

What does Mai Mai Mean?

Project Summary

What does Mai Mai Mean? was the pilot initiative established after an invitation by the Kwa-Mai Mai Market leadership to support a development strategy for their cultural common space in inner-city Johannesburg, South Africa.



The question was designed to co-productively explore the socio-spatial values of the market over a series of small interventions, activations and public events. The project collaboration between 1to1 – Agency of Engagement and WeAmbush initiated the longer engagement through a curated public performance inside the Public Acts/Johannesburg that aimed to reveal the seemingly hidden values of the market in a careful and critical manner.

The Kwa-Mai Mai Market is a space that offers access to traditional healing products, services and rituals to a mainly isiZulu client, in addition to other cultural groups that operate from the inner market space. The Kwa- Mai Mai Market is one of the oldest markets in Johannesburg and an importance space for both local and visiting amaZulu people. It is stigmatized by many due to its location, user group and appearance, while being exploited by visiting tourists who simply use the deeply traditional and private space as a photo stop without respecting or acknowledging the market's traditions, privacy or meaningfully contributing to the market's economy.

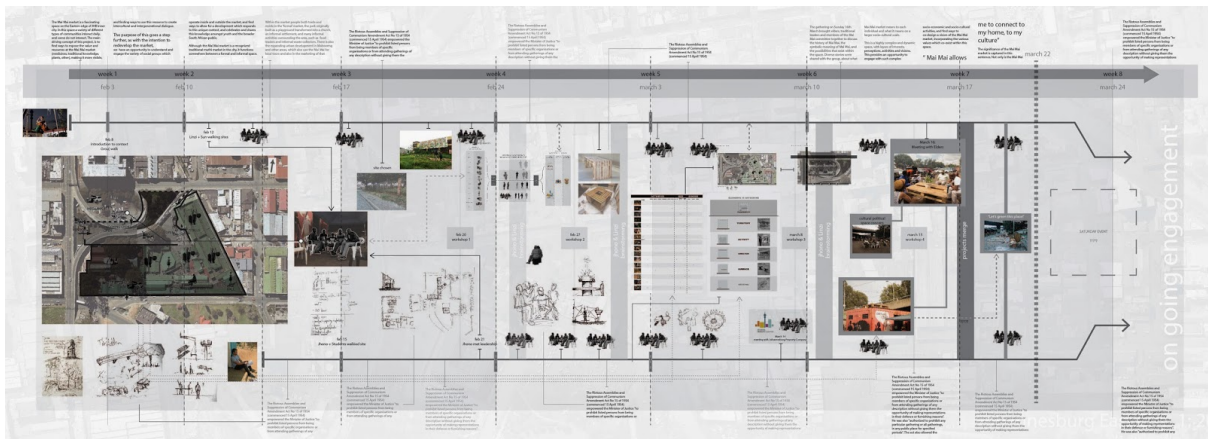


A location outside the actual market was selected with the Kwa-Mai Mai leadership for the research and spatial activation due to the sensitivity of the space. This was undertaken over several weeks of engagement that used planting and

gathering as forms of storytelling for ethical research collection and sharing. Some of these findings were collated and recorded (in both English and isiZulu) onto small sections of recycled palettes, and in conjunction with a creative seating provocation, were assembled into a public garden and communal gathering area as the launch of Act#5 and #6.



The larger findings from the co-productive research process of the Public Acts/Johannesburg project was shared through a public discussion later that day. This initial 6-week process was the first in many projects with the leadership including a spatial development programme, mobile trading stands several smaller support exercises as well.



See the full project documentation here: www.whatdoesmaimaimean.blogspot.com

Act#5 & #6: What does Mai Mai Mean?

Focusing on new and emerging public spaces Public Acts/Johannesburg aimed to investigate and showcase its many different manifestations and potentials. Producing a catalogue of urban public conditions based on criteria that respond to the contemporary reality of our city and represent its diverse geographies, six sites are identified for their critical value. These meander between the New Imaginaries, the Everyday, the Grand and Spectacular, the Ephemeral and Politics, Power and Protest. Acknowledging different interpretations of publicness, six creative collaborators alongside local actors are invited to produce a series of actions, site-specific interactions or performances in defined sites, to provoke discussion and the imagination around future public spaces in Johannesburg.¹

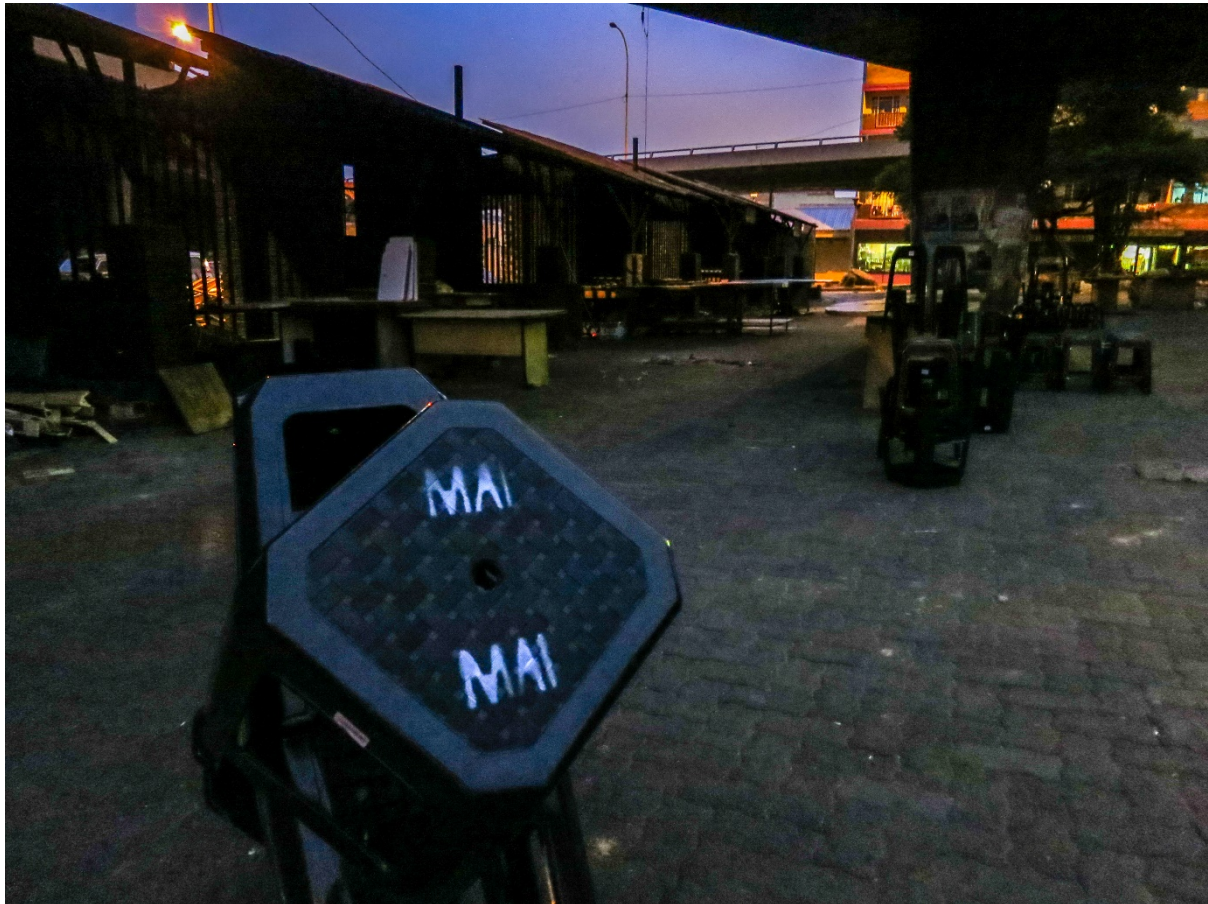
Act#5 & #6 culminated in a 24-hour multi intervention, choreographed Public Act, which invites city users to playfully, but critically, engage and interact with the creative interpretations of 'public' in Johannesburg. The Public Acts/Johannesburg aimed to challenge local urban actors and decision-makers to engage and construct public spaces in Johannesburg in innovative and democratic ways. The findings were documented and curated as creative outputs functioned as a guide on how to approach, use, misuse, appropriate and imagine public space in African cities.

¹ text taken from www.publicacts.org

The activation ended with a public street discussion that aimed to engage local stakeholders and a greater public to critically reflect and comment on the project's findings, speculations and provocations. The event gave space for critical thought about the conditions and production of public space in Johannesburg.

Act#5 - Gathering: The basic unit of public space

Act#5 explored the public act of gathering in the culturally and socially diverse space of the Kwa-Mai Mai Market in Johannesburg. Through a participative process of critical engagement with the users, an action-research spatial activation was established and performed with the Kwa-Mai Mai users alongside Act#6 of the Public Acts/Johannesburg project. This process aimed to reveal the nature of spatial agency and user control of the Kwa-Mai Mai Market while co-building a shared public facility for 'gathering'. The initial intervention was the first 6-week culmination of a grounded process of engagement with the Kwa-Mai Mai leaders and set the foundation of a much longer co-productive set of actions around upgrading the market spaces for the retailers and users of the Kwa-Mai Mai.



Act#6 - Story Planting

The Story-Planting Public Act aimed to capture stories and meaning of KwaMai Mai, a traditional muthi market in the inner city of Johannesburg, through transformative and symbolic planting. Plants play an important role in many South African cultures and were used as a means of both sharing value as well as discussing where value lies in regard to place. Through a series of participatory processes and engagements with a variety of local space-users the process informed the project about the connections and values people associate with the Kwa-Mai Mai.



Kwa-Mai Mai Support:

In March 2014, 1to1 and WeAmbush were requested to support the Kwa-Mai Mai leadership in the aim of upgrading and developing the market complex. In order to support the leadership, the collaborative used the PublicActs/Johannesburg as a means of guiding a set of research engagements with the Kwa-Mai Mai leadership and users.

The Kwa-Mai Mai Market is governed by a layered system of elders, committees and retailers who have occupied the spaces since Johannesburg's early development. The social dynamic does not lie at the surface and required hours of engagement in order to unpack the nature of local governance. The extent of the Kwa-Mai Mai leadership's control of the both the Market and Food Court in relation to the values attributed to the market through the participative planting exercise revealed a careful hierarchy of control and use negotiated through the leadership and the ad hoc users of the City of Johannesburg.

The earlier phases included participatory action research engagement to determine the Mai Mai Market spatial ownership dynamic as well as the Food Court's spatial hierarchy. The process of engagement was slow, but crucial. Due to the nature of the Kwa-Mai Mai Market, the process of engagement to intervention was incremental and deliberate. This was important in order to build and practice ethical trust with the leadership to co-develop the necessary understanding and implement a sustainable and leadership/user led set of interventions.



The first phase of the project, through Public Acts/Johannesburg, resulted in a co-built and planted community garden – the basis for the relationship of future projects. The garden was built in the busiest and most used part of the Food Court and emerged through several engagements and activations. A certain level of success can be attributed to this space as several months later not only was the garden still there and growing, but the local leadership had installed 2 taps to water the garden and provide water access to the Food Court users.

At later stages students of spatial design disciplines (architects, graphic designers and industrial designers) played a role in linking in city officials through the development of chisa nyama cooking/trading stand. The Chisa Nyama Mobile Trading Stand was the first prototype design and built that aims to be co-designed with both local carpenters and trade users to create a mobile trading stand that can work with the fluid trading spaces of the food court.



Throughout 1to1, alongside newer collaborators that included Counterspace, University of Johannesburg Staff and other actors, worked with the leadership to develop a larger scale strategy for the Kwa-Mai Mai's upgrading to accommodate large cultural events, better food stalls and a more managed and respectful tourist relationship. Links were established with the Markets of Warwick in Durban and business plans were developed closely with other local supporters.

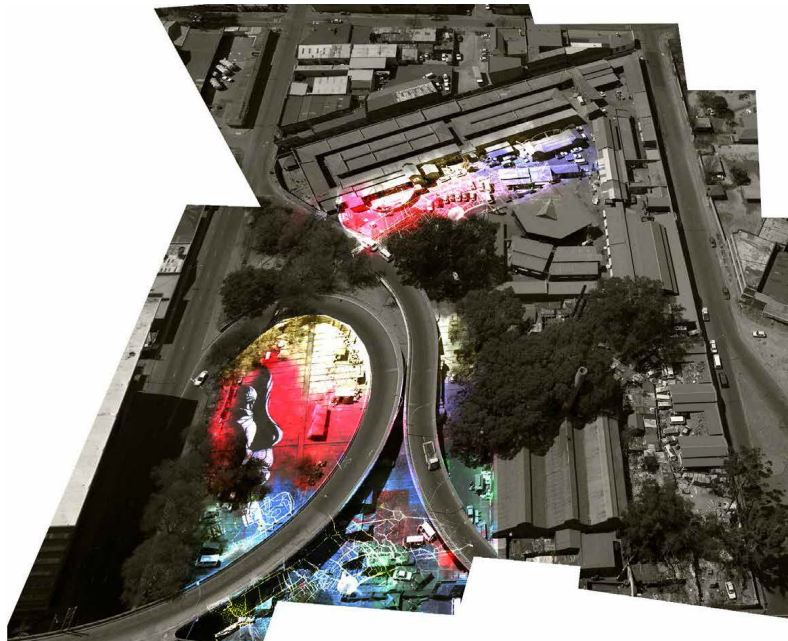


Image by CounterSpace (photo Leon Krige)

The 3-year engagement ended after the City of Johannesburg failed to return the Kwa-Mai Mai leaderships correspondence on the competition of the business strategy and spatial development plan. 1to1 remains available to support and complete the project, but due to the fluid nature of local government in Johannesburg this is dependent on favor from these political figures considering the city's own development vision.