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ON URBAN FORESTS

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*Green Horizons: Shaping the Future Resilience of African Cities through Urban Forests*

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Food and Agriculture  
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United Nations



# Towards resilient cities: Private sector partnerships for sustainable urban parks in Africa

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# THE XTREME PARK MAKEOVER

PROJECTS, REVIEW  
AND FUTURE  
2007 - 2023

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The crises of African cities and public spaces  
in present and historical context

New Directions

Xtreme Parks in Johannesburg

1. Fast-tracking parks
2. Hype and private sector support
3. Addressing the apartheid geography of parks
4. The soccer World Cup context
5. Consultation and engagements



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### **Objective of the Review:**

- Examine contemporary challenges and approaches related to parks and public spaces in African contexts.

### **Focus on 'Xtreme Park' Concept:**

- Study the 'Xtreme Park' concept implemented in Johannesburg (2007-2015).
- Share lessons learned for potential revitalization, improvement, or further development.

### **Case Studies of 'Xtreme Park Makeover' Programme:**

- Evaluate and document selected case studies:
- *Wilgeheuwel Park* in Roodepoort as an inclusive and accessible public space.
- *Rotunda Park* in Turffontein as a socially integrated development.
- *Mongameli Park* in Ivory Park as a co-management with the private sector.

### **Analysis Goals:**

- Identify successes to build upon.
- Extract lessons from challenges faced.

### **Purpose of the Review:**

- Contribute insights for imagining and developing contemporary African public spaces.



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# The crises of African cities and public spaces in present and historical context

## **Contemporary Challenges in African Cities and Public Spaces:**

- Increased urbanization, deepening inequalities, and ecological destruction.

## **Opportunities and Challenges of Urbanization:**

- Economic and income opportunities from rapid urbanization.
- The increased demand for services, transport, education, and housing poses sustainability challenges.
- Balancing population growth while protecting the environment, addressing crime, ensuring safety, and fostering inclusivity and social well-being.

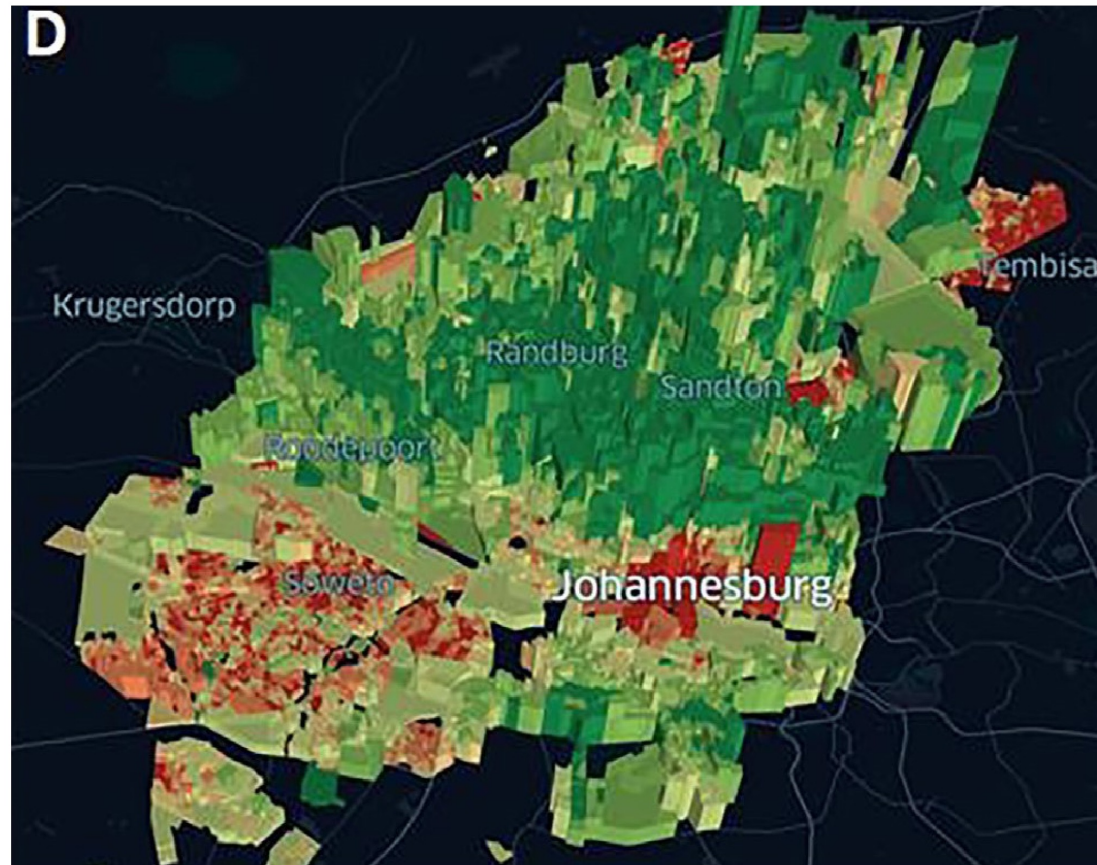
## **Need for Transformational Urban Planning and Governance:**

- Addressing unplanned and unregulated city growth to prevent increased poverty.
- Overcoming the limitations of existing urban plans rooted in colonialism and biased towards the elite.

## **Historical and Deep-Rooted Challenges:**

- Lack of integration of existing settlements and cultures in the establishment of South African cities during colonialism.

# The crises of African cities and public spaces in present and historical context



## Marginalization in Urban Spaces:

- Quantitative (i.e. distributive) and qualitative (i.e. integrative) disparities in 'Green Apartheid'

Relationship between relative street greenness (colours) and income (heights) in the City of Johannesburg (Venter et al 2020:9).



# New Directions



## **Globally, Adoption of the 'New Urban Agenda' (NUA) in 2016:**

- Global recognition that green public spaces serve social, societal, economic, and environmental purposes.
- Contributes to fostering prosperity and quality of life for all.

## **SA Post-Colonial/Apartheid Transformations:**

- Complete turnover of residents in the Inner City and surrounding areas.
- The Inner City became an important immigrant point of entry.
- Ongoing challenges in conceiving and planning for the social and economic dynamics of new communities.



# Xtreme Parks in Johannesburg



## 'Xtreme Park Makeover' Initiative Overview:

- Experiment by the City of Johannesburg through the department of City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ).
- Ran from 2007 to 2015, producing eight urban parks in total.

## Inspiration and Concept:

- Modeled after the popular reality TV series to create fast-tracked urban spaces for sports, recreation, children activities, and eco-conservation.

## Recognition and Lack of Evaluation:

- Gained global recognition as a novel approach to park and public space creation.
- Despite its popularity, the initiative was not seriously evaluated – mostly through initial intentions rather than post-occupancy lessons.



# Xtreme Parks in Johannesburg

## CONTEXTS AND OBJECTIVES

### Fast-Tracking Parks:

- Aimed at quickly creating urban parks.

### Hype, Image, and Cross-Sector Support:

- Focused on generating excitement, building an attractive image, and garnering support across sectors.

### Addressing Apartheid Geography of Parks:

- Targeted the historical disparity in the distribution of parks during colonialism/apartheid.

### Soccer World Cup Context:

- Emerged within the context of the 2010 soccer World Cup (e.g. Fan Fest parks.), possibly leveraging the event for development.

### Community Involvement:

- Emphasized involving the community in the park creation process (i.e. the '24 hour' launch day activities).

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### Xtreme Parks in Johannesburg

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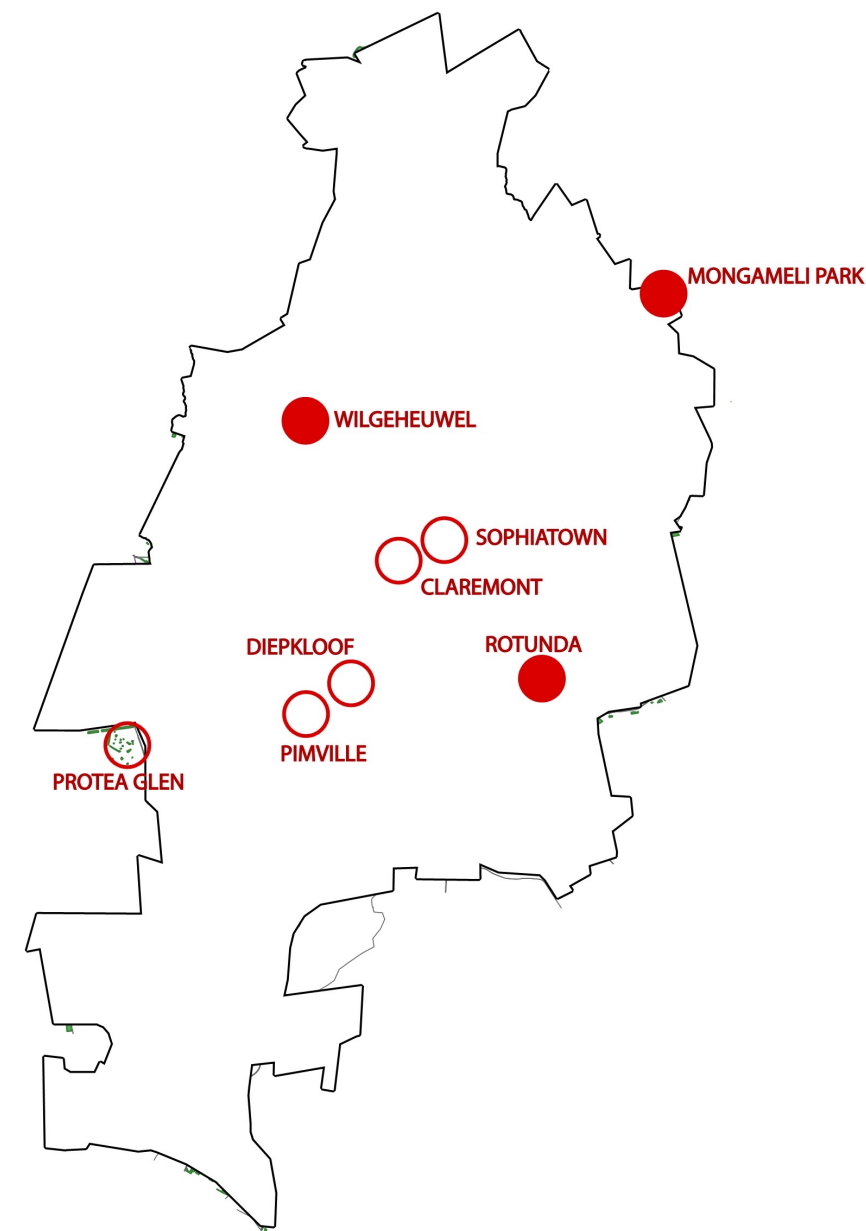
## Xtreme Parks

Eight parks were developed in Johannesburg under the 'Xtreme Park Makeover' programme.

These were:

- 1. Wilgehuewel Park, 2007**
2. Diepkloof Park, 2008
3. Protea Glen Park, 2009
4. Claremont Park, 2010
5. Pimville Park, 2011
- 6. Mongameli Park, 2011**
7. Sophiatown Park, 2013
- 8. Rotunda Park, 2015**

The '24 hour' launch day implementation varied between 48 hours and 6 hours between the parks. Three of these - *Wilgehuewel park*, *Mongameli park*, and *Rotunda park* - are explored as case studies.





# Wilgeheuwel Park, Roodepoort

## Location:

- Located in the Wilgeheuwel suburb west of Johannesburg.

## Site History:

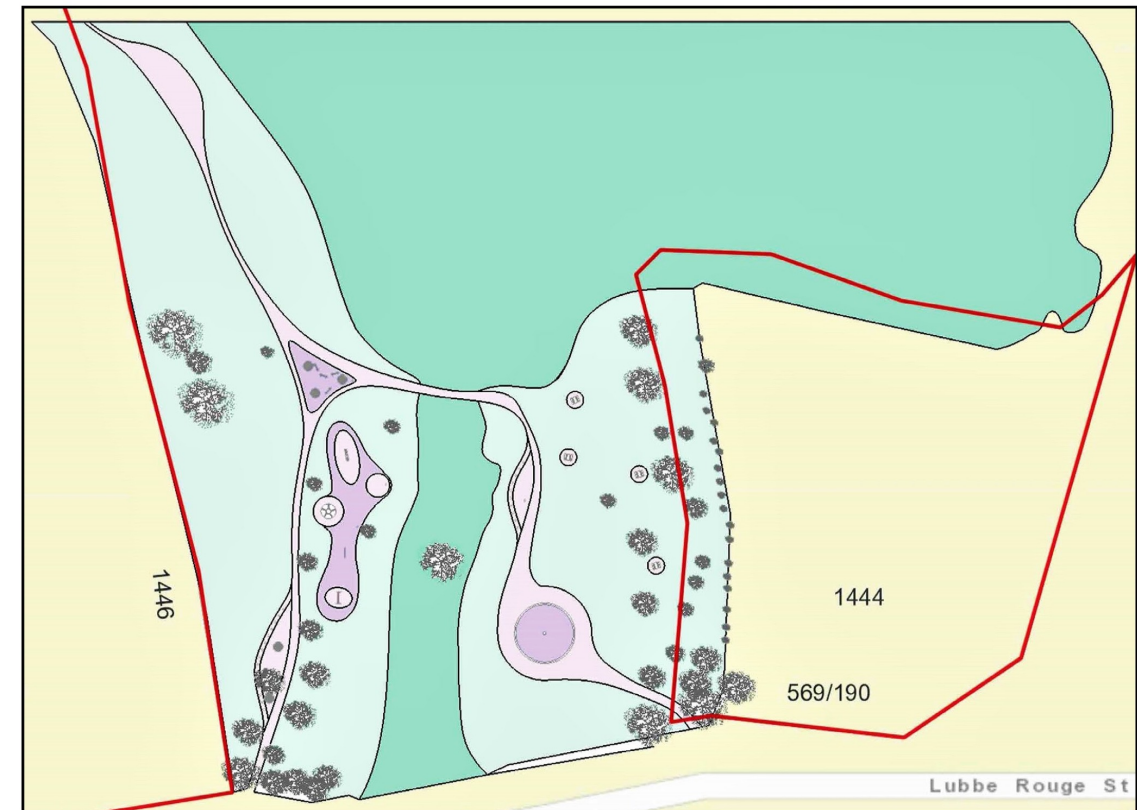
- 1.22 ha site previously part of a natural wetland system.
- Surrounded by town housing estates on the east and west sides.

## Launch Day Implementation:

- Completed as the first Xtreme park in June 2007.
- Approximately 200 workers accomplished the final implementation within 24 hours.

## Park Features:

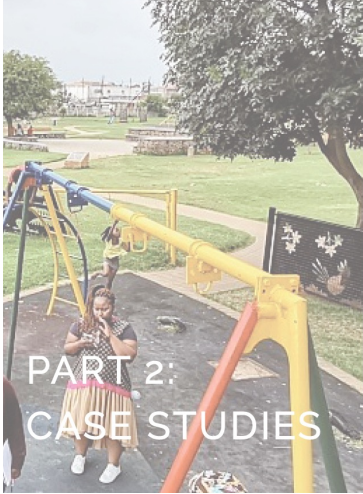
- Transformed from an open piece of land into a fully developed park.
- Features include lights, lawns, tree sculptures, pathways, trees, play area, benches, picnic tables, braai areas, and a fountain.



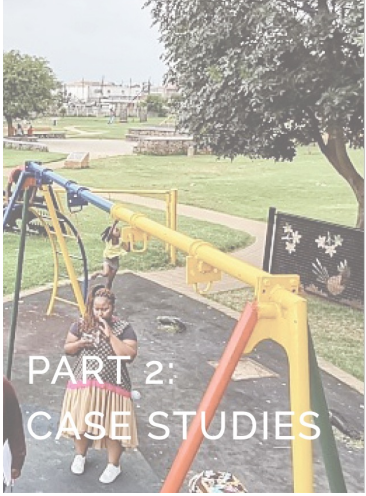


# Wilgeheuwel Park, Roodepoort

The '24 hour' implementation of Wilgeheuwel Park in June 2007.







# Wilgeheuwel Park, Roodepoort

## CONSIDERATIONS: (1) WETLANDS AS PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

### Location and Rationale:

- Not in a historically disadvantaged area, contrary to the typical focus of the program.

### Urban Environment and Pedestrian Access:

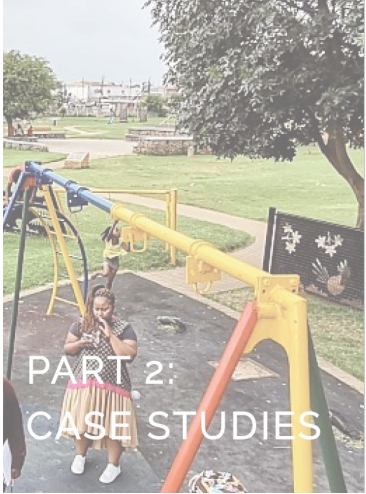
- However, critical in an urban environment dominated by cars and lacking in pedestrian-friendly infrastructure.
- Developed on leftover spaces created by natural wetlands within the built-up fabric.

### Case Study Significance:

- Serves as a valuable case study for creating POS in urban areas experiencing similar urbanization and expansion, where access to POS and the natural environment is limited, degraded, or neglected.







# Wilgeheuwel Park, Roodepoort

## CONSIDERATIONS: (1) WETLANDS AS PUBLIC OPEN SPACE

### Challenges with Neglected Wetlands:

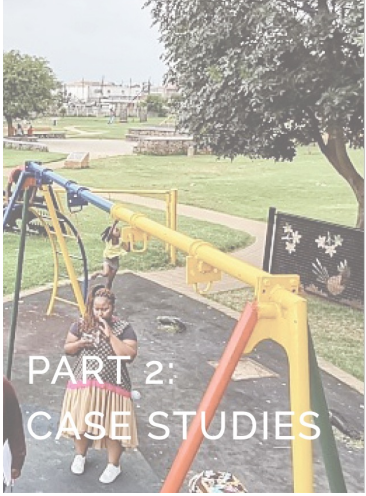
- Subject to flooding during rainy seasons, impacting nearby houses.
- Lack of adequate responsive and resilient strategies, especially during flooding periods.

### Potential Strategies to Consider:

- Exploring strategies for making use of neglected wetland spaces as opportunities for POS in urban planning.
- E.g.: Developing a network of raised platforms and walkways to ensure access to POS during flooding.
- E.g.: Increasing usable area by covering a larger land area during flooding.







# Wilgeheuwel Park, Roodepoort

## CONSIDERATIONS: (2) CONSULTATION AND ENGAGEMENTS

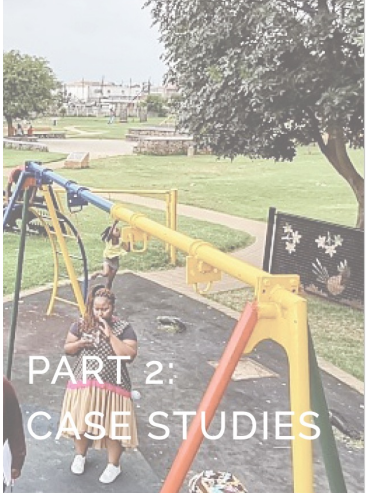
### Observation:

- Despite media and literature emphasis on the Xtreme parks program, little to no engagement with the local community.
- Intra-departmental City consultation also appears to have been lacking.

### Impact on Planning and Design:

- Lack of consultation may have resulted in a focus largely on children's activities.
- Engagement could have informed more diverse and *cross-generational uses* of the park.
- Consultation might have guided the strategic *placement of facilities* such as picnic tables and braai areas, that are scarcely used.





# Wilgeheuwel Park, Roodepoort

## CONSIDERATIONS: (3) SOCIAL RESPONSIVENESS

### Social Stresses and Homelessness:

- *Homelessness* and other social stresses are evident in the park

### Recyclers and Their Impact:

- *Recyclers* stationed on one side of the park contribute to challenges and may affect the park's attractiveness to local residents.

### Security Concerns:

- Reported incidents of *muggings* in the park raise security concerns.

### Broader Social Context:

- Challenges at Wilgeheuwel Park are not unique but reflect a larger social context affecting all urban public spaces and parks in Johannesburg.

### Need for Comprehensive Planning and Management:

- Highlights the importance of social responsiveness in planning and managing urban public spaces to address broader societal challenges.

### Need for Workable and Humane Strategies:

- Planning and management strategies must be both workable and humane to address social challenges.
- Balance inclusivity with effective management.
- Address the needs of diverse users, without exclusion based on socio-economic status.

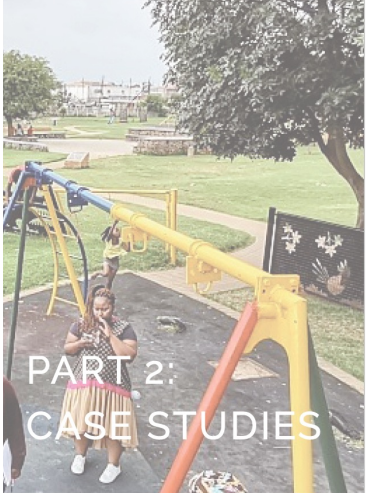


# Wilgeheuwel Park, Roodepoort

## CONSIDERATIONS: (4) MAINTENANCE CONCERNS

### Core Concern:

- Maintenance and sustainability of facilities emerge as a core concern across all studied parks.
- Situated in a relatively well-off suburb, was well looked after initially, but noticeable changes over the years in the park's maintenance.
- E.g.: a once-attractive and popular fountain for kids is no longer working.







# Mongameli Park, Ivory Park

## **Location:**

- Situated on Boshoff Road in Ivory Park, a densely populated and largely informal township in the northeast of the City of Johannesburg.

## **Density and Character of Ivory Park:**

- Extremely dense area with around 20,020 persons per km<sup>2</sup>.
- One of ten parks in Ivory Park managed by JCPZ.
- Designated as one of JCPZ's three priority "flagship parks" in the area.
- Borders Ivory Park Primary School, and is frequently used by school children.

## **Importance in the Community:**

- Significantly contributes to the limited availability of large public open spaces in the densely populated area.







## Mongameli Park, Ivory Park

### Private sector funding:

- The project was a once-off public-private partnership between JCPZ and MTN.
- MTN approached JCPZ.
- No longer-term private involvement beyond implementation.



### Consultation and engagements:

- Like Wilgeheuwel Park, was little local stakeholder engagement.
- Hence planning and design could have been better informed.
- Conflicting uses and tensions exist.
- E.g.: Gender conflicts – older women sat on the floor far from adult men that occupied the seating areas; and could not use the park at night because there are no lights. Young women did not dwell in the park.
- E.g.: Generational conflicts between school children and older men.
- Makeshift paths and entrances at variance to formal paths and entrances.
- These may have emerged and been highlighted in a participation process.

# Mongameli Park, Ivory Park

## Planning and Integration:

- Although a Flagship park and therefore given high priority, appears to be little integration with other Ivory Park frameworks.

## Maintenance:

- As a Flagship park, maintained on a weekly basis.
- With 24-hour permanent security. But no water or toilets.
- Still evidence of theft/vandalism evident.



Despite 24-hour security, there is still evidence of theft/vandalism.







# Rotunda Park, Turffontein

## Historical Background:

- The upgrade of Rotunda Park in Turffontein, Johannesburg South, in 2015 marked the culmination of JCPZ's Xtreme parks series developed almost annually since 2007.

## Diverse Activity Offerings:

- In contrast to the park at Wilgeheuveld, the upgraded Rotunda Park in Johannesburg South offered a diverse range of activities catering to different age groups.
- The upgraded park included: Outdoor play areas, catering to multiple generations, Active sporting areas, gym area, Entrance enhancements, Pathways and a fitness track, Picnic shelters, Cycling track.







## Rotunda Park, Turffontein

### Planning Integration:

- Since 2013, the last years of the Xtreme parks model of public space-making, it intersected with the CoJ's new and ambitious "Corridors of Freedom" (CoF) strategy.
- In line with the CoF vision, Turffontein's Rotunda Park was identified for the 'Xtreme Park Makeover' programme in 2015, as a strategic open space to support future mixed-use densification projects.
- First time 'Xtreme Parks' worked in tandem with a clear and deliberate city-wide strategic vision for Johannesburg, rather than a mandate focused on its parks only.
- Enabled an integration of the immediate-impact projects of the Xtreme parks model with longer term goals and vision of the CoF.





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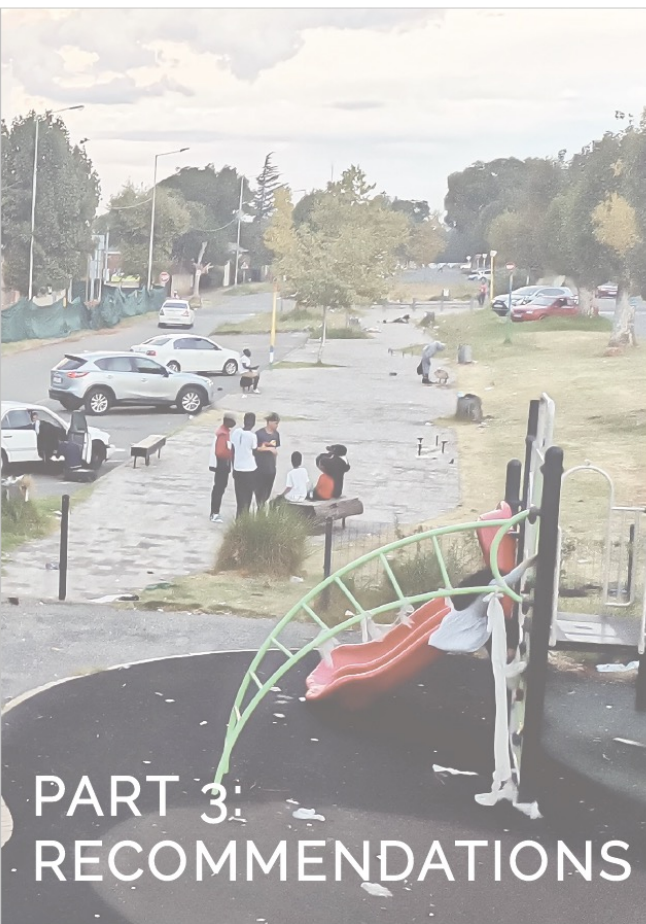
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## Looking back, looking forward and building institutional capacity

### **Period and Characteristics:**

- 'Xtreme Park Makeover' program ran from 2007 to 2015.
- Shared characteristics of speed and hype, contributing to successes, especially during Johannesburg's restructuring into a single metropolitan authority and the 2010 FIFA World Cup period.

### **Shifts in Priorities:**

- While speed and hype were once high priorities, many City practitioners interviewed no longer consider them as such.

### **Diversity in Contexts:**

Despite common threads, Xtreme parks were diverse in urban, environmental, and social contexts.

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### **CASE STUDY 1: WILGEHEUWEL XTREME PARK**

#### **Innovative Wetland Transformation:**

- Wilgeheuwel Xtreme Park transformed a wetland into Public Open Space (POS).
- Innovation lies in considering both the urban human-made setting and natural systems.

#### **Relevance Today and Future:**

- Such an approach remains highly relevant today, addressing the need for recreational and social space alongside ecological restoration.
- Particularly significant with growing concerns about climate change and limited resources.



#### **Applicability Beyond Wilgeheuwel:**

- Applicable not only in fragmented and car-dominated conurbations like Wilgeheuwel but also in addressing polluted wetlands in Johannesburg within POS.





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### **CASE STUDY 2: IVORY PARK XTREME PARK**

#### **Securing POS:**

- Ivory Park Xtreme Park plays an important role in securing POS in the extremely dense and stressed context of Ivory Park.

#### **Recent Innovations in Green Spaces:**

- In addition to securing and maintaining green spaces, examples like End Street North Park and Gilfillan Park in Johannesburg inner-city showcase consultative and collaborative processes – bringing diverse life and activities into green spaces.

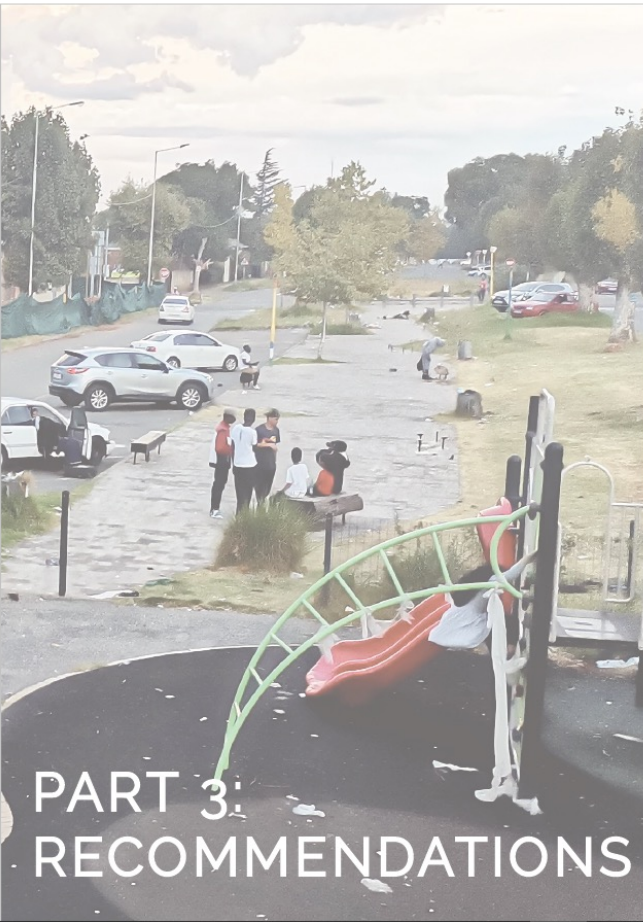


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### **CASE STUDY 3: ROTUNDA PARK PRECINCT**

#### **Planning Integration and Impact:**

- Visionary integration of immediate and mid-term goals with long-term strategies.
- Highlighted the need for spatial planning integration to make a wider impact.
- Emphasized the crucial roles that parks and Public Open Spaces (POS) play in this integration.







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### **GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS: CONTEXTS**

#### **Contextual Variety:**

- The Xtreme Parks demonstrate that parks and POS in cities like Johannesburg operate in diverse contexts, serving ecological, social, and developmental purposes.

#### **Vision and Mandate for the Future:**

- The importance of developing a vision and mandate for the future of Johannesburg's parks and POS, aligned with ecological, social, or developmental goals.

#### **A New African Direction:**

- The dissipation of the 'Xtreme Park Makeover' program and the 'Corridors of Freedom' program left a relative vacuum in the identity of JCPZ and City of Johannesburg (CoJ).
- The review emphasized the poignancy of a new African direction in crafting an exciting vision for POS in the next phase.
- Opportunity to evaluate, extract benefits, and build upon past examples for future development.



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### **GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS: VISION**

#### **Key Challenge:**

- The need for an overarching vision, strategic direction, and development of appropriate approaches and best practices.
- Should guide short/mid-term initiatives (e.g. public-private partnerships)

#### **Secondary Concerns:**

- While secondary concerns were highlighted and can be addressed, the key focus remains on the larger vision and strategic direction.

#### **Moving Forward – Reframing Public Space Models:**

- Local case studies exist for developing context-relevant public space models, but these need reframing to align with future priorities.

#### **Evaluation, not replication:**

- The need to evaluate, extract benefits, and build upon the ecological, social, or developmental advantages offered by past projects rather than replicating the 'Xtreme' model itself.





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### **GENERAL RECOMMENDATIONS: INSTITUTIONAL**

#### **Strategic Role of 'Centre on African Public Spaces' (CAPS):**

- CAPS, launched in 2022 by CoJ in collaboration with African cities, civil society organizations, and international bodies, is strategically positioned to address public space-related concerns.

#### **Knowledge and Institutional Support:**

- CAPS can support the coordination and development of new knowledge, institutional structures, practices, cooperative governance, and inclusive decision-making.

#### **Partnerships for Future Development:**

- Collaboration with entities in government or society, including CAPS, can facilitate the development of new strategic directions and best practices in line with evolving priorities.

# Thank You.

