

Keleketla! Urban folk tale



The historic Johannesburg inner-city Drill Hall was a dilapidated space. Now it has become a vibrant centre for various community projects.

Kagiso Mnisi describes the aims of one of these projects, Keleketla!

With the erection of a cultural hub comes the novel idea of trying to retain the communal vibrancy that already exists. This is just one of the traits that underpins the groundbreaking idea of Keleketla!

Keleketla! is a library-cum-resource centre comfortably wedged in the bowels of the old apartheid South African Defence Force Drill Hall in the centre of Johannesburg near Joubert Park. It has been declared a heritage site and has the trappings and historical echoes of a military camp whilst at the same time being a landmark for political activists when a bomb exploded outside its doors.

The Drill Hall was built in 1904 and was used by the military until

1992. The recruitment and mobilisation of the army for both world wars was conducted from the building. It was here too that in 1956, 156 leaders of the liberation movement, including Albert Luthuli, Oliver Tambo, Walter Sisulu and Nelson Mandela, appeared on charges of treason when the complex served as a courtroom.

In 2004 the abandoned Drill Hall was converted in a manner sensitive to its rich heritage into a new architectural space which now provides a platform for cultural activity. The upper floor of the west wing was destroyed by fire, but the northern two-storey building, untouched by the fire, has been restored and is shared by Keleketla! and Time for Change.

INTRODUCING KELEKETLA!

Keleketla! came into being in 2007 at the hands of Bettina Malcomess, a lecturer at the University of Cape Town's Michaelis School of Fine Art, together with the arts collective, Innacitycommunity, which is composed of three 20-somethings of varying backgrounds.

Innacitycommunity initiated an array of projects. The first one was called 'Once Upon A Month' which created a dynamic space for dwellers around the Joubert Park area, specifically young people and older teens, to participate in such pursuits as drama and singing. The other component of the monthly occasion was the broadcasting of an experimental radio project called City-x.



Keleketla's offices in the Drill Hall.

At present Keleketla is under the administration of Innocentia Mokoena, Mphahlele Mokoena and Fananathi, the latter two are associated with independent publishing and street-art marketing. The collaborative effort of these movements has allowed for the maximising of resources to realise a media lab. This lab hopes to serve as a base for research, the production of alternative media and sustainable frameworks for inner-city organisations.

Jozi's wide spectrum of alternative media is seen as a chariot for a revolutionary challenge to mainstream ideas that can transcend current moulds. Unnoticed by the mainstream is street-art marketing that emerges from an ethos of modest resources and which only a discerning pool of the market has spotted. Such people are open to stretching the limits of what's possible and 'could be' instead of fixating on what merely works.

From the street: Exhibit A

The clean-up campaign is the brainchild of Malose Mokoena at Malahlela where the media in question is disposable trash bags. The target of this street art is inner-city schools and flats and is aimed at dwellers of varying ages. The use

of flamboyant colouring on the bags serves to alert, raise awareness and stimulate a response towards ridding the streets of filth. The exercise involves filling the bags with trash and once full, the tagged message on the bags enlarges and becomes apparent to the eye.

From the street: Exhibit B

The digital age presents challenges to genuine personal interaction (a Facebook gift just doesn't carry much weight does it... mmm?), so tactile material now becomes the vogue. This includes personalised collectables such as book casings, exclusive notepads and other creative utilities. This aesthetic system of reusing recyclable material is practised by such street-art luminaries as Fananathi. Their aim is to encourage independent crafters.

Radical innovation is the order of the day in these economically challenging times which gives clout to alternative media. It has given us a framework for unique concepts which can still thrive economically. In our thinking any system should be easily torn down for the sake of progression and transcendence. Media should shift to survive. There is no one standard locally or globally. Such concepts allow

Keleketla to play a vital role in community upliftment.

Keleketla's ethos lies majorly in grassroots mobilisation so the team has resuscitated the age-old practice of a stokvel. The stokvel concept serves as an economic cooperative model where our aim is to share resources amongst other movements and the inner-city community at large.

This is associated with media ownership which involves the consumers of this media - the people of the city.

Our last stokvel consisted of a transatlantic conversation via skype with community organisers in Detroit, Michigan in the United States. The gist was how Hip Hop can help uplift a community. The exercise was interesting in the sense that the African American community have a similar practice to a stokvel which they refer to as 'potluck'.

The immediate future of the media lab is to hold an art auction with works donated by reputable young artists. The proceeds will give us the space to carry on expanding the legacy of the Drill Hall with its architecture of rich historical significance. This project will allow us to continue with combating Johannesburg's cultural stagnancy while lending a hand in the greater development of the city's people.

The story of Keleketla must become an urban folk tale where we create greatness from dust, with a belief in self-reliance. This is what the once makeshift library will become - a new-age communication's domain given birth through the toil of practical visionaries. LB

Kagiso Mhisi is coordinator of the media lab at Keleketla! Visit their blog at thefanpalproject.wordpress.com