



HISTORY OF PLAY AFRICA



“ 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 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 physical, cognitive, emotional and social needs as citizens. 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 play in our communities. ”

-Gretchen Wilson-Prangley, founder Play Africa

INTRODUCTION TO PLAY AFRICA

Play Africa Group is a globally recognized children's museum. We make use of public spaces to drive creative learning for children, engagement by parents and cohesion for our larger society. From its base at Johannesburg's iconic Constitution Hill, Play Africa has developed a flexible city-wide museum model, which delivers 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 first dedicated children's museum, Play Africa is 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 have successfully created a model of a well-networked, agile, relevant, and low-cost museum that creates original content to serve 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 completely 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, in many ways, apartheid is a thing of the past. All people have the same rights under the law. But on the ground, the inequalities of apartheid are proving hard to shift. In March, the World Bank said - by any measure - South Africa is one of the most unequal countries in the world.

CREATION OF PLAY AFRICA

I decided I wanted to start a world-class children's museum in Johannesburg.

The key non-negotiables:

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

Rooted in our community, acting as a bridge, this profound investment in children and their families that would help create a more just, more equitable and inclusive city for everyone. We ran workshops with children and parents asked them to imagine this place. We used human-centred design principles. I spoke with children's museum directors around the world about business models – balancing 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 do that, we needed \$26 million dollars.



We thought that would come pretty easily. It didn't.

“ We shared this idea with hundreds of potential funders in South Africa. Finally, after two years of rejection after rejection, two donors committed \$100 thousand dollars a year for three years. Soon after, the city offered us 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, things changed at the city. The city was backing out. They were going to keep the land for a commercial project. When our agreement fell through, one of our donors withdrew their funding. And the other wanted to do the same.

So as a team, we decided two things.

1. What we'd been doing wasn't working. We had to disrupt ourselves -- and move into a new future that was unfamiliar.
2. Children would be at the heart of whatever came next.

So we thought...what if we took our little money left and...

What if we turned everything on its head?

What if we just got started, without a building, by creating Play Africa in the city itself?

So we started prototyping. We asked ourselves, what's the

most we could do with the least amount of money? We got started, and asked children what they liked, and wanted more of. And pretty soon we realised, to help Edward or Imtiaz or Lloyd have a great day, we don't need \$26 million dollars. 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 start up, we were lean and agile. We were intuitive. Each space was different, and we had to adapt at a moment's notice. We called it “radical flexibility.”

The results were magic. In the morning, we would start at 6 a.m. loading up a truck, travel to the site, unpack the truck, set up, run programmes all day, pack it all up, get back and unpack by 6 p.m. It was terribly exhausting, but it was magic.

And we did it again and again. In school halls, in playgrounds, community centres, parks, and on inner city rooftops.

It was then that we realised: our stock of capital was not the cash in the bank, it was in our authentic, trusting relationships with more than 115 community partners, and thousands of children, and parents and teachers.

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“ We had pushed and stretched and tried, and despite all the constraints we encountered, we found a way to deliver on our promise as a museum without walls.

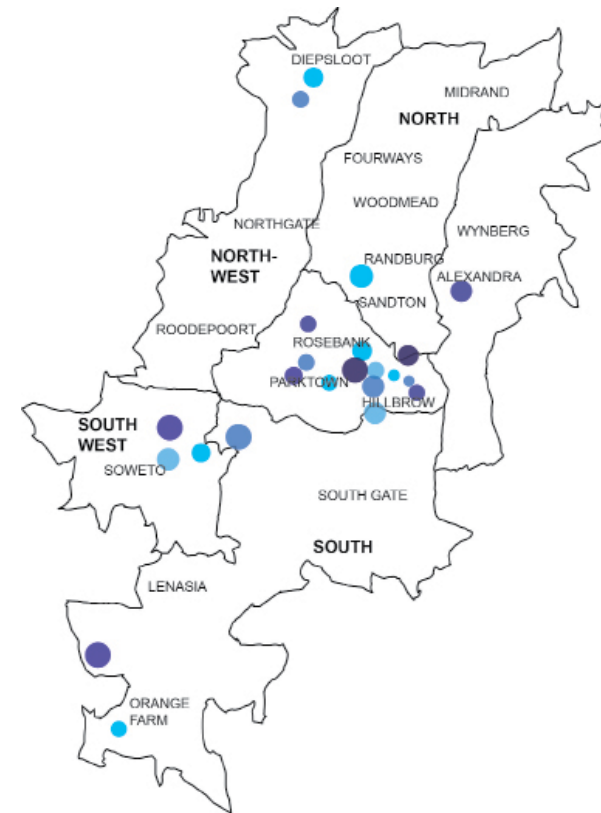
In 2017 Play Africa was invited to move into Constitution Hill, a notorious apartheid-era prison in the inner city that is now seat of the Constitutional Court. We're based just 15 metres from where Nelson Mandela was once incarcerated.

This is how Play Africa is disrupting with children. We're not just disrupting the museum model. 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.

I 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.

(excerpted from a keynote address MuseumNext, June 2018)



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PLACEMAKING PROGRAMMING

Some of the earliest Play Africa programmes centered around engaging children in public spaces. Play Africa aimed to empower children to see public spaces as areas they can safely and happily explore. These Play Africa programmes urged children, and their adults, to re-think and reclaim public spaces.

NATURE HEROES

One of Play Africa's first programmes that drew on this philosophy was Nature Heroes. In this multi-day programme, children were invited to explore a local park, which many of them had not previously visited. We offered them activities to learn 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



Just like other children's museums around the world, Play Africa develops meaningful partnerships with other institutions in our community to advance our mission and have a greater impact through collaboration. The Big Show is an illustrated children's book sprouted from a collaboration between Play Africa, Johannesburg City Parks and Zoos, and Keen Projects. The Big Show, written and illustrated by Pamela Phatsimo-Sunstrum, was written for young children in Johannesburg, aimed at sparking an interest in conservation promoting the importance of park environments in our city.

At the launch of this children's book, Play Africa hosted a programme called Park Detective, inspired by The Big Show, to encourage discovery of the natural world in city parks. Children engaged in activities to learn how to observe the natural world, and how humans make an impact on the natural world.



OPEN STREETS

Play Africa worked with the Cape Town-based organisation Open Streets on developing child safety recommendations and activities for their Johannesburg activation. During the event, public streets were closed to vehicle traffic and various community groups, 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 who and how the streets are used, and imagine how they could be used in the future.



CHILD'S PLAY

As part of its site development work, Play Africa partnered in early 2016 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 Joburg. The compilation of the research and data collected by the students was published in "Child's Play in Architecture: A research and design studio at the Wits School of Architecture & Planning for Play Africa."

Ultimately Play Africa was unable to use the site. However, the insights gleaned from engaging the local community informed Play Africa's move into community-based programmes.



CHILDREN'S PARTICIPATION PROGRAMMING

From its inception, Play Africa has focused on empowering children to recognize 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

PLAY DAY AT MBUYISA MAKHUBU
PRIMARY, IN COLLABORATION WITH
JOHANNESBURG SCHOOL
DISTRICT 12

Play Africa conducted a prototyping Play Day at Mbuyisa Makhubu Primary School in collaboration with Johannesburg School District 12 in Orlando West, Soweto in June 2016. During the event, Play Africa facilitators and volunteers worked with staff from Mbuyisa Makhubu and children to prototype, test and experiment new and existing exhibits such as Magnatiles, Imagination Playground and Fantasy Play. 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 and sparked thinking around the organisation's original Learning Framework.



CHILDREN'S VOICES

Children's Voices is an original Play Africa programme for children ages 7-11. It helps create a new generation of informed, engaged South African citizens who feel empowered to make a positive difference in the world around them, and who are aware of their rights and responsibilities as enshrined in the Constitution. 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', secret voting at a child-sized booth, and an announcement of the election results.



CHILDREN'S COURTROOM

This bespoke child-scale courtroom invites 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.



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. In this programme children engage in activities to foster empathy and understanding of the challenges faced by all children. Children then engage in activities to showcase their shared humanity.



CHILDREN DESIGNING I AM A SCIENTIST

Play Africa's newest programme is around empowering children to see themselves as scientists. Once the initial programme was designed, it was shared with children to gather feedback. Children indicated which aspects they found most interesting, where they had questions, and which areas that wanted to learn more about. The programme designers then took this feedback to refine the programme before sharing it with schools and communities.



EMPOWERING CHILDREN THROUGH DESIGN THINKING

OUR IDEAL WORLD

One particular programme was the inspiration for this virtual toolkit and caught the attention of the Real Play City Challenge. Our Ideal World is a facilitated, 2-hour programme for children aged 7-11, which teaches the central concepts of design thinking for use in tackling real-world challenges. This builds children's confidence as self-directed problem solvers.

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 math) 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

Our Ideal World (Bertrams)

The first iteration of this workshop was conducted with a group of children in a Boy's and Girl's club in Johannesburg. Children shared their perceptions of their communities, including their concerns and worries. They then created prototypes of inventions that could help solve some of the problems they identified.



“ 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! ”



INITIAL PROTOTYPING

Our Ideal World (Orange Grove)

The second iteration of the workshop included collaboration with local community and arts groups. In this multi-day workshop children engaged in placemaking, and also in the development of a dramatic play of their own creation. 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 prototypes for their set. Adults supported children in the development of the life-sized set. The programme was a success in transforming a child-hostile space into a fantastically child-friendly space designed by children.



INITIAL PROTOTYPING

Scaling

Play Africa was awarded a special mention by the Real Play Cities Challenge to scale the Our Ideal World programme. We chose to develop our workshop to be accessible to community groups, urban actors, and child advocates in any setting, and to provide groups with a fun and creative way 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 souracable tools.



PILOTS

Designing with Children

Melusi

The first pilot of this phase occurred at the Melusi Youth Development Organisation (MYDO) in Melusi, an informal settlement in 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 centre.

During the pilot the architecture students modified the workshop and guided children to consider a specific area—the space directly outside the MYDO centre. Throughout the workshop children shared their 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. They are planning an intervention involving the planting of tree avenues in the area, and will endeavor to include children in the next phase of design.



PILOTS

Designing with Children

Lenasia Ext 2

A small community group in Lenasia Extension 2 piloted the workshop. The group was already focused on including children in community improvement, but needed a tool to engage children. 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 children and 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 each other.



PILOTS

Designing with Children

Streetlight Schools

Streetlight Schools, in Jeppestown Johannesburg, approached the workshop differently; they extended 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 3 different grades participated in this process. This allowed teachers to observe the development of design thinking and creativity over the years as students become more familiar with the Design Thinking process.



PILOTS

Designing with Children

Mamelodi

The Mamelodi pilot was conducted by a Co-Design studio of students from the University of Pretoria. The team adapted the workshop for high school students from a local school. 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 on the way to building a piece 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.

This workshop is a tool that can be used by people of all levels of experience to create a playful learning experience for children that also empowers children 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.

At Play Africa we want others to see the value in children's insights, and harness this creativity from children to make positive changes in your community.

