

Municipal Safety Case Studies Project

COMMUNITY-DRIVEN THEME: OCTOBER 2023

# Community with Heart

**Brixton Light Festival**  
JOHANNESBURG



CASE STUDY



Supported by:







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# Brixton

In the 1990s, when President Nelson Mandela wore a cap that said ‘I don’t do crime’. Justin Foxton, recently returned from the United Kingdom, started an initiative, ‘Stop Crime, Say Hello’. Its premise was that it’s harder to hurt someone once you’ve looked them in the eye, that if you behave humanely, others are likely to follow.

**At the core of the Brixton Light Festival sits the same principle, that we are all safer when we know one another and do things together.**





# The Brixton Light Festival

The Brixton Tower casts a long shadow over the suburb and can be seen from a great distance.

It has become a marker for the Brixton Light Festival, this year hosted on 2nd September, the latest and biggest and brightest iteration yet – and sadly, at the end of a week of tragedy and loss of life in the inner city, less than 5km away.





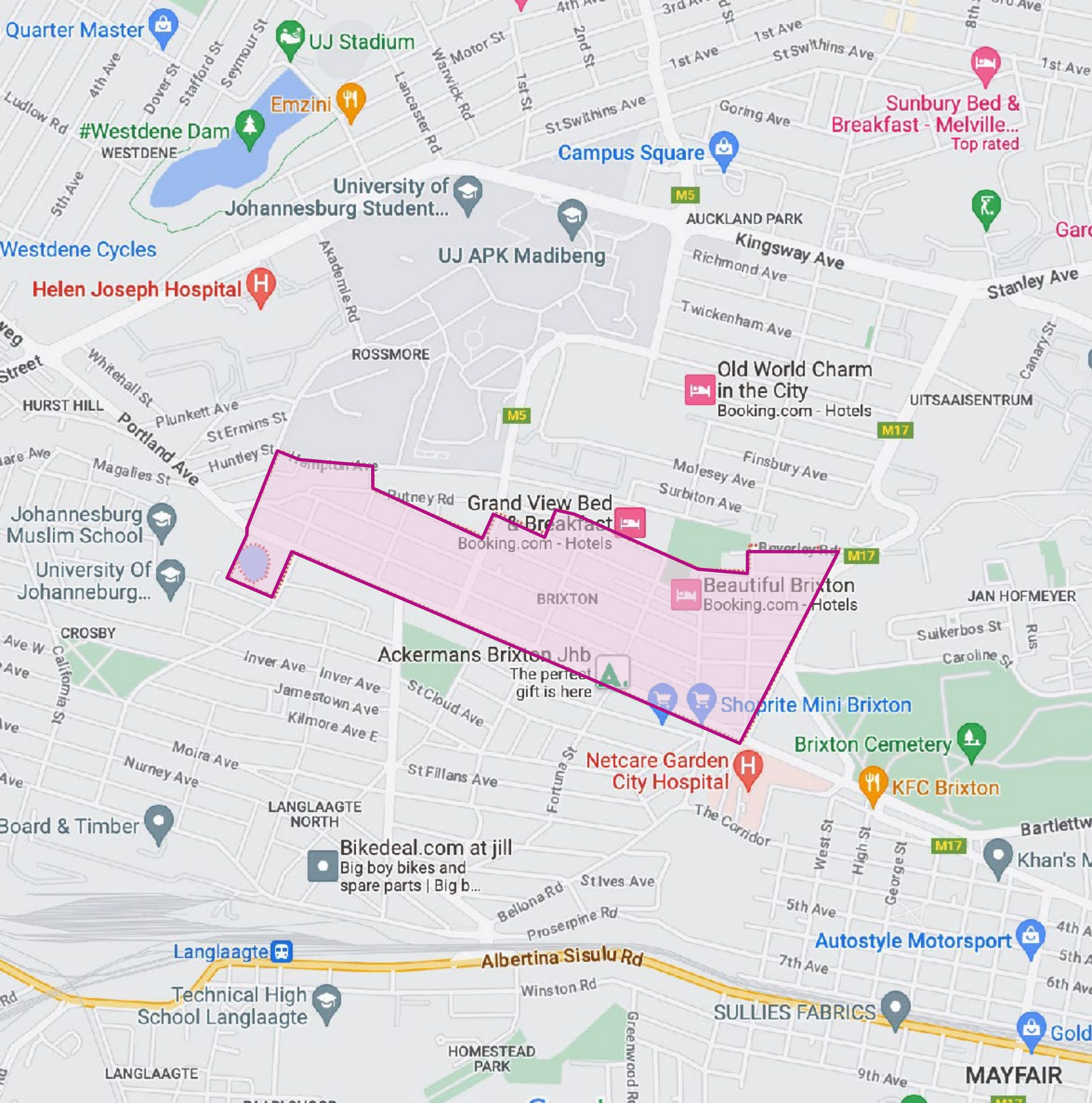


Music included the NWU Brass ensemble, the National Youth Orchestra, the Field Band Foundation, Zulu punk band Shameless, local Brixton-based singer Bonj, the Local Vocals choir, and the Windybrow Choi. This year for the second time, the Brixton Tower was lit from top to bottom, brightening Joburg's skyline, as was the Brixton Water Tower, spreading the joy.

The An estimated 3000 people, many with small children, participated, including from outside of Brixton, although this is not the real intention of the festival, which is a local celebration for members of the community.







## All Community is Complex

Brixton is a very mixed suburb. It has young families, migrants, single professional people, homeless, elderly, students, artists, and businesspeople, shopkeepers and academics of diverse races and socio-economic status.



# Collaborative Leadership

The central figures in Brixton community activities vary in their approach but share a commitment to the suburb.

## Sophia

**Sophia**, demanding, creative and energetic, is passionate about Brixton and everything that happens there. Sophia is an organizer at heart, making connections and weaving networks. This year, with support from the Helen Suzman Foundation and the OHCHR, Sophia brought the giant puppet Nana to the parade, to highlight the plight of local migrants plagued by xenophobia.

*“I am proud of the fact that we got one of the oldest houses in Brixton repainted in a beautiful candy pink, and that we had community members join in to paint their walls ahead of the festival. City officials helped us with as much as they could ahead of the festival - fixing street lights and traffic lights and clearing the park - I drove around with our Ward Councillor to help log everything we could see.” - Sophia*







## Tamzyn

**Tamzyn** works with big visions and is not daunted by the challenges they present. This year the theme of the festival is water and light, highlighting the watershed that runs through Great Rift Valley down through Africa and the Constitutional Court, and divides Brixton, with water heading either to the Atlantic or the Indian Ocean.

For several years, she has worked out of a house on Caroline Street that used to be a Chinese store. She used things that had been left behind to tell the story of the family that lived there, in an exhibition in 2019.



Tamzyn getting hands on with the mural



Mark introducing the exhibit in the alley



## SHADE

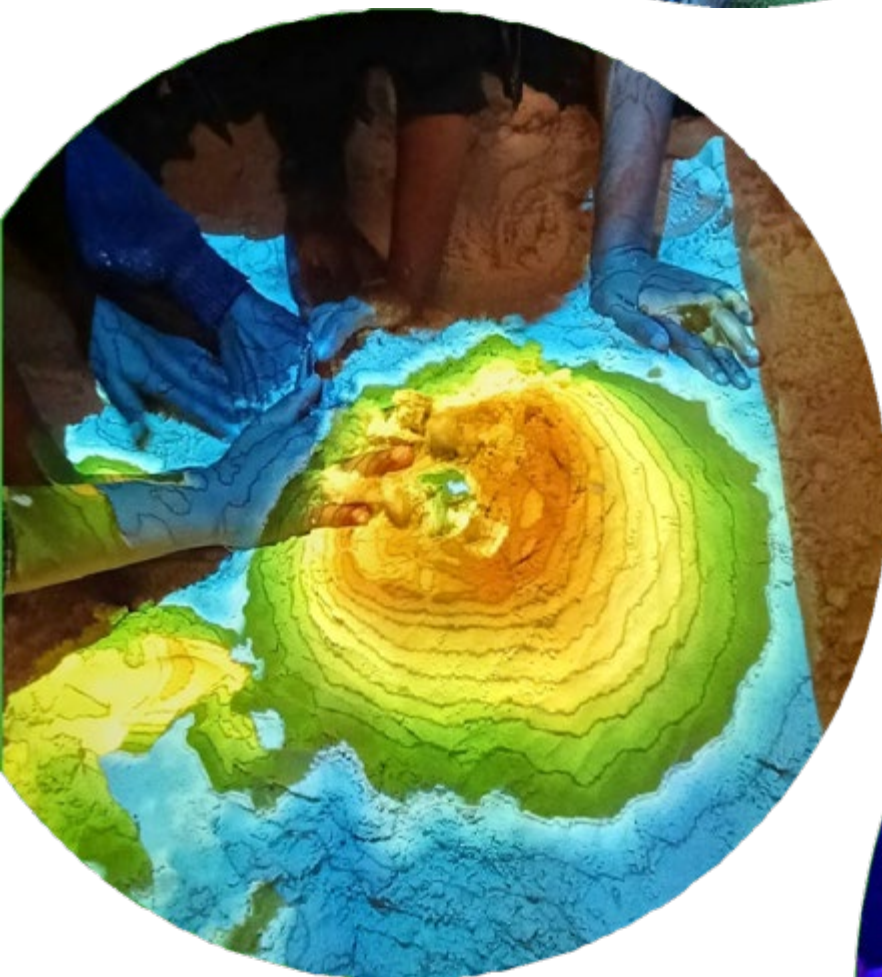
**SHADE** is a project led by Tamzyn, in which local children make art from recycled things of all kinds, not just for the festival, but all year round, often with invited artists to work on a specific theme or piece. SHADE renders art accessible for many who might never otherwise step into an art gallery or artist's studio.

“I love it here in Brixton. I feel like I make a difference to people ~~who~~ need it and in return, I have friends who look out for me. We look ~~for~~ each other, without judgment. And these kids, we know ~~that~~ they're seen, they can't get lost or start doing bad things here because they know we'll stop them and turn them around.

- Lucy







## Children

**Children** are important beneficiaries of the Brixton community projects, but they're also participants in their own right. This year for the festival children from Mimosa School, an ECD in the area, have been on preparatory safety walks in which they were asked to identify sounds, feelings, sights and smells that made them feel safe or made them uncomfortable





## Ann

**Ann** has lived either adjacent to or close to the Kingston Frost Park in Brixton for many years. Ann personifies the characteristics of effective community leaders: kindness, selflessness, leadership, humanity, willingness, the need to make a difference, a clear vision. She listens. She leaves her ego at home when she collaborates, she is insightful and caring. She is constantly expanding her knowledge about community development, about governance, child development and gardening.

## Ladies of the Light

Costumes, decorations and bunting for the festival are also made by the '**Ladies of the Light**' a community sewing group. Another group, notably including men and boys, some seasoned and others new to the craft, prepares a quilt for each new baby in Brixton, reflecting the key elements of the suburb and the character of the family into which it is born.

## Mark

**Mark**, a local architect, urban planner and committed local activist, is a custodian of the Brixton spatial plan. Mark has initiated a mapping project in which locals chart their routes and the places that are special to them – or are problematic. Mark believes that stories connect people to places, to history and identity, and that by telling its stories, Brixton can strengthen its own identity as a connected and thriving community.





## Not Without Challenges

The organizing team for the Light Festival confesses that each one of them has been tempted to leave the project at some time or another.

“Everyone has their moment of stomping off to sulk, but we always come back, because we love it. Nobody is in it for personal gain, although I suppose we all gain from the collective benefits that come from being an active community.

- Mark

Funding is a perennial problem. The event is possible because ‘everyone donates their time and whatever they can that’s useful, there’s so much goodwill’. – Sophia

Communication intensifies as the festival approaches. It is achieved through four Brixton community **WhatsApp groups**.

Everyone is very loyal to the festival and its community. Nobody really wants to talk about the challenges. They shrug and smile and move on.

## The City and Replication

**Ayanda**, an official of Joburg City Parks and Zoo (JCPZ), says there is no way of properly measuring the contribution that community initiatives like the light festival make to the City.

“Yoh but Brixton feels safe tonight!

Ayanda is often encountered at community meetings on Saturday afternoons and participates actively in the planning and the event itself. Ayanda is invested in this project not just as an official but as a person with relationships with other individuals, and she goes beyond her working mandate to bring the City’s participation to the event and to the community.



# Shining the light on Community

Community building, particularly when resources are scarce, is hard work, requires long-term commitment, power-sharing, trust, good communication - and the ability to accept when you are wrong, or to let someone else have their way.

What Brixton achieves is a showcase of what can be done by the collective, what happens when enough people realize that if they want to live in a place that is home, they need to think and act collectively, know and support each other, to demonstrate what a shared vision looks like in action.

Professor Doris Sommer, Director of the Cultural Agents Initiative at Harvard Business School, says that human beings are dynamic and that their energy can be safely channeled through participative arts and cultural activities. The Brixton Light Festival, with its inclusive and organic aesthetic, makes the point in a very visual way.



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