



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

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Public art helps shape the urban experience, UCT research reveals

Public art can help foster different ways of experiencing and understanding urban life, reveals new research from the University of Cape Town.

In her PhD thesis, Dr Rike Sitas analysed three public art projects in three different small towns, with a view to understanding how public art can offer important lessons for understanding cities.

“Our response to cities is largely shaped by affect – different places and situations make us feel welcome, alienated, uncomfortable, safe, happy etc, but research still tends to think of people and politics as wholly rational. Recasting people and politics not only as rational offers important possibilities of encouraging engaged citizenship,” said Dr Sitas.

The research looked at Domino Toernooi – a domino tournament in Hermon in the Western Cape; Living Within History – a collage and performative engagement with a colonial and apartheid archive in Dundee in KwaZulu-Natal, and Dlala Indima – a graffiti-led spatial design project in Phakamisa in the Eastern Cape. Each project showed how art can be used as a catalyst to engage serious urban issues in non-threatening ways.

In addition, Dr Sitas said her research showed that public-facing art projects that take people and public spaces seriously can offer new ways of producing new knowledge on cities.

“Public art no longer only refers to sculptures, monuments and memorials. Increasingly permanent art objects in public spaces have been criticised for not reflecting the interests of ordinary people. Alongside this, there has been a marked increase in what is referred to as ‘socially engaged’ art. Under the right conditions, these kinds of art projects offer a space for an experimental politics that challenges the status quo – which in South Africa is fundamentally linked to the social and spatial legacy of apartheid.”

Dr Sitas said her research could benefit society by challenging how power shapes culture and cities, by changing the way we think about people and political participation and by contributing to policy discussions on culture and the city.

Dr Sitashas a BA in Political and Historical Studies from UCT, a BA (Hons) in Sociology from the University of KwaZulu-Natal and an MTech in Fine Art from Durban University of Technology. Given her experience as a public art practitioner, Dr Sitas' PhD emerged out of a desire to explore public art as a form of urban inquiry. She received her PhD in Architecture and Planning from UCT on 19 December 2015. Her thesis was supervised by Professor Edgar Pieterse of the African Centre for Cities & School of Architecture & Planning, and by Dr Shari Daya of the Department of Environmental and Geographical Science.

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Azwi Mufamadi

Media Liaison and Monitoring Officer
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Tel: (021) 650 5427 Fax: (021) 650 3780
Cell: (078) 528 6065
Email: azwi.mufamadi@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za