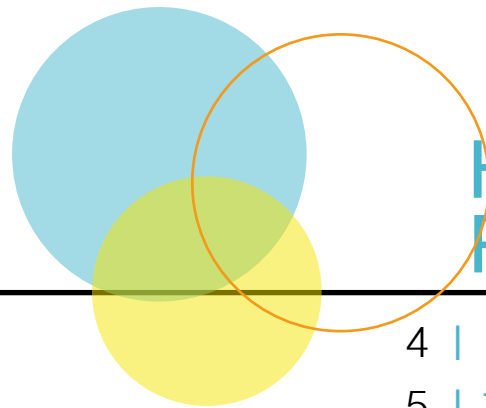




HISTORY OF PLAY AFRICA



HISTORY OF PLAY AFRICA

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“ Children are full and equal citizens in our society who deserve to be seen, heard and valued. If we start with the premise that all children, even babies, are full and equal citizens – what does that mean for our public spaces? It means we need to design and create nurturing environments for their healthy development. This means intentionally considering their developmental needs as citizens – including their physical, cognitive, emotional and social needs.

Play Africa is a loud champion of this approach to placemaking, from our base in Johannesburg. We use design thinking and prototyping to ensure our processes are locally relevant and catalytic for cities across Africa. We help local governments, architects and urban planners identify and respond to the causes and effects of lack of safe and appropriate spaces for children’s play in our communities.

”

- Gretchen Wilson-Prangley, founder Play Africa

INTRODUCTION TO PLAY AFRICA

Play Africa is a globally recognised children’s museum in Johannesburg, South Africa. We make use of public spaces to drive creative learning for children, engagement by parents and cohesion for our larger society. From our base at the iconic Constitution Hill human rights precinct, we’ve developed a flexible, city-wide museum model, offering learning approaches informed by global thinking to local children, parents and teachers.

Every child deserves access to safe environments where they can play, create, discover and connect with one another. Our decentralised model uses existing public spaces to offer 21st-century, playful learning. As South Africa’s pioneering education makerspace, we are dedicated to including Johannesburg’s children in a global movement to unlock the power of education for all children, through hands-on, play-based learning experiences that change lives.





THE CITY IS OUR CHILDREN'S MUSEUM

THE PLAY AFRICA JOURNEY

How can small, scrappy museums play a major role in the lives of children and families in underserved communities? Unlike many traditional museums, Play Africa is modular, agile and adaptive. On a shoestring budget, we've successfully created a model of a well-networked, agile, relevant and low-cost museum that creates original content in response to the needs of the communities we serve. As the first children's museum of its kind in the region, we are mentoring and sharing knowledge with emergent spaces like ours across Africa.

Johannesburg is home to more than 8 million people, including 1 million children under the age of 10. But Johannesburg, like everywhere in South Africa, still lives with the painful legacies of colonialism and apartheid. Apartheid literally means "apartness". Basic human rights of the Black majority were eviscerated as the white minority restricted people's movement, economic activities and political participation. Apartheid officially ended in 1994, when Nelson Mandela was democratically elected president. Today, all people have the same rights under the law. But on the ground, inequalities are proving hard to shift, and today South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world.

So when we decided to start a world-class children's museum in Johannesburg, we had a few key non-negotiables:

- This museum would be created ground up by the community itself, including children
- Success would be determined by our audience: whether those inside the museum reflected the communities outside the museum; how well we brought people together; and by how well we served and supported those on the margins of our society
- Inclusion had to be at its core

We believed that by being rooted in our community, by acting as a bridge and by investing in children, families and educators, we could help create a more just, more equitable and inclusive city for everyone. We ran workshops with children and parents, and asked them to imagine Play Africa and what it could become. We used human-centred design principles to interview refugees and recent immigrants about the realities of parenting young children in Johannesburg's inner city. We spoke with children's museum directors around the world about business models that work as we strove to balance accessibility with sustainability.



But for all this engagement, we had a traditional idea of how to build a museum. We wanted a site – so we could have an architecture design competition – design all the exhibits that would go inside – build and install them – so we could open our doors to serve a minimum of 200,000 visitors a year.

To create a flagship, world-class children's museum like this for children in South Africa, we estimated we'd need about US \$26 million (about R250 million). With such an exciting cause, we thought that this amount would be fairly easy to raise. It wasn't.

We are a proudly South African initiative, and wanted to raise the initial funds locally. So we shared our plans with hundreds of potential corporate and individual funders in South Africa, and received seed funding from a few investors. Soon after, the city offered us a 99-year lease on an incredible piece of land. We got formal approvals. We hired experts. We brought on three legal teams to check – and double check – we were doing everything right. But 16 months later, just before the final approvals, the deal fell through. The land was now earmarked for a different project.

When this agreement fell through, one of our initial donors withdrew their funding. And the other wanted to do the same. We were at a nadir, and we were exhausted, angry and demoralised. Worse, after years of hard work, we had done little yet to practically and tangibly improve the landscape of our city for children and families. So as a team, we decided two things:

1. What we'd been doing wasn't working. It would be insane to try to take the same approach again and expect different results. We had to disrupt our own way of thinking about Play Africa – and step into a new future.
2. Children would be at the heart of whatever we did next.

So we thought: what if we took what little money we had left and ... turned everything on its head? What if we just got started, without a building, by creating Play Africa in the city itself? Do we even need a building? Could the city be our museum?

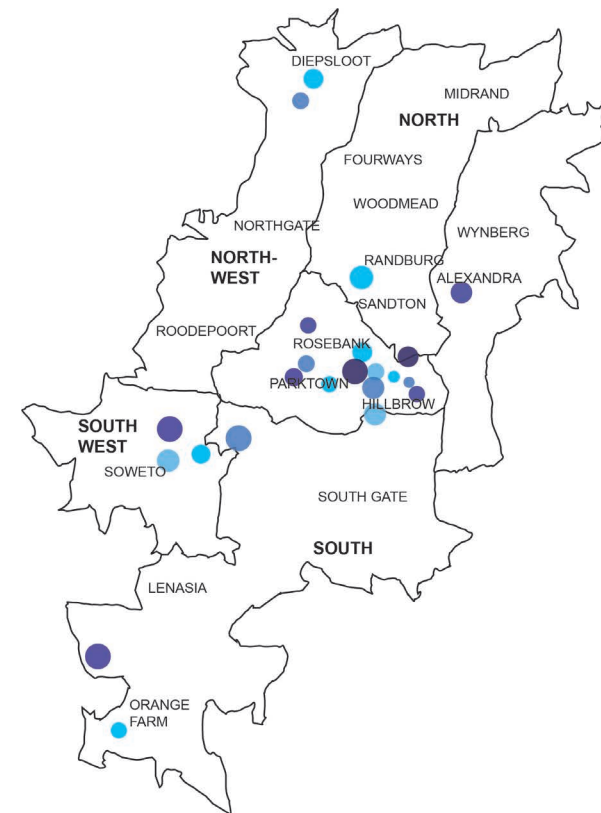
So we started prototyping – rapidly, clumsily and boldly, with a bias to action that supported children's play and development. We stopped waiting for everything to be perfect and beautiful. We asked ourselves: What's the most we can do with the least amount of money? What

would give us the highest social impact return on our investment? What would a minimum viable product (MVP) look like?

As we prototyped, we asked our audience what they liked, and wanted more of. What else did they need? And pretty soon we realised, to help a child, a parent or an educator have a transformational playful learning experience, we don't actually need the entire budget now. We just need enough to give them an incredible children's museum experience, wherever they are.

And pretty soon, we were operating with several programmes as a children's museum without walls – built around our image of the child and children's rights. Just like a startup, we were lean and agile. We were intuitive. Each space was different, and we had to adapt at a moment's notice. As a team, we called this approach “radical flexibility”.

The results of those first several months were magic. In the morning, we would start at 6 a.m. loading up a truck, travel to the site, unpack the truck with a community partner, set up a joyful, child-friendly space for playful discovery, support play all day, pack it all up, get back and unpack by 6 p.m. It was terribly exhausting, but it



Play Africa's "museum without walls" provided innovative learning opportunities across Gauteng

was an incredible experience to create new, vibrant and equitable spaces for play in our city in a way that no one had ever seen. And we did it again and again, in school halls, in playgrounds, community centres, parks, streets, and on inner city rooftops.

We realised our capital wasn't in the cash we had in the bank. It was in our authentic relationships with more than 115 (now 240!) local partners, including community groups schools, early childhood development (ECD) centres, nursery schools, and tens of thousands of children, parents and teachers.

We had pushed and stretched, and despite all the constraints we encountered, we found a way to deliver on our promise as a museum without walls. In 2017 Play Africa was invited to move into Constitution Hill, a notorious apartheid-era prison in the inner city that is now seat of the Constitutional Court. We're based just 15 metres from where former President Nelson Mandela was once incarcerated. This is how Play Africa is disrupting with children. We're not just disrupting the museum model or cities, we're disrupting how our society sees children. And – in our own small way – we're disrupting the legacies of apartheid.

Our journey didn't go the way we expected. Through failure and disappointment, blood, sweat and tears, we stumbled upon this innovative approach – and created a vibrant museum that is completely unique in Johannesburg.

We believe everyone has the power to create something entirely new, relevant and disruptive in their own context. And that in doing so, all of us can build societies that are more inclusive, vibrant and equitable.

(adapted from a keynote address by Gretchen Wilson-Prangley at MuseumNext, June 2018)

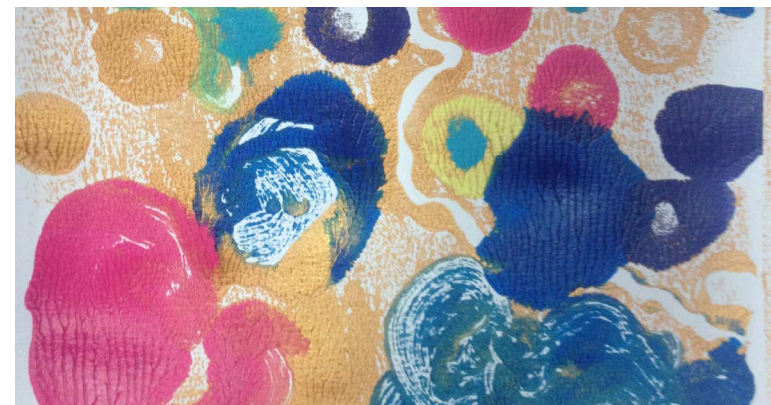


PLACEMAKING PROGRAMMING

In 2016, Play Africa began prototyping new programmes centred on children's play and playful learning in Johannesburg's public spaces. These Play Africa programmes urged children, and the adults, to re-think and reclaim public spaces for children's play, creativity, exploration and connection.

ART ACROSS OCEANS

A collaboration between Kohl Children's Museum of Greater Chicago and Play Africa, this cultural exchange for children used art and play – two universal media – to transform community spaces in Jabavu, Soweto and Sogatown, as well as north Chicago.



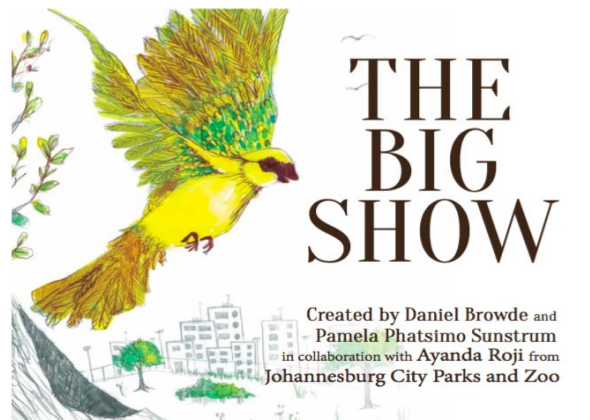
NATURE HEROES

In partnership with Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo, Play Africa prototyped this environmental education programme in several city parks, which many local children had never visited. Through playful learning, children developed awareness of scientific concepts, such as making pressings of found objects, measuring trees, exploring refraction and temperature, and designing objects using biomimicry.

In the process of designing their ideal parks, children were able to share their fears and concerns that keep them from the park. During the programme children were able to explore the park and begin to reclaim a public space.



THE BIG SHOW



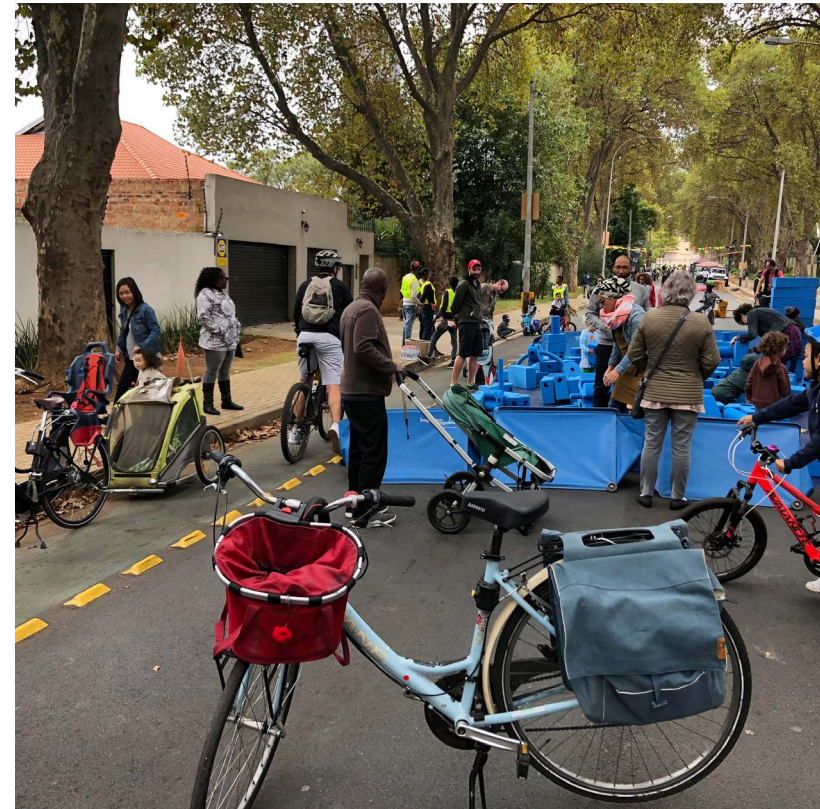
Like other children's museums around the world, Play Africa develops meaningful partnerships to advance our mission through collaboration. Play Africa, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoo, Keen Projects and the UN Environmental Programme created *The Big Show*, a children's book written by Daniel Browde and illustrated by Pamela Phatsimo Sunstrum. The Big Show showcases children as active citizens of our city, and aims to spark children's interest in green spaces, parks and conservation. Play Africa led various activations around the city to promote outdoor play and exploration, and to encourage discovery of the natural world in city parks. Children learned playful ways to carefully observe the natural world, and how human actions can positively or negatively impact life and ecosystems in urban Africa.



OPEN STREETS

Play Africa partnered with several Johannesburg-based community groups and municipal departments to host Open Streets in Auckland Park. Inspired by Open Streets Cape Town and other citizen-driven initiatives changing how residents use, perceive and experience streets, this placemaking event focused on children's experience of the City of Johannesburg.

Play Africa developed child safety recommendations and playful family activities for the event, in which streets were closed to vehicle traffic to support pedestrians and cyclists in exploring the neighbourhood. Various community volunteers and researchers provided activities and entertainment for families. Children were encouraged to conduct quantitative and qualitative research on the city streets during different times of the day. This helped children understand how the streets are used, and imagine how they could be used in the future.



CHILD'S PLAY

In 2016, Play Africa partnered with the Department of Architecture and Planning at Wits University to engage 10 emerging architects on building a locally relevant children's museum in Johannesburg. Volunteers conducted more than 60 interviews with residents of Hillbrow, Yeoville and Berea about public spaces, play spaces and environments for children and families in Johannesburg. The compilation of the research and data collected by the students was published in a book published by Play Africa: *Child's Play in Architecture: A research and design studio at the Wits School of Architecture & Planning for Play Africa.*



CHILD'S PLAY
A Johannesburg Children's Museum



PLAY AFRICA AT CONSTITUTION HILL

Play Africa has been based at Constitution Hill since 2017. Before the Covid-19 pandemic, we were open five days a week, offering play and playful learning experiences free to the public. As an inclusive cultural institution, we exist to serve all one million children aged 10 and under in greater Johannesburg, as well as their caregivers and educators. The focus of our outreach has been on children, families and schools in the inner city and informal settlements, children with disabilities in these communities, and refugees and asylum seekers. But we also attract children, families and schools from suburban areas, as well as field trips of school groups from neighbouring provinces. Before Covid disrupted our in-person work, more than 35,000 individuals had enjoyed meaningful, transformative play visits lasting three hours or more with Play Africa.

In addition to offering regular time for free play, we also developed 25 original programmes to support playful learning in public spaces around Johannesburg. These included facilitated, innovative programmes in the creative arts, and in science, technology, engineering and maths (STEM) (which, due to space constraints, we will not elaborate on in this toolkit). Importantly, a key focus of Play Africa's work included several programmes to promote active citizenship and children's participation in South Africa's democracy.



CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION PROGRAMMING

From its inception, Play Africa has focused on empowering children to recognise their rights, abilities and value as citizens in South Africa's democracy. Specifically, Play Africa encourages all children to find their voice, so that they can participate actively in their own society. Our programmes include the following:

PLAY DAYS

From 2016, Play Africa partnered with local schools to prototype "Play Days", transforming existing schools into magical playscapes for children's imagination. During these events, Play Africa facilitators and volunteers worked with children, staff and parent volunteers to prototype, test and experiment with new Play Africa exhibits and programmes such as Fantasy Play, Marble Run, Hands-on Maths and Our Stories. Through feedback from children and teachers, Play Africa was able to iterate and improve exhibits for future events and activities. This event was pivotal in Play Africa's human-centred approach to exhibit and programme design and development. It also informed the development of our Learning Framework.



Two of more than 20 educators observing how children are learning through play at Play Africa's Play Day at Mbuyisa Makhubu Primary School in collaboration with Johannesburg School District 12 in Orlando West, Soweto in June 2016

CHILDREN'S VOICES

Children's Voices is an original Play Africa programme for children ages 7-11. This half-day workshop helps create a new generation of informed, engaged South African citizens empowered to make a positive difference in the world around them, and who are aware of their rights and responsibilities. Through dialogue and playful activities, children are introduced to key concepts of South Africa's democratic Constitution, children's rights and the rule of law. Children go through a mock election, including voter 'registration' and voting at a child-sized booth. Play Africa has run this pioneering workshop with more than 3,000 children in public spaces across the city of Johannesburg and beyond.



CHILDREN'S COURTROOM

This bespoke child-scale courtroom can travel anywhere in the city, inviting children to learn about South Africa's justice system and imagine new career paths through facilitated role play. From judge to court officer, children take turns to try out different court roles, and in doing so achieve a deeper understanding of the institutions and professionals underpinning the rule of law. Children build vocabulary and knowledge of the Constitution, rights and duties of citizens, and the role of the courts in a constitutional democracy.



BRIDGES OF PEACE

Xenophobia and intolerance of refugees and asylum seekers remain a serious challenge in Johannesburg, despite South Africa's many strides towards a more democratic, rights-based society. For South Africa's democracy to thrive in future generations, children need to learn to live, play, learn and work alongside one another with tolerance and peace. This begins by learning how to identify and prevent incidences of xenophobia and xenophobic violence. This modular, travelling exhibition can be transported to any public space, inviting children to take part in activities designed to foster empathy, understanding and *Ubuntu*.



COVID-19 RESPONSE

During the COVID-19 crisis, we leveraged accessible technology and used design thinking to reach new audiences across southern Africa. Since March 2020, Play Africa prototyped 11 new Covid-response programmes offering locally relevant programming to tens of thousands of children, parents and educators across South Africa and Africa. Technology enabled us to create entirely new and innovative ways for communities to connect with one another. An example of these ways was an online storytelling experience for children at home to enjoy.

Through low-cost, accessible, affordable technology, we continue to equip parents, educators and policy makers make greater provision for play amid lockdown restrictions and COVID-19 protocols. Together with partners, we are re-imagining “placemaking” in the digital realm.



Storytellers from the African Storytelling Series, an online experience for children and families

CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION IN EXHIBITION AND PROGRAMME DESIGN

Throughout the prototyping process, Play Africa has seen children as active “co-designers” of the museum’s original exhibits and programmes. In 2020/2021, Play Africa developed “I am a Scientist”, a new 340m² travelling exhibition to empower all children to see themselves as emerging scientists, including girls, gender non-conforming children and children from communities traditionally underrepresented in the sciences.

Once the initial exhibition was designed, children gave feedback on which areas they found most interesting, where they had questions, and which areas they felt least likely to explore. Play Africa’s designers then took this feedback to refine the exhibition before building it. Once it was built, children who provided the design input were among the first to enjoy playful learning in the exhibition.



EMPOWERING CHILDREN THROUGH DESIGN THINKING

“OUR IDEAL WORLD”: DESIGN THINKING WITH CHILDREN

“Our Ideal World” is a flexible, adaptable workshop that was designed by Play Africa for children between the ages of 7 and 12, teaching creative problem solving. Developed in collaboration with local and international design thinking experts, Play Africa’s customised curriculum uses an adaptation of the design-thinking process used by the Stanford d.school to teach children to understand social challenges, and how to generate, prototype and test possible solutions that can be shared more widely.

In addition to providing a powerful opportunity to engage with local neighbourhood challenges, throughout the workshop, children learn literacy, problem solving, creativity, critical thinking, and other skill sets that develop capabilities in STEM (science, technology, engineering and maths) and the creative arts.

Importantly, children feel seen, heard and valued as adults recognise their creative solutions to real world issues, developing their confidence as inventors and innovators with original solutions.



INITIAL PROTOTYPING

Bertrams, Johannesburg

The first iterations of this workshop were conducted with different groups of children in partnership with the Boys and Girls Club in Bertrams, Johannesburg. Play Africa's education team developed a workshop curriculum to help children participate meaningfully in placemaking by sharing their feelings, insights and ideas about their neighbourhood, as well as prototyping models of potential solutions.



“ I learned I can invent anything if I put my heart to it. ”

“ Today was the best day ever. I learnt that a child can create anything! ”

Orange Grove, Johannesburg

The next iteration of the workshop included collaboration with local community and arts groups to transform a busy transit corridor in the city to a site for children's dramatic play. In this multi-day workshop, children transformed a busy intersection into a colourful street-facing theatre, made up of fabricated elements they helped design.

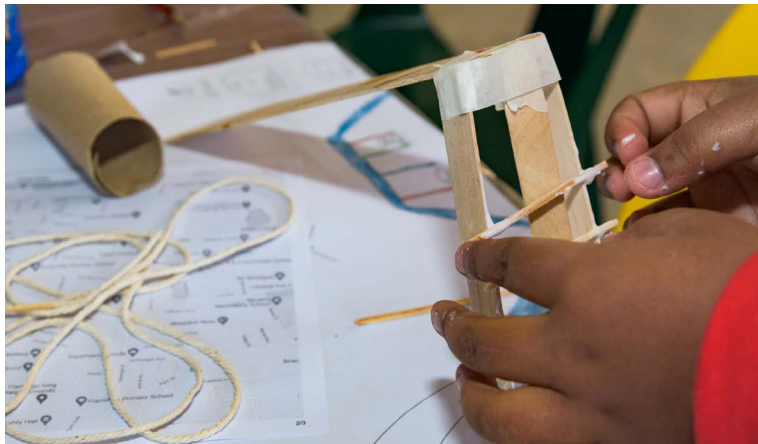
First, children conducted a site assessment to find a suitable area to use as a performance space. The site assessment process exposed children to the various ways public spaces are used, and asked them to consider what would be the best spot for their unique needs.

Once the site was selected, children used the design-thinking process to develop prototype models for their set. Adults then turned those prototype models into life-sized set elements. The programme was a success in transforming a child-hostile space into a fantastically child-friendly space designed by children.



SCALING

In 2020, Play Africa was awarded a special mention for placemaking by the Real Play Cities Challenge. This award created an opportunity to scale the “Our Ideal World” programme, making the workshop accessible to community groups, urban practitioners, and child advocates in any setting. We knew many groups were looking for fun and creative ways to empower children to help create more child-friendly communities. Our workshop is grounded in our experience in an urban African city which is reflected in the curriculum. We have designed the workshop to be adaptable to a variety of settings, and using a variety of sourceable tools.



PILOTS - Testing our “Designing with Children” workshop in various contexts in South Africa

Melusi

The first pilot of this phase occurred at the Melusi Youth Development Organisation (MYDO) in Melusi, an informal settlement west of Pretoria. A group of architecture Master’s students from the University of Pretoria and Chalmers University in Sweden conducted the workshop with a group of children at the MYDO community centre.

During the pilot, the architecture students modified the workshop to guide children to use design thinking to re-imagine a specific area - the space directly outside the MYDO centre. Throughout the workshop children shared specific thoughts and feelings about the area, and provided insights into the lived experience of children. The architecture students used the information gathered from the workshop to inform their planning for a larger research project – an intervention involving the planting of tree avenues in the area, and they will endeavour to include children in the next phase of design.



Photo Markus Zorn

Lenasia Extension 2

A small community group in Lenasia Extension 2, a suburb south of Soweto, piloted Play Africa's design thinking workshop. The group was already focused on including children in community improvement, but was looking for a tool to engage children meaningfully in the process. They recruited children from a local school, and, in particular, made an effort to include children with enthusiasm and creativity rather than search only for stellar students.

The workshop engaged both children and their parents in imagining how they might improve their community. The facilitators encouraged brainstorming when recruiting children, so many children came to the workshop ready to share ideas and create inventions. This workshop also drew in the larger community. The facilitators were able to collaborate with local businesses to provide donations for the workshop, and parents enjoyed participating with children and meeting one another.



Streetlight Schools

Streetlight Schools, in Jeppestown Johannesburg, approached Play Africa's workshop differently. Educators decided to extend the design-thinking process to stretch over multiple weeks, to fit within the school schedule. The teachers and students were already familiar with design thinking, so teachers took the opportunity to add academic skills, such as essay writing and map creation, to the process.

The teachers also shifted the focus of the workshop: rather than examine the neighbourhood, students were encouraged to identify areas of the school that would benefit from inventions.

Students in three different grades participated in this process. This allowed teachers to observe the development of design thinking and creativity over the years as students became more familiar with the design-thinking process.



Mamelodi

The Mamelodi pilot was conducted by a Co-Design studio of architecture students from the University of Pretoria. The team adapted the workshop for local high school students. During the session, children provided insightful commentary on the social challenges in the area, but also reflected on the positive aspects that make Mamelodi a vibrant community.

Children created prototypes of fantastic inventions for young people in Mamelodi: an outdoor cinema, a safe place for teenagers to chill, and even a stargazing platform! The engagement level was high; children felt motivated by the flexible, playful format of the workshop to try new things and imagine how they could make an impact in their community.

The Co-Design studio intends to use the prototypes created by children to inform their design for an intervention in Mamelodi. They will adapt the workshop again to engage children in the next phase of their design process to create an installation in the built environment for and with the community.



All four pilots were successful in providing children with a playful and empowering workshop. Each pilot looked quite different: various ages, settings, parental involvement and experience with design thinking. However, each group was able to adapt the workshop to fit their specific needs.



CONCLUSION

At Play Africa, we want others to see the value in children's insights. Because children are full and equal citizens who deserve to be seen, heard and valued, we want to invite everyone to empower them as co-designers. By teaching children the basics of design thinking and prototyping, we can help ensure placemaking is locally relevant and catalytic. Our hope is that our design thinking workshop will help people across Africa and around the world to harness this creativity from children, and empower them to help make positive changes in their community.

This toolkit can be used by everyone to create a playful learning experience for children while empowering them to imagine an improved community. Children are acutely aware of social challenges in their communities, however, they also have wonderful imaginations that can create inventions no one has considered before. Through design thinking, children can develop solutions to local neighbourhood challenges, and, in so doing, create child-friendly, safer, playful cities. At the same time, they are introduced to problem solving, creativity, critical thinking and other 21st-century skills.

Child-centred placemaking processes can also help promote and amplify the Real Play Coalition Framework, the City at Eye Level for Kids Framework, and help local governments, urban planners and citizens identify and respond to the causes and effects of lack of play in cities. We aim to be a driving force in Africa in making cities more inclusive for optimal child development. Together, we can help urban actors understand the power of play in a child's life.



This toolkit is in itself a prototype! This work is important to us at Play Africa, and we have a bold vision for a programme that will enable us to deepen our impact:

- Become a bolder, more visible champion for children in Africa's cities, writing more and speaking out more publicly about our vision for more playful, inclusive and child-friendly urban environments.
- Join forces with municipalities in urban design projects across South Africa and Africa.
- Partner with universities and other institutions to conduct new research and develop further insights on design thinking with children, designing playful cities, and making sure children are included in the participation of placemaking and its value.
- Refine our guidelines regarding different adaptations (including young children ages 3-6) and within different environments to increase the adaptability of the approach.
- Pioneer new innovations in urban Africa by partnering with urban designers and practitioners who don't usually include children in their work.
- Deepen the impact of the approach by developing additional guidelines for optional pre- and post-workshop activities, including on-site inquiry and impact assessments.
- Create explicit tie-ins between our workshop and local and international curriculum standards.

We'd love to hear from you! Please reach out to us and start a conversation on our social media platforms!

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<https://www.linkedin.com/company/play-africa-children's-museum/>

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