

# FEATURES

## URBAN DEVELOPMENT

# Space awaiting meaning

**Good intentions and a large investment have not yet brought life to this area**

**The street gutters of Kliptown** run with grey water. Tracks crisscross the street, indicating the pathways of illegal electrical connections. Last year a boy stood on an exposed wire. He survived, but needs further medical procedures to separate his fused toes.

"People have been waiting so long for electricity that now they are taking it. Don't use the word 'steal'. *Ons neem, ons vat*. We've asked and asked for electricity in our homes, but now people are taking it," says community leader Gene Duiker.

Kliptown, south-east of Soweto, is ramshackle even by SA township standards. It is home to an estimated 48 000 people, of whom roughly 75% are unemployed.

A mishmash of built houses and shacks, tarred roads and gravel paths, it was an isolated settlement where mixed-race couples escaped the Group Areas Act and people of all races lived together during apartheid. Today, the residents are still racially diverse and proud of this — but their isolation has also kept developers at bay.

When the Freedom Charter was adopted at a gathering known as the Congress of the People in Kliptown on June 26 1955 — 55 years ago this week — the area made a mark on the map. The charter forms a basis for the country's constitution.

When designs to build a square commemorating the signing of the Freedom Charter were revealed in 2002, Kliptown thought its time had finally come.

A competition sought a design for the square, and the winner was architectural firm StudioMAS, with capital investment



**Angry voice** Kliptown resident Gene Duiker

from BlueIQ and the City of Johannesburg, via the Johannesburg Development Agency (JDA).

The development today comprises a large open square, bordered by a multi-purpose hall, a market area, a luxury hotel and other spaces.

In 2005 the completed Walter Sisulu Square of Dedication — or Freedom Square, as it is colloquially known — was unveiled. It was the largest investment in Kliptown since the township's humble beginnings in 1904.

"The concept was that it would be a catalytic project for more development in the area," says Precious Makwe, a partner at StudioMAS. "It was intended to be multipurpose and scalable. We knew it would change in time and would have to

adapt to the community's needs."

But the square remains controversial. Critics say the space is cold and impersonal, a cement block towering over the landscape; and Kliptown residents are resentful that the budget of almost R400m was not used to create more immediately tangible benefits for them, such as housing.

"Generally, it is not used optimally. It is very quiet. It works well for big events, but it is not ideal

for the smaller events. It is not the dynamic space it was intended to be," says Sharon Lewis, executive manager for planning and strategy at the JDA.

The JDA is open to some criticism of what is one of its major developments, and is committed to longer-term interventions in the area. Last year it com-

missioned a review of the previous framework and investment, undertaken by architect and Wits University academic Hilton Judin.

The review says that though there were good intentions behind the investment in the square, it is not working. It also says there was a failure to consult with the community.

"But the issues are not insurmountable. We need to figure out how to get more people on the square, make sure the tenants make enough [money], and that the community enjoys the spillover benefits," says Lewis.

Stall operators in the market are critical of the space allocated to them. "If it rains we get wet, and it is too cold. There are no customers here. There's no door or lock on your stall," says Rachel Mashimbyi, who runs a vegetable stall.

The cold seems to be the most common complaint this bitter winter. Sharon Mametsa and Phumudzo Makhala huddle around a fire and a two-bar heater. "This place is too cold. The sun doesn't come in here," says Mametsa.

Makwe says the initial design had office space above the market, which would have provided more shelter for the traders, but it cost too much.

Judin says that because of the scale of



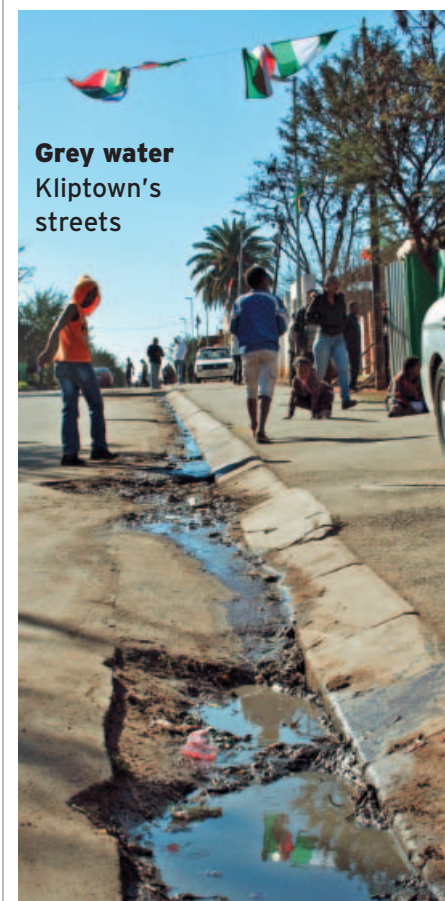
**Stall operator** Rachel Mashimbyi

the square — one of the largest in SA — it requires some kind of civic function to make it work. "If there was a clinic or a library in the space it would bring meaning and practicality into the square."

Duiker is less optimistic about the potential. "In my opinion, it is a white elephant. And to add insult to injury, they built a four-star hotel in an area as impoverished as Kliptown. They'll tell you all about spin-off benefits, but that's bull. There are minimal positives, if any."

Lewis doesn't believe the investment has failed outright. "I believe the square's time hasn't come yet. Today some could say that it looks like a white elephant but in 15 years it might fit better.

"There are temptations to find design solutions to soften the space, but it is my view that we need to focus on the link-



**Grey water** Kliptown's streets

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— GENE DUIKER

ages rather than redesigning the square and not touching the people who live in the surrounding blocks."

There are plans for regeneration projects in Kliptown.

"The JDA is planning major public environment upgrading — partly to make the square work better but also to improve the area beyond the square," says Lewis. "We need to reconfigure vehicle and pedestrian movement and upgrade Union Street and the feeder streets. We are also building a bridge across the railway line." The bridge will connect currently disparate sections of Kliptown.

These developments are scheduled for completion by June 2011.

"Our lesson at the JDA was that we need to go into projects for the medium to long term in order to make sustainable urban regeneration changes," says Lewis. "When improving neighbourhoods, we need to do it carefully, incrementally, and focus on smaller-scale developments."

All seem to agree there is a dire need for housing in Kliptown. Houses are dilapidated, and most are not connected to water-borne sewage, running water or electricity.

The City of Johannesburg confirms there are plans for more housing in Kliptown but is unable to provide details.

Judin says he has consulted on plans drawn up by the city to create "hundreds of units of housing" in the next three to five years.

"As long as the housing isn't delivered, [residents] will be unhappy. They have been promised housing on a number of occasions. There is a lot of resentment because of the amount of money spent on the square," he says.

Duiker is not convinced: "This is a long, sorry saga that seems to have no end. When people come here we think it's another talk shop; the community has no confidence that anything will happen."

Kate Thompson

## Controversial Freedom Square

