

# Negotiating a Changed World through Craft-design. Maker Praxis and Our Research in South Africa

**Harriet McKay and Melanie Youles**

## **Abstract:**

Writing in 1988, Gavin Younge, Emeritus Professor, Michaelis School of Art, Cape Town, began his seminal study *Art of the South African Townships* with a description of the many hardships of apartheid life in the nation's informal settlements. He remarked: 'It will undoubtedly come as a surprise to many people that any art at all has surface in the bleak, dusty streets and urban squalor of the South African Townships' (Younge, 1988, 10). It is the contention of this paper that seventeen years into democracy – and despite Cape Town's 2014 tenure of the World Design Capital status – the palpable vitality of design produced for example in Soweto and Khayelitsha has still yet to be recognised elsewhere. The aim of this paper is both to proclaim that black South African design matters and to revisit Younge's text for the post-apartheid era.

Examining the changed design landscape facilitated by South African non-governmental and not-for-profit organisations in fostering black craft-design practice, we also wish to raise issues pertinent to our conducting this research in the altered environment created by pandemic. Whilst conducting Zoom interviews with South African makers accords with the current landscape of electronic interaction, we also explore researching relevant material without access to travel and via township contacts who may live without electricity, let alone the internet. We present these dilemmas by way of creating an impact around encouraging methodological

problem-solving.

It is also our aim that that our paper be of impact in presenting conversations around social justice and enablement in design practice in the global South. Our work will be configured such that it continues our conversations with Michaelis School of Art and with the School of Art, Architecture and Design at London Met about staging an exhibition and catalogue which offers an update of Art of the Townships for the 21st century.

**Notes:**

- Outside Johannesburg and Cape Town respectively, Soweto and Khayelitsha are South Africa's two largest townships, or informal settlements.
- The term craft-design is a South African phrase which usefully confounds Western 'design' versus 'craft' hierarchies, and which acknowledges the skill of makers who may not necessarily have received a formal design education.