Story by Terry Kurgan
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South Africa's response to the migration that is transforming cities like Johannesburg appears to be far less than welcoming, and official and popular responses to immigration are testing its commitment to tolerance and the rule of law.[1] This stands in stark contrast to the inclusive and high-minded principles of our Constitution, the "rhetoric of inclusive cosmopolitanism"[2] and the professed desire of policy makers to embrace and to be embraced by Africa.

Hotel Yeoville is a new collaborative public art project in progress sited in Yeoville, an old suburb on the eastern edge of the inner city of Johannesburg. The project is about migration and the reconfiguration of the city and aims to make visible – through a range of media, site specific cultural interventions and public participation processes – a social map of this neglected inner city neighborhood that is home, of sorts, to a largely invisible community of migrants from all over the continent. The first phase of the project is an engagement with an immigrant community and their web culture via the Internet cafes on the Yeoville high street.

I was first brought into contact with the issue of migration through a previous project called Park Pictures[3] based in Joubert Park, a rare public space and business territory to a large community of street photographers in the dense inner city of Johannesburg. Since the demise of apartheid there has been a deluge of migration to the centre of the city, with large numbers of South African migrants and African émigrés claiming it as their own. While Park Pictures was not so much about migration as it was about the complex and elusive nature of all photographic transactions, I came into contact with many people who have come to live in Johannesburg from elsewhere on the continent. Their stories inevitably described their harsh experience of xenophobia, marginalisation, discrimination, and human rights violations.

Two years later, on a photographic commission in the suburb of Yeoville, which is largely populated by African immigrants and refugees, I was once again struck by the adverse circumstances in which non-national migrants and refugees try and go about their lives in this country, but also by the extraordinary level of education, entrepreneurial skills and tendency to risk-taking that they bring with them. Whereas many South Africans arriving in central Johannesburg are from rural areas and peri-urban townships, "more than 95% of non-nationals have spent their lives in cities or towns before leaving for South Africa. Foreign migrants also have disproportionately higher levels of technical and academic qualifications and bring with them skills needed to survive in cities: entrepreneurial chutzpah and the skill to talk and bribe their way out of hairy encounters with state agents ".[4]

Walking through the streets of Yeoville, I began to think about a new project that might reflect and make visible the presence and experience of communities of recent migrants in public discourse. Until the early 1990s Yeoville was a densely populated working class, student and immigrant white neighborhood. It was always the place that white immigrants started from before they began their journey north and upwards into the middle classes. With the advent of democracy and the demise of the Group Areas Act, the character of the area underwent dramatic transformation. Its proximity to employment and the city centre made it the preferred destination for a predominantly black, poor and working class population rapidly moving to the city from the far-flung black townships, rural areas of the South African hinterland and elsewhere on the African continent. White residents slowly began to move away taking their business and money with them. Property owners and landlords began to neglect their properties because of uncertainty about their value in the context of this radical change. They also exploited the vulnerable and tenuous status of their new tenants, massively hiking rents and neglecting to provide essential services. This made rents unaffordable, which led to subletting and overcrowding; and overcrowding, in turn, has led to excessive strain on buildings and their services. Buildings are now largely in a terrible state of decay and illegal new inner-city tenants choose not to complain about deteriorating conditions for fear of eviction.

Currently, the majority of Yeoville's inhabitants are micro communities from countries like Nigeria, Cameroon, Angola, Botswana, DRC, Ethiopia, Somalia, Ghana, Ivory Coast, Liberia, Malawi, Zambia and Zimbabwe amongst others. The ability of these residents to gain and retain access to the most basic conditions of everyday urban life is further undermined by a widely-documented, uncertain, corrupt and poorly managed immigration policy. In spite of laws that provide them with certain of these rights, refugees and asylum seekers are denied access to basic health services, housing and education; faced with arbitrary arrests, detentions, extortion, xenophobic

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attacks and more. They are also generally unable to access the most basic of banking services, let alone loans or other forms of credit. They are made scapegoats for a host of social ills from crime to unemployment, isolated and excluded from mainstream South African society and the formal economy, and their dominant engagement is with each other and with home in far away places. The heterogeneity of the population has worked against any sense of community or the possibility of collective engagement. Xenophobia and fear of the other are dominant themes in public discourse and in official public policy.

In September 2007 we started our first research process and I have undertaken to lead a two-year project which will ultimately produce a body of research, a website, an exhibition and a publication. The Hotel Yeoville project is partnering with the Wits Forced

Migration Studies Programme (FMSP) and is a close collaboration between a mix of people who work across many different disciplines and occupations, hailing from South Africa and elsewhere on the continent and the globe. The team includes multimedia artists, photographers, urban planners, social scientists, community activists, Internet café owners and their personnel, an information architect, a web designer and a web developer.

Our first process was to conduct site visits towards an understanding of the social and spatial infrastructure of the neighborhood, engaging in conversation with residents and small business owners on the high street. The unusual density of Internet cafes on Yeoville's main Rocky Street was an immediately striking phenomenon. We counted 20 in just four blocks and all of them filled with customers at every terminal.

The term "Internet café" usually evokes an image of world travelers checking on their email and their lives back at home. In this context however, they are much more than that. They are places where you can make long distance phone calls, have your CV typed, commission somebody to do research for you, have all kinds of forms filled in, or a job application photocopied; you can hire a DVD, order a plate of food, have your hair cut and styled or find out about places to stay and routes through the city and its authorities. Café income is of necessity produced in multiple ways; customers using the Internet to communicate with family and friends in far-flung homes across the continent bring in the least of it. People use the cafés to be with familiar people and share news and information. Most of the cafés are owned and run by foreigners and have very specific national identities providing the link between people living in South Africa and the places that they have come from. Internet cafés in Yeoville seem to be integrated into the lives of the people living around them; many customers making repeat visits at intervals throughout the day.

The spin-off of this need creates interesting community spaces and we discussed introducing our project through a customised website aimed at the online community of Yeoville. Our thinking here was to introduce a cultural space and/or a cultural project in such a way that it would not be not separated from existing social infrastructure and contemporary everyday practices. In order to do so we began a process of negotiation between partners, participants, stakeholders, audience and ourselves through whom the project began to take shape.

In a modest way, the website idea was conceived of as a strategic intervention to assist the residents of Yeoville in building social networks and social capital, decreasing their isolation, increasing their visibility and accessing the hidden resources of their own community. But we were also thinking about it as a cultural object; a site that might produce itself through largely user-generated functionality, simultaneously producing a social map of the territory our project engages with and producing the raw material necessary for the next two phases of our project; the design and production of an exhibition and a book publication.

Preliminary discussions with the owners and managers of Internet cafés were very interesting and encouraging.

They liked the idea, or were curious enough to generously agree to host our research process. We gathered together a research team of a mix of South African and immigrant researchers mostly resident in Yeoville and designed a series of research tools comprising paper and online questionnaires aimed at Internet café users, Internet café owner/managers and staff, and people on the street.

Internet café users were friendly and responsive, and our questionnaires produced a sense of a typical research persona and their Internet needs. We discovered that – contrary to the popular notion about developing countries that there is a huge digital divide between rich and poor people – the Yeoville community, in fact, maximise technology as a survival strategy with hundreds of users completely disrupting that digital divide idea. It revealed how available technology in developing contexts is already being used and is key to the ways in which people manage to survive, regardless of the apparent lack of infrastructure and first world notions of "developed" (one person, one PC).[5] For the people in these communities "digital divide" is a purely academic notion while they actively embrace and share technology to get on with their lives.

We then worked on designing the Hotel Yeoville website based upon the political importance of the minutely-observed details of personal everyday life. We decided to design the site's navigation through six everyday life categories; to have a site that largely produces itself as a cultural object through user generated content and interactivity. To add useful resources and to include playful interactivity that might generate social mapping. We then went back to the Internet café owners and managers for feedback.

The website is now in the final process of being built. The Internet café owners have, in principal, agreed to make Hotel Yeoville the home page on each of their terminals. We hope to go live with the first iteration of the site soon.

While art can't change the world, it's often the way society holds a conversation with itself about itself, provoking thoughts and questions, and holding up to the light or placing in relief a range of pressing global socio-political conditions. In this first phase of the project, we hope to generate those conversations and to consider the implication of these reflections for the decisions of policymakers, city planners and designers while drawing on the lived experience of urban residents themselves.

Endnotes

1. See Loren B. Landau, 2004. *The Laws of (In) Hospitality: Black Africans in South Africa.* The Forced Migration Studies Working Paper Series. Working Paper# 7. Accessed 18 January 2008 http://migration.org.za/research/downloads/papers/7_landau.pdf
2. Ibid
3. See www.terrykurgan.com – SITE section
4. See Caroline Kihato and Loren B. Landau, 2006. *The Uncaptured Urbanite: Migration and State Power in Johannesburg* Studies Working Paper Series. Working Paper# 25. Accessed 18 January 2008. http://migration.org.za/research/downloads/papers/25_kihatolandau.pdf
5. See Jason Hobbs and Tegan Bristow, 2007. *Communal computing and shared spaces of usage: a study of Internet cafes in developing contexts.* Accessed 21 November 2007. http://www.jh-01.com/research/communal_computing_shared_spaces_of_use.pdf

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