

DPD 801 REPORT

Reimagining the Fence Condition: An 'Interwoven Coexistence' Approach to Urban Informal Trading Spaces at the South African State Theatre

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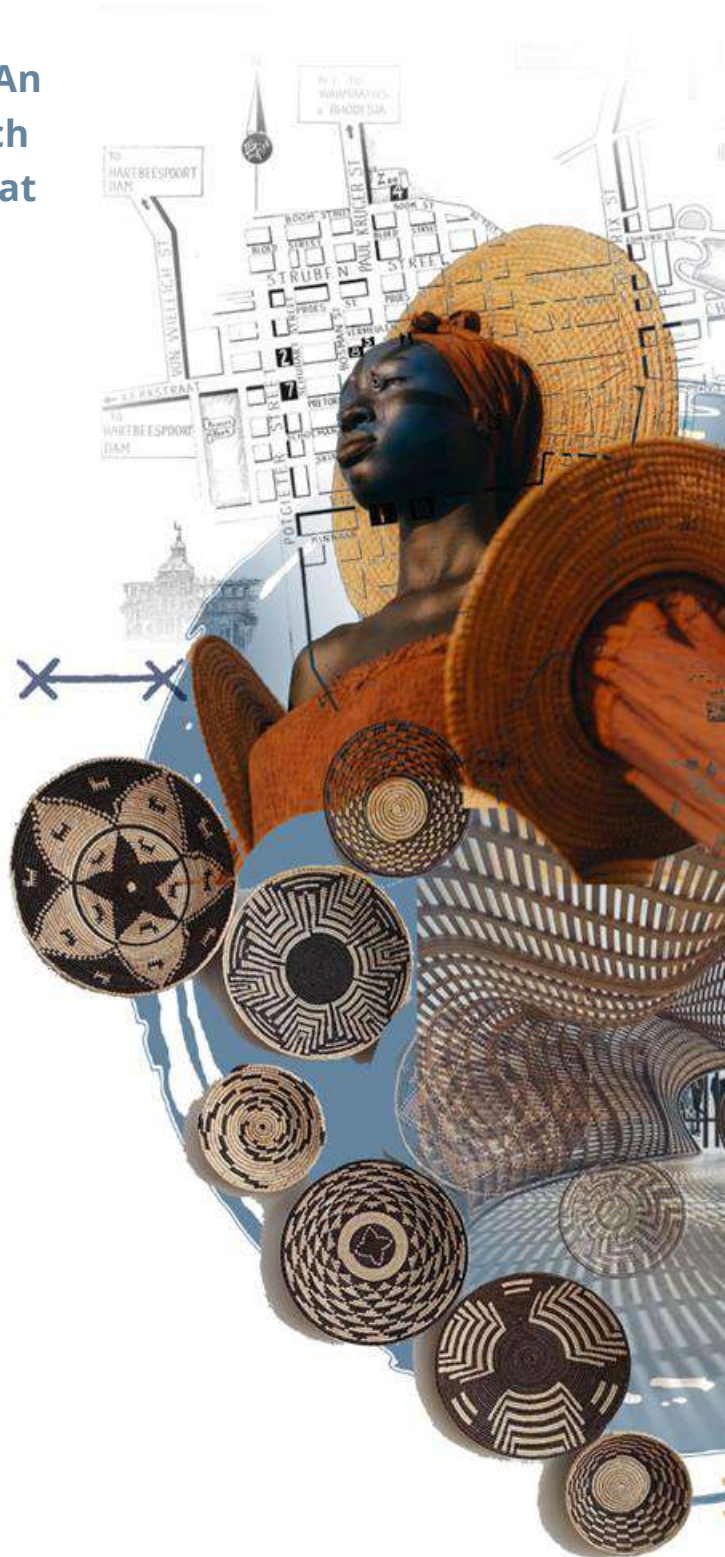


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1. Abstract

This report explores the reimagination of the fence condition surrounding The South African State Theatre, emphasizing a symbiotic relationship between formal and informal structures, revitalizing underused public areas, and nurturing a vibrant urban culture. The design not only enhances spatial access, activation, and safety but also introduces a new architectural language celebrating everyday life as a performance.

At its core, this design intervention draws inspiration from Pretoria's Central Business District's informal trading scenarios, viewed through the lenses of urban interiority and public interiors. It's a heartfelt exploration focused on transforming the fence condition into an inhabitable space fostering synergy between formal and informal elements, reactivating the public square/plaza, and ensuring safety.

The proposed design is a celebration of the everyday. It aims to authentically reflect the daily practices and rituals of informal traders, revealing the intricate spatial dynamics and social exchanges that define their spaces. The rich tapestry of sounds, sights, and scents in the urban landscape creates a multi-sensory experience, profoundly shaping people's perceptions of the city.

This exploration delves into the temporal and spatial dimensions of informal trading, providing insights to create public interiors that are inclusive and adaptable, celebrating the cultural diversity that characterizes the urban environment. Additionally, it underscores the importance of place identity, fostering a sense of belonging and authenticity at the human scale.

2. Critical reflection 1 – Impact of mini-project

The idea of a city as an evolving organism resonates strongly with Richard Sennett's (2016) extensive work on urbanity. The exhibition piece "City Perceptions | Existentialism in the City," portrays the city as a canvas of ever-shifting memories, cultures, and identities, a space that is as malleable in its physical structure as it is in its existential meaning for its inhabitants. This mirrors the city not as a fixed entity but as an ever-evolving social fabric shaped by its inhabitants. The organic portrayal of Pretoria CBD from a centre of nationalism and apartheid to a beacon of modern-day democracy resonates with Sennett's (2016) views on the transformative nature of urban landscapes.

The concept of 'subjective interiority' (Sennett, 2016) is an invitation to a deep introspective journey which is not merely about viewing the city as an external entity but an intricate part of one's own psyche. Through this lens, one is encouraged to both view and be viewed, to be both the observer and the observed. The emphasis on this theory suggests that the individual's internal experiences play a profound role in shaping the urban landscape. This is not just about physical structures but also the emotional, psychological, and socio-political edifices that constitute a city.

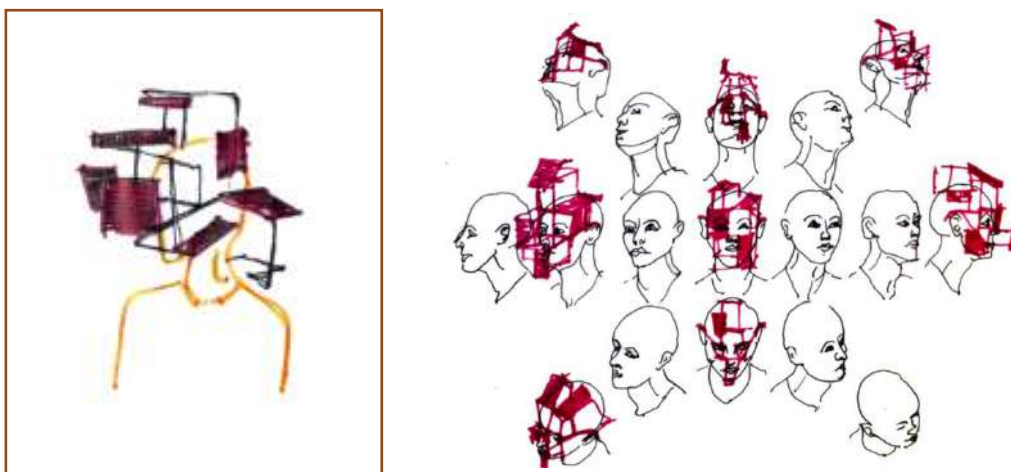


Figure 1: Ideation sketches exploring subjective interiority as form.

However, the challenge remains: how does one take these profound introspections and theories and weave them into the tangible fabric of a city, especially in an informal context such as the trading scenarios of Pretoria? The 'subjective interiority' offers a directive tool in this regard. By focusing on the internal experiences and reflections of traders and consumers, one could design spaces that resonate with their shared memories, aspirations, and identities. The design then becomes not just about physical

shelter or economic activity but about creating a space of meaning, a space that honours the diverse histories, stories, and dreams of its users.

Furthermore, the emphasis on "Layering of Cultural Landscapes, Identity, and Memory" takes the discourse beyond the present, into the realms of the past and the future. The informal trading spaces, in this light, can be viewed not just as economic hubs, but as living museums of exhibition and incubators. They are spaces where cultural histories are shared and preserved, where new identities are forged, and where dreams of a collective future are nurtured.

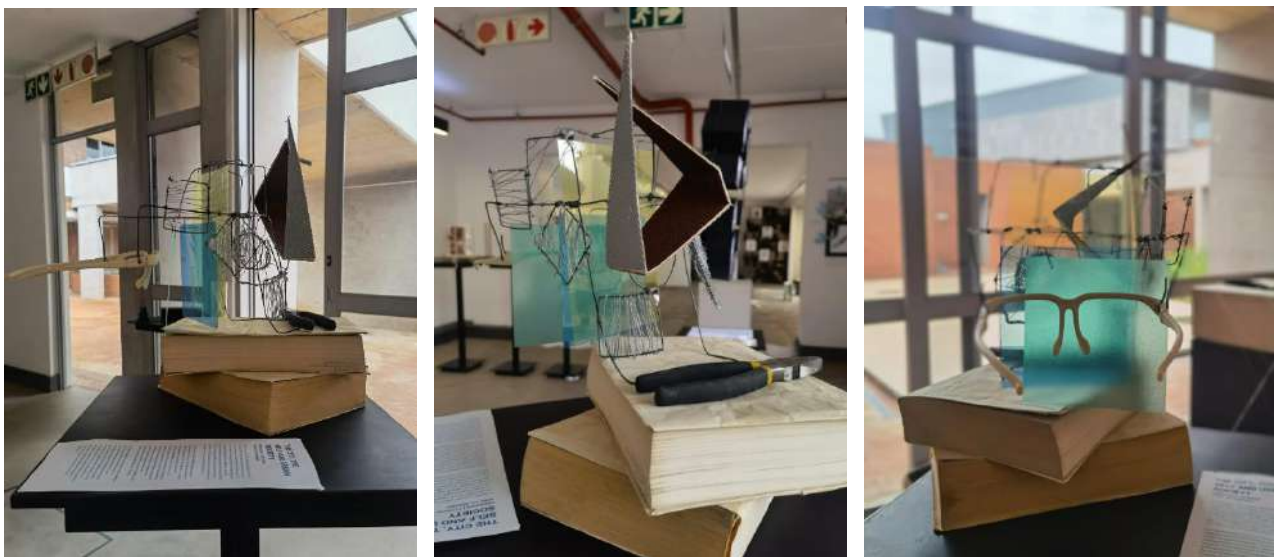


Figure 2: Explorative headpiece on display at the Boukunde Master's exhibition 2023.

3. Project Description

3.1 Project area and context

The design project locates itself at the South African State Theatre, an iconic symbol of the performing arts in Pretoria CBD, which has always captivated its audience. However, its surroundings tell a complex tale of the interplay between formal and informal elements. The urban canvas here is marked by challenges, with fences and gates alienating the once-vibrant public plaza. Informal traders, an integral part of African cities, deserve better than spaces lacking dignity and equity. This analysis explores the theatre's surroundings and their intricate relationship with three distinct informal trading scenarios namely (i) in front of shopfront, (ii) pedestrianized street and (iii) street corner.

SITE + CONTEXT

The South African State Theatre, Pretoria CBD

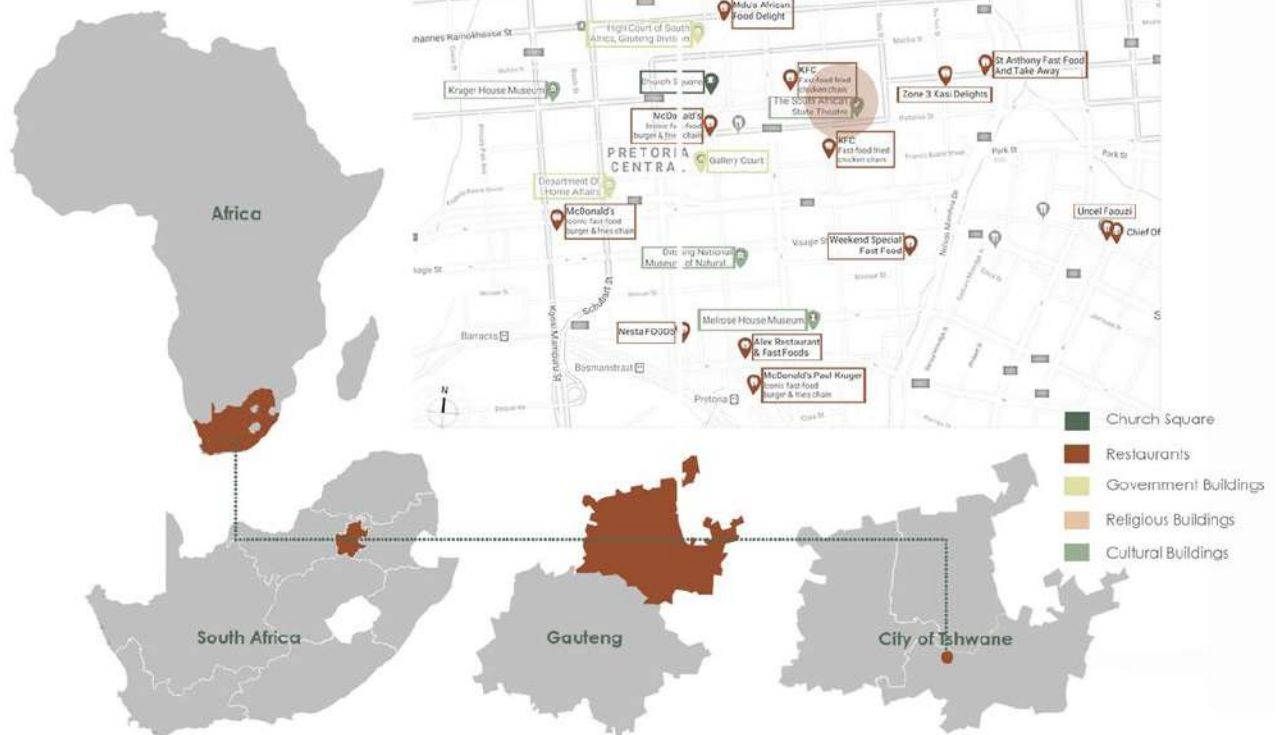


Figure 3: Map showing site and context of the project.

3.2 Urban Vision

The proposed design intervention inserts itself on the line of delineation where metal welded meshed fences stand, creating a boundary that currently deteriorates access to communal gathering public space. This selection is deliberate, given the prevalence of informal trading activities, and the extensive use of gates and fencing. It serves as a microcosm of broader urban dynamics in Pretoria.

The urban vision for the State Theatre precinct unfolds in three distinctive phases, each weaving an integral part of the urban fabric to revitalize the urban experience. While the entire vision is significant, emphasis is that the intervention focuses on fully investigating *Phase 1: Reimagining the Fence Condition* as the foundation for the design component of this project. The phases are as follows:

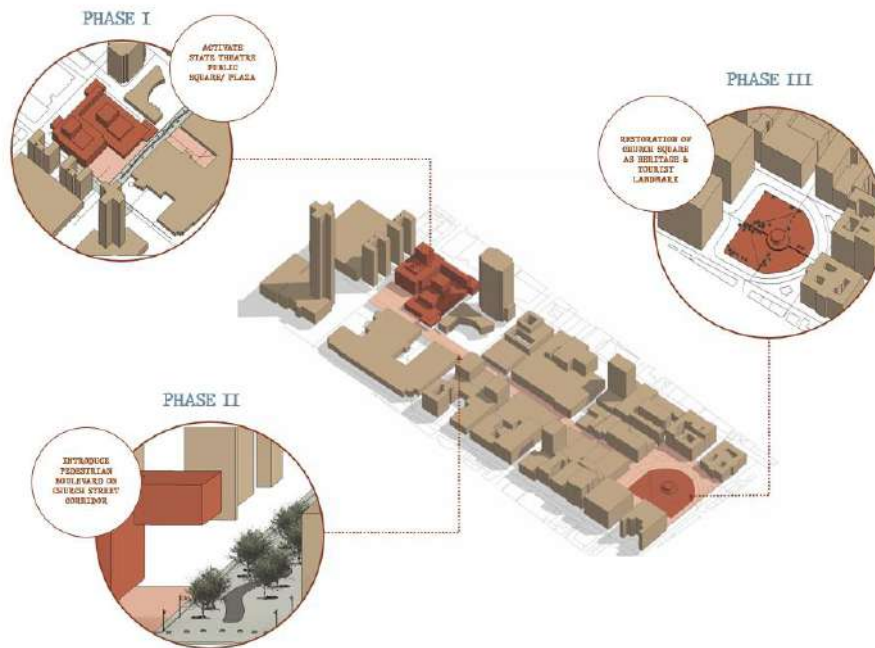


Figure 4: Map showing site and context of the project.

3.2.1 Phase 1: Reimagining the Fence Condition

This phase aims to break down the barriers that have isolated the State Theatre from the vibrant informal trade adjacent to it. These barriers were initially erected for safety but have, over time, led to the detachment of the public plaza. Like a skilled weaver, the project intends to remove these threads of division to reintegrate the State Theatre into the urban fabric. This phase symbolizes a return to inclusivity, accessibility, and interconnectedness, reminiscent of the historical transformation of public spaces from

bustling trading hubs to culturally significant gathering areas.

The design embarks on a journey that deeply respects and embraces African Indigenous Knowledge Systems dedicated to understanding the value of the art of creation, craftsmanship, and the vital connection to nature, emphasizing traditional techniques and locally sourced materials that connect deeply with the land. It is here that ways of making and meaning of these become important.

3.2.2 Phase 2: Fully Pedestrianizing Church Street

Phase two fully restricts vehicular access and parking, transforming the street into a pedestrian boulevard that allows city dwellers and visitors to move freely and comfortably through a multifunctional and lively urban space. Still interweaving formal and informal elements, the street will feature seating areas, greenery, and playful design elements that will be incorporated, making Church Street an inviting and inclusive space where people from all walks of life can come together.

3.2.3 Phase 3: Restoration and Maintenance of Church Square

The third phase is dedicated to restoring and maintaining the cultural value of Church Square. This historic space, once known as Market Square, has lost some of its heritage significance over the years. This phase aims to return Church Square to its former glory. It becomes not only a tourist attraction but also a dynamic space that reflects and honours the lively spirit of the city's history, cultural heritage, and contemporary urban life.

3.3 Theoretical framework

In the domain of interior architecture within urban settings, it is paramount to possess a profound understanding of the intricate dynamics that define the spaces users engage with. This theoretical groundwork endeavours to decode these intricacies, serving as the bedrock for the design proposal aimed at addressing the reimagination of the fence condition into an inhabitable typology that celebrates informal trading dynamics in an urban setting.

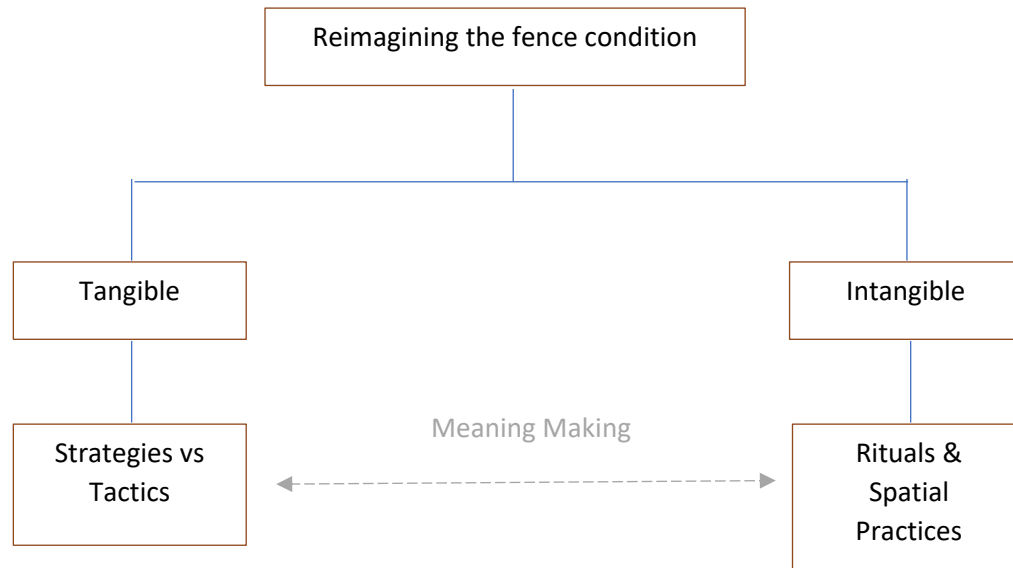


Figure 5: Diagram of theoretical framework

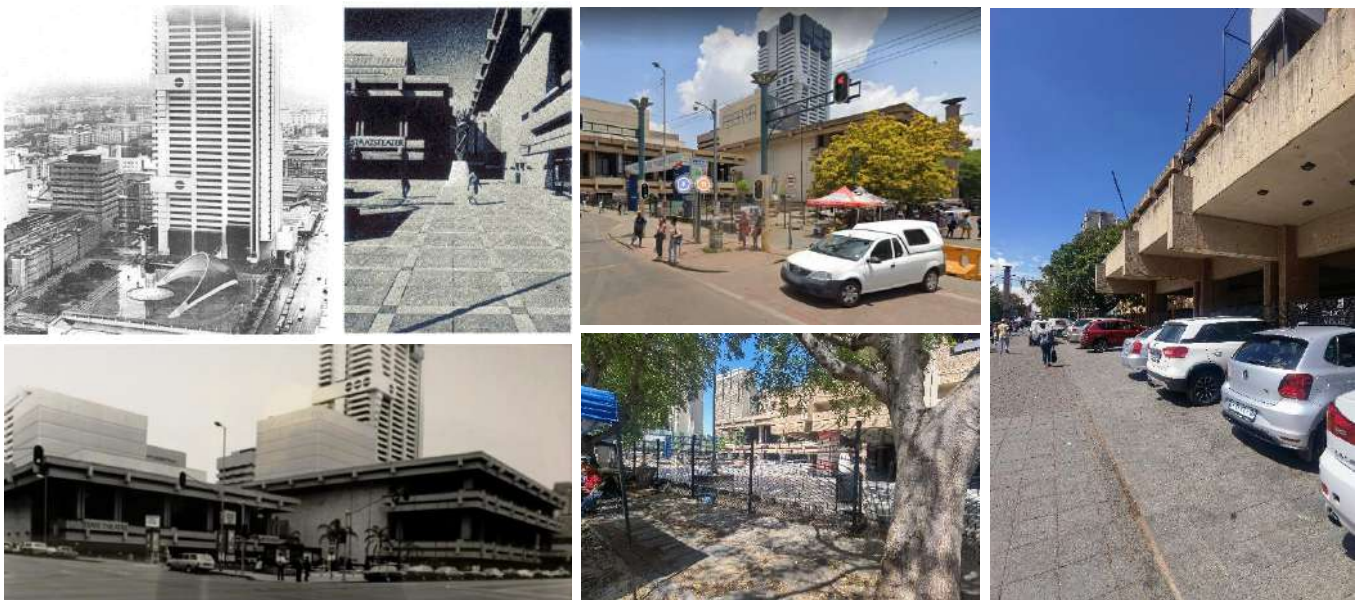


Figure 6: Collage of old pictures of the State theatre block's physical environment and infrastructure (Architecture SA, 1989) that was open to the public in (black and white), and the current condition of this block

3.3.1 Strategies vs Tactics

This project vision draws upon the profound insights of de Certeau's (1984), who introduced the concept of 'tactics.' These 'tactics' reflect the creative, subversive practices and resilience of informal traders, who ingeniously navigate their spaces within the broader 'strategies' (systematic plans executed by dominant powers) of formal urban planning (de Certeau, 1998:19).

The design intervention and installations deliberately integrate these 'tactics' as essential traces of inhabitation and urban rituals of trading to boldly emphasize

accessibility and security, creating a synthesis that mirrors nature's harmony. It also seeks to foster the interconnected social networks and relationships within urban contexts, asserting that tactics are not solely individual but are shaped by socio-political and cultural dynamics (Farias and Bender, 2012: 6-12).

The emergence of informal trading in African cities serves as a significant framework for our study. Informal trading, existing outside established regulatory frameworks, plays a vital role in providing goods and services to urban residents, especially those in impoverished areas (Watson, 2013: 5-6). It is crucial to recognize its significance and its intricate relationship with formal urban planning and architecture.

3.3.2 Rituals and spatial practices

The pulse of the intervention lies in the rituals and routines woven into the fabric of the three distinct informal trading scenarios. These rituals, deeply ingrained in the daily lives of traders and visitors, are not just mundane routines but profound elements that define the very essence of these spaces.

Just as rituals are integral to how individuals live and interact with their built environments, the rituals within these trading scenarios hold a special significance. From the way a trader sets up their stall each morning to the familiar greetings exchanged between long-time patrons (de Certeau, 1998:91), these rituals create a rhythm, a sense of continuity in these dynamic urban spaces. They are the undercurrent, the silent language that orchestrates the choreography of daily life within these trading hubs.

These rituals are design drivers for the intervention and go beyond the act of buying and selling; they encompass the act of dwelling, of moving through these spaces, and the negotiations that occur daily (Ligger & Perry, 2005:1-18). The rhythm of these scenarios is composed of countless such rituals. It is in the way traders and visitors alike move, talk, negotiate, and connect with these spaces. Each action contributes to the production and transformation of these urban interiors.

And, much like the mundane everyday routines in any interior space within a contained building, these rituals serve to create a sense of familiarity and comfort within these spaces. The informal trading scenarios are not just about economic transactions; they are about relationships, community, and a sense of belonging (Jones & Meagher, 2006:19-20). The significance of these rituals lies in their ability to shape individuals' perceptions and establish meaningful connections with the spaces they inhabit (Till, 2017: 142-151).

The design proposal makes consideration of the physical aspects of these spaces whilst honouring and enhance these rituals. The design is not an imposition but a stage where these daily trading operational rituals can continue to unfold. We understand that any transformation must align with and enrich these daily routines, fostering a sense of continuity and belonging. The design aims to ensure that these rituals, which create a sense of place and identity, are not only preserved but celebrated within these urban interiors. This is expressed through the following spatial zoning and programming:

Fresh Produce Market Hall - A Lively Pulse

The heart of the design, the Fresh Produce Market Hall, embodies the vibrant rhythm of a pedestrian street. Here, life pulsates within the intervention, echoing the lively energy of daily urban existence. This bustling space captures the essence of informal trading scenario 02 (pedestrianized street), where fresh goods change hands and stories are exchanged. It's a place where the city's heartbeat is most pronounced.

Local Craft Market & Gathering space - A Cultural Kaleidoscope

The local craft market & gathering space forms an intricate part of informal trading scenario 01 – In front of shopfront. These stalls seamlessly blend informal trade that is made up of makeshift and portable display arrangement with the site's profound cultural significance. It provides a welcoming and inviting space for large gathering, where visitors can immerse themselves communal engagements and conversation. It is a place where craftsmanship and heritage meld, offering an authentic experience.

The Cultural Hub - Storytelling, Reflection, and Performance

The Cultural Hub is the beating heart of informal trading scenario 03. Within its embrace lie Reflective Spaces, Exhibition Areas, a Training Hub, and the Open-Air Theatre. This multifaceted space becomes a centre for indigenous storytelling, celebrating the city's everyday life as a theatrical performance.



Longitudinal Section – East to West



Cross Section – North to South



Fresh Produce Market



Local Craft Market & Gathering space

Figure 7: Spatial captures of proposed design intervention

4. Summary of integrated design and technical investigation

The reimagining this inhabitable fence condition, the proposed design intervention emerges as a response to several pressing site issues and concerns present on the site, namely public square inaccessibility, the erosion of urban culture, and safety concerns.

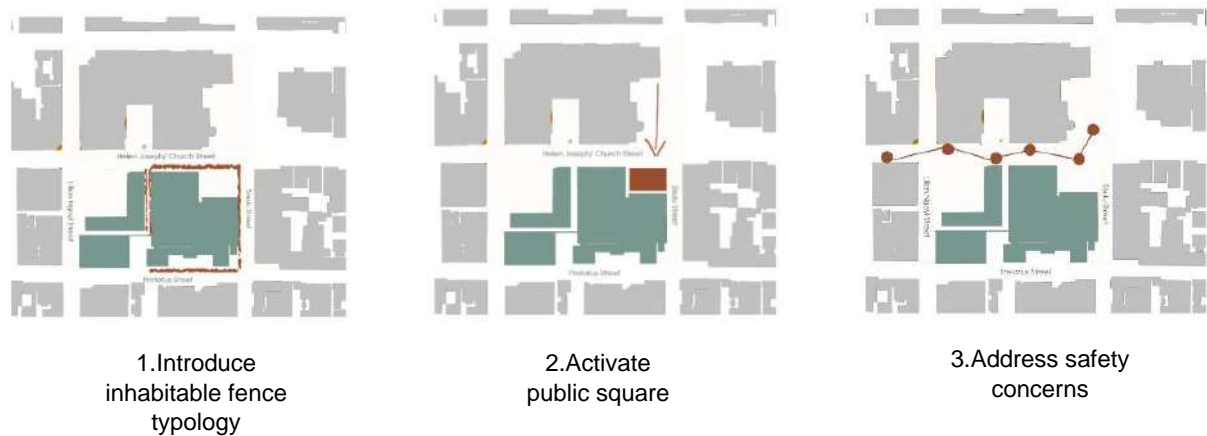


Figure 8: A series of illustrations showing the project intention.

Public Square Inaccessibility

The existing fence barriers that hinder public square accessibility are dismantled. This architectural decision is paramount in opening up the space, allowing a seamless flow between the public square and the surrounding urban environment. No longer segregated by these barriers, the square becomes a natural extension of the city, inviting everyone to explore its offerings.

The interventions design language is one of natural and organic forms that juxtapose the existing brutalist features of the theatre. Where curved and undulated walls meet and/or wrap, various points access are introduced along the 68m length of the building allowing for the intermittent points of permeability into the intervention and public square.



To enhance the spatial narrative and experience along this wall local cultural references are expressed in the brick bonds. These alternate from runner bond (solid), to clay brick inlays (intentional patterns for meaning making of abstracted geometric Ndebele motifs) and finally to perforated brick bonds that filter and allow for poetics of light into the interior spaces created. This animation of the façade seeks to act as a wayfinding device that assists in directing users along the building edge, from the street edge into the intervention.

Figure 9: Design intention collage for 'brick skin as threshold' technical investigation

The Erosion of Urban Culture

To combat the erosion of urban culture, apart from trading operations the design introduces spaces of gathering, multi-cultural hub (exhibition space, open-air theatre and training hub) along its spine. Inspired by traditional African communal settings, serving as a symbolic space for communal interaction. It's a place where the diverse cultural fabric where city dwellers can come together over a shared activity, fostering a sense of place identity and sense of community through means of rotational workshops such as woodworking classes the one weekend and traditional basket making the next.

The large glulam waffle structure canopies not only respond to the large-scale, monumentality on the site's block and provide passive design, but also become a visual storytelling feature carrying cultural significance and assisting in the cultural production and meaning making of the space. The prefabricated nature

and construction technique aim to allow for efficiency of assemble and disassembly on site.



The design of these canopies is multi-functional in nature on all planes with acoustic properties, transitioning from the overhead providing lighting to serving as vertical display shelving, morphing into trading display table; and in other areas seating. This seamless transition of planes has a practical role while contributing to the interventions overall visual appeal and atmosphere, harmonizing aesthetics and utility. This design approach makes reference to the process of traditional weaving of natural fibres that are used to create grass mats and baskets; and denote the interaction and exchange of oral traditions that takes place during these skilled activities where knowledge is

usually passed down through generations.

Figure 10: Design intention collage for 'Ways of gathering' canopies' technical investigation

Safety Concerns

Safety concerns are addressed through the emphasis on monumentality in the building intervention. The project introduces boundary brickwork walls that bring a tangible sense of solidity and durability. These structures contribute to a feeling of safety and permanence.

The space dynamically transforms from day to night. During the day, it's inviting and open, but as the sun sets, the design allows for the gradual closing off of the space. The intervention opens up during the day to emphasize the sense of permeability (relying on high traffic and passive surveillance) and closes off access at night to control accessibility of the public.

The undulating intervention creates spatial zones and niches, enhancing passive surveillance. These spaces provide clear sightlines, reducing slightly wrapped spaces and fostering a sense of security. Visitors can move through the space with confidence, knowing that they are well-visible to others.

The large canopies not only provide shade but also act as beacons of light. They illuminate the square at night, creating a welcoming and safe environment. The play of light and shadow adds to the aesthetic appeal while ensuring visibility.

5. Documentation of iterative design process

Design Iteration 1: Exploring Stereotomic nature and permanence of intervention as inhabitable fence typology

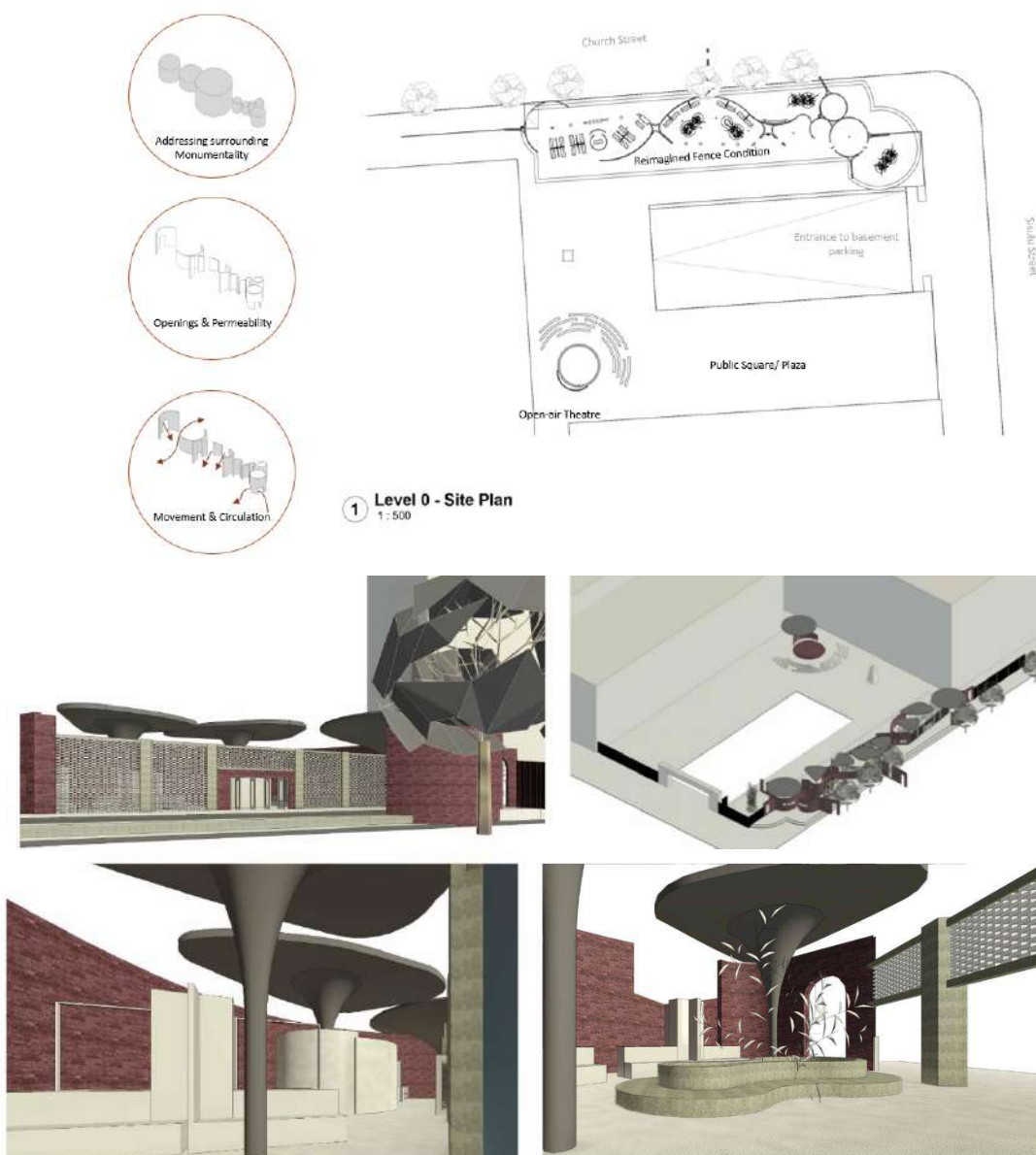


Figure 11 : Design iteration 01.

Design Iteration 2: Animation of boundary and focus on rituals and routines extending from functional large canopies as tectonic elements

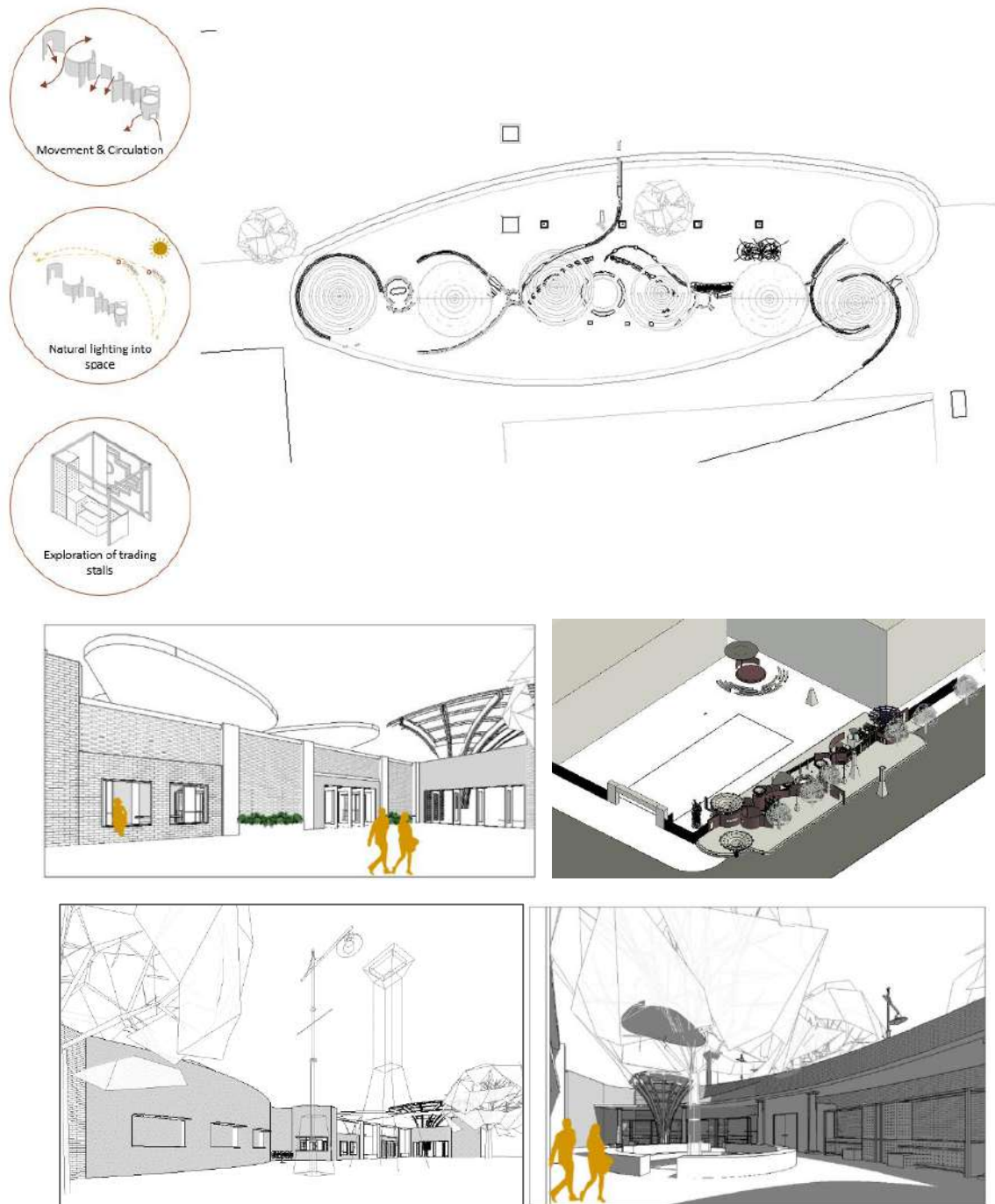


Figure 12: Design Iteration 02.

6. Critical reflection 2 – Major project outcome

Navigating the intricate web of Pretoria's urban fabric, the proposed design intervention for the three informal trading scenarios holds the potential to be embedded within the heartbeats of its citizens, echoing their aspirations, memories, and challenges.

Pretoria, like many global urban landscapes, presents a balancing act between its formal, established sectors and the bustling, vibrant informal ones. The intervention does not lean towards favouring one over the other but aims to harmoniously interweave them. This approach recognizes the pressing need for designs that do not marginalize but include and appreciate the vibrancy of informal sectors.

The reimagining of fences, traditionally seen as tools of division and exclusion, into avenues of connection is noteworthy. In this vision, fences do not stand as barriers but as connectors, welcoming the city's inhabitants to share in its narrative. This shift in perception promises a future where urban spaces, whether formal or informal, coexist without hierarchy or discrimination.

Additionally, the emphasis on the 'celebration of the everyday' holds significance. Elevating daily activities into performances underlines the importance of every individual in the city's grand tapestry. This is not merely a space for commerce; it's a living theatre, where every trader, buyer, or passer-by plays a role.

However, potential challenges cannot be overlooked. The vision, while robust, will find its test in execution. Addressing deeply-rooted socio-political disparities and ensuring the safety of inhabitants without resorting to exclusivity remains crucial. The emphasis on organic growth and flexibility is noted, but striking a balance between organized spontaneity and potential chaos presents challenges.

The proposed intervention for Pretoria's informal trading scenarios ventures beyond architectural boundaries. It champions inclusivity, highlights the importance of everyday life in the city's evolution, and presents a hope-filled vision for a more harmonious urban future.

7. Conclusion

The design intervention surrounding The South African State Theatre represents an reimagination of the fence condition, aiming for a harmonious interplay between formal and informal structures. Rooted in the daily rituals and spatial practices of Pretoria's informal trading scenarios, the intervention is a celebration of the everyday, seeking to reflect the vibrant pulse of urban life.

Central to this endeavour is the acknowledgement of 'tactics' de Certeau's (1984) framework, recognizing the ingenuity and resilience of informal traders in navigating urban spaces. This understanding forms the basis for strategies that enhance accessibility, security, and cultural richness.

The design unfolds as a narrative woven with cultural threads, where the dismantling of existing barriers transforms the public square into a seamless extension of the city. The undulating walls, influenced by natural and organic forms, not only serve as access points but also express local cultural references through various brick bonds, creating a visually engaging and culturally resonant experience.

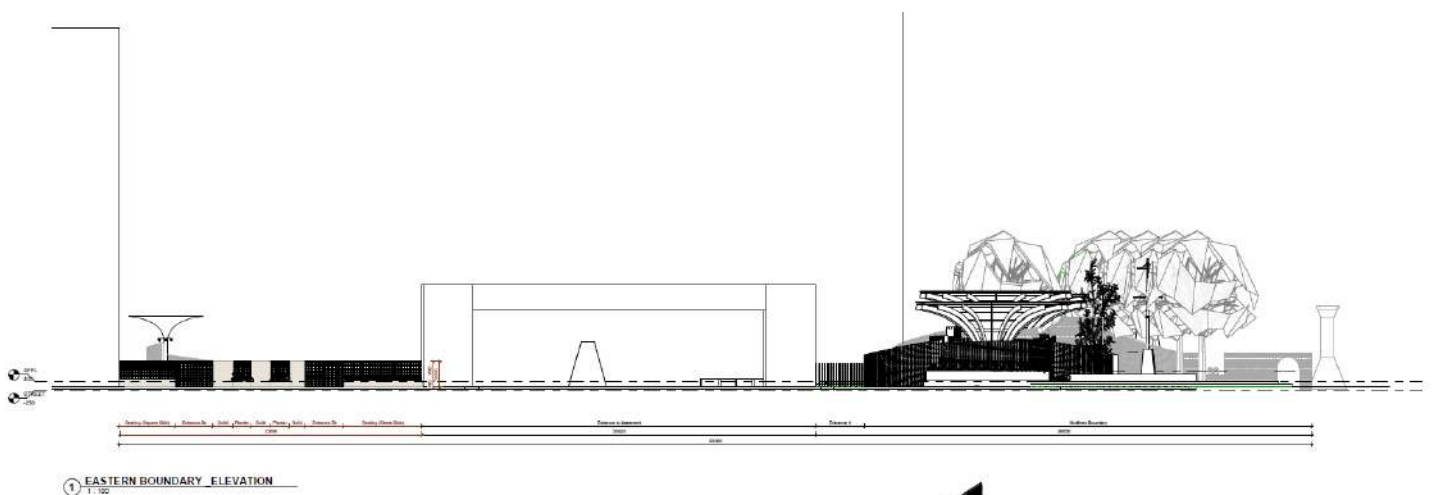


Figure 13: Eastern Boundary Elevation showing Reimagined fence conditions that surround the South African State Theatre Public Square.

Against the erosion of urban culture, the intervention introduces spaces of gathering and a multicultural hub, fostering a sense of community and place identity. The large scaled canopies, besides providing practical functions, become symbolic storytelling features, referencing traditional weaving techniques and facilitating the exchange of oral traditions.

Safety concerns are met with a design that emphasizes monumentality and adaptability. The boundary brickwork walls offer solidity, while the dynamic transformation of the space from day to night ensures controlled access. The undulating architecture

enhances passive surveillance, providing clear sightlines and a sense of security, complemented by canopies that act as beacons of light, illuminating the square and creating a safe, welcoming environment.

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