

VISUALISATION STUDIOS FOR SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION: A PRACTICE NOTE

DATE: NOVEMBER 2021



Contents

Background	3
Pilot Studio in eThekweni	3
Finding participants	4
Engagements	4
Group-making sessions	6
One-on-one.....	6
DIY homework sessions	7
Communication	8
Reflections from the pilot process.....	9
Visualisation Studios	9
Scheduled studios	9
Introductory sessions.....	9
Open sessions	11
Outcomes.....	14
Online vs In-person	15
Reflections on the Visualisation Studios Process.....	15
Recommendations.....	16

Figures

Figure 1: Engagement process for the pilot studio.....	4
Figure 2: Process of the first engagement	5
Figure 3: Process of the second engagement	5
Figure 4: Participants building their future city from objects around their home.....	6
Figure 5: The personality of the city – descriptors or adjectives that give the city a personality.....	6
Figure 6: Three home studio exercises	7
Figure 7: eThekweni pilot studio sessions	8
Figure 10: Local pick-up exercise (Ekurhuleni).....	9
Figure 11: Trash and treasure exercise (eThekweni)	10
Figure 12: Visualisation developed in the session from participant inputs (Ekurhuleni).....	10
Figure 13: Visualisation developed in the session from participant inputs (Ekurhuleni & Tshwane).....	11
Figure 14: Understanding perspectives from inside the home.....	12
Figure 15: The future city built with household items (Tshwane)	12
Figure 16: Artefacts representing things participants would like to change/see more of in their city (Cape Town)	14

Background

The South African planning system is laden with democratic processes aimed at elevating the voices of citizens and ensuring that stakeholders buy into municipal development initiatives. However, despite IDP consultations and community participation structures, these efforts by municipalities and cities often fall short of being truly inclusive and participatory. Dissent voices are lost in the process, while politics and community dynamics reduce the ability of citizen voices to be logged in the system.

South Africa's policy aspirations seek to spatially integrate cities, to transform them from unequal and inefficient spaces to more prosperous and sustainable human settlements (COGTA, 2016). Policy is the main tool developed to assist public officials in realising the ideal of spatially transformed cities, but tangible ideas or imagery of what such cities will look like are lacking. Furthermore, public officials, local communities, civil society organisations and city residents experience the city in various ways and so have different views and visions of what the future city should look like.

The lack of a platform for sharing, articulating or interrogating these visions means that those with the agency to transform cities are limited to a few. The visualisation studios project seeks to engage multiple city voices, stakeholders and actors in imagining collectively their future city through multimedia formats.

The project's aim is to articulate in practical and spatial terms what transformation would look like, through:

- developing visuals, photographs, models and various multimedia that reflect how different actors perceive a post-apartheid, integrated future city;
- exploring creative tools and methods of engaging with city residents;
- providing space to amplify stifled voices in imagining city futures; and
- creating a collaborative and multidisciplinary approach to imagining different urban visions.

The initial plan was to host at least two visualisation studios in each of the nine cities, using a group design or architectural studio to create three sets of future city visuals per city. However, in March 2020, government announced the national lockdown to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Group gatherings were prohibited, and so the project team had to find a way to navigate these new circumstances and to establish whether hosting the studios in nine cities would still be possible.

The decision was taken to continue the work, which seemed even more relevant in such times, given the precariousness of the future. The project was reconfigured, so that it could be facilitated virtually, which meant looking at participation differently. This created an opportunity to explore the potential of technology as a participatory tool, although access to technology was a concern. The timelines were adjusted, and a pilot approach was introduced.

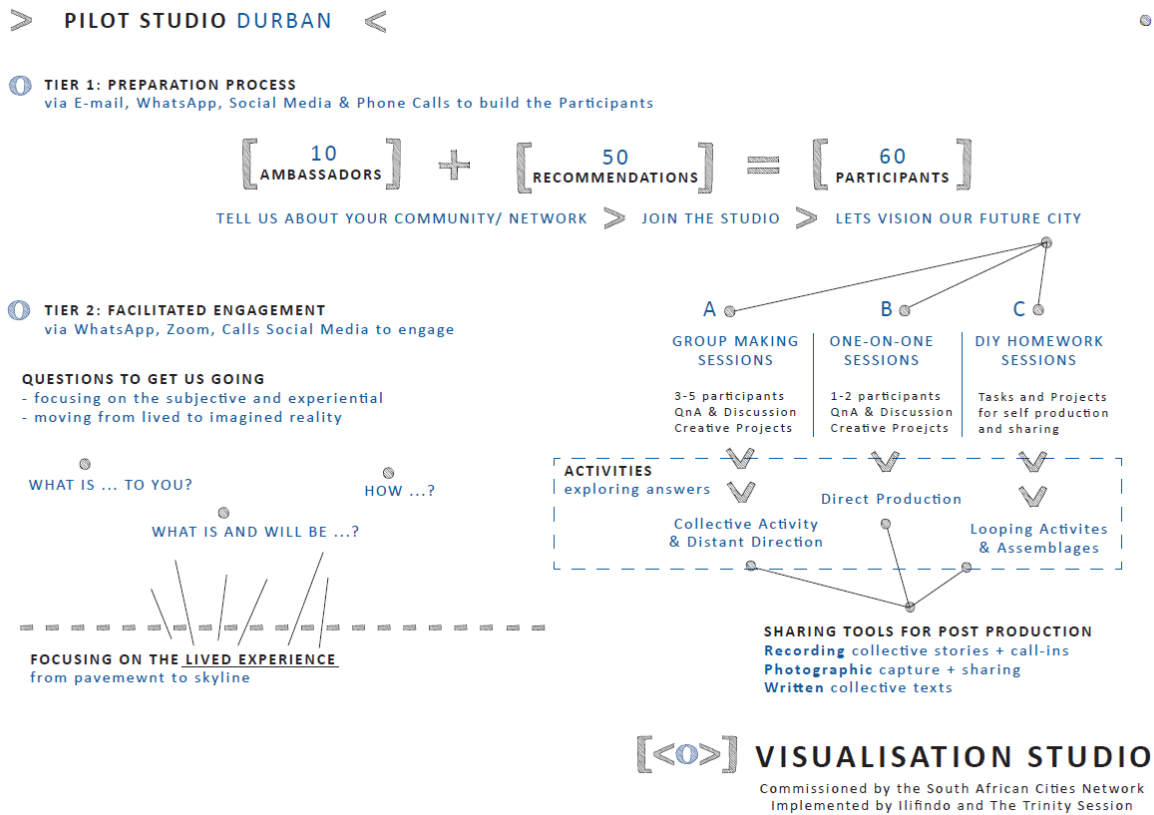
Pilot Studio in eThekweni

The city chosen for the pilot studio was eThekweni, as the project team had a vast network in the city, and the city offered a potential diversity of participants. The engagement process for the pilot studio involved three tiers:

1. Preparation: finding ambassadors who could connect the project team with individuals interested in participating in this work.
2. Facilitated engagements: engaging with participants through creative workshops, including group-making sessions, DIY homework and one-on-one sessions.
3. Facilitated interpretation: based on the conversations during the sessions, creatives developed renditions, interpretations and visuals that reflected the content of the discussions.

Figure 1 illustrates the first two tiers of the process.

Figure 1: Engagement process for the pilot studio



Finding participants

From the outset, the aim was to attract a diversity of participants, to demonstrate an all-of-society approach, as outlined in the IUDF. Service providers had to meet the criteria of having a network in the cities where the studios would be hosted. Ilifindo and Trinity Sessions, which were appointed to design and facilitate the studio sessions, met these criteria.

The participants had to represent a diversity in terms of age, race, gender and qualifications; come from various disciplines (artistic, non-governmental, sports, engineering, business); and have an interest in city futures or be working to improve city spaces. They were identified using desktop research (Google) and personal networks – local **ambassadors** spread the word among their networks, and the invitation was shared with the SACN's contacts, especially those linked to the work of the Built Environment Integration Task Team (BEITT). Participants were invited personally, rather than through an open call.

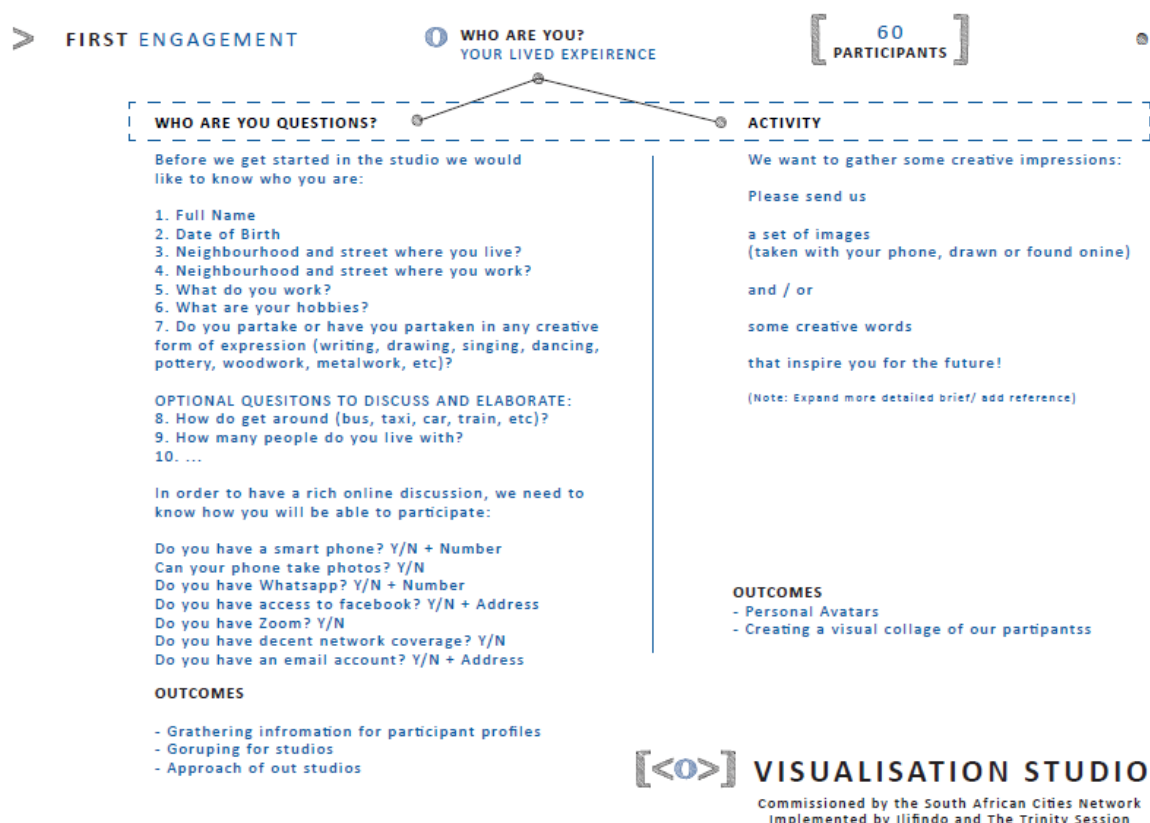
Many participants were young, which was to be expected, as discussions about the future of cities are relevant to the youth. The number of participants decreased over time, as lockdown restrictions were lifted, and more people were able to return to work. In some instances, individuals were not willing to participate without being compensated for their time.

Engagements

The journey was part administrative and part creative. The team had to manage databases and participants for each city, as well as to conceptualise the creative studios and visual responses to the discussions at each studio.

In the lead up to every studio, the project teams compiled databases for each city and sent out orientational information. As Figure 2 shows, the creative process began when organisations or individuals who expressed interest in participating were invited to share some information about themselves, e.g. where they live. At the same time, participants were asked about their level of connectivity and access to online platforms such as Zoom and WhatsApp, so that the engagement method could be adjusted to suit their access to technology. For example, some people were engaged via WhatsApp and phone calls, while others were able to join on Zoom after undergoing some training before the first session.

Figure 2: Process of the first engagement



The second part of the engagement was the actual studio session (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Process of the second engagement



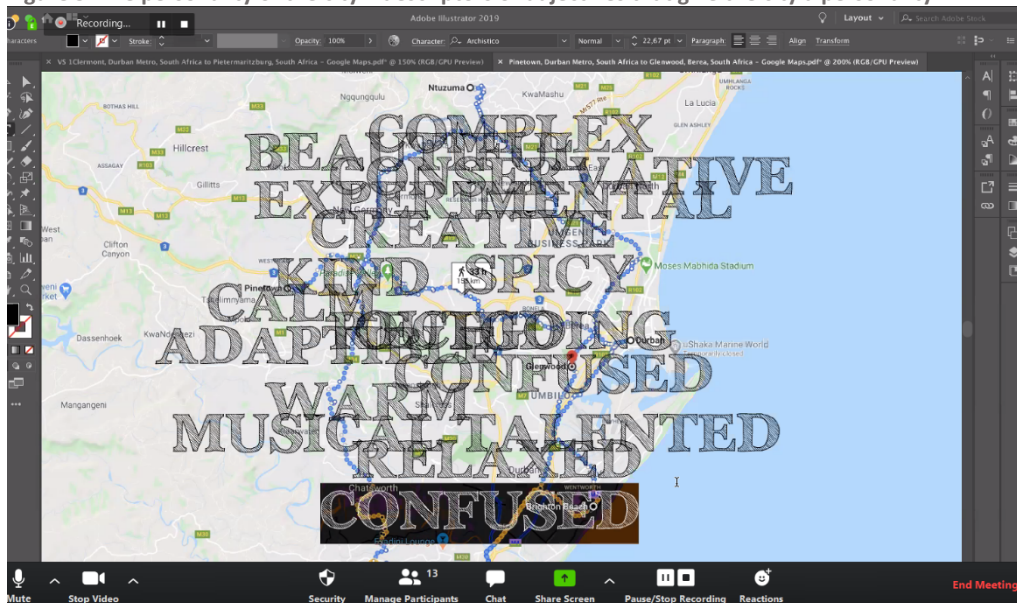
Group-making sessions

These included a variety of explorative conversations and activities, including collectively making the sound of the city, giving the city a personality, representing the city as a creature and building the future city with household items. Each participant was given the opportunity to present their future city to the group. Figures 4 and 5 illustrate results from some of these activities.

Figure 4: Participants building their future city from objects around their home



Figure 5: The personality of the city – descriptors or adjectives that give the city a personality



One-on-one

The one-to-one sessions were about giving voices to those who showed interest in specific subjects or were knowledgeable about a subject area that the team wished to investigate further. These sessions focused on themes and threads that emerged during the introductory and open sessions. The facilitators identified focus areas in advance and created a set of prompts prior to the session that guided the conversation.

DIY homework sessions

Figure 6: Three home studio exercises

HOME STUDIO #1 [[<0>](#)]

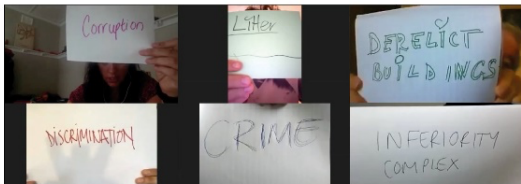
CITY SURPRISE

"Sometimes in my mind I play games when I am travelling through the city and I invent something that will surprise me around the next corner."

Have you had any moments like that? What new thing could you imagine around the next corner that would get you to stop and wonder?

Let us know if you have a specific location in mind.

Send videos, voice notes, drawings, photos or texts.



GROWING THE CITY

"We need to consider our environment. Most of what we use does not grow naturally!"

Can you imagine trees that grow all that we need in our city. Let us create a fantastical collection of plants that grow the things we consume without regard for our environment. What would you grow?

Try your hand at drawing the plant and its wondrous leaves and fruit. You could also collage cutouts from magazines and newspapers or Google images.

Send videos, voice notes, drawings, photos or texts.

HOME STUDIO #2 [[<0>](#)]

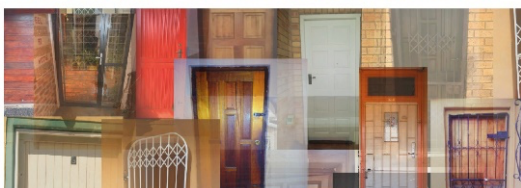
HOME STUDIO #3 [[<0>](#)]

MIXED CITY

Given global trends, our urban futures are going to be increasingly more culturally diverse, with different styles, buildings, rituals, languages and food. Co-existing will look different in the future, how do you imagine your culture in the future?

Use Google image searches, photographs at home of objects, clothes, hair, food etc, magazine collages, drawn patterns, sketches and storytelling to share.

Send videos, voice notes, drawings, photos or texts.



The eThekwini pilot studio took place over a month and comprised nine sessions (Figure 7), which were designed to be thorough for onboarding participants and to test certain exercises and methodology. More effort and time were invested in the pilot, and many practice sessions among the team were held.

Figure 7: eThekwini pilot studio sessions

Session Type	Date	Respondents & Visualisations
Intro Session 1	24 April 2020	6
Intro Session 2	24 April 2020	2
Intro Session 3	25 April 2020	3
Intro Session 4	25 April 2020	2
Intro Session 5	27 April 2020	2
Open Session 1 Perspective and Home	29 April 2020	3
Open Session 2 Sites and Sounds	30 April 2020	2
Open Session 3 The City as Creature	1 May 2020	3
One to One Session 1 – 4	21 May – 26 May 2020	4

Communication

The Visualisation Studio's communication checklist was designed to do two jobs:

- To share information about the process and project intentions.
- To collect information from interested parties and entice some creative thinking before and after the workshop.

The communication hierarchy was set up to track the project timeline, from invitation to thank-you notes – in a sense creating a feedback loop for each of the participants. All participants were invited to continue the conversation on dedicated social media platforms, i.e. each city has a Facebook page that acts as a communication channel and archive or memory of the studios.

For those participants who were unable to attend all the sessions but who really wanted to contribute to the process, the team created special "homework" packs that were distributed and then collected a week later. These participants could often find their input on their city's Facebook page.

After the eThekwini pilot studio, the project team came together to access and debrief on the way forward. This evaluation of the pilot included looking at the effectiveness of each of the in-session activities, any additions that were needed and ideas for documenting the data mined from the sessions.

Reflections from the pilot process

- Virtual sessions take much longer to organise and facilitate.
- Visualisations should be about encouraging contributions from a wider audience, not just about being consumed by the public.
- Areas to explore:
 - What to do with the data and insights from the sessions – how can these be best translated or communicated?
 - What to do with the experiences and connections formed – i.e. what have people done with this experience?
 - Are there more unconventional ways of engaging and communicating ideas.

Visualisation Studios

Following the eThekwin pilot, visualisation studios were held in the other eight cities between June and September 2020.

Scheduled studios

It was decided to host all the Gauteng studios (Tshwane, Johannesburg and Ekurhuleni) together during June, and to bring on more facilitators and visual artists to the project. In July, the Nelson Mandela Bay and Mangaung studios were held, while the Cape Town, Buffalo City and Msunduzi studios took place over August and September.

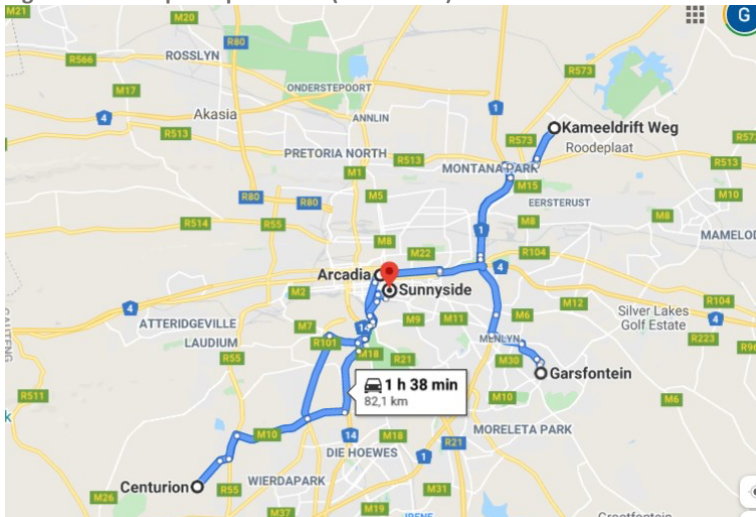
Introductory sessions

A considerable amount of research and planning went into each studio. The introductory studios followed a similar format and were intended to be an ice breaker, to introduce participants to the process, and to get them to feel comfortable with speaking in front of the group. On average, two introductory studios were held in each province, followed by two open studios.

Local pick up

As the studio was held virtually, each of the participants were picked up virtually from their locations. A Google map route was created that showed the location of each participant (Figure 10). This gave a great view of the diverse locations and highlighted some connections (participants who stayed near each other or frequented the same places).

Figure 10: Local pick-up exercise (Ekurhuleni)

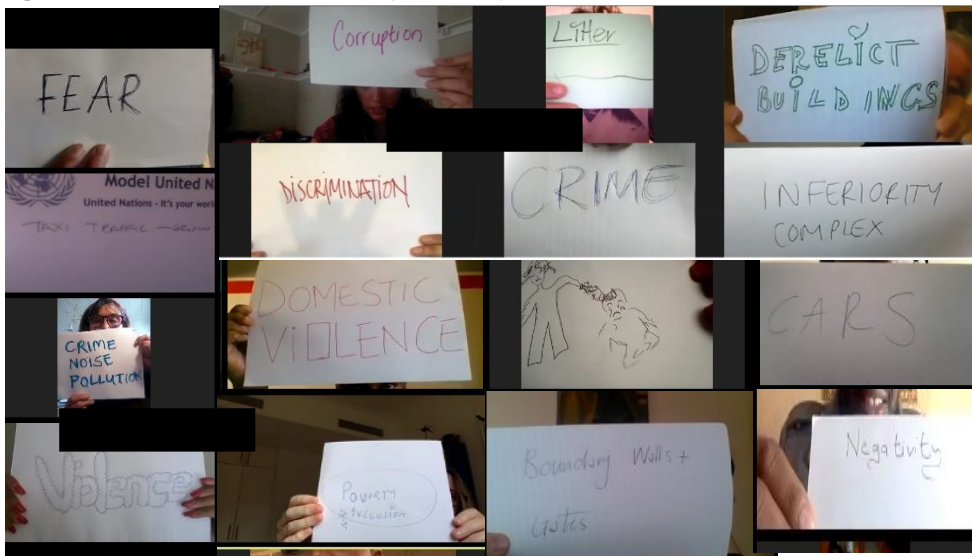


Trash and treasure

Participants were asked to answer the following questions, write down their answers and hold them up to the screen:

- What parts of your city would you keep and treasure? If a war were to break out, which part of the city would you defend, regardless of where you are staying?
- If you had to remove one place/thing/space in your city, what would it be and why?
- What place or space would you put in place of that removed thing or space, and why?
- Please draw this ideal replacement and hold it up to the screen.
- Please explain the junction of your new (desired) space.
- Regarding feedback, how would you feel if this new space became a reality?

Figure 11: Trash and treasure exercise (eThekweni)



The answers served as a conversation starter. Some people had similar answers, while others disagreed completely, which led to productive debates. While people were presenting their answers and explaining their motivations for removing or keeping elements of their city, the creative respondents were capturing the discussions visually in the background.

Figure 12: Visualisation developed in the session from participant inputs (Ekurhuleni)



Figure 13: Visualisation developed in the session from participant inputs (Ekurhuleni & Tshwane)



The development of these visuals during the introductory sessions enabled participants to get a feel for what would come next and to open up the conversation on their experiences of living in urban spaces.

Open sessions

The open studios were much more specific and each had a core theme. As the process unfolded, aspects that were successful (or unsuccessful) were adapted or upcycled for the next workshops. For example, the studios where participants were asked to stand up and make sounds and movements were much more successful than the studios where the participants sat as observers while the respondents did all of the creative mapping.

Six types of open sessions were held across all nine cities: Common 'sites' and sounds, perspective/home, city as a creature, future tellers, missing ministers, and letters of demand

Common 'sites' and sounds

Participants were asked to imagine themselves in a place that they frequent often and to select a familiar space from that place. The facilitator then shared their screens, showing a map of the common site. Participants had to describe what it was like to frequent that space – the sounds and experiences – and the facilitator and artists added rudimentary interventions onto the map, based on what people said that they would like to see in the space.

Perspectives/home

To understand perspectives from inside the home, showing different home typologies, materials and views, participants were asked "what do you see when you look outside?" or "what do you see when you look up?". Participants then described or showed the group what they could see by turning their cameras towards the ceiling or their window.

Thank you for volunteering to participate.



Wednesday 29 April 2pm to 4pm

These studios were unique because participants opened up and were willing to share their homes and private spaces with the rest of the group. Yet, despite being very intimate, these conversations spoke about issues on a much larger, public scale.

City as a creature

These studios encouraged participants to view their city as a creature, real or make believe, or perhaps a combination of both! Participants were asked to dress up and act out their creatures: what sounds does it make, how does it walk, how does it respond to other creatures, and what are its ailments – and how could these ailments be addressed (i.e. what additions would be needed to fix existing problems in the city?). The outcomes of these sessions were as performative as the process, with creative respondents building figurines and props, which were then treated with paint, or “muti”, to fix their problems.

Future tellers

Participants were asked to pretend that they were time-travelling astronauts who could travel anywhere in time and space. They had to consider what they would bring back for their city if they could travel into the past or into the future; and, if traveling into the future, how they and their culture would be represented in 10 or 20 years from now. Some responses were very whimsical, such as instant teleportation machines, while other responses were more grounded in reality, such as creating Apps to teach indigenous languages. The visual outcomes were as imaginative as the participants’ responses, with many of them representing solar systems, stars, and crystal balls.

Missing ministers

This session was designed to move the group towards action. Participants were asked, “if you were a minister, what department would you be minister of?” and wrote their ideas down on paper and raised it to the screen to share with the group. Many invented new departments, such as the department of fun or the department of getting things done. Later in the session, participants could choose their cabinet from people on the call, or anyone who they thought could help implement their department mandate.

Letters of demand

Participants were asked to gather artefacts or objects, which represented things that they would like to change or see more of in their city. These included hearts, birds, hula hoops, pens and paint brushes, and each symbolised change in cities, ranging from an emphasis on creative education, more spaces for play, understanding play as a tool that empowers, self-expression and greater inclusivity and heart. Participants were then asked to describe the demands that citizens would make of these objects in the future city, and these included safe micro spaces, spaces to speak out and be yourself, and support for local creatives. Lastly, participants discussed the types of personalities needed to realise these demands, which produced imaginary job descriptions and municipal departments. What emerged was an emphasis on multidisciplinary decision makers and including the voice of the creative.

Figure 16: Artefacts representing things participants would like to change/see more of in their city (Cape Town)



Some ideas that came out were to create:

- A Minister of Fun
- Department of Making and Doing
- The Department of Five Minutes

One-on-one sessions

During the open studios, the team identified several key participants who really engaged with the process and offered interesting perspectives. These participants were asked back for more focused one-on-one conversations to unpack concepts that arose during the group studios.

Special family studio

Early in lockdown, a special (one-off) open studio, specifically for families with young children, took place in Johannesburg. A family created a song that reflected their aspirations for the future city, with each member expressing their own interests. This demonstrated a new way of harnessing information and perspectives, without using alienating language or concepts that people cannot relate to.

Outcomes

<https://www.urbanfestival.co/visualisation-studios>

Online vs In-person

The online studios took significantly more time than a two-day, in-person workshop. At least four sessions were held in each city to compensate for challenges encountered during the process. Some of the issues that emerged included:

- New technology (Zoom): Some participants had to be trained in using Zoom before the sessions, while others experienced Zoom fatigue. People did not always have the capacity to join and commit to Zoom sessions.
- Impact of COVID-19 lockdown: The country's state of emergency and lockdown affected people's general mood, health and environment, as well as their willingness to participate.
- Connectivity issues: Despite the SACN loading data bundles for participants who needed them, poor network quality meant that many people located in townships were not able to participate fully, which limited their voices and participation.
- Loadshedding.

Nevertheless, despite the stress generated by COVID-19, those who participated were proactively engaged in each session. For many, the creative sessions were a welcome distraction to the daily grind and an opportunity to connect during a time when they were forced to be disconnected.

Reflections on the Visualisation Studios Process

- Officials use policy jargon to communicate instead of explaining (e.g. what does “smart city” mean?).
- When people hear the ideas, opinions and thoughts from others in the session, they tend to shift their own propositions to connect with what others are saying. It feels like a sort of compromise, as we progress and learn more about each other and our ideas and shows an openness to collaboration and learning from others in the session.
- There is a lot of energy in the city for collective activism and to participate in democratic processes, but officials are frustrated by the system: “We seek too much democracy because of that we don't move. Can't the voices just disappear and let us do the work? There's so much interference”.
- Virtual/online engagements do not need to be exclusionary, but taking physical engagements online requires effort, consideration, and sensitivity.
- Pockets of excellence, energy, passion and optimism are found everywhere where the youth is concerned. Processes like this are useful in connecting those individuals for collaboration and partnerships for future projects
- National lockdown was an opportunity for many people who are usually overcommitted and would not ordinarily have had the time to participate and meaningfully engage.
- Engaging in active listening is a good way of building trust between the city administration and communities and developing productive and meaningful relationships requires connecting on a human level. Participants, including city officials, did not introduce themselves but were able to listen intently, and to speak without fear or intimidation.
- Why do city practitioners become defensive in the session? The participants do not necessarily blame the city and what it is not doing but wanting to contribute to creating a better future city. Practitioners just get into presentation mode
- Our collective visions for the city as people from different background are more similar than we think. Having a platform like this highlights our similar intentions for the future city

Recommendations

- **Understand and plan for difference.** People do not have the same level of access, and so patience is needed to bring voices of people without resources to the centre
- **Children should be welcomed and invited.** Children provide a unique lived experience that is hardly ever incorporated into design of urban spaces.
- **Ambassadors are important.** Identify people in the community who are self-starters and understand and support what you want to do. They will grant you access to their networks and advocate for your idea and agenda.
- **Encourage debate and questioning.**
- **Treat everyone equally as an expert on their city.** No introductions are needed, as they create barriers and may lead to some people feeling intimidated by those with more experience, education, or social status.
- **Invest in building relationships with community.** Public participation is a process, not an event.