion of "unlearning by doing" thus revealed the extent of what we still do not comprehend.

Despite significant time constraints linked to the SACN-Wits funding arrangement, the Safety Shelter project revealed the meaningful long-term impacts achievable through participatory, community-driven interventions. While the project's transformative effect on the University may be limited, it effectively strengthened local knowledge networks and laid important groundwork for future collaborations (MOREIRA et al, 2025). Moving forward, our experiences advocate for deeper, more critical inquiries into the processes shaping urban contexts. This perspective cautions against oversimplified portrayals of participatory methodologies, recognizing instead their inherent complexity and uncertainty. Meaningful academic and community partnerships must thus engage openly with these challenges, valuing iterative reflection and continuous learning and unlearning as key components in engaging with genuine inclusive and transformative urban practices.

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Notes

[1] This research is supported by the Centennial Postdoctoral Fellowship at the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES), School of Architecture and Planning, University of the Witwatersrand. The City Studio is coordinated by Professor Marie Huchzermeyer.

[2] The Urban Safety Reference Group (USRG), convened by the South African Cities Network (SACN), is composed of 10-25 participants representing eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, the City of Johannesburg, the City of Tshwane, SACN, and the National Department of Human Settlements (DoHS). The project has been made possible through the Inclusive Violence and Crime Prevention (VCP) Programme, implemented by the Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) on behalf of the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and co-financed by Global Affairs Canada (GAC).

[3] To address persistent and violent crime in the neighbourhood, the K Stjwetla Patrollers - a volunteer group of 18 members, including seven women - was established in early 2023. Operating continuously, the group enhances community safety and maintains a visible presence in Stjwetla, in collaboration with the Stjwetla Leadership Committee and the Bramley Police Station (SAPS).

[4] On 26th of October 2024, the panel discussion titled "Urban Safety and Public Space Design Proposals" brought together lecturers, patrollers, and local stakeholders, creating a platform for public engagement with ongoing initiatives around spatial and safety governance in Stjwetla and its surroundings. The panel featured Nkosilehile Mavuso (Lecturer, School of Architecture and Planning), Nomonde Gwebu (PhD Candidate and Lecturer, School of Architecture and Planning), and Paul Maluleke (Director, Alexandra Water Warriors). The discussion was moderated by Dr Paulo Moreira, from the City Studio team.

[5] As a postdoctoral fellow, the research developed primarily as an individual project, without an associated formal course. However, students from architecture and planning - who usually work separately, except for sporadic all-school events and a first-year course - were engaged through informal gatherings. Workshops were strategically scheduled during study breaks to enable student participation.

[6] The Alexandra Water Warriors (AWW) is a community-based organisation committed to addressing water-related challenges in Alexandra, Johannesburg. By recycling river waste, the group contributes to environmental preservation and the protection of natural resources. Founded during the COVID-19 pandemic in 2021 and formally registered in 2022, AWW has become a key player in local environmental conservation and community development efforts.

[7] The ethics clearance process at Wits University required extensive documentation, detailing the project's methodology, participant engagement strategies, and ethical instruments and safeguards. The entire assessment process, including online training, assignments, and formal validation, took over six months to complete.

[8] The SACN and GIZ partnership provided funding for the design-build initiative of the safety shelters. However, regulatory requirements necessitated certain adjustments, including compensating labourers through gift vouchers instead of payments in cash. Additional unforeseen circumstances required further fundraising, adding complexity to the process. The discretionary funds from CUBES were eventually used to cover budget overruns during the construction phase.

[9] Small grants from Wits University supported the research at different stages. The Research Development Working Group (RDWG) fund enabled the initial hands-on workshop, while the Planning and Housing Graduate Funds facilitated collective mapping workshops.

[10] Gift vouchers (also known as gift cards) are prepaid instruments issued by Makro, a wholesale and retail chain. These vouchers allow holders to purchase goods at any Makro store, the nearest to Stjwetla being located in Woodmead, approximately 5 km from the northern side of the settlement.

[11] Although an initial site had been selected, late-stage discussions with the Stjwetla Leadership Committee resulted in relocating the shelter to an open space near the bridge over the Jukskei River. As with many open areas surrounding Stjwetla, this site was covered with rubble and required unforeseen clearing and levelling. On-site, the team also had to strengthen the foundation slab due to ground conditions, leading to additional costs. These adjustments underscored the need for flexibility in community-led planning processes.

[12] Approximately six weeks after construction, the toilets were reinstalled, considerably improving residents' daily lives and their access to basic sanitation services.