

The Streetscapes Project

Report for Khulisa Social Solutions

Link to creative aspect of project:
www.thestreetscapesproject.org

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UCT KNOWLEDGE CO-OP

The UCT Knowledge Co-op facilitated this collaborative project
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A report and brief reflective piece on my role as a journalist working with Khulisa by documenting the challenges of street-based people in the city

In 2015, the City's Mayoral Committee Member for Social Development and Early Childhood Development, Suzette Little, revealed that there were currently just over 7 000 homeless people in Cape Town. In February 2017, *The Citizen* published an [article](#) a few hours before the State of the Nation address was to take place, mentioning that the city's homeless were reported not to have optimistic expectations of help from the government.

"I wish the government will really start listening to our concerns and problems, and hope that the new government that will take over in the coming years will start reconnecting with the people who vote them into power," said Caroline Abrahams, who has been living on the streets for more than twenty years, while another mentioned that politicians constantly make "empty promises" and only allowed the homeless' voice to be heard when elections approaches.

Indeed, later that day, no mention of the homeless was made in the State of the Nation Address for 2017. Instead, the only hint concerning "radical socio-economic transformation" was the following:

We mean fundamental change in the structure, systems, institutions and patterns of ownership, management and control of the economy in favour of all South Africans, especially the poor... Today we are starting a new chapter of radical socio-economic transformation. We are saying that we should move beyond words, to practical programmes... The State will play a role in the economy to drive that transformation...

In 2016's SoNA, the poor were also fleetingly mentioned, with no indication of creation of housing and employment opportunities. Although South Africa has reached just over twenty years into democracy, it is still largely afflicted with poverty, inequality and unemployment. According to a 2017 *Mail & Guardian* Opinion [piece](#) by Thabang Motsosi (2017), the 'pro-poor' rhetoric of the leading political party has failed to translate into meaningful economic policy. Although job creation was one of five priority areas President Jacob Zuma decided to focus on at the beginning of his administration, the party has dismally failed at achieving the goal.

In his 2010 SoNA, the president also promised to alleviate poverty and reduce the inequality gap. At the time, 20% of South Africans lived below the poverty line, whilst today, the figure has increased to 21.5% (Pityana, 2017). Since then, inequality has also increased, with South Africa ranked as one of the top four most unequal countries in the world (Green, 2017; Musyoka, 2016).

My creative project's aim was to document the stories of ten street-based people of the city, exploring and addressing the challenges of the larger social and systemic issues they face on a regular basis. In addition, the project also focused on the significance of jobs in dignifying street-based people, as well as the importance of businesses coming on board to support local non-profit organisations, such as [Khulisa's Streetscapes project](#) that creates work opportunities for those that are chronically homeless. The project is described as a "'hand-up', not a handout". *The Streetscapes Project*, the title of my MA project, aims to be accessible to the public, and I therefore designed a website and had its content published on the 15th of March 2017. The website URL is www.thestreetscapesproject.org.

Working with Khulisa and with Streetscapes' employees – My experience

Homelessness: on discovering the complexities behind the term

Homelessness is often associated solely with sleeping on the streets, but this conceals the range and scale of the problem. A very narrow definition confining homelessness to people 'sleeping rough' conveys a much distorted view of the extent of homelessness. Instead, it must be recognised that homelessness can take various forms. The reality is that a large proportion of homeless people are families or single people who are not 'sleeping rough'. Instead, some may be staying with relatives and friends on a temporary basis, whilst others live in temporary accommodation, such as night shelters.

Generally, the government has favoured a restrictive definition that accepts as homeless only those who are literally homeless – meaning those that have no place to sleep, and often rely on shelters, but advocates have called for a broader definition that includes people living in abandoned housing, or with people, which becomes temporary shelter, also known as 'sofa surfing'. How widely one casts the 'homeless net' has a tremendous impact on the numbers and characteristics of the people included in the definition of homelessness.

For its study, the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) adopted a definition of homelessness that emphasises living 'on the street'. Their interviews and surveys addressed adults and children who live on the streets full-time, in true homelessness or 'rooflessness' – the condition of routinely sleeping on the streets without regular access to shelter. The HSRC's results indicate there may be approximately 100 000 to 200 000 truly homeless people living on the streets in South Africa's urban and rural districts together, including both adults and children, and a study released in 2016 revealed that just over 7 000 people live on the streets in Cape Town.

In light of this, and for the purpose of this project, the term 'street-based people' was used to refer to those living on the streets of the city. Although the ten interviewees are not all currently living on the streets, they each slept on the streets of the city at some point in their lives, and this information was made clear on the website. For most news publications, the 'homeless' is an overused term and is often equated for the often-'invisible' people on the streets. However, this is a term street-based people often find misleading, if not offensive, which was evident with the interviewees, who, when sleeping on the streets of Cape Town at certain points in their lives, did not consider themselves homeless. For example, Jolene and Matthew* chose to live on the streets despite having family members with informal housing in Manenberg. Similarly, Theresa chose to live on the streets for many years, even though her sister had a council flat. Nevertheless, the project focused on the interviewees' experience of living on the streets, and how this affected their self-esteem, daily struggles and [lack of] opportunities, in addition to exploring other issues.

Spending time at the Streetscapes garden prior to carrying out the interviews

I was advised to spend some time at the Streetscapes garden opposite Food Lover's Market, so as to get to know the street-based individuals and possible participants that would be the subjects of my project. Hence, I spent a few hours on multiple days getting to know them, their histories, witnessing their daily tasks and life skills activities such as yoga that were offered at the Service Dining Rooms at one point in 2015. When I approached them about being involved with the project, they happily agreed. However, as a few months passed by, some of them left the rehabilitation and reintegration programme at the garden, and so, I was left to find 'new' individuals. Whilst eight of the ten participants have been working at the garden for the past few months, Gideon Harris is the only

participant that was a part of the previous group. However, after spending the most time with him, I was still eager to have him be a part of the project. I also approached Magadien Wentzel, former gang leader of the 28s, and subject of Jonny Steinberg's award-winning book *The Number*, since I believed he could offer a unique angle to the project, telling his story of exiting the gang, sleeping on the streets of the city, and finally leading a reformed life of motivating and aiding the vulnerable such as the youth in gang-ridden areas and those living on the streets of the city.

Justification of subject for a creative project, the process of completing it and some findings

Essentially, the goal of the project was a written and photographic documentation of street-based people that would be published in a platform that is easily accessible to the wider public; hence, a web developer was employed to design a website about two months before the deadline. When in the process of research of homelessness in a global context, a large number of literature was discovered. However, it was noted that majority of literature encountered of an academic nature was based on international studies, and was especially in the fields of psychology, health and social sciences. Local literature on street-based people, specifically within Cape Town is scarce, where majority of the narratives of those on the streets of the city are published by news publications.

The *Cape Argus' The Dignity Project*, a 15-part daily series of homeless people that documented their daily survival struggles, and aims to debunk stereotypes about homeless people (www.iol.co.za/capeargus/the-dignity-project), was the only lengthy series found whereas multiple credible articles featuring street-based people were published by the *Daily Maverick*, *Mail & Guardian* and *GroundUp*. However, although these articles discuss some of the issues of the challenges of street-based people, the articles are either outdated or do not reveal the issues in great detail which is what this project aimed to uncover, for instance, the encouraging difference that a [business' support](#) can make to programmes such as the Streetscapes urban garden project. It was also noted that although *The Dignity Project* explored the various and important challenges of street-based people, it did not feature opinions from expert or official sources. Hence, this creative project took objectivity into account and sought the opinion of officials in different fields, including law enforcement, the Central City Improvement District (CCID) and social workers, among others. Khulisa (specifically Jesse Laitinen) was very helpful in linking me to the abovementioned sources, to which am I incredibly grateful.

The structure of the project was widely influenced by Brandon Stanton's *Humans of New York*, a photography project that began in 2010. Stanton's project, commonly referred to as HONY, started as a street photography portfolio and has since grown into an international humanitarian project. Stanton has faced some criticism of his work over the years though: he has received flak for documenting nothing more than his own perspective by reducing his subjects to "whatever decontextualized sentence or three he chooses to use along with their photo," (D'Addario, 2014). In trying to avoid similar criticism that Stanton has received, *The Streetscapes Project* did not simply include portraits of the ten interviewees with short quotes. Instead, the series of portraits included their biographies and explored the larger issues, i.e. structural challenges they come across on a regular basis. Considering the 'hyper-digital culture' of internet readers who are easily distracted and do not want to read lengthy chunks of information, the biographies were edited to avoid readers from leaving the site without a completion of reading, although it still attempted to relay detailed, relevant and informative material. Each story was limited to around 2 000 words.

It is therefore this discourse and format of journalistic storytelling that will allow the subject of street-based people to stand out from others from different fields, such as social sciences, making it easily accessible to readers. Although, as aforementioned, there are several journalistic representations of people living on the streets in South Africa, this project identifies a gap in storytelling combined with research on the strategic barriers related to their daily lived experiences. This project also attempts to increase awareness and sensitivity around the subject in an effort to combat stereotypes. In so doing, it hopes to: Avoid stereotyping street-based people by grouping them into one category of 'homeless people' – this was included under a tab that explains the problematic meaning around the term homelessness; illuminate the structural challenges facing street-based people, and include the viewpoints from officials mentioned in their stories, such as law enforcement, the Central City Improvement District (CCID), etc. and also explores why businesses have decided to support Khulisa's Streetscapes project, the effect it has had on the project, etc.

The purpose of this project is not to garner sympathy for those living on the streets, but rather creates a basic understanding surrounding several barriers that prevent them from uplifting themselves. These include, but are not limited to, these findings:

- Since, under the by-law of the City, begging and sleeping on the streets is illegal, street-based people risk being arrested, fined (although this was [denied](#) by law enforcement), or "picked up" and taken to the nearest police station, only to return to the streets to find their belongings stolen. This makes it exceptionally difficult for them to rebuild their lives from scratch, since important items such as their Identity Documents are often stolen and they do not have the fee to reapply for a new one. This, in turn, prevents them from seeking and obtaining jobs as most formal jobs require them to have an ID.
- Shelter services were also described as a service that the participants prefer not to make use of, for various reasons, including theft, too many rules, a lack of privacy, etc. As a result, their only option is to remain living on the streets, consequently leading to the problems in the point above.
- Although the Streetscapes Project offers a means of income for street-based people, the salary is oftentimes not enough to allow the individual to move off the streets. Rental costs, shelter fees, and other basic expenses are impossible to cover with their salary. Nevertheless, each participant of this project expressed gratitude to Khulisa for providing them with a job that allows them to live their lives with dignity and to afford their basic necessities like food, toiletries, etc. while living on the streets.
- Breaking the cycle of substance and alcohol abuse while living on the streets is extremely challenging, as explained by Mehnaaz Essop (Khulisa's social worker) in [Achmat's](#) story.
- Quite a few of the participants, such as [Theresa](#), have applied for a Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP) house many years ago, but have lost hope of their application ever being successful.

This project gathered research and was subsequently divided into three segments during the process of completion. The first segment being interviewing, photographing and documenting the stories of street-based people, the second compiling two features pieces on the benefits of gardening, especially for vulnerable people, as well as an article on the importance of businesses and society's role in helping the marginalized group. Finally, the third segment constituted interviewing formal and informal sources from the various fields explored in the project, including law enforcement, the CCID, social workers and shelter services, so as to provide a perspective on the issues that is in the form of a discourse easily understood by the ordinary citizen.

The website and concluding thoughts

Once the website was complete and all material (text and photos) were uploaded, and prior to it being published, I asked three friends and family members to browse through the site, read the material and offer any suggestions and advice on information that seemed unclear in any way. The initial design and layout of the website was changed a bit. This was because the final layout seemed more visually pleasing, as the featured photos of the ten participants were fuller and therefore more visible to viewers. The order of appearance of participants' stories on the homepage was randomly placed.

The aim of the design of the website was to keep it as simple as possible so that it is easy for users to navigate their way through each participant's story. Hence, I requested the landing page to feature the ten photos of all participants since it forms the main component of the project, with the tabs displayed above to enlighten readers on issues relating to the stories. The web developer also included footnoted information in the form of a box on the right side of some participants' stories at my request. This information was provided so that it could take readers to different sites to read more about the particular issue mentioned in the participant's story, for example, Jolene's story briefly mentions her time in Pollsmoor Prison, and a footnote in the information box leads readers to a *Mail & Guardian* article on the state of Pollsmoor's female prison. Having the website designed was a process of going back and forth with the web developer, though it was exciting to see the final product.

On the whole, carrying out this project has been completely meaningful, and, I believe, worthwhile. It is a project I thoroughly enjoyed and in the end changed my own perspective about the challenges of street-based people in the city, and I hope that the publishing of the website will educate the larger public as well. Once my results are released –which is possibly sometime in June 2017 – I will share the website via my social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter and Instagram), and will request that the Streetscapes Facebook page, managed by Khulisa, also posts the link to the website on their page, in the hope that the greater public can be enlightened on the subject. I also hope to have each participant's portraits (along with a quote from their stories) printed in an A3/A2 format, which can then be used to hold an exhibition sometime in 2017 (as suggested by Jesse).

That being said, this project also notes that it is limited in its findings, and that the issues explored in it are certainly not generalisable to all street-based people in the city or country. This was proven in that each participant had a unique angle to their story, such as the difficulty of overcoming drug or substance abuse, the pain of losing a loved one, the foster care system in South Africa, the pressure and strain of accepting contract-jobs, etc. as it relates to people living on the streets. A small sample of ten participants that are either living or have lived on the streets of Cape Town is not large enough to conclude definitive findings, however, this project is an attempt at providing the less fortunate of the city with a platform with the aim of enlightening the general South African public on their fellow citizens' difficulties experienced on the streets, and how they can help them live with and maintain their dignity by doing something as simple as providing them with a meaningful job.

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