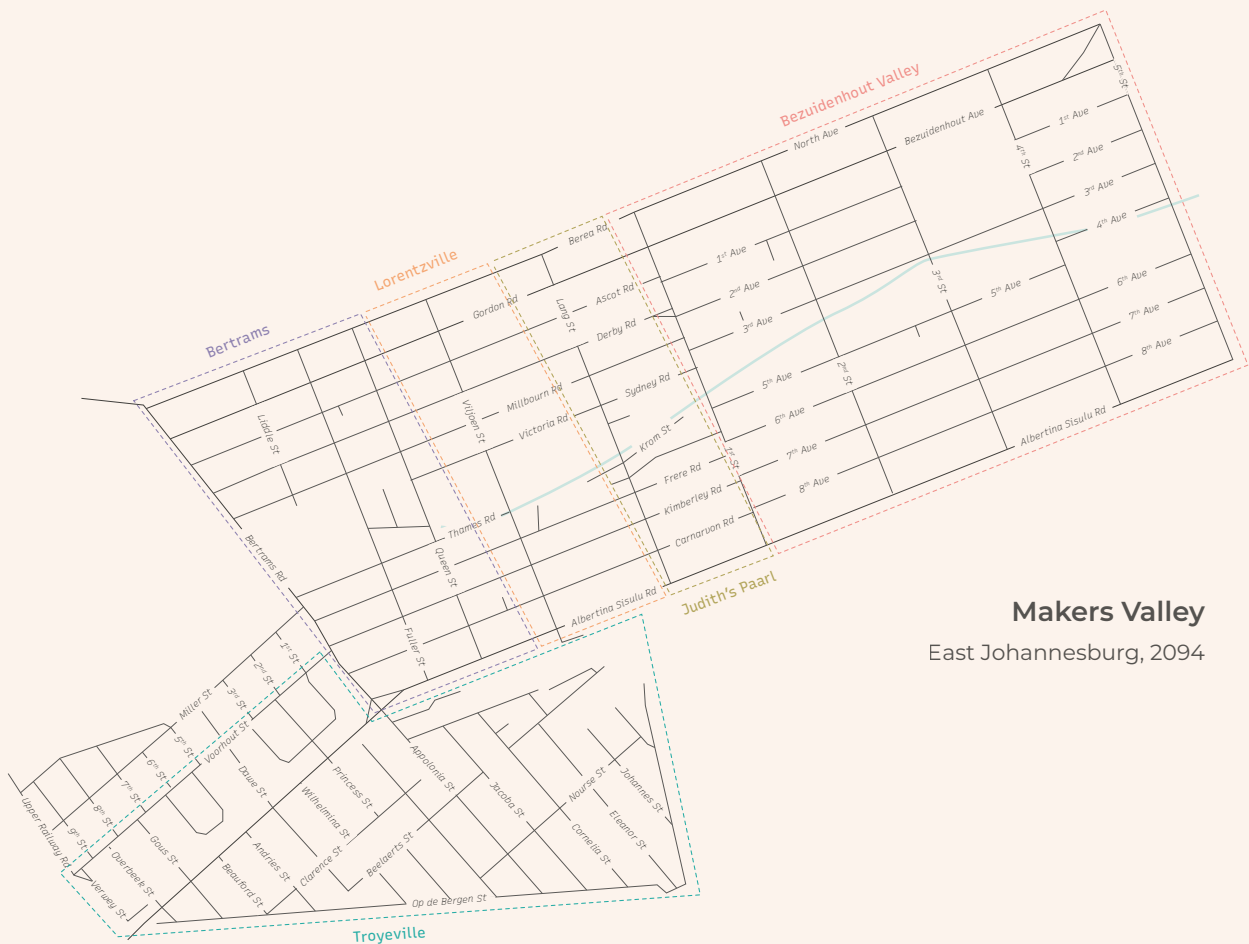




Leila Kidson & Cara Eyre of OCTOPI spent May, 2024 on residency with the Goethe Institut in Johannesburg - exploring the concept of 'circular neighbourhoods' through their 'Sustainable Together' program.

OCTOPI is a social design studio based in Cape Town that supports collective action against systemic oppression. Through our work with INGOs, social movements and grassroots initiatives, we aim to collaboratively reimagine more inclusive futures through narrative activism, systems design, and solidarity.



Makers Valley
East Johannesburg, 2094

We intend on continuing this work, acknowledging that research on the value contributions within a community can never really be complete. If you'd like to contribute to this growing knowledge commons on the presence of initiatives in Makers Valley, or if you would like to be kept updated on this work - please email Leila at leila@octopi.co.za

Mapping Contributions to Circularity and Wellbeing in Makers Valley

Introduction

The intergenerational presence of people in an area holds the architecture of heritage in their memory of a better reality for a neighbourhood. The youth hold a vision for a future best suited to their hopes and dreams. Together, active citizens in their self-determination to restore and improve on that vision are informed contextually and collectively - often holding critical knowledge on the problems and relevant solutions in that space. How these pillars of human resolve in community are resourced with reliable and localised infrastructure that engages pro-activity and centres ownerships within the community is how we believe we shift the needle toward localised resilience in community-led development.

In May 2024, during the Goethe Institut's Sustainable Together residency, we immersed ourselves in Makers Valley, a vibrant neighbourhood east of Johannesburg's CBD. This area spans from New Doornfontein to Bezuidenhout Valley and includes Bertrams, Judith's Paarl, Troyeville, and Lorentzville. Makers Valley is known for its burgeoning creative entrepreneurship and change-making initiatives. Our research began with exploring how an ecosystem of community-led initiatives fosters circular, local development by leveraging critical, contextual knowledge and proximity to issues—thus enabling relevant solutions strengthened by robust networks and relationships.

A key goal of our research was to reflect back to the community the quality of community-led transformation present and to provide visibility to external stakeholders of the impactful initiatives already in place, aiming to catalyse support and increased transformative resourcing efforts.

Where did this research take place?

Makers Valley is a diverse community with significant variations in socio-economic status, ethnicity, and religion. Despite facing high levels of poverty and unemployment, and visible signs of urban decay, the area is countered by dynamic growth in both formal and informal business sectors. The scarcity of employment opportunities, especially among the youth, has spurred initiatives to encourage entrepreneurship.

The formal economy is on the rise, fuelled by property developers and various businesses. Emerging partnerships between these developers, creative industries, residents, universities, and local government entities are enhancing collective well-being and promoting sustainable urban development and socio-economic transformation.

How did we conduct the research?

Our research process prioritised ongoing dialogue, open discussion, and the exploration of stories central to the lives in the area. We facilitated group dialogues, employing research tools such as collective visioning, participatory narrative inquiry, and action research, alongside community asset mapping and a series of simple questions to open up conversations about the realities experienced locally and the efforts present to navigate those realities.

Key elements of our methodology included:

- **Transformative Research:** We incorporated principles from the "Othering and Belonging" toolkit, emphasising transformative interactions that foster community sense-making, connection, and cohesion.
- **Storytelling-Based Research:** Storytelling, as a core method, encouraged participants to share their experiences through open-ended questions, creating a space where voices were heard and valued, thereby enhancing the depth and authenticity of the information gathered.
- **Emergent Conversations:** Our conversations were semi-structured, focusing on thematic areas relevant to the community while remaining adaptable to emergent topics and insights.

Data Collection Mechanisms:

- **Group Dialogues:** These facilitated collective discussions, enabling community members to co-develop understandings of local challenges and opportunities.
- **Walk-and-Talks:** Conducted throughout the area, these informal sessions provided insights in a more personal and relaxed setting.
- **Individual Interviews:** Focused conversations with community members delved deeper into personal experiences and perspectives.

Throughout the research process, we established lines of trust by engaging with a diverse array of people and their networks, ensuring that every conversation was built on a foundation of belonging. This approach facilitated conditions conducive to authenticity, honesty, and dignity. We were meticulous in developing our research methodologies to ensure that our research was not merely extractive but contributed positively in every interaction.

Over the month, we engaged with over fifty people from the Makers Valley area, ranging from homeowners to entrepreneurs and NGO founders. We conducted three group sessions with members of the Urban Rangers, Water for the Future, and local community kitchens, exploring their relationships with the community and their efforts to serve their neighbourhood. With children aged 7-12 at Timbuktu in the Valley, we facilitated a creative visioning workshop to explore the possibilities for a future Makers Valley. Through numerous individual and small group conversations and interviews, we walked, talked, and mapped the area's human, social, environmental, spiritual, and community-owned assets that contribute to the value held in the Valley.

What were our key findings?

- **Community-initiated lateral efforts to serve and surveil their neighbourhood:** Highlighting the value of trust and relationships as a core mechanism for circularity, our interactions with longstanding members of the community underscored a profound resolve to ensure that their neighbourhood was safe, clean, secure, and service-oriented, particularly towards the youth. Community organising was central to many of the initiatives discussed, relying on the networks of caretakers for the area and utilising their access to external support to bolster their efforts.
- **Socio-ecological restoration and stewardship:** Through both individuals and organisations, we witnessed extensive efforts to connect more deeply with the land and engage in a more symbiotic relationship with natural resources, benefiting both food sovereignty and community health. Many individuals from the area either contributed critical knowledge on restoration, indigenous crops, and peri-urban farming or, through access to capacity-building initiatives, became custodians of such knowledge and therefore stewards of their natural neighbourhoods.
- **Established infrastructure as channels for accessing resources/inclusive development:** Although difficult to quantify, a clear insight from our research was the value of the diverse socio-economic status among both developments and individuals within Makers Valley. Recognising how the proximity of people with access to external resources and funding to an area generally considered resource-poor provided the potential for bridges for the diffusion of those resources into the community through relationship-building and empathy. This highlights the potential for inclusive, community-led development in this area and many others across the world, providing the beginnings of a blueprint for development in service to community well-being.

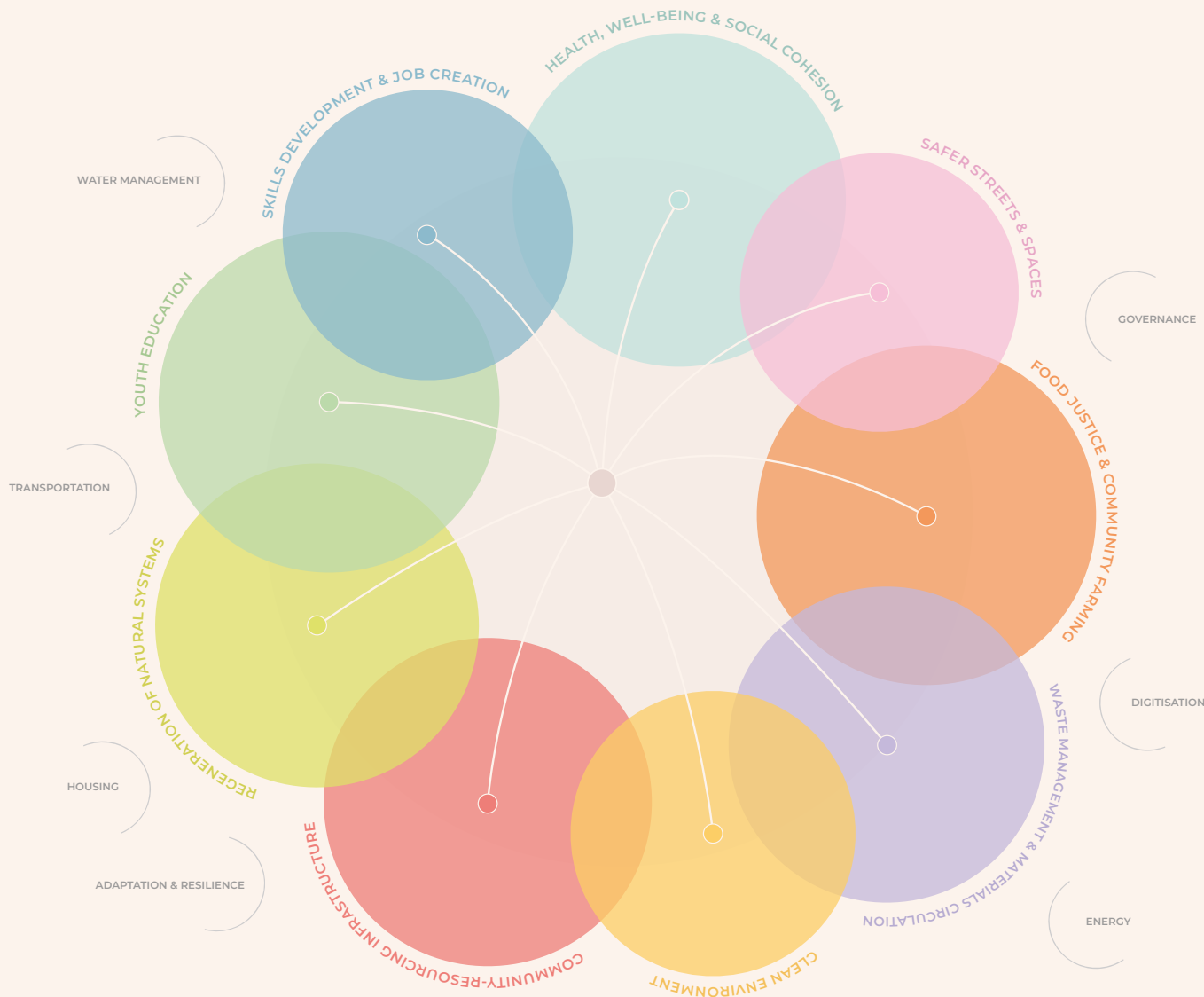
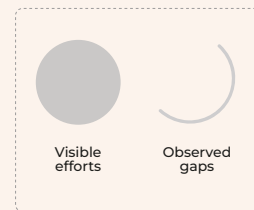
Conclusion

Makers Valley exemplifies a dynamic model of community-led circular economy initiatives. The breadth and depth of activities highlight robust engagement with circular principles, from resource management to educational empowerment and ecological stewardship. Strengthening these initiatives and addressing any gaps in community efforts will be essential for sustainable development and enhancing the resilience of Makers Valley. This research aims to provide a foundation for continued support and expansion of these vital community-led efforts, advocating for an integrated approach to community development and sustainability.



Visible efforts towards circularity in Makers Valley

Makers Valley, located just east of Johannesburg's CBD, spans from New Doornfontein to Bezuidenhout Valley and includes Bertrams, Judith's Paarl, Troyeville, and Lorentzville. This neighbourhood is distinguished by its vibrant community of creative entrepreneurs and change-makers. Our research focused on community-led initiatives that enhance neighbourhood wellbeing. Here are the key thematic areas identified, along with notable gaps in sectors where initiatives seem to be lacking.



Community-resourcing infrastructure

Mobilising external engagement across sectors to foster the flow of assets and infrastructure that support community endeavours directly and indirectly.

Food justice & community farming

Addressing food apartheid by coordinating access to food due for landfill, and supporting a local knowledge commons on food sovereignty through knowledge of indigenous, climate-resilient crops and urban farming.

Health, well-being & social cohesion

Access to local individuals, groups and institutions supporting well-being from a holistic and culturally integrated perspective - centring sports, arts, dignity and safety.

Youth education

Empowering children within the community context, nurturing their agency for future development through curiosity, support, safety, and exploration, allowing them to dream safely.

Skills development & job creation

Prioritising and envisioning localised upliftment, engagement, and development of people's futures by providing community-level opportunities, led by notable individuals and organisations.

Waste management & materials circulation

Material valuation through community exchange of post-consumer waste, organic/household waste, and enterprise - raising awareness on the value of waste as an asset and supporting alternative economic models in the area.

Regeneration of natural systems

Remembering and reconciling the value of land and the Juksei River on environmental, social, and spiritual levels for the wellbeing of the direct community and those connected to its watershed.

Safer streets & spaces

Collective surveillance and cohesion through awareness, activity, and accountability, with organised patrols by community members and increased presence of programs on the streets.

Clean environment

Ecosystem support through restoration efforts linked to pride of place and attentiveness to environmental pollution led by homeowners & local employees of Water for the Future, and Urban Rangers to restore dignity.

Thematic insights on transformative change toward circularity in Makers Valley

Our research explored potential circularity in Makers Valley, emphasising how relationships and value transfer channels within a community are crucial for sustainability. Below are insights from our research, highlighting prevalent themes in community-led contributions to transformative change.

Youth education

A nexus of initiatives is profoundly reimagining the futures of local children. These efforts range from providing education for undocumented immigrant children to established schooling centres that develop curricula and training tailored to the youth's practical employability needs. Efforts to integrate experiential learning, often provided by volunteers from the neighbourhoods the children are coming from, demonstrates a contextual and careful focus on offering diverse options for how young people spend their time and shape their futures.

Skills development & job creation

The Social Employment Fund significantly boosted job creation in Makers Valley, enabling over 100 local hires for community projects. This initiative not only provided financial stimulus but also access to skills development and networking opportunities through organisations like Water for the Future and Makers Valley Partnership. Additionally, resources from Victoria Yards, Nando's, and MVP enhances local learning environments, enabling leaders from initiatives like Urban Rangers to conduct relevant training, further enriching the community's skill set and employability.

Regeneration of natural systems

Water For The Future is dedicated to the comprehensive restoration of the Jukskei River, beginning at its source in Lorentzville. Their efforts include cleaning, restoring, studying, and educating the public to transform the river back into a valuable asset for the 5 million people along its route from Johannesburg to Mozambique. Additionally, they extend their environmental restoration to include the areas adjacent to the river, fostering a healthier ecosystem that benefits local communities. In partnership with the Alexandra Water Warriors, they have utilised the SEF grant to create over 100 jobs, providing local workers with education and skills development to deepen their connection to the river and encourage long-term stewardship of its banks. Concurrently, other initiatives and community farms reclaim illegal dumping sites, converting them into food gardens and revitalising the soil.

Food justice & community farming

The community-driven initiatives in Makers Valley are significantly supporting local food justice and enhancing community resilience. The People's Pantry, by redirecting food from landfills, and coordinating external resources to community kitchens and homes, supports local women in sustaining meal delivery. The Ndawo Entle farm enriches the community with indigenous agricultural knowledge and produce, while the many community kitchens, led by local women, expand nutritional outreach with traditional cooking methods to optimise food utility. The Urban Rangers' conversion of dumping sites into urban gardens and collaborations like Siyabonga Ndlangamandla's and Siyakhana Farm's work in peri-urban farming highlight a collective commitment to environmental stewardship and food security, feeding hundreds and fostering a network of sustainable practices.

Clean environment

Participants in programs like Urban Rangers spoke to how they have developed a deep sense of dignity in their roles as custodians of community spaces, reflected by members of the community thanking them for their efforts. The impact on the neighbourhood is most evident in people's increased ownership of efforts to clean the street, fostering pride of place and an embrace of stewardship responsibilities. Homeowners noted how they needed to take responsibility for their direct environment, and in doing so hopefully nurture more neighbourhood initiatives to do the same.

Safer streets & spaces

Many observed an enhanced sense of safety due to initiatives like Urban Rangers and Water for the Future under the SEF program, adding over 100 people to visible work on the streets of Makers Valley. This increased visibility seems to have added to the existing collective surveillance developed by the community-led patrols and 'stoep grannies' keeping eyes on their neighbourhoods. Efforts to maintain cleanliness, manage illegal dumping sites, and transform formerly dangerous areas into vibrant, artistic, permaculture spaces through various initiatives has notably contributed to creating safer community environments.

Waste management & materials circulation

Our research highlights a significant focus on material valuation through community exchanges involving post-consumer and organic waste. Initiatives like LOCK and Water for the Future, alongside local reclaimers, are transforming waste into valuable resources. LOCK, leveraging its expertise in material reuse, empowers local women to reclaim and repurpose waste from dumps, enhancing community awareness of waste as an asset. Similarly, Water for the Future's efforts in removing invasive species contributes to this sustainable ecosystem. There's a growing interest in upcycling and entrepreneurial skills development, with community members exploring innovative uses for waste materials, such as creating clothing from plastics and developing composting techniques. This shift not only addresses environmental concerns but also fosters a new economic model within Makers Valley.

Health, well-being & social cohesion

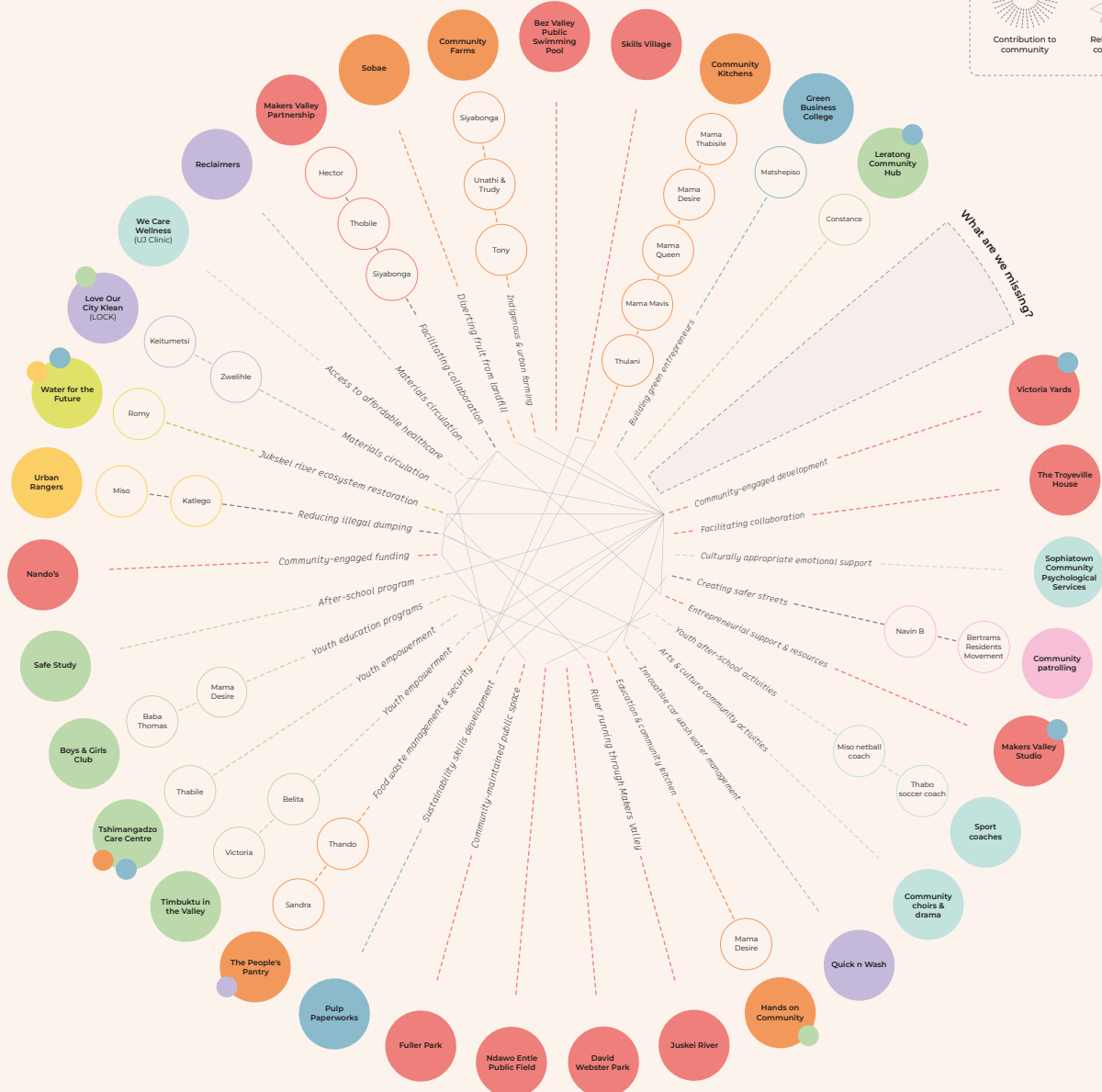
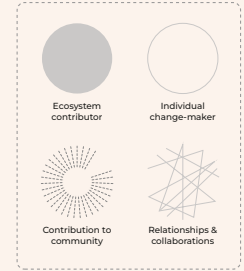
Community-initiated group activities were a common occurrence in speaking to people about where they experienced joy. Beyond activities for the youth, groups like the Urban Rangers are establishing choirs and drama classes to engage with each other and build confidence, and many individuals spoke of being netball or soccer coaches to many age groups. There was a consistent resolve to connect to others informally through arts, culture and sport - supported by formal programs led by drama therapists, counselling clinics and other institutions.

Community-resourcing infrastructure

Victoria Yards, Nando's and similar developments play a role in connecting the Makers Valley community to external stakeholders and resources. These establishments can act as gateways, offering access to wider networks which can enhance funding and visibility. However, the effectiveness of these linkages in truly addressing local needs can vary, and there remains a need for these establishments to deepen their community relationships to enhance understanding of local contexts and ensure that interventions are truly community-led, engaged and beneficial.

Community contributions to a circular Makers Valley

Highlighting the dynamic collaboration and presence of initiatives in Makers Valley, East Johannesburg, dedicated to transforming the area. Our research revealed that the most successful efforts engaged the local community, nurturing pride, ownership and consistent feedback loops that foster the potential for a circular neighbourhood in service to all.



Overview into the most visible elements of circularity in this neighbourhood

<p>Community-resourcing infrastructure</p> <p>Mobilising external engagement across sectors to foster the flow of assets and infrastructure that support community endeavours directly and indirectly.</p>	<p>Food justice & community farming</p> <p>Addressing food apartheid by coordinating access to food due for landfill, and supporting a local knowledge commons on food sovereignty through knowledge of indigenous, climate-resilient crops and urban farming.</p>	<p>Health, well-being & social cohesion</p> <p>Access to local individuals, groups and institutions supporting well-being from a holistic and culturally integrated perspective - centring sports, arts, dignity and safety.</p>	<p>Youth education</p> <p>Empowering children within the community context, nurturing their agency for future development through curiosity, support, safety, and exploration, allowing them to dream safely.</p>	
<p>Skills development & job creation</p> <p>Prioritising and envisioning localised upliftment, engagement, and development of people's futures by providing community-level opportunities, led by notable individuals and organisations.</p>	<p>Waste management & materials circulation</p> <p>Material valuation through community exchange of post-consumer waste, organic/household waste, and enterprise - raising awareness on the value of waste as an asset and supporting alternative economic models in the area.</p>	<p>Regeneration of natural systems</p> <p>Remembering and reconciling the value of land and the Jukesel River on environmental, social, and spiritual levels for the wellbeing of the direct community and those connected to its watershed.</p>	<p>Safer streets & spaces</p> <p>Collective surveillance and cohesion through awareness, activity, and accountability, with organised patrols by community members and increased presence of programs on the streets.</p>	<p>Clean environment</p> <p>Ecosystem support through restoration efforts linked to pride of place and attentiveness to environmental pollution led by homeowners & local employees of Water for the Future, and Urban Rangers to restore dignity.</p>

Seeds of Transformative Change

We need inspirational examples that demonstrate transformative actions leading to more sustainable, community-led, and hopeful futures. Many of these inspiring cases originate from grassroots initiatives, often small and on the margins, yet they hold the potential to catalyse significant transformative change on a larger scale. Below are a few of the established initiatives we encountered in our research in Makers Valley:

Love Our City Klean (LOCK) is a creative waste management company that actively repurposes waste and educates communities on environmental issues. They have helped shift a former dump into a Materials Recovery Facility, fostering a culture of materials circulation through artistic, community engagement and collaborations.

Over 5 **community kitchens** run every week in the Makers Valley area, led by longstanding members of the community. Supported by local businesses and NGOs like The People's Pantry, these kitchens often feed over 300 people each, repurposing food waste and strengthening community ties through shared meals.

Timbuktu in the Valley, based at Victoria Yards, provides a learning space for children in Makers Valley area - bridging the socio-economic gap of the space by imparting knowledge and skills to the youth nearby. They focus on providing education that is relevant to the lived realities in the area, fostering imagination and building practical skills. Exposing the youth to diverse career paths and traditional African wisdom, they seek to nurture conscious, proactive agents of change.

The People's Pantry addresses urgent food insecurity challenges in the low-income communities of the Makers Valley area while addressing systemic issues in the food system, environment, and community cohesion. They coordinate external resources and distribute them locally through community kitchens led by local leaders. Their swop shop, in partnership with Love Our City Klean, encourages recycling by offering fresh produce in return.

Urban Rangers, a community-led initiative in Makers Valley, cleans the streets, educates the community on waste management and converts illegal dumping sites into food gardens. This program transforms citizens into custodians of their streets, fostering neighbourhood connections and restoring pride in public spaces.

Makers Valley Partnership has evolved from a collective of local entrepreneurs, academics, and civil society members, and works closely with business and government partners such as Victoria Yards and the City of Johannesburg to support local makers and creative enterprises in the Valley. Their activities aim to provide livelihood opportunities and stimulate local economic development through cross-sectoral networking, partnerships, and infrastructure improvements.

The **Makers Valley Partnership (MVP) Studio** is a space in Victoria Yards where citizens can come together to connect, engage, and share ideas. The space offers free studio use, WIFI, computer usage and various programs to empower community members. The studio invests in assisting entrepreneurs start, extend, or enhance their businesses, as well as promote long-term economic and social prosperity for the communities it serves.

Water For The Future is a citizen-led NGO dedicated to restoring the Jukskei River's ecosystem from its daylight point, investing in the river as an asset to its neighbours. In collaboration with academia, local businesses and city officials, they study the river ecosystem, clear invasive species, build local relationships with the river, and run community projects to improve the river's health and the economic and social well-being of the area.

Founded in 2015, the **Bertrams Residents Movement** is a volunteer-led neighbourhood watch that utilizes natural surveillance from patrollers and home-based grandmothers to deter crime and improve safety. Volunteers address a variety of community issues, including illegal evictions, utility disruptions, child safety, and running a community soup kitchen, demonstrating a deep commitment to collective well-being.

The **Fuller Park** refurbishment was driven by local community engagement, creating 100 jobs, particularly for youth and women, in tasks like park restoration and maintenance. The park now features new playgrounds, gym equipment, and solar lighting, and will be maintained by community-employed workers, solidifying local ownership and stewardship of the space.

WeCare Wellness Community Clinic at Victoria Yards, operated by the University of Johannesburg, provides accessible healthcare through integrative medicine delivered by graduating students.

Victoria Yards, a development in Makers Valley, hosts studios for artists, NGOs, creatives, and entrepreneurs. The space is a hub for artistic collaboration and community involvement, featuring vegetable gardens and skills upliftment programs, often in partnership with MVP. Many local enterprises were incubated through their VY Commons working space, supported by Nando's.

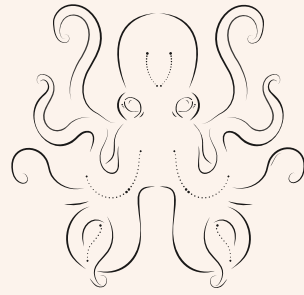
Active citizens utilise a **Ndawo Entle public field** in Bez Valley for sports, offering local children healthy afternoon activities and community engagement. This space is vital for providing accessible recreational opportunities, keeping children engaged in positive group activities and away from the streets.

Safe Study is an after-school enrichment program in Bez Valley that transformed a community soup kitchen into a nurturing educational space during COVID-19. It focuses on arts enrichment, academic support, and mental wellness, aiming to strengthen social cohesion through capacity-building and creative programs.

Boys & Girls Clubs are an international facility based after-school programs for school aged young people, supervised by trained professionals providing daily structured programs and activities. In Bertrams, locals who were already supporting youth were recruited to run the club, leveraging the international network to amplify their local impact.

Across Makers Valley, through many **community farms** and inspired individuals, critical knowledge around indigenous food crops, medicinal plants and water-resistant urban agriculture are being shared - developing the seeds of localised resilience and food sovereignty. The Ndawo Entle farm in Bez Valley, services their community with both food and knowledge, hosting workshops at local schools and growing crops relevant and resilient to their neighbourhood.

Tshimangadzo Care Centre is dedicated to sparking potential and alleviating suffering in the Bertrams community through four key pillars: bridging educational gaps with support for schools and tutoring programs, empowering youth with mentorship and skills development, combating gender-based violence with awareness campaigns and survivor support, and addressing food insecurity with nutritious meal programs. These initiatives aim to foster growth, resilience, and well-being for all community members.



Although the residency has ended, we intend to continue the work, posing the following question:

How can we catalyse on and fortify the intergenerational vision and localised knowledge of active citizens by seeding mechanisms for collective listening, and resourcing community-led efforts toward circular, inclusive futures?

In the short term, we want to continue to identify and enhance the community's capacity to create a more self-supporting ecosystem. Longer term, we would like to develop a replicable toolkit for identifying and resourcing community-led development elsewhere. This toolkit will map existing community efforts, facilitating the identification of underutilised capabilities and fostering collaborations that leverage local knowledge and relationships.

This research hopes to provide a model for resilient community development adaptable to other contexts. By showcasing the potential within Makers Valley, we aim to attract support from funders and stakeholders, fostering a reciprocal dynamic that strengthens the social, economic, and environmental safety nets of communities.

Moving forward, we will refine our research to deepen stakeholder engagement and community collaboration. We will emphasise building relationships and active listening to integrate diverse community contributions. This approach not only aims for better outcomes but also fosters a more collaborative and inclusive environment for community development and increased social cohesion.

If you are interested in contributing to our work, either within Makers Valley, or more broadly with criticism, compliments, skills, knowledge or networks - we would love to be in touch. We are keen to keep learning and exploring more avenues for supporting adaptive, kind and community-led development.

Get in touch by emailing Leila at leila@octopi.co.za - even if you just want to say hi!