

Inverting the Guard Hut and its Architecture of Fear:

Enhancing Safety Governance through Dignified Safety Shelters in the Stjwetla Informal Settlement in Alexandra, Johannesburg

Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships for Transversal Safety Governance

(Cross-University Collaboration for Professionalisation of Safety Governance)*

July 2024 – March 2025



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1. Introduction

Ensuring safety in precarious or vulnerable urban communities presents complex challenges due to limited resources, informal infrastructure, and systemic inequalities. The Safety Shelters project was developed within the Kelvin-Alexandra-Frankenwald City Studio ([City Studio](http://www.wits.ac.za/cubes/city-studio)), a 2024–2026 initiative of the Centre for Urbanism and Built Environment Studies (CUBES) at Wits University. The City Studio addresses spatial justice, urban resilience, and sustainability within a 1–3km radius around the Marlboro Gautrain Station in Johannesburg. As it progressed the Safety Shelters project partnered with the Urban Safety Reference Group (USRG), a practice-based learning platform for city practitioners responsible for community safety functions. The USRG was interested in the additional aspect of collaborative safety governance or how Cities, universities and local actors can partner to improve safety. The USRG is convened by the South African Cities Network (SACN).

As part of the City Studio, students and staff investigate various challenges, opportunities, and approaches to planning and design, including initiatives for improved safety. The City Studio is interdisciplinary, engaging students across the School of Architecture and Planning and beyond, exploring methodologies in design, history, infrastructure, environmental challenges, and social dynamics. A particular focus in 2024 involved the second-year urban planning course, where students examined safer township environments and governance structures that could support improved safety measures.

The Safety Shelters project emerged as a direct outcome of this student engagement. Specifically, it seeks to enhance security in Stjwetla by creating two ‘safety shelters’ at key crime hotspots. These are roofed areas for the Stjwetla patrollers, particularly after dark, providing protection and visibility reinforcing their presence within the community. The initiative to co-produce the safety shelters integrates pedagogical and practical approaches, engaging students, local artisans and residents in collaborative knowledge exchange, while prioritizing locally sourced and repurposed materials to ensure cost-effectiveness and sustainability.

This practice note shares key lessons from the process of conceptualizing and building the safety shelters, while also reflecting on the role of collaborative safety governance and partnerships.



2. Safety Patrolling in Stjwetla and the Idea of Safety Shelters

Stjwetla is a large informal settlement that includes several former temporary relocation areas. It is situated on the western bank of the Jukskei River, opposite Extension 7 on the Far East Bank of Alexandra, Johannesburg. The area faces severe socio-spatial challenges, including flooding risks, limited access to sanitation and clean water, waste management issues, and high crime rates. Despite these hardships, the community demonstrates resilience and ingenuity in the absence of sufficient state support.

In an effort to curb persistent and violent crime, including domestic violence, a volunteer patroller group—the K Stjwetla Patrollers—was established in early 2023. The 18 members of the K Stjwetla Patrollers, including seven women, patrol Stjwetla 24 hours per day in an effort to reduce crime in the area. The patroller group collaborates with the Stjwetla leadership committee and the Bramley Police Station (SAPS). A former security guard hut at the entrance of the Green House TRA (Temporary Relocation Area) at the northern vehicular access point into Stjwetla serves as their operational base and meeting space.





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Already in the preparatory stage of the City Studio in 2023, participants from Wits University depended on the K Stjwetla Patrollers for safety while getting to know the area. Throughout 2024, K Stjwetla Patrollers accompanied individual researchers, groups, or large student classes on weekly site visits.



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During a participatory engagement at the formal launch of the City Studio at Marlboro Station in May 2024, the patrollers, in their pursuit of visibility and legitimacy within the community, requested assistance in fundraising for uniforms, raincoats, brightly coloured jackets and equipment, particularly two-way radios. The broader question of safety was also addressed through interactive anonymous cards distributed to attendees. One of the responses pointed to what became the safety shelter initiative:

“Urban crime has a profound impact on the social fabric and economic viability of a neighborhood (...). By ignoring this issue, we risk perpetuating a cycle of decline and neglect that has plagued this area.”



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In further engagements around the second-year urban planning course, the patrollers requested assistance with a visible and protected presence at key locations. This led to the idea of safety shelters strategically placed in high-risk areas. The second-year students explored two sites, considering urban strategies for these. The studies were exhibited and discussed at an ‘Urban Fare’ at Marlboro Station in October 2024.



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As the co-production of the safety shelters unfolded from November 2024 to March 2025, the City Studio gained insight into dynamics we were not aware of up to that point. This related to spatial politics, competing interests in the land the leadership had allocated for the shelters, and some of the techniques the patrollers were using to assert respect and control over unwanted behaviour. Gail Super (2020) observed from her research in informal settings in Khayelitsha, Cape Town, that in contexts of extreme inequality and crime, the line between ‘community’ and ‘mob’ is porous, with patrol groups at risk of evolving into enforcers of extrajudicial justice. In Stjwetla, it became clear to us that the patrollers’ request for our assistance with formal patroller gear and the safety shelters were key to their efforts to be ‘seen’ and respected by the community as a formal entity. In 2025, one of the questions the City Studio has begun to engage is how the community responds to the visibility and formality and the extent to which this enables the patrollers to adjust their techniques.



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3. Inverting the Guard Hut: Locating and building a safety shelter in Stjwetla

Through a collaborative process involving the Stjwetla Leadership Committee and the K Stjwetla Patrollers, the locations for the two safety shelters were identified based on movement patterns and crime hotspots. The selected sites were:

1. An area near Florence Moposho Street at the southern end of Stjwetla.
2. The site of an abandoned vendor stall at the northern end of the area known as Maponyaville, the part of Stjwetla closest to the Gautrain.

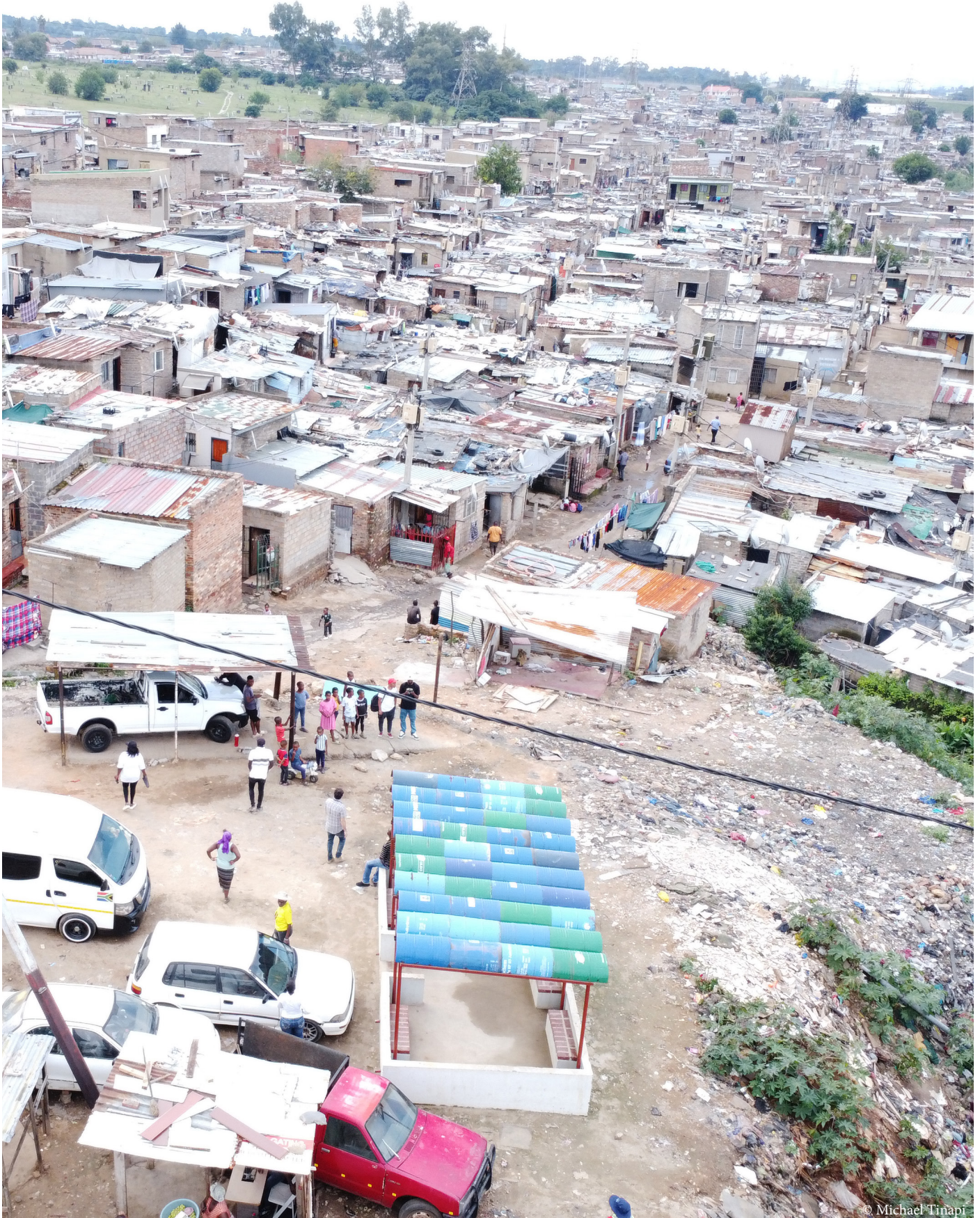
The work began late November 2024 at the southern site. Initially, a location had been selected, between the road-side and Stjwetla's densely developed houses. However, late-stage discussions revealed potential municipal plans to construct a boundary wall in this area. The Stjwetla Leadership Committee shifted the location eastwards to an open area close to the bridge across the Jukskei River. Like many open areas surrounding Stjwetla, this site contained rubble and required some unanticipated clearing and levelling. This adjustment in location and in the actual work highlighted the importance of flexibility in community-led planning.



In November and December 2024, a team of ten local artisans worked to construct the first shelter using recycled materials where possible. The resulting structure challenged traditional security architecture, inverting the stereotype of restrictive guard huts. The impactful roof structure, made from repurposed 44-gallon drums, draws attention while creating pleasant shade. The safety shelter is open on all four sides, therefore prioritising visibility of the patrollers over their protection against criminals.

The project aimed at cost-effective construction methods and materials, to ensure affordability and sustainability. The impromptu design enhancements that were required on-site included strengthening the foundation slab due to the condition of the site. As a result, additional work hours had to be added and compensated for. The adaptive solutions, while placing pressure on the project's budget and timeframe, nevertheless were able to reinforce the project's collaborative, community-led nature.





4. The Pedagogic Dimension of the Safety Shelter Initiative

The pedagogical dimension of the Safety Shelter initiative was realised through a two-pronged approach: the second-year Urban Planning design studio and a three-day Summer School held in early December 2024, which was open to students across Architecture and Planning.

The second-year Urban Planning design studio, led by Nkosilenhle Mavuso, required students to investigate the multiple challenges faced by the Stjwetla settlement, including overcrowding, inadequate social and physical infrastructure, limited public space, and safety concerns. Students were assigned two strategic “safety spot” locations in the settlement: at the northern entrance/exit (connecting to Marlboro Station, Kelvin, and Linbro Park), and at the southern edge (leading to Alexandra, Wynberg, and Sandton). These are key commuting nodes, and areas identified as needing urban design interventions to improve perceptions and experiences of safety.

Students were tasked with developing visions for these sites under the theme of a *Safe + Inclusive + Connected Kasi* (neighbourhood). Their proposals sought to integrate formal and informal urban elements, envisioning mixed-use, accessible, and well-connected spaces that support sustainable urban form and architectural expression – spaces where people in Stjwetla can live, work, and play.

Through this studio, students conceptualised urban frameworks that extended beyond the safety shelter prototype. Their work included detailed design proposals that physically connected Stjwetla to their broader strategic visions, focusing on principles of functionality, diversity, and connectivity. These frameworks also incorporated public space systems and typologies that contribute to safety – such as street-level interventions with public furniture to support trading, gathering, and play.



Building on these ideas, the Safety Shelter design-build initiative and Summer School, coordinated by Dr Paulo Moreira, translated student-led research into two constructed shelters at opposite ends of Stjwetla. While construction progressed on-site, ten Architecture and Planning students participated in the Summer School hosted in the John Moffat Building at Wits University, home to the School of Architecture and Planning and the CUBES interactive room.

The Summer School reimaged the typical suburban guard hut – often minimal, cost-effective, and undignified – as a site of design generosity. Working in a studio setting, students explored how repurposed materials could enable alternative spatial solutions for safety in Stjwetla. These ideas were visualised through a variety of media, including drawings, illustrations, collages, and physical models. The exercise included a knowledge exchange with Sipehelele Ngobese, representative from the USRG, and two local artisans, who were playing a key role in the co-production of the safety shelters in Stjwetla. The artisans participated in training students in welding, grinding and painting using the same materials as in Stjwetla. This hands-on engagement expanded the project's impact into pedagogy, promoting interdisciplinary collaboration between students, professionals, and community members.

University insurance cover for students did not permit these activities to take place in Stjwetla. However, the visibility of the summer school activity within John Moffat Building at Wits University sparked questions and comments beyond the Summer School participants and allowed for conversations around the spatial dignity and safety governance to be taken up pedagogically in 2025. These topics were previously addressed during an online discussion held on 21 November 2024, titled ‘Transversal Partnerships: Cross-University Collaboration for Safety Governance’. The event brought together members of the City Studio team at Wits University and representatives of the Urban Safety Reference Group (USRG) – a reference group comprising 10–25 participants from eThekweni Metropolitan Municipality, the City of Johannesburg, the City of Tshwane, SACN, and the National Department of Human Settlements (DoHS).

Alongside broader reflections on the USRG's trajectory, the discussion underscored the importance of institutional collaborations with universities. This insight directly influenced the format of the Summer School, which was initially conceived as an exchange between university and community. By involving USRG representatives in the Summer School activities and feedback processes, a triangular model of engagement was established – demonstrating how official institutions can remain connected to the lived realities of community safety, with the university acting as a bridge in facilitating that exchange.





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5. Outcomes and Challenges we did not foresee

The first safety shelter was completed in December 2024 and has served mainly as a night-time base in between safety patrols. In the day-time it has served as a recreational space, primarily used by men to drink, relax and talk. In the first two months since its completion, the first safety shelter has been intensely used and not vandalised. Requests have been voiced through the Stijwetla leadership directly to the City Studio team for not only the second but several additional safety shelters and further park-type recreational spaces.

In this sense, the shelter has a dual community relevance. On the one hand, it provides day-time shade and gathering space, enhancing environmental conditions (mitigating dump-site effects). On the other hand, it enhances night-time patrolling. The shelter has also unlocked a spatial imagination for collective improvements of this nature (exemplified by the above-mentioned requests), with their possibility understood to be tangible or on the immediate horizon. However, the predominantly male day-time use of the shelter has brought to our attention that more effort is needed to understand women's needs in terms of multi-purpose recreational space.

The shelter initiative also sparked challenges and revealed underlying local spatial dynamics. In February 2025, a dispute arose concerning an area immediately below the first safety shelter, where chemical toilets had been long been lined up. As a result, the toilets were temporarily relocated to the area surrounding the shelter, interfering with the intended visibility. Local community members reported that some toilets were vandalised and thrown into the river. In response, two weeks later, the company responsible for managing the toilets decided to remove them entirely from the site. The toilets were reinstalled at their original location in March 2025, for which the land-dispute appears to have been resolved.



This episode demonstrates a continuous process of tension and changing conditions around the site. Other realities that needed to be navigated were the changing costs resulting from the flexibility that the setting required. In the initial budget, we underestimated the actual costs inherent in the dynamic process of co-designing and co-producing the shelter. This included the time required from the local construction team, which exceeded the number of days originally budgeted for. Furthermore, due to university insurance constraints, students were not allowed to take part in on-site design-build activities,

limiting their direct involvement in the shelter's construction, which could have saved costs.

Learning from these experiences, the second shelter was planned with a different approach: a smaller team of local representatives and artisans – primarily those involved in the more hardworking and productive aspects of the previous process – was engaged. The site, located at the northern tip of Stijwetla, was also initially under dispute, but by February 2025 the leadership and patrollers reached consensus on the exact position. This area offered a quieter, more stable environment, with neighbours who were welcoming, helpful and did not demand any form of compensation, a dynamic that had to be managed in the construction of the first shelter.



The roof of the second shelter incorporates the lids from the same drums used in the first structure, demonstrating the possibility of reusing 100% of the material with zero waste. The roof structure is flat and less exuberant than the first shelter. The actual shelter is also smaller, triangular in form, with an unwallled platform with three benches creating a space for gathering, encouraging dialogue and social interaction. Its reception among the community and the patrollers will be a theme in the City Studio throughout 2025.



The construction process for both shelters was documented in a video featuring testimonies from three local participants – a community leader, a patroller, and a builder – accompanied by footage of the construction process and final outcomes of both safety shelters. These testimonies bring a more vivid and engaging perspective to the two interventions, their main characteristics and their use. The only challenge faced during the making of the documentary was the reluctance of many patrollers to be interviewed, as the camera seemed to make several of them shy away. However, they expressed their appreciation for the project and were present in large numbers during the video recordings. Although they did not wear the uniforms provided during filming, they mentioned that they primarily use them during night patrols.



6. Key insights and hypotheses to be taken forward

Several of our assumptions or points of departure were confirmed through the co-production process:

- Safety governance and spatial governance are interconnected: mapping safe vs. unsafe areas is essential to understanding and undoing spatial patterns of crime. This underscores the importance of localized data and collaboration between municipalities and patrollers in collection and analysis to improve evidence-informed decision making.
- Community ownership is crucial: building trust and maintaining transparent communication are essential to strengthening engagement. In this project, trust and involvement were reinforced by providing platforms that amplified local voices in addressing safety concerns.

A notable example took place during the Urban Fare event at Marlboro Station, where a panel discussion brought together lecturers, patrollers, and local stakeholders. This gave the audience an opportunity to learn from ongoing initiatives related to spatial and safety governance in Stijwetla and its surroundings.

Hard-learned lessons:

- Flexible financial arrangements are essential to built interventions in dynamic and informal spaces.
- Local participation in construction work must be carefully planned and negotiated to avoid unmet expectations.
- Community-led site selection for infrastructural interventions such as safety shelters requires time and flexibility with the possibility of last-minute changes and navigation of competing demands for space.
- Student involvement in hands-on initiatives complementary to their courses should be structured around academic schedules to maximise participation.

Scaling and Policy Implications, with precautions:

- This model presents opportunities for integration into local policy. It can be replicated in other informal settlements, but with caution, considering the lessons.
- This approach could tie explicitly to the relationship and opportunities for closer collaboration between municipalities and communities as a pipeline for feeding local knowledge into policy.

Key propositions for further exploration:

- In the uncertain and precarious context of informality, a visible, multi-purpose spatial intervention can enhance the governance of safety.
- Interventions to enhance safety should not rely on an architecture of fear.
- In a context where many livelihoods depend on the hard work of salvaging discarded materials, strikingly visible and celebratory re-use of materials gives dignity to this lived reality.

7. Final Reflections and Conclusion

While the Safety Shelter project was carried out under the time pressures related to the SACN-Wits funding arrangement, it demonstrated the potentially long-term impact of innovative, participatory, community-driven interventions in enhancing urban safety governance. The initiative also strengthened local knowledge networks, bridging gaps between academia, governance, and grassroots initiatives, providing the base on which to build future collaboration in this field.

Reference:

Super, G. (2020) 'Three warnings and you're out': Banishment and precarious penalty in *South Africa's informal settlements*.



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