Yeoville Studio:
Negotiating the Line Between Research and Activism

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Yeoville Studio is a community-oriented research initiative led by the School of Architecture and Planning at the University of the Witwatersrand in partnership with local Yeoville organisations and involving students from second year to PhD level, senior academics, local Yeoville leaders and residents. It is an initiative sponsored by Wits University, and supported by the French Institute of South Africa (IFAS) as well as the Goethe Institute in South Africa.

Yeoville is a vibrant and popular neighbourhood near the centre of Johannesburg: an area to which many African immigrants gravitate on arrival. Here they find social networks, invaluable resources and intractable social entanglements. The area is often described as a 'slum' by middle-class motorists who pass through it on their way to the city’s airport, but it is one of the few inner-city areas where one can move in the street freely and in a variety of languages and outfits.

Yeoville is the location for the studio for one crucial reason: we found there enthusiastic civil society partners, namely the Yeoville Stakeholders Forum (YSF) and the Yeoville Bellevue Community Development Trust (YBCDT). Both these organisations are committed to building a community vision for the area and so the studio came as an empowering initiative in an already existing community dynamic. Studio personnel also had links to other groups active in the area, such as the African Diaspora Forum and the South African National Traders and Retailers Association.

Other reasons for choosing Yeoville are, like its very essence, myriad: it is a vibrant and diverse inner-city neighbourhood; it has a dense social complexity and a strong sense of local identity, which is based on a rich history visible in particular through its very specific art deco architecture. Yeoville is also conveniently located close to the university, and so easily accessible to students and staff. In addition to many shebeens and informal eateries and market stalls, Yeoville offers a range of friendly restaurants and cafes.

Important too, for the success of the initiative, are the long political and personal connections between Wits alumnae and the neighbourhood.

In dialogue with our community partners, Yeoville Studio defined four broad themes for research and engagement: Yeoville stories, celebrating African diversity, public spaces (and informality), and housing issues. Yeoville Studio 2010 focused mostly on the first two themes, in order to better know the place and the people. This was done through story-telling and listening, research and data gathering, exploration and exposure, public meetings, collective discussions and private conversations. The 2011 initiative has seen more direct and deeper engagement, at the request of our community partners, who appreciated the sense of community-building, pride and celebration that emerged from the Yeoville Studio 2010, but wanted more policy oriented and practical ideas on two key issues: trading and housing.

As someone who teaches others about cities and ways to research them, I have always encouraged students to do so through small projects in defined neighbourhoods, in partnership with local organisations, and with findings and recommendations shared among all stakeholders.

Yeoville Studio built on this idea, and expanded it tremendously. It is now an initiative that involves the entire School of Architecture and Planning, all interested staff members (about 15
last year) and their related courses (about 20, involving 200 students throughout the year). Not only has the scale of the previous initiative grown, but the very nature of its research, teaching and partnership dimensions has also shifted.

Coordinating the studio is a demanding, and exciting undertaking. When I am tired, I picture it as a rapidly growing monster (a giant octopus, with an increasing number of active arms, taking over my brain, my thoughts and my dreams): the politics, the intertwining, the contradictions and the articulations of all the subprojects and their (teaching, research and community) dynamics, open unexpected and challenging avenues and become new subprojects with their own dynamics. When I am energetic, I see it as a unique and stimulating way of combining, and developing in a collective setting, my own passions in life: the activism that attracted me to South Africa in the first place (the exhilarating sense that one can contribute to change in society, or at least to build part of it); challenging and innovative teaching methods; and research that is strongly based in urban realities and their politics.

Perhaps Yeoville Studio is best described through the variety of projects undertaken by enthusiastic or reluctant, fearful or excited, overloaded or committed Wits students (most of whom have never set a foot in the area); by lecturers, many of whom grew up or lived in Yeoville in its ‘golden years’, and are through this initiative returning to it with a mixture of nostalgia, apprehension and curiosity; and by residents mostly curious and enthused, sometimes critical, grumpy or suspicious of the purpose and possible achievements of the initiative, but most often pleased with being taken seriously.

In the following examples I reflect more particularly on the fine line between research and activism – a line that Yeoville Studio is constantly negotiating.
Yeoville studio and Yeoville stories

The Yeoville Stories workshops were organised every two–three weeks with a core group of 10–15 residents, who discussed their lives and practices in Yeoville through a variety of media. Through the workshops, the group produced a series of ‘Photomaps’ that were showcased in a much-celebrated exhibition in Yeoville. This group of residents also partnered with students to produce a series of walking tours of Yeoville – another way of celebrating both historical and everyday meanings of the neighbourhood.

Another initiative, based on students’ photographs of Muller Street, led to the presentation and discussion in focus groups, of the most liked, the most disliked and the most ‘realistic’ depictions of the street.

Heated debates developed around the photographs, the workshop triggering negotiations about what is, and what is not acceptable or desirable for the Muller Street ‘community’. Beyond aspirations for middle-class status (affirmations possibly emphasised by our very presence), it became obvious, almost irritating, that there was little room for the celebration or even the defense of popular lifestyles, practices and cultures. Discourses about clean, formal and orderly streets, well-kept children in private and closed spaces, and teetotalism and God-fearing attitudes were expressed forcefully by dominant characters, who sometimes adopted the lingo more familiar to the City of Joburg’s website (‘competitive city’, ‘world class’ etc). Although understandable in the face of very real local challenges, these dominant discourses obviously contradicted residents’ daily practices: shopping in convenient and cheap street spaza shops, appreciating the vibrancy and neighbourliness of the street (also as a response to the lack of space in overcrowded buildings); enjoying the entertainment activities and the dynamic social life and dense networks of community. Developing a legitimate discourse around people’s real practices, without romanticising the difficulties of everyday living conditions, became one of the Studio’s objectives.

These experiences were intensely positive, with sincere enthusiasm shared by participants and Yeoville Studio facilitators. They provided potentially longer-term prospects for development including: consolidating or creating social networks, locally and beyond; reversing the stigma attached to the neighbourhood; developing a sense of pride about the place as a basis for empowerment; and celebrating the neighbourhood, or at least some of its
(unique) aspects. On the other hand, a celebration of this potential could also have invited trends for gentrification—preparing the ground for private developers to step in, as was already the case in some parts of Yeoville. Albeit, some residents are not unhappy about this trend, for the Yeoville Studio the power of conservative and dominant discourses on what Yeoville should be, at the expense of alternative visions of a neighbourhood was a concern. Would it be possible to imagine a Yeoville that could develop and overcome its ills, but keep a (central?) place for its specific and vibrant popular practices?

**Yeoville studio and African diversity**

The xenophobic attacks of 2008 left Yeoville relatively untouched, yet it was in Yeoville that the African Diaspora Forum (ADF), an umbrella body of African migrant organisations in Johannesburg, was founded. The absence of mass violence against migrants in Yeoville could be explained by the relatively strong network of local organisations holding the neighbourhood together, in spite of some xenophobic public statements made by the local councilor at the time. We could not, however, ignore the existing xenophobic tensions in this very dense and fluid neighbourhood, where scarcity of housing and trading space fuels intense competition, as well as difficult living conditions. Furthermore, we did not want to frame the question of migration politics in a priori conflicting terms, even if the conflicts and their management were one aspect Yeoville Studio needed to address.

We began, in line with our local partners’ endeavours, to study and stress the cultural diversity that this migration was bringing to Yeoville. Contributing, and consolidating the local YBCDT-ADF-YSF initiative of celebrating Africa Day (25 May) through an annual street festival, we embarked on a survey of formal and informal African restaurants. Second-year students, although not always au fait with the complexity of the licensing terrain that traders in the area must so delicately negotiate, were able to produce what became one of the (many) popular outputs of the studio—an African restaurants map/guide.

This became the possible starting point for a network of African restaurant owners or managers. The guide also inspired several local activists to develop a plan to train local tourist guides, and the YBCDT successfully applied for sponsorship for this initiative from the Gauteng government. The map, alongside other local initiatives, created a way for local residents to understand the economic (if not cultural and social) value of diversity and another future for Yeoville.

At the same time as we were attending innumerable public meetings (so as to update the community about the Studio, and solicit feedback), we regularly witnessed unashamed expressions of xenophobia. We were struck by the diversity of tactics used to address, respond
to and manage xenophobic expressions (from derogatory language to hate speech), depending on leadership and platforms. These included mostly sympathetic tolerance; often direct encouragement (leaders themselves inciting xenophobic discourses); too seldom uncompromising condemnation; and in exceptional cases, pedagogic deconstruction.

It was in these public meetings that we began to understand the constructed character of collective xenophobia, and the crucial role of local leadership in shaping different spoken and practised futures. It was also here that we experienced the frustrating gaps between research and activism: those which often rendered us, unbearably, silent observers. Because we were ultimately outsiders, intervening in these public meetings was difficult: our role as members of the Yeoville Studio was to make visible the visions of others about what Yeoville could be; to bring to the fore alternative discourses on diversity and migration; and to support our community partners with material that they could use in their endeavours to create an integrated neighbourhood.

I come from KwaZulu-Natal. I came here in 2006. I was living in Soweto. One day I came here to Yeoville to meet someone. This is where I lost my way. I spent the whole day going back to this place. I was there in this park watching the Vodacom sign performing. The taxi dropped me there and when I asked people the way to Yeoville, they told me “go to the end of Regent”. AI, there’s no place like that, so I go back to this park... For hours I was looking for my friend. I came back to this place for the whole day, serious. So now I hate this place, even if it seems like a festive place, because that’s where I was lost.

This is where I stay now. I like this place because I’m happy to be in Yeoville. It’s the best place to stay – I’m serious. I love this place as if it was a mother or a father, a grandmother. There’s my church, I stay here so I can be close to my church to listen to the Gospel.

There’s this place where I was staying with my brother. The place was dirty, I don’t like that flat even now. That’s where my brother stays, in a place where you go down and it’s just a store room, but they gave it to him as a room.

Photomap by Yeoville stories workshop participant
Yeoville studio and public spaces

Yeoville Studio 2010 did extensive research on the various and intertwined forms of trading in Rockey-Raleigh Street, the main thoroughfare of Yeoville, vibrant with shops and restaurants public facilities, informal street trading (when the metro police are not in sight), a quiet mall (formerly a cinema, and for a short time Hugh Masekela’s jazz club) and a local market opened in 1999 (on-street trading was banned thereafter).

Our research challenged a few preconceived ideas including the dominant view that street trading was unwelcome in Yeoville. Aside from the usual complaints about litter and congestion, street trading and traders were perceived by residents as convenient and friendly. The vast majority of shop keepers interviewed argued that ‘without them Yeoville is like a ghost town’.

Other findings challenged the dominant understanding of the local market’s economic difficulties: many perceived the limited success of the market as the consequence of street trading competition, but in fact it could be more convincingly explained by market design and management issues. Our research also highlighted that xenophobic tensions in the market were more often triggered by external pressure (local leaders eager to please their constituency; city policy creating scarcity) than by internal disputes among traders themselves. Finally, we also sensed that the traders’ muted concerns about the new market management system (the ‘smart card’) were warranted, aimed as the system was at instituting tight control over market traders and tremendously weakening their autonomy.

At the end of 2010, as the market management company was in the process of issuing these ‘smart cards’, the city of Joburg called an urgent meeting with street traders and market traders. A rumour had been circulating that the city was to demarcate stalls in Rockey-Raleigh Street, leading struggling market traders to put up stalls in the street.

The city, encouraged by YBCDT, called for a negotiated practical solution to the issue, and proceeded to elect five representatives to a steering committee. Yeoville Studio volunteered to help explore solutions, as we had findings to support new ideas for integrated trading in Yeoville. The city reluctantly took note and we were eventually invited, ‘as observers’ to the trading steering committee meetings.

It soon became obvious that the street traders were intimidated and not able to properly raise their concerns in these meetings, in which market traders and the YBCDT made vocal proposals to remove them from Rockey-Raleigh Street. As the City’s angry accusations against (female) street trader leaders’ ‘passivity’, ‘problem of attitude’ and ‘negativity’ multiplied, we had to push the line between research and activism: we stepped in, offering Yeoville Studio’s services to support street traders to articulate their views.

A workshop was organised in March 2011, in which street traders expressed strong views against being removed from their positions on Rockey-Raleigh. Yeoville Studio assisted them by writing a position paper on the matter.

At the next meeting, street traders presented their positions and Yeoville Studio presented its findings. These were politely contested by market traders, who ultimately decided it was politically more rewarding to side with the city and to blame street traders than to challenge the authorities about management of street and market trading in the community. The issue of the transition to smart cards and the stress that they imposed on traders, particularly those in arrears, was not properly addressed.

We proposed a workshop with market traders, to develop ideas to make the market more attractive. This suggestion was received with enthusiasm by market leaders, ‘no matter what happens’. Yet, at the next meeting with the city, we were strongly attacked by those same leaders, who accused Yeoville Studio of being biased, of manipulating street traders, and of not having consulted them on our research on the market. In short, they shot down the studio and its work as a way to further undermine street traders. Thus the Yeoville Studio entered the political arena.