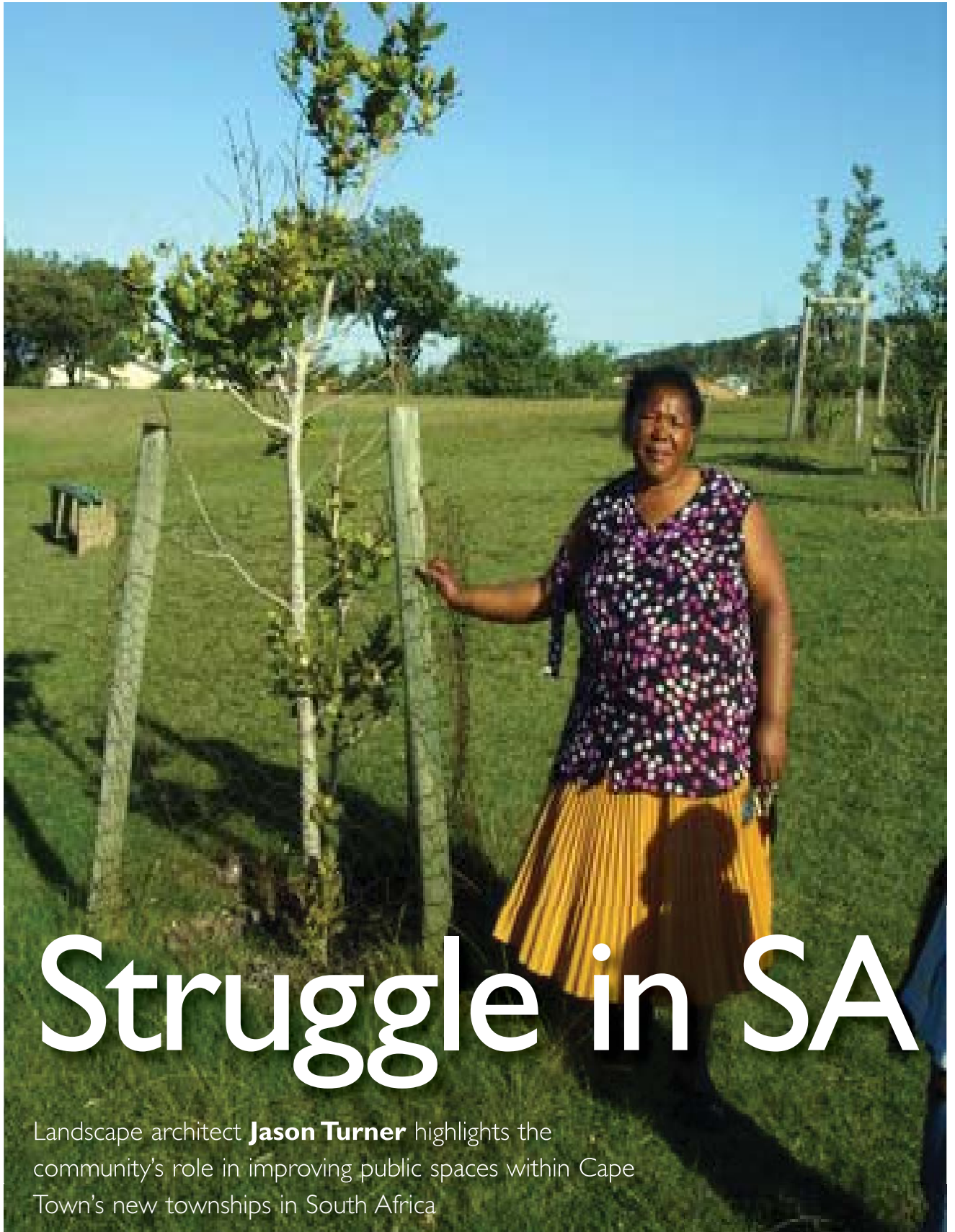


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Struggle in SA

Landscape architect **Jason Turner** highlights the community's role in improving public spaces within Cape Town's new townships in South Africa

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CHRISTINA KABA IS a remarkable woman. Moving from a rural area in South Africa's Eastern Cape to Cape Town in 1984, she has become a force to be reckoned with in grass roots development. Her way of rolling up her sleeves and getting stuck in has won her numerous awards such as: Woman Of The Year Award in 2002; a finalist in the Desmond Tutu Fellowship and in the

Ashoka Award 2006; and Khayalitsha Development Worker of the Year 2005 for her work in community gardening and greening. This is all part of her work in poverty relief and empowerment. It only takes a couple of minutes to realise that this unassuming woman is a powerhouse to be reckoned with.

I met Kaba in the Manyanani Peace Park in 'A Section' of Khayalitsha (Kye-

a-leech-a), a township on the wind blown Cape Flats outside Cape Town. In 1995, just after the first real democratic elections in South Africa of 1994, an international coalition of hundreds of volunteers looked for areas of land in which to plant 'The Peace Tree' to celebrate South Africa's remarkable and peaceful transition. The Peace Tree initiative was under the

auspices of Earth Steward Network, based in Bainbridge USA, an international movement designed to bridge cultural divides. Volunteers came globally to be part of this first Peace Trees event in Africa – they later undertook tree planting programmes elsewhere in Africa and around the world. The tree selected locally was *Syzgium cordatum* or Water Berry.

Living a few roads away from what is now the park, Kaba became aware of the initiative and made sure that the piece of commonage nearby was selected. The volunteers started with earth shaping, created an amphitheatre and a simple stage was built. Other earth shaping created berms which were planted with trees, grass and a few flower beds; a football field and a netball court were constructed. The outcome was so impressive that it won the Presidents Social Forestry Award in 1998 and a Green Trust Award in xxxx.

An ongoing challenge is the maintenance of public spaces once the initial development is complete. Nationwide, local councils are very stretched for resources and funding, so that only the most basic maintenance of parks can ever be undertaken. It is an ongoing problem that landscaped parks deteriorate to dust bowls fairly quickly after construction. Evidently, this is not a situation unique to this part of the world.

Regardless, Kaba was not going to have any of that. She rallied the neighbours and arranged that each of them would contribute the equivalent of £5 (adjusted for exchange rates and local salaries) a month to a kitty which they use to pay the salaries of two permanent staff members, who look after the park by watering and cleaning the community centre they have had built by a Dutch contributor. The care of the flower beds is done by the neighbours, who give up time over weekends to plant and water them.

Driving around the Cape Flats, one encounters many parks, but at best they are bland areas of grass and trees, at worst derelict wastelands. This throws the Manyanani Peace Park into sharp contrast with these areas. Despite the very modest living conditions of the residents around the park, they are able to achieve what residents of more affluent areas have not, by taking

ownership of the park and responsibility for its upkeep.

Organisation is what Kaba does best. She was a co-founder of the Khayalitsha impulse of Abalimi Bezekhaya organisation, which promotes sustainable and organic farming within the townships. This offers people most often without any formal income the chance to grow food for their tables and sell any surplus to raise some money. Abalimi has been supported by the World Wide Fund for Nature Conservation and Development as a core funder since 1996. It has been running for 25 years and now supports gardens across the Cape Flats.

Creating a place of hope

But Kaba is only just getting warmed up. The apartheid policy of migrant labour shattered local cultures and society has not had a chance to regain equilibrium. Alcohol and substance abuse, violent crime and high-risk sexual activity take a heavy toll on the younger people in the townships. Kaba remembers the values instilled during her more traditional upbringing on a farm. She knows that you can't stop the youngsters getting mixed up with what they do, but she wants to create a cultural centre where the traditions of their culture can be celebrated, and offer a social touchstone to the residents of the area.

Kaba has her eye on the piece of land adjacent to Manyanani Peace Park on which to build 'Moya We Khaya' (Spirit of Home) – 'a place of hope, a home, where the people of Khayalitsha can start believing that they are part of the world' The brochure explains: "Moya We Khaya has been designed in the context of an indigenous botanical garden and park with the guiding principles of cultural and ecological respect, renewal and celebration."

Conceptually it looks to link a number of currently disparate spheres into a whole:

- A 'Place of the Elders', to honour the wisdom of the elders and remind people of the standing the elders used to carry within society as the holders of cultural wisdom.
- 'The Cultural Meeting Place' – a reminder to return to the roots of African Culture and values that make us human. It is a space linked to the



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others which will be used for meetings, events, activities and celebrations.

- 'A Place to Rest' – offering hospitality, nourishment and safety with a restaurant, conference facility and offering nutritional advice.
- 'The Place of Beginnings' – dedicated to the children, it offers youth programmes and activities that encourage learning, creativity and confidence.

The land around the centre will be a landscaped botanical garden using indigenous herbs used in traditional medicine, cooking and crafts, and laid out to create different spaces and user areas. The gardens will interface directly with the buildings. Sustainable and environmentally sound building practices will be employed to build the



centre, designed by Anna Cowen Architects. Kaba is currently trying to raise the estimated £1m funds to make this project happen, but accepts that it will happen in phases.

This could be one of the most exciting projects in the Cape Town area, and it seems to be ticking all the right boxes ■

Visit: www.abalimi.org.za