

## A creative buzz in Makers' Valley: artists and entrepreneurs turn decayed Johannesburg neighbourhood into inclusive economy hub

by Andrew Thompson

Something is happening in East Johannesburg. This is a large area of the inner-city that covers Bertrams, Troyeville, New Doornfontein, Judith's Paarl and Lorentzville. It has suffered a process of urban decay but is now showing signs of revival with growing activity by new businesses, residents, and social and creative entrepreneurs. Previously abandoned old factories and buildings such as the Victoria Yards complex are being used again. Those involved include artists, artisans, urban gardeners, carpenters, auto-mechanics, shoemakers, metal and woodworkers, poets, clothing designers, and youth workers. Unemployment remains high, with pockets of poverty and new development co-existing side by side. The area still has informal settlements, but also houses the global headquarters of Nando's, the fast-food chain. Most importantly, the wave of new entrepreneurs is helping re-brand the entire area, which is now being called Makers' Valley, defining itself as "the heart of Johannesburg's social and creative enterprise". Some see it as an example of an emerging 'new economy', built around encouraging creativity, sharing, learning, participation and mutual support for positive change.



© Maker's Valley

Pretty much at the centre of a complex network of entrepreneurs, organisations and partnerships is a creative social enterprise called [Makers' Valley](#) which is involved in a



project supported by the British Council's DICE Fund to strengthen development of the area. The aim is to offer training, mentorship, and seed funding to women and youth who have been excluded from mainstream economic opportunities.

Simon Sizwe Mayson of Makers' Valley explains that the British Council funding comes in through a local alliance called the Johannesburg Inner City Partnership (JICP). In turn Makers' Valley is managing the project on its behalf and helping individual enterprises scale their activities. Among them are 94 Colours (youth focused events), Reimagination (social work with high school students), Anchor (work with 'not employed or in education or training' – NEET youth) and the Curriculum Development Project (CDP – a collective of women artists and makers).

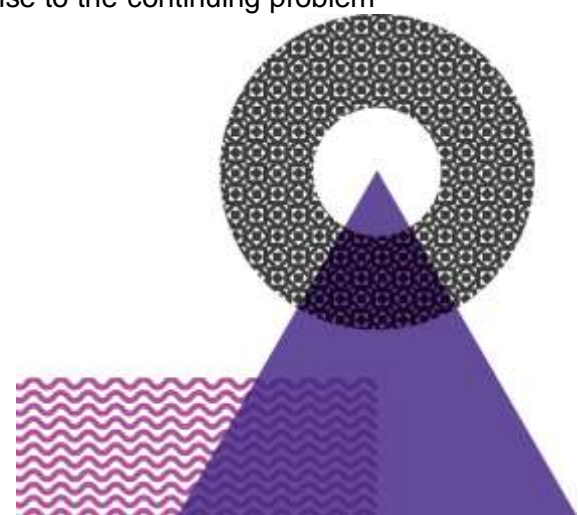
To assist the overall development of the Makers' Valley concept, the DICE Fund has enabled a link with a long running successful project in the UK city of Plymouth. There, the [Real Ideas Organisation](#) has over a period of 15 years helped build up a thriving social and creative enterprise scene. Ed Whitelaw, Head of Enterprise and Regeneration at Real Ideas, explains "A bit like Victoria Yards in Johannesburg, we have venues, we have a bakery, we have offices, we have artists; work spaces, we sell tea, coffee, floor space, weddings, events – real things the customers understand." Ed travelled to Johannesburg to take part in intensive workshops with Makers' Valley and the organisations it was seeking to support.

At least three big themes emerged through this partnership (or through Ed's experience in Plymouth?). The first was that so-called infrastructure organisations are necessary but need to be lean and highly focused on the needs of their members. The Plymouth Social Enterprise Network (PSEN) has acted as a kind of federation, representing and promoting the needs of its members to the city authorities and other stakeholders. But Ed warns that such networks have the potential to go horribly wrong. This happens when they build up their own bureaucracy, staff, and overheads which in the worst case leads to perverse incentives, putting the membership organisations before the members and ultimately committing "infanticide" - competing with their member organisations for resources. Instead, they should ideally have what he calls a graphene structure, named after the molecule which is "flat, flexible, highly connected, strong and stable".

The graphene model certainly chimes with Simon's approach. He says Makers Valley aims to be "a support team which does minimal work itself; mostly what it is doing is supporting its partners who are actually the implementing agents. MV has also used workshops to help build a "theory of change" trying to find the optimum balance between loose and more structured collaboration."

A second point is that "gentrification" is undesirable. Gentrification happens when a previously neglected area becomes highly fashionable. This triggers a big inflow of wealthier people, property prices rise, and this leads eventually to the expulsion of the original communities. Simon says, "we need to be careful about how we market ourselves, we don't want to create displacement in the neighbourhood." Instead he wants to focus on filling empty business spaces and old warehouses, creating a response to the continuing problem of unemployment. Ed says in Plymouth RIO has tried to avoid "falling into the obvious traps like quick gentrification, which doesn't seem to solve social problems, it just moves them round."

The third point is related to marketing and promotion. Plymouth was able to win recognition from Social Enterprise UK as the country's one of the first "social enterprise city". At one level recognition was no more than "winning a badge" but



it helped focus attention on what had been achieved: “We can point to £6-7m in additional investment for the city, we have 200 social enterprises that employ 9,000 people directly, with a turnover of just over half a billion pounds -- so all of a sudden that becomes quite an influential lobby”. The idea is that Makers’ Valley could take a similar route, becoming recognised as “the first social and creative enterprise city in South Africa. That would help and reinforce promotional activities. A festival had been planned for March to attract 10,000 visitors but had to be put on hold because of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Other themes also emerged. RIO has been struck by the innovative approach of Makers’ Valley partners. 94 Colours, for example, is run by two young founders who have combined an eclectic combination of youth work, tour guiding, marketing, upcycling, and fund raising to help victims of the Mozambique floods, all with the kind of lean and efficient structure that it likens to the graphene molecule. As a result, RIO has raised the money to bring them to the UK to explain their approach. Keneilwe Manganya, an MV project manager says the DICE programme has also had unexpected benefits, “fostering new partnerships and collaborations among our partners which we hadn’t expected to happen.”

