

# CREATIVE CITIES ARE SAFER CITIES

RETHINKING URBAN SAFETY FROM  
A **CREATIVE** AND **FRUGAL** PERSPECTIVE

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## URBAN SAFETY AND SECURITY

challenges, especially for vulnerable groups. Over 60 percent of all city dwellers — over 70 percent in Africa and Latin America — have been a victim of crime over the past 5 years. The urban poor, women and children are more vulnerable to crime and other forms of unsafety, and crime has a more devastating effect on them as they have less resources to bounce back (Tibaijuka, 2013).

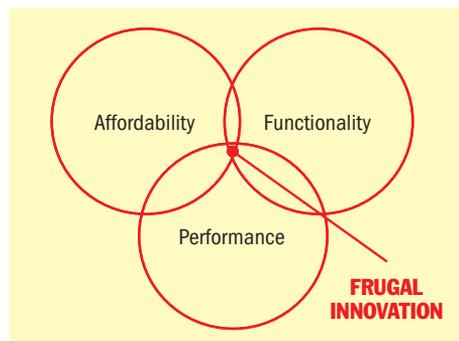
Scholars increasingly perceive urban unsafety of vulnerable groups as a wicked problem, whereby unemployment, unsafe public space, exclusion, youth gangs, access to weapons, exclusion and domestic violence create a negative vicious cycle. It is also a spatial effect: unsafety is unevenly spread and is especially sticky in public spaces of the urban poor such as parks, roads and public transport (Milikin, 2019). More recently, the Internet has emerged as a digital public space, creating new challenges of unsafety and access.

In the last decade, scholars and practitioners acknowledge that the traditional approach of crime reduction such as local policing with harsh punishments is not enough to break through this cycle of insecurity (Milikin, 2019; Tibaijuka, 2013; Ramoroka, 2013). Wicked problems such as unsafety require new forms of cooperation of multi actors at multiple levels working on multidisciplinary solutions (Koliba et al., 2017). As unsafety manifests itself within a unique local context, its solutions need to be locally relevant. At the same time, the principles, processes and technologies underlying these solutions should be useable at various scales. Our preliminary research findings show that creativity and frugality can play a role in engendering urban safety particularly in resource-constrained cities.

## CREATIVITY AND FRUGALITY

Charles Landry (2012) argues that cities should be creative in order to deal with wicked problems. Creative people drive urban development processes (Florida, 2005), but an excessive focus on the high-educated or creative professionals is likely lead to inequality and exclusion. Study findings on Smart Cities show similar results: a high-tech focus is likely to lead to more exclusion (Datta, 2015; Kummitha and Crutzen, 2017). In his latest book, Richard Florida (2017) refers to these trends as the new urban crisis. Thus, conventional approaches used to mobilize creativity in cities that exclude the urban poor can indirectly increase their unsafety.

Creative processes should be inclusive, and this is viable when 'quadruple' innovation processes are deployed (Arnkil et al., 2010): processes within which the government, firms, researchers and community openly and creatively discuss ideas on an equal footing. They take local knowledge into account and empower urban communities in the process. By involving urban communities as users and producers, solutions can become targeted and creative. These processes are far from easy, as they demand a radical change in approach, technologies and culture. They demand a frugal mindset, especially where resources are severely constrained (George et al., 2012; Soni and Krishnan, 2014).





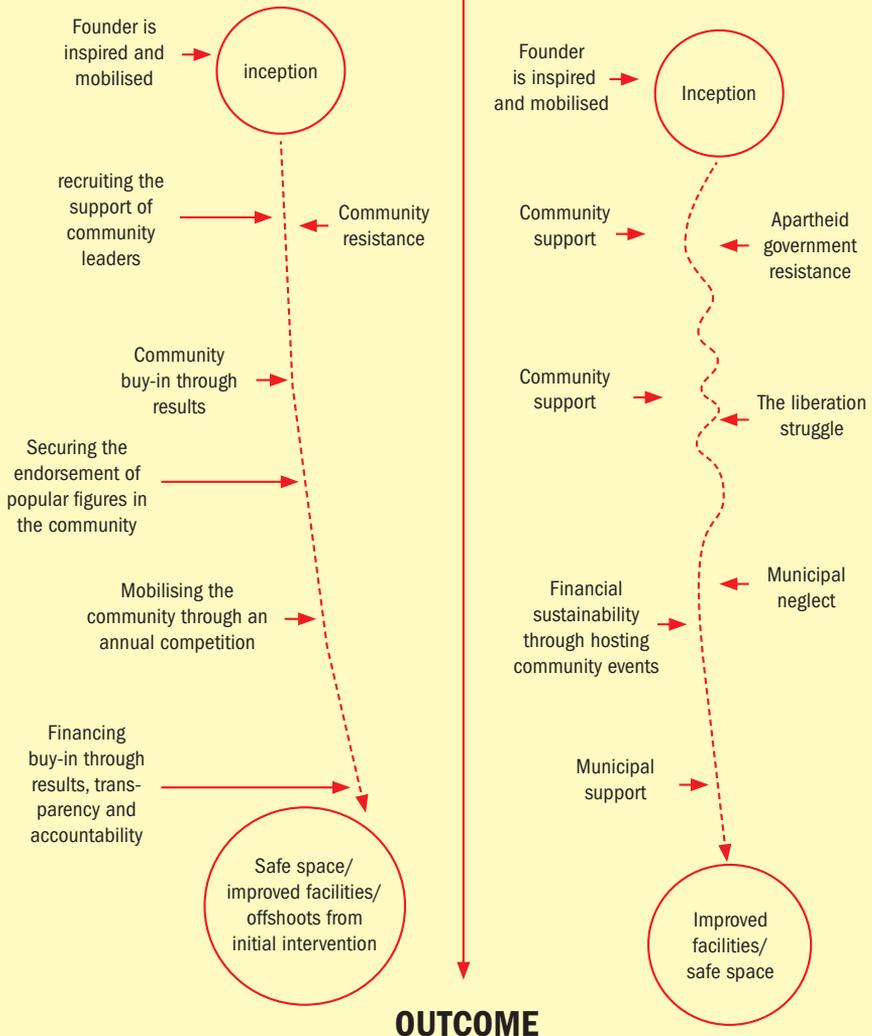
Frugal innovations fit neighbourhoods experiencing severe resource constraints, sharp economic inequalities, exclusion and poverty; features that characterize many of the unsafe and insecure neighbourhoods across the globe. Frugal innovations combine affordability with basic functionality and optimized performance by which they become accessible low-income communities (Knorringa et al., 2016). Frugal innovation processes can facilitate co-creation among different stakeholders invested in promoting public safety, be they 'top-down' or 'bottom-up' actors (Annala, Sarin, & Green, 2018). Our preliminary findings show that frugal innovation coupled with creativity advance public safety and strengthen communities by simultaneously reducing crime and incarceration rates. However, these findings are based on two isolated and relatively small-scale case studies.

# PROCESS

## NAIROBI

## DURBAN

### NEED



## ILLUSTRATIVE CASES: NAIROBI AND DURBAN

We are presently conducting a baseline survey in order to map and analyze creative and frugal community initiatives which improve the safety of vulnerable groups in Nairobi County (Kenya) and in eThekweni Municipality (South Africa). How Long? Park in eThekweni and the Dandora Transformation League in Nairobi give an impression of how communities take on the challenge of unsafety.

### ETHEKWINI HOW LONG? PARK

Umlazi is the fourth largest township in South Africa. Like other townships it has been historically underserved and disconnected from economic opportunities. The community is predominantly black and plagued with poverty, unemployment and violent crime. The legacy of segregation and spatial injustice still endures. Despite this, the spirit of community is vibrant. They have taken steps to remedy unsafety by establishing tertiary education institutions, malls, infrastructure and services.

In 1976, Michael Fana Mlangeni envisioned a public space where the people of Umlazi could reconnect with nature. He found a suitable spot along the banks of the Isipingo River and began to rehabilitate it by planting flowers and landscaping using river rock. He did not have any money, so he provided labour and used materials that were available on site. Members of the community also contributed labour, materials and tools. The community appreciates that the park reinforces the spirit of community by providing a venue for social events. It enhances safety by 'putting eyes on the street'. It also ensures that the immediate neighbourhood is safer because the park employs guards who patrol the neighbourhood.



### NAIROBI DANDORA TRANSFORMATION LEAGUE

Dandora is a low income neighbourhood in Nairobi. It was set up as a site and service scheme in the late 1970s providing housing for people working in surrounding industrial areas near Kenya's largest dumpsite. After the collapse of industries in the 80s, unemployment rates skyrocketed. This coincided with a cut back of municipal services, as city council was financially unable to meet its obligations. According to Charles Gachanga, founder of the Dandora Transformation League, these events ultimately led to a culture of crime.

Having grown up in Dandora, Charles had watched it decline. In 2014 he was tired of crime and wanted to make a change. Together of two friends he successfully improved the open space of Mustard Seed Court. Looking to replicate this success they reached out to Robinson Esialimba-founder of the Awesome Foundation for funding and thus the Dandora Transformation League was formed.

The Dandora Transformation League (DTL) encourages youth groups in Dandora and surrounding neighbourhoods to improve open spaces and identify income-generating activities. Residents of the transformed housing courts contribute monthly for maintenance. In 2014, DTL introduced the Changing Faces Competition, which aims to mobilise young people to transform neglected public spaces into safe and clean parks and playgrounds. The competition ran for three years in Dandora after which it was scaled up to the whole of Nairobi under the umbrella of Public Space Network.

DTL has created a safer community. Some estimates state that crime in Dandora has fallen by 90% since the inception of the project. Improving safety has boosted business and enabled children to play outside. DTL has provided the opportunity to former criminals to transform their lives and become a force for good in their communities.

This has created a new narrative for the youth, which is beginning to break the cycles of crime and violence. It also led to better police accountability, reducing the incidences of extra-judicial killings.

## OUTLOOK: STIMULATING CREATIVITY AND FRUGAL INNOVATION IN CITIES

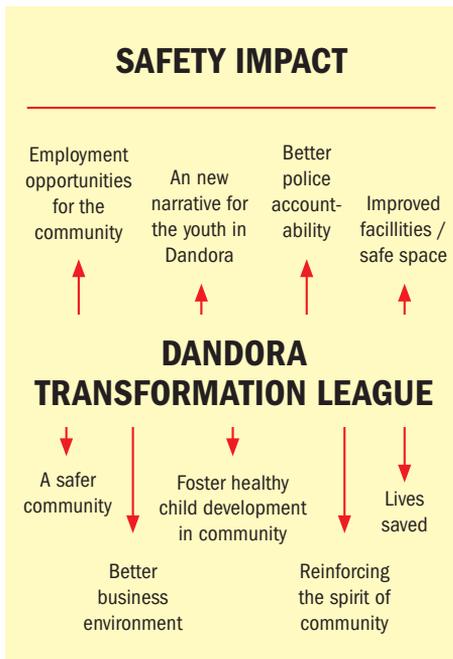
In the Creative Cities are Safer Cities initiative, we plan to explore the following avenues to investigate how public safety in cities can be advanced.

### A) URBAN SAFETY LABS

Urban living labs are explicit interventions at the boundaries of research, innovation and policy that aim to deliver sustainability goals for cities (Bulkeley et al., 2016), among them, public safety. Urban safety labs include urban communities as co-creators on equal ground with the government, researchers and firms. They may either test and adjust an existing solution in a local context, or they may study a local problem within its context, brainstorm ideas, select possible improvements and test those in real life (Almirall et al., 2012). Depending on the type of safety problem, one of the actors can take the lead role in a safety lab (Leminen, 2013). This initiative aims to build on ongoing initiatives in Nairobi and Durban, establish public private partnerships, build local capacities and integrate technical, social and governance design.

### B) DESIGN CHALLENGE

Historically, design challenges or competitions have had significant positive impacts on urban planning and design (Lehrer, 2011). In this initiative, we aim to issue a Global Safer Cities Challenge in order to unleash creative ideas for bottom-up, creative and frugal solutions that will contribute to safety and security of vulnerable groups. The Challenge will explicitly invite community members to submit ideas. We hope that the ideas provide further inspiration for



the Urban Safety Labs, where they will be discussed, altered, improved upon and ultimately tested.

### C) SOCIAL DESIGN RESEARCH

The initiative will combine action with research. While design is common in architecture and other natural studies, it is rare in social science. However, the recent drive for co-creation has triggered social researchers to think of design as an academic approach. We look at design as an applied research strategy to explore and co-create. 'Design thinking can enlarge the solution space, foster creativity and enhance imaginative power' (van Buuren et al., 2020: 11). By fostering out-of-the-box thinking, we hope to contribute to local solutions and scalable policy recommendations. At the same time, we aim to study the process of co-creation, in order to offer recommendations for improvements of the participatory process. Research therefore aims to support the participatory processes and to enable upscaling.

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## **OUR INVITATION TO YOU**

We invite all interested creatives, practitioners and researchers to join us, in order to unleash and test creative and frugal ideas which improve the safety of vulnerable urban groups.

Please contact us at:

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[creativecities@whatdesigncando.com](mailto:creativecities@whatdesigncando.com)**

