

Taming The Wilds: tactical urbanism and creative placemaking in the revitalisation of a nature reserve in Johannesburg, South Africa

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Abstract. The use of tactical urbanism and creative placemaking in the revitalisation of public space has received growing research interest. In Johannesburg, there is evidence of these approaches in the revitalisation of The Wilds, a nature reserve located near the inner-city. The Wilds experienced neglect and decline due to increased crime. By the mid-2010s, an artist championed the bottom-up revitalisation of The Wilds through routine maintenance, the introduction of public art, and events to encourage engagement with the space. This study draws on personal communication and semi-structured interviews with key informants and utilises netnography. It was found that the use of public art and social media resulted in an increase in visitor numbers and volunteers who assisted in the maintenance, restoration and engagement with the space. The use of tactical urbanism and creative placemaking, however, has brought volunteers into conflict with the city over the usage and co-management of The Wilds.

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1. Introduction

Since the 2008 financial crisis, tactical urbanism and creative placemaking have emerged as new approaches to reimagining declining urban spaces – especially in a North American context (Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Courage, 2021). These approaches have been adopted in other cities located in the Global North (Comunian & England, 2018; Richards & Duif, 2018) and to a limited extent in the Global South (Bueno & Lanng, 2019; Andres et al., 2021). It can be argued that tactical urbanism and creative placemaking form part of the broader creative city movement, which sees the use of cultural and creative industries as a lever for urban regeneration (Landry, 2012). For Mould (2014) these approaches have been incorporated into neoliberal urban policy and the widespread commodification of cultural and creative industries in urban development. In addition, there is recognition that tactical urbanism and creative placemaking can contribute to gentrification (Mould, 2014; Lew, 2017).

The use of cultural and creative industries in urban regeneration and local economic development has received growing academic recognition in South Africa (see Dirsuweit, 1999; Rogerson, 2006; Visser, 2014; Booyens & Rogerson, 2015; Gregory, 2016; Hoogendoorn & Gregory, 2016). Indeed, the use of cultural and creative industries for urban development have been given widespread policy recognition at all levels of government (Gregory & Rogerson, 2016). Private property developers have utilised cultural and creative industries to redevelop and gentrify urban neighbourhoods such as Woodstock in Cape Town and the Maboneng precinct in Johannesburg (see Booyens, 2012; Wenz, 2012; Gregory, 2016; Ah Goo, 2017; Gregory, 2019).

In recent years there is evidence of what could be identified as a form of tactical urbanism and creative placemaking in the revitalisation of The Wilds, a nature reserve located on the edge of Johannesburg's inner-city. This study explores the complexities surrounding the use of tactical urbanism and creative placemaking in the revitalisation of this public space. The study draws on several qualitative methods – notably, personal communication and semi-structured interviews with key informants involved in the bottom-up revitalisation of The Wilds. In addition, personal communication with a representative from the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation and a semi-structured interview with a representative from the Johannesburg Department of City Parks and Zoo helped inform this research. This was supplemented

with netnography, which involves the observation of posts and conversations about the nature reserve on the Friends of The Wilds Facebook page, as well as on the Rotary Club of Johannesburg's Facebook page. Lastly, an analysis of Google and TripAdvisor reviews helped to understand the broader public and tourists' perception of the space.

2. Understanding creative placemaking and tactical urbanism

The concept of placemaking in urban planning and design discourse became popular in the 1960s. It can be seen as a reaction to modernist urban planning and a feeling of placelessness (Aravot, 2002; Friedmann, 2010). The process of placemaking is highly collaborative and transdisciplinary in practice. This, however, contributes to much ambiguity regarding an accepted definition (Lew, 2017; Courage, 2021). For Arefi (2014), placemaking is complex, as it deals with how places are conceived, perceived and lived. Lew (2017) maintains placemaking involves several tangible and intangible elements; these include the physical design of the landscape or the built environment, overlaid by ethnoscapas, producing engagement with and imageability of space. Courage (2021: 2) outlines a defining feature; “placemaking is an approach and a set of tools that put the community front and centre of deciding how their place looks and how it functions”. Therefore, the geographical concept of “sense of place” becomes central to placemaking initiatives (Courage, 2017; Lew, 2017).

Over the decades there have been various approaches to placemaking, ranging from organic bottom-up or community-led initiatives to strategically planned top-down initiatives through government intervention or, in some cases, a partnership of both (Arefi, 2014; Lew, 2017). Wyckoff et al. (2015) identify four types of placemaking. Firstly, standard placemaking, which involves incremental and perhaps uncoordinated improvements to a place; this approach is organic and often stems from bottom-up initiatives. Secondly, strategic placemaking involves top-down intervention from government or city officials, which sees major new investments in projects aimed as a catalyst in redefining a neighbourhood or city. Thirdly, creative placemaking using arts and culture in creating interesting and vibrant spaces. Fourthly, tactical placemaking, such as multiple temporary and experimental projects to activate and promote engagement with urban space. Attention

in this study is given to understanding creative placemaking and tactical urbanism.

Indeed, creative placemaking is seen as a cultural policy for economic development and has its origins in the United States of America in the 2000s. Hughes (2021) maintains that, for many city officials in the United States of America, creative placemaking became a strategic tool for economic development after the financial crisis of 2008. Creative placemaking is focused on harnessing arts and culture for animating places and sparking economic development (Markusen & Gadwa, 2010).

Creative placemaking, however, is political and can result in contested social spaces. Indeed, power is distributed unevenly among actors who may hold different views on what the process should entail (Arefi, 2014). Courage (2021) calls for placemaking to work for social and environmental justice and Schupbach (2021) cautions against “privileged placemaking”. The process can contribute to gentrification and lead to the subsequent exclusion, dispossession and displacement of poor residents (Lou, 2010; Richards, 2014). Zitcer (2020) also questions the uniqueness and authenticity of creative placemaking initiatives, as many projects draw on existing international urban trends, which can lead to the homogenisation of space and cautions against the creation of a “white spatial imagery”.

In recent years, the concept of tactical urbanism has gained traction in urban discourse as a specific type of placemaking (Webb, 2018). The concept is difficult to define, and several different terms are used to describe it; these include “do-it-yourself (DIY) urbanism”, “guerrilla urbanism” or “pop-up urbanism” (Courage, 2013; Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Silva, 2016). Tactical urbanism in its broadest sense refers to “an approach to neighbourhood building and activation using short-term, low-cost, and scalable interventions and policies” (Lydon & Garcia, 2015: 2). For Finn (2014: 382), DIY urbanism comprises of “activities enacted in public space that to some degree attempt to emulate or augment formal municipal designs and infrastructure”. For Courage (2013: 88), “tactical urbanism tends to be grassroots and bottom-up, has anti-authoritarian characteristics and aims to enhance the urban lived experience through incremental strategies of improvement”. Examples of tactical urbanism include pop-up parks, colourful crosswalks, yarnbombing and the introduction of temporary public art installations (Lydon & Garcia, 2015).

This movement is often a response to frustration with outdated or slow progress in urban planning and city-building (Webb, 2018). Tactical urbanism

can be used by a range of actors, ranging from individuals and citizen groups to non-profit organisations and governments. Tactical urbanism promotes engaged citizenry, is characterised by small-scale interventions and is action-oriented (Courage, 2013). Some of the strategies of tactical urbanism can be sanctioned or unsanctioned. For some, tactical urbanism links to the “right to the city”, with citizens reclaiming urban space; for others, it can be viewed as an expression of civil disobedience (Silva, 2016). Indeed, unsanctioned projects can elicit a negative response from city officials. But, in some cases, cities have embraced or sanctioned projects to help inform and formulate better policies for future urban planning (Lydon & Garcia, 2015).

Both creative placemaking and tactical urbanism have extended beyond the confines of the North American context to other cities located in the Global North (Comunian & England, 2018; Richards & Duif, 2018; Courage & McKeown, 2019). The concepts of creative placemaking and tactical urbanism have received limited scholarly attention in the Global South (see Strydom et al., 2018; Bueno & Lanng, 2019; Duconseille & Saner, 2020; Andres et al., 2021). Cities located in the Global South face major planning challenges, limited planning capacity, resource constraints and often weak urban governance (Oldfield & Parnell, 2014). Within this context, bottom-up or citizen-led placemaking plays an important role (Devlin, 2018). Urbanites of the Global South often improvise and shape their urban environment, such as when they provide housing for themselves. But informal or temporary urbanism is not always welcomed by city officials (Roy, 2009). Indeed, informal or temporary urbanism can help inform and understand the processes of tactical urbanism and placemaking (Devlin, 2018). Additionally, creative placemaking and tactical urbanism trends from the Global North are sometimes imposed on the Global South. Andres et al. (2021: 31) underscore that “it is timely to consider what type of planning combined with localised and contextualised place-making is required for African cities that have different histories, lifestyles, environments and planning systems”.

Parks and public space have been popular sites for tactical urbanism and creative placemaking initiatives. Globally, city parks are viewed as a form of value creation in urban economies. The revitalisation of parks and public space helps to increase place competitiveness, improves the quality of life, and contributes to the health and wellbeing of a population; it also supports local biomes and

adds economic value to cities (Lima & Jones, 2021). The revitalisation of parks can contribute to a form of green or environmental gentrification which sees an increase in surrounding property values. In addition, it can introduce forms of exclusionary use and can be unwelcoming to the homeless, the urban poor or marginalised groups – especially in wealthier or gentrifying neighbourhoods (Rigolon & Németh, 2019; Parish, 2020).

3. Parks and public space in Johannesburg

During the early 20th century, the Johannesburg town council invested substantial amounts of money in the establishment of “parks in the veld” (Grundling, 2012). These spaces were mostly developed for the city's white residents. In part, the development of parks was instrumental in establishing a sense of civic pride and to position Johannesburg as a modern metropolis in line with international trends in urban planning (Foster, 2012).

The development of parks did not enjoy the same level of attention in the townships where people of colour were subjugated to reside during the colonial and apartheid eras. This led to inequitable access to parks and other forms of recreational space across Johannesburg (Venter et al., 2020). Indeed, during apartheid, preference was given to the development of parks and recreational areas designated for white people (McKay & Tantoh, 2021). The spatial legacy of apartheid city planning endures to this day, with far fewer parks and other recreational spaces such as nature reserves in areas where the majority of people of colour reside, producing a distinctive “green apartheid” (Venter et al., 2020). This is despite an active focus on the redistribution and development of parks and recreational spaces in townships (Landman, 2006, 2016; McKay & Tantoh, 2021).

Additionally, in the post-apartheid era, public space such as parks have deteriorated, due to neglect, vandalism, poor management and crime (de Vries & Kotze, 2016; Landman, 2016). Indeed, the maintenance of parks continues to be a significant challenge for local governments, not just in Johannesburg (Nemutamvuni et al., 2020). McKay and Tantoh (2021) maintain that budgets for the development and maintenance of parks are limited, with various other pressing needs such as housing and infrastructural projects enjoying preference. In addition, many members of the public break the rules and regulations of park usage, worsened by the limited capacity to enforce violations of park usage. De Vries and Kotze (2016) underscore the

need for community members to become stewards of these spaces.

A response to this decline has been the privatisation of public space by private developers (Landman, 2006). Thus, semi- or pseudo-public spaces in shopping mall complexes and gated communities are now common (Landman, 2006, 2016). In addition, the establishment of various business and city improvement districts since the 1990s has seen increased private management of public space. This includes the upgrading or redesigning of public spaces such as inner-city parks, as well as routine maintenance and security through private urban management (Didier et al., 2012; 2013). Indeed, the post-apartheid city offers a limited supply of meaningful public spaces that have not been subjected to privatisation. As Murray (2011: 215) explains, “inclusive urban commons, or accessible public spaces that facilitate a hybrid mixture of social exchanges between individuals and different social groups, have never been an abundant resource in South Africa's cities”.

Nevertheless, there is policy recognition for the need to revitalise parks and public spaces in Johannesburg. For example, the inner-city regeneration charter recognises that parks and public spaces are inadequate, with facilities that are overrun, degraded and in need of revitalisation (de Vries & Kotze, 2016). The Spatial Development Framework (SDF) also highlights the inequalities in accessing quality parks across the city (de Vries & Kotze, 2016). In addition, Landman (2019) underscores that, in Johannesburg, the SDF focuses on public spaces that promote opportunities for greater social inclusion and economic activity.

The establishment of parks also fits with the city's “corridors of freedom” or transit-oriented development plan, where access to social infrastructures such as parks will help redress the socio-spatial inequality of apartheid city planning (Harrison et al., 2019). The city's new Integrated Development Plan (2020/21) recognises the challenge of inadequate management and maintenance and the impact of crime on park usage. This policy is supportive of active citizenry taking ownership of parks and public spaces (City of Johannesburg, 2020).

For McKay and Tantoh (2021), the top-down management of parks by the City of Johannesburg produces conflicting views between communities and the municipality in the design, planning and usage of parks. Bénit-Gbaffou (2018) argues that community participation in the management of parks can contribute to urban citizenship and empowerment. This said, community participation

can also contribute to conflict over the use of space, and produce spaces of exclusion (Nemutamvuni et al., 2020). Johannesburg's Department of City Parks and Zoo has signed agreements with various community groups or non-profit organisations to assist in the establishment of "friends of" groups for various parks and nature reserves across the city. This neoliberal approach to park management sees the raising of external funding sources and draws on external human resources through volunteer work (de Vries, 2019). The politics that are produced in these types of partnerships become complex and are often layered with racial and class tension. In addition, there is much uncertainty and ambiguity related to the terms and conditions of these agreements that produce challenges for co-management. These types of partnerships can entrench spatial inequalities in the post-apartheid city – with parks in well-resourced areas benefitting more than those located in poorer parts of the city (Béni-Gbaffou, 2018).

4. Taming The Wilds

The Wilds is a 45-acre nature reserve located in the affluent suburb of Houghton on the northern edge of Johannesburg's inner-city (see Fig. 1). The reserve is located on Houghton ridge and bisected by Houghton Drive. The land was donated to the city by the Johannesburg Consolidated Investment Company (Foster, 2012). In 1938, Mr van Balen, inspired by the Kirstenbosch Botanical Gardens in Cape Town, designed The Wilds to showcase South Africa's diverse indigenous flora (Edwards, 1949). The western section is more parklike, with gardens, lawns, elaborate water features and a greenhouse. The eastern section is less developed and is more natural.

The Wilds was popular with residents, school groups, as well as regional and international visitors. Edwards (1949: 12) recalls that "the bright flowers and inviting lawns of The Wilds provide an

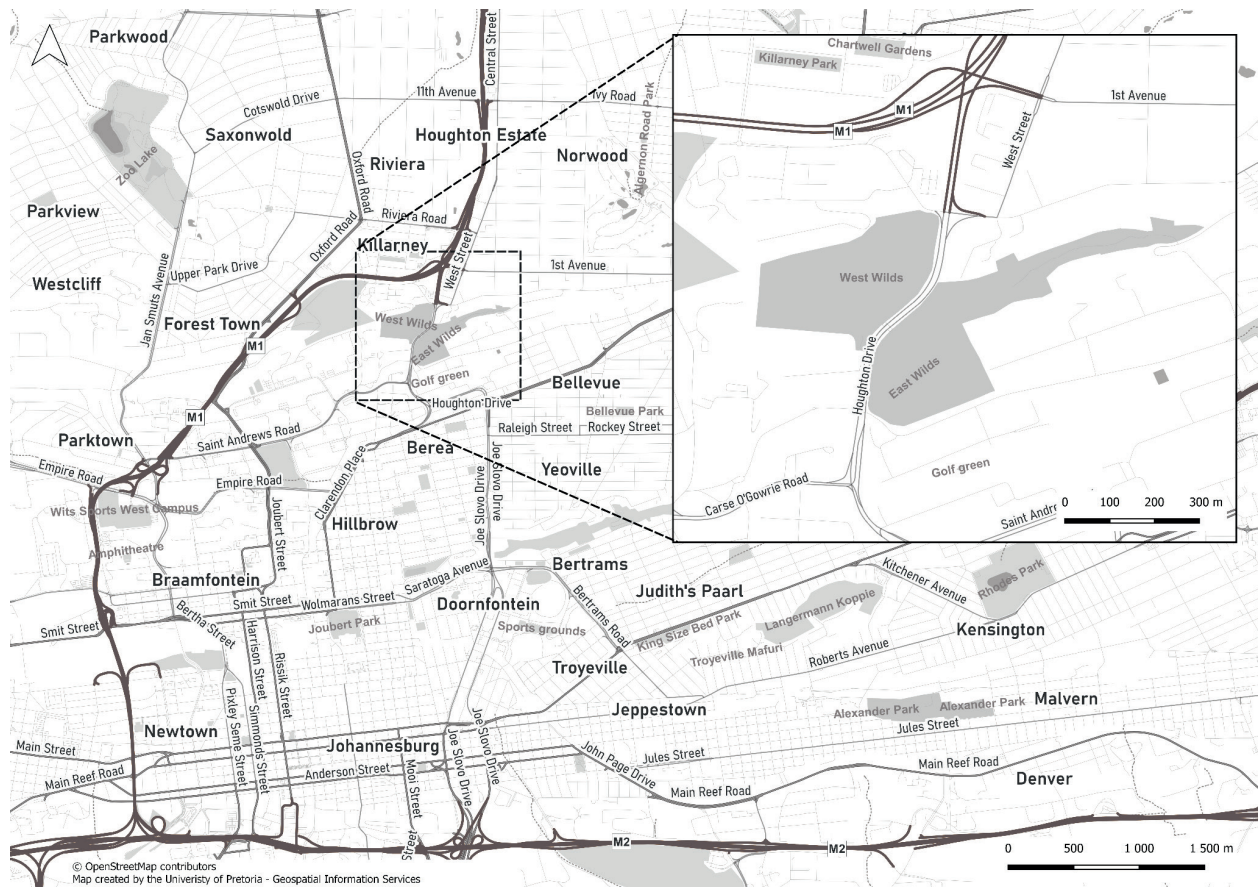


Fig. 1. The Wilds Nature Reserve, Johannesburg

Source: author

attraction to hundreds of flat-dwellers". According to Gevisser (2014: 229), "in 1939, forty-five thousand people entered the park on weekends; that number remained stable until the late 1980s". In a review of historical urban tourism between 1920 and 1950 in Johannesburg, Rogerson and Rogerson (2019) note the drive to promote Johannesburg as a tourism destination during this period. Amongst other things, The Wilds was promoted as a popular site for visitors. Indeed, "after World War II the maturing landscape of The Wilds was further elaborated by various water features and ultra-modern pavilions and became an iconic scenic sight for visitors to Johannesburg" (Foster 2012: 42).

The inner-city of Johannesburg began to show signs of economic stagnation and decline in the 1980s (Beavon, 2004). Economic decline, the crumbling apartheid state, rapid desegregation of inner-city neighbourhoods, as well as massive decentralisation of commercial activities to Sandton and other suburbs, were the main causes (Murray, 2011). Increased crime, especially violent crime such as murders and rapes, made The Wilds a no-go area, eventually becoming a forgotten space by almost all residents. For Gevisser (2014: 227) "The Wilds (separates) the mean streets of Hillbrow and Yeoville from the bounty of the Northern suburbs". The changing socio-economic complexity of the inner-city and soaring crime rates meant safety could not be guaranteed at The Wilds, so visitor numbers plummeted. Crime seriously tarnished the reputation of The Wilds (Gevisser, 2014).

During the early 2000s, a horticulturist and a few elderly park workers remained in charge of maintenance at The Wilds (J. de Klerk, pers. comm., 5 April 2022). Overall, the park was overgrown and suffered from years of neglect. The elaborate water features and pathways that once dazzled thousands of visitors had either disappeared or were completely overgrown. During the mid-2000s, two residents, namely TJ and Jennifer de Klerk, became champions of a bottom-up revival of The Wilds. Jennifer de Klerk (pers. comm., 5 April 2022) recalls:

I was scared the first time we walked in The Wilds, jumpy, looking over my shoulder. It was 2004 and I'd been told for years never to go near the park, that it was the haunt of thieves, murderers and rapists. Now I was in it, and it was beautiful. Quiet, peaceful and deserted, except for the birds.

With the help of the horticulturist and his team, the paths were cleared. In 2005, Jennifer de Klerk was published in the *Saturday Star*. She

penned an article entitled "Joburg's hidden gem" and invited people to join her on a walk on that Sunday morning. Around 600 people turned up (J. de Klerk, pers. comm., 5 April 2022). The impact of crime remained a challenge. Jennifer explains that:

there were intruders, people who slept in the park; we found plenty of evidence of interesting and illegal activities. We could not recommend that people walk alone or in small groups on the wilder (Eastern) slopes, but the tamer West, on the greenhouse side was reasonably safe. (J. de Klerk, pers comm, 5 April 2022)

She elaborates that "TJ and the dogs were attacked on one of his early morning recces and a small group was held up and robbed one Sunday afternoon" (J. de Klerk, pers. comm., 5 April 2022). Apart from the threat of crime, another major challenge was theft and vandalism of infrastructure – "with donations the fence went up and down, pieces were stolen and (water) pumps vandalised almost faster than we could get them fixed... it was heart-breaking" (J. de Klerk, pers. comm., 5 April 2022). That said, these volunteers played a crucial role in the regeneration of the park in the 2000s. For example, in 2005, the de Klerk's were offered a sundial. It was ceremonially placed on the top of the Western ridge on Mother's Day in 2005. A local crafter made mosaic trail markers and a group of Scouts helped build some of the stone walls. Soon thereafter, they found themselves inadvertently clashing with the City of Johannesburg. Jennifer (pers. comm., 5 April 2022) recalls:

we had no idea at that stage that we needed the permission of all the high-up's of City Parks. The battle with City Parks began and continued for years. We were mavericks, troublemakers, we had acted without permission, we had no right to bring people into the park.

Eventually, TJ and Jennifer de Klerk's involvement came to an end in 2012 (J. de Klerk, pers. comm., 5 April 2022).

In 2014, a local artist, James Delaney decided to start walking his dog, Pablo, in The Wilds. He recalls:

I first visited The Wilds in 2014, despite having lived right next to it for several years. My back windows face the park, but it was so dark and overgrown one couldn't see in. People in my area regarded it as an extremely

dangerous place and none of my neighbours had ever visited.

He further notes that:

it was badly overgrown - trees collapsed onto cycads, infestations of weeds, erosion, broken benches, empty water features, crumbling stonework (and) dead branches hanging off trees. (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021)

He also noted the staff who worked at The Wilds were also afraid. As a result, they only kept the lawns, ignoring the rest. It was clear that no one from the Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo had inspected the reserve in years. James felt at least some of the danger was due to the reserve being overgrown, and thus he “needed to open the lines of sight so that walkers could see around them” (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021). Thus, he hired Thulani Nkomo, and the pair started clearing the undergrowth and dead branches. A process that took them three years. James Delaney (pers. comm., 2 June 2021) estimates that “in those three years, we cut and (City Parks) removed 50 large truckloads of branches”. Once this was completed, their focus shifted to revitalising the flowerbeds. On an ad-hoc basis, he recruited friends and residents in neighbouring apartment blocks to help, and many spent hours each Sunday assisting. But he realised the task was huge, so he worked on developing communication channels and relationships with City Parks and Zoo, as well as recruiting regular volunteers and fundraising (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021). With this in mind, he designed and installed 67 brightly coloured owl sculptures in the forest canopy as part of the Nelson Mandela Day celebrations in July 2017. He explains that “I hoped they’d draw people’s attention to the trees, and create something they’d talk about on social media”. He further recalls:

hundreds of people came that day, armed with clippers and saws. Kids screamed with delight when they saw the owls, counting them, their parents picnicked, people chopped, cleared and planted. (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021)

His relationship with Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo has flourished, with a team of ten workers now paid by the City to help with weeding, mowing and planting. An additional eight workers are employed and contracted by the Friends of The Wilds to take care of regular maintenance.

James Delaney also briefly partnered with the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation (JHF) and signed a Memorandum of Agreement (MoU) with the Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo. This agreement legitimised the work that Delaney was doing and provided a platform for fundraising through the foundation (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021). By the end of 2021, the agreement with the JHF came to an end. Although JHF recognises the input of James Delaney to protect, restore, enjoy and rediscover The Wilds, the organisation feels that:

The Wilds is a heritage resource in terms of the National Heritage Resource Act (NHRA). In this regard, the JHF’s interest is that due process (is) followed with any initiative in The Wilds, e.g. appropriate Heritage Impact Assessments, and also to keep our ear on the ground re(garding) any plans which might have a heritage impact. (Representative, JHF, pers. comm., 31 January 2022)

Additionally, City Parks and Zoo became less supportive. James Delaney (pers. comm., 2 June 2021) explains:

I was offending some people at City Parks; several times they have used obscure by-laws to stop me. Who knew that park benches must be painted green, or that a tiny Yellowwood sapling can only be moved by the Forestry Department, even when it’s about to be stood upon.

In another example:

for a few months, young local entrepreneurs ran a fabulous coffee stand in the car park on Sundays, which brought great energy and a sense of welcome. City Parks never visited on weekends, so they didn’t know about it. Then someone found out, sent in the park rangers and cops to shut it down. That was a low point. (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021)

There is a common misperception that The Wilds is a park, when it is technically a nature reserve. This adds a layer of complexity to the efforts of James Delaney and other volunteers. A representative from City Parks and Zoo (Interview, 8 March 2022) explains that all city by-laws, as well as environmental legislation enforced by the Gauteng Department of Agriculture and Rural Development, and the city’s Environmental Infrastructure Development Department, all have to be applied. Thus, City Parks and Zoo has to ensure

their compliance with by-laws and legislation. For example,

you cannot go and cut off a branch from a Yellowwood tree, because they are a protected species. You cannot remove rocks from the natural koppie to create pathways and seating areas - you are disturbing the ecological habitat of a lot of smaller animals in the natural koppie area. (Interview, Representative, City Parks and Zoo, 8 March 2022)

City Parks and Zoo is also driving a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with the Friends of The Wilds ...

... to try to alleviate the problems that are currently experienced. We try to get them on par. You know, for them it's red tape. I can understand for them it is frustrating, but it is frustrating for us too. Compliance with legislation is our first priority.

It is hoped that, once the MoU is signed, everyone would be aligned with what is expected from both parties (Interview, Representative, City Parks and Zoo, 8 March 2022). That said, City Parks and Zoo does recognise the efforts of James Delaney and countless volunteers; however, there is tension over some of the art and other tactical interventions. The City Parks and Zoo representative maintains that:

for me in the West, the more manicured side of The Wilds the introduction of art was more appropriate, but I wouldn't like to see the artwork flowing over to the Eastern, wilder part of the reserve. For me, it doesn't belong in conservation and protected areas. (Interview, 8 March 2022)

Despite this, art has played an important role in the revitalisation of The Wilds (see Figs. 2 and 3). During a talk hosted by the Rotary Club of Johannesburg, James Delaney explains:

as an artist, I came up with this idea of doing sculptures. I thought if I can make some interesting (sculptures) and catch people's attention, they (will) take photographs of these things and these photographs will be shared on social media and that will bring more people to the park. (The Rotary Club of Johannesburg, Facebook Group, 2020)

He further elaborates that:

as the sculptures became popular, I used them to open up sections of the park that people weren't visiting – they became destinations within the park, allowing people to walk further and spend more time exploring. There are now 100 sculptures. (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021)

One of the most popular sculptures is a large, five-metre-high pink and yellow giraffe that was designed and installed by James Delaney and paid for through crowdfunding. This sculpture is visible from the road, drawing the attention of passers-by (see Fig. 3). Apart from James Delaney's contribution, several other artists have contributed their time, art and financial support for the revitalisation of The Wilds. James recalls a “memorable walk across The Wilds with William



Fig. 2. Ostriches sculpture
Source: author



Fig. 3. Giraffe sculpture
Source: author

Kentridge (1) recounting (his) childhood memories of the park and (he) committing funding for the next three years” (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021).

In addition, social media has been invaluable in promoting the reserve and changing people's perception of The Wilds. The brightly coloured sculptures are “social media friendly”. Indeed, James Delaney used social media to promote the sculptures, attract volunteers, source fundraising and publicise the various activities at The Wilds. He explains that he “*started building a network using the Facebook page, sending out requests to people that I thought could help*” (The Rotary Club of Johannesburg, Facebook Group, 2020).

The revitalisation of The Wilds through the efforts of James Delaney and countless volunteers has made it a popular public space to visit once again. James Delaney (pers. comm., 2 June 2021) notes “*the car park now overflowed all weekend - queues of cars trying to squeeze into the small car park. I always tell people a well-used park is a safe park*”. Indeed, since the revitalisation and widespread usage of the park, incidents of crime such as muggings have declined significantly. He explains “*it's common now to see women walking alone on the West Wilds*” (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021). This is echoed by the representative from City Parks and Zoo, “*safety has most definitely improved, we have an outsourced security company and we have three guards with dogs*” (Interview, 8 March 2022).

The popularity of The Wilds is reflected on various online platforms. There are 10,000 members on the Friends of the Wilds Facebook Group (May, 2022). The Wilds boasts a rating of 4.5 out of 5 stars, with over 1,800 written reviews recounting the beauty of the reserve on Google Reviews (May, 2022). On TripAdvisor, the world's largest travel review platform, The Wilds is listed as number 13 of 182 things to do in Johannesburg and has a 5-star rating on the website. An assessment of the 55 written reviews on TripAdvisor revealed that The Wilds has in recent years become a popular site for residents and tourists. Several reviews recount The Wilds as a “*hidden gem*” and a “*tranquil space*”. The presence of the art installations and the efforts of James Delaney are also mentioned (TripAdvisor, May, 2022). The revitalisation of The Wilds has received several awards. James Delaney and Aluminium Trading Group (Pty) Ltd received an award from Business Arts South Africa (BASA) “*for bringing The Wilds back to life with sculptures*” (South African Cultural Observatory 2018, p. 1). Other awards and recognition include

the South African Institute of Architecture, the Rotary Club of Johannesburg and Caxton's Best of Joburg (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021).

5. Conclusion

As has been shown, tactical urbanism and creative placemaking have aided the bottom-up revitalisation of The Wilds. This links with Wyckoff et al.'s (2015) description of incremental or bottom-up and tactical placemaking trends that have emerged in a North American context in recent years. Indeed, James Delaney has spent a considerable amount of time in global cities such as New York, where he was inspired by community efforts in the revitalisation of public spaces such as Central Park (J. Delaney, pers. comm., 2 June 2021). These tactical interventions were born out of frustration with the overall neglect and decline of the public green space. Notwithstanding, urban informality is not always supported by the local authorities (Andres et al. 2021). Similarly, the revitalisation through community-led efforts has not always been supported by the City of Johannesburg.

This paper contributes to Bénit-Gbaffou's (2018) and McKay and Tantoh's (2021) observations on the challenges between communities and the city with respect to the use and co-management of parks and other recreational areas in Johannesburg. While City of Johannesburg policies seem to support active citizenry and are favourable towards the establishment of “friends of” groups to help manage parks and other recreational spaces, there is not always alignment between policy and practice. For example, there is a tendency to want written agreements, adherence to by-laws (no matter how inappropriate) and, in this case, also with environmental and heritage legislation. Yet, the terms and conditions of these agreements and such are not uncontested, and may represent an attempt by those in power to regain the upper hand and revert to a top-down approach. They also tend to inhibit community and individual passion and enthusiasm for urban regeneration, as the bureaucracy adds multiple layers of complexity and is time-, energy- and resource- draining. Micro-politics also produce tensions, such as City Parks and Zoo stopping some of the volunteer work over concerns of by-laws or environmental legislation infringement. Similarly, the Johannesburg Heritage Foundation has raised concerns over heritage impacts of certain interventions.

As a result, what started as passionate, self-initiated tactical interventions by the de Klerk's and James Delaney, recruiting volunteers along the way has evolved into a project that requires legitimacy and support from the City of Johannesburg. This reflects the international experience where tactical urbanism interventions start as unsanctioned but evolve to become sanctioned projects with support from city officials (Lydon & Garcia, 2015; Silva, 2016). Despite the challenges, the success in reigniting interest in, and the use of, the nature reserve must be underscored. The efforts of a few dedicated citizens, the introduction of art and harnessing the power of social media have revitalised and reanimated the space. The renewed popularity of The Wilds is reflected in its visitor numbers, an indication that there is now a sense of safety. Overall, Johannesburg lacks meaningful public spaces where people can interact (Murray, 2011). Indeed, The Wilds has become an important place for a cross-section of society – a space where inner-city residents and suburbanites - can engage. Therefore, care must be taken to ensure that The Wilds remains an inclusive, diverse and meaningful public space for social interaction.

The success achieved at The Wilds has inspired the creation of a new sculpture and wellness park in Braamfontein, an inner-city neighbourhood not far from The Wilds. This new park is privately developed by Liberty Holdings Limited (a financial services and property holding company). Amongst other artists and experts, James Delaney has been consulted and involved in the design of this new park (Emmett, 2022). This signals the popularity and importance of harnessing the arts in the revitalisation of parks and other public spaces across Johannesburg. Indeed, artists have an important role to play in creative placemaking and urban regeneration in general, but it should be underscored that these interventions can contribute to exclusion and gentrification. Indeed, careful consideration and caution against environmental or green gentrification are needed to ensure that these spaces are not exclusionary and remain welcoming to all.

Notes

(1) William Kentridge is a world-renowned South African artist best known for his prints, drawings and animated films.

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