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JOIN THE TREEEVOLUTION

Freedom by Nature: The Official Launch of Maboneng's co-created artwork.

"For some reason, the colours and images on this wall make me feel so much safer and I guess, well, more carefree when I walk down this street. This space has turned from grey and dusty to something just beautiful," says local Maboneng resident, Gladness Phiri. A balmy spring Maboneng Sunday marked the unveiling of the Johannesburg leg of Greenpop's UNESCO-IFPC (International Fund for the Preservation of Culture) funded art and environment project, on 11 September, as part of Johannesburg Art Week. Together with [Propertuity](#), Art Africa and Chava Alheit Art Projects, this Greenpop project aimed to create "Conservation Conversation Corners" in Livingstone and Johannesburg. Here disused public corners in each city were transformed using public participation, art, public seating, sculpture and indigenous plants, turning each space into a place of connection and of conversation around the incredible biodiversity that makes each city unique and special. The twin artworks and spaces serve to physically, visually and conceptually link the two cities. Livingstone's artwork (themed *Trees for Bees*) was unveiled as part of Greenpop's Zambia Festival of Action in July, earlier this year.

Three talented artists were selected for the Johannesburg leg of the project, including Zambian sculptor Owen Shikabeta and Zambian painter Mwamba Chikwemba - both involved in the Livingstone leg - as well as South African installation artist Mbali Dhlamini. Through their work they invited people into the space to break down barriers across countries, disciplines, people and nature, turning the space on the Corner of Commissioner Street and Berea Rd (opposite Arts on Main), into a functioning, colourful, public space including new seating and of course, their thought-provoking artworks. Paint for the project was generously sponsored by eco-friendly paint producers [B-Earth](#) and public seating was generously donated by [Krost](#).

Johannesburg is one of the largest man-made forests in the world, gifted with magnificent birdlife and rich biodiversity, but it is also a city with one of the highest crime rates in the country. In this city of bars, walls and fences the artists set out to ask: *"Where do we truly feel free?"* International studies have shown that [birdsong](#) and [urban green space](#) help to reduce the crime rates in towns and cities. Urban nature and public green spaces help to break down the barriers both mental and physical, sparking imaginations, forging new connections, and bringing people together. Through these works, the artists give thanks to the magnificent biodiversity in Johannesburg and hope to spark conversations around its importance in our daily lives.

In an interview with the artists, Mbali Dhlamini stated: *"Birds are synonymous with freedom. As a woman in Jozi, you always feel like you need to keep eyes at the back of your head. We stay*

on our guards and alert at all times, whether walking or driving in the city, because of the crime here. How wonderful it would be to feel free and at peace. Nature has that. Nature gives us that. We need to access it and conserve it more in our towns and cities."

Mwamba Chikwemba added that she could only relax properly when in nature. *"I realised, the only place I've truly been able to relax during my stay here is in fact on my visit to Walter Sisulu Botanical Gardens. Being in nature, in a functioning and safe green space, makes you feel physically and mentally free,"* she said.

Zambian artist, Owen Shikabeta created a powerful sculpture and public seating out of upcycled burglar bars. *"There seems to be burglar bars everywhere in this city. When hunting for scrap to upcycle for this artwork- I came across so many bars. I use what I find and so I created a bench. Instead of bars separating us, I wanted to make something that would bring people together. When you sit on it, I wanted it to somehow feel as though you are sitting outside of a cage. Free as a bird."* This was in addition to his life-size sculpture of a human, arms outstretched and free, which sits next to the bench.

Over the past two weeks, the community of Maboneng and local artists have been making their way to the art piece to pick up a paintbrush, lending their voices and talent and leaving their mark. Maboneng student, Thando Nkosi commented: *"I study in the area and it has been truly remarkable walking past this wall and seeing randoms [sic] and young children helping to create this piece. It's evolved everyday. I see one of my favourite birds over there, although you don't often hear it in this part of the city, when that bird sings you know the rain is coming - it's a comforting sound."*

The project has used art in this space to catalyse placemaking, spark a sense of community, and connect people to nature while opening conversations and a deeper awareness about conservation issues, access to nature and the benefits it provides. As local Johannesburg stencil artist Snow Ribeiro said when commenting on the work, *"Art in areas like Johannesburg's CBD has such power to transform a space. It makes it more human. It reminds us of our humanity, who and what we really are. We need colour and beauty and nature for our mental well being. Art, like nature, has the power to provide just that."*

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***For interview requests with the selected artists please contact Georgina Avlonitis
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