

# A COMMUNITY TAKES SHAPE



A wall mural in Westbury, Johannesburg, does more than bring colour and a sense of place to a community, it tells an intimate story.

PHOTOGRAPHS DOOK PRODUCTION ANNEMARIE MEINTJES WORDS MILA CREWE-BROWN



The new bridge in Westbury connects people with people and people with the public park that has a play area for children, an exercise station and amphitheatre.  
Opposite: Artist and architect, Lorenzo Nassimbeni.

If you found yourself in Westbury, Johannesburg, today, chances are you would have come into the neighbourhood on a bus that delivered you to the recently completed Westbury BRT Station. The new bridge that connects either side of the area's busiest thoroughfare would lead you down into a public park with an exercise station, kids' play area, amphitheatre and graphic red wall murals.

The latter is courtesy of architect and artist Lorenzo Nassimbeni, who worked intimately with a team of Westbury community members to create the murals. At first glance you might appreciate the colour that brings the park to life, and perhaps the bold geometric patterns that cover the walls, but there's far greater meaning beneath the layers of paint.

As both an architect and artist, Lorenzo feels compelled to incorporate the landscape into the built environment. His job was to create a mural for the park walls by way of a community project that would engage the neighbourhoods of Westbury and Coronationville. "I decided to look at the boundaries of Westbury with its neighbours because historically it has both a contentious and rich history; how it has bordered onto those areas has been of political significance over time," he explains of the area, previously named Western Native Township.

### COMMUNITY OWNERSHIP

How do you authentically and honestly represent a community whose land your mural inhabits? This was of great importance to Lorenzo, who aimed to draw in the surrounding landscape. Lorenzo approached members of the Westbury community and its youth centre and formed a team of around 15 individuals. Split into three groups, they were armed with disposable cameras and sent out into the urban landscape to explore the boundaries of Westbury and its neighbours. Three core areas were documented, those being the border between Westbury and Sophiatown, Westbury and Coronationville, and Westbury and Newclare – all neighbourhoods that have been part of turf wars for decades.

What came back was an authentic imprint of the people and the place, with stories of the spaces that make Westbury what it



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Members of the Westbury community were armed with disposable cameras and sent out to explore. A new landscape was formed from their combined photographs and mapped out onto roughly 250 metres of wall. In this way the community gained ownership of the space.



is today. "The community gains ownership by way of their photographs being directly represented in this wall. Each one speaks to an actual photograph taken," Lorenzo says.

A new landscape was formed from the combined photographs and mapped out onto roughly 250 metres of wall space. "The wall tells the narrative of the place and each artist's experiences with it. [This] is so important, because as an outsider I'd never be able to capture the story and the magic of a place like this," he says.

### LIFE IN COLOUR

Three paint colours were chosen to depict this new landscape. Plascon Wall & All Hot-n-Spicy (R6-B1-1) was used to coincide with the red of the new bridge; Plascon Wall & All Bovine (EC 47) was used to add dimension; and Plascon Wall & All Light Grey Aluminium (EC 44) as grid infill on the bridge pillar.

Since the park is a microcosm of Westbury, Lorenzo geographically aligned the walls in a move that reveals his depth of thought on projects like this. The Sophiatown wall runs



parallel to Sophiatown, and the same for the other two boundaries.

“Because this is such a contextually driven design, the mural becomes an extension of the urban design and an homage to the area,” Lorenzo explains. “It’s an engagement with the landscape, where architecture and art are the means of communication.”

[lorenzonassimbeni.com](http://lorenzonassimbeni.com)

### THE POWER OF PAINT

Painting the walls is one of the quickest and most direct means of transforming a space. Taking ownership in this way has potent effects on the mind. Street art, by extension, has the same influence. In South Africa there have been waves of initiatives that use painting as a means of elevating communities in need. Colour brings much-needed delight in otherwise grim surrounds at institutions like schools and hospitals; and the artists of I Art Joburg and Faith 47 in Warwick Junction have embarked on public works on empty city walls, bringing art to the people, inspiring them on their daily routes and even broadcasting important messages.

### TO GREAT EFFECT

The owner of Past Experiences and pioneer of walking tours in Johannesburg, Jo Buitendach has a love of street art, through which she observes the power of paint to effect change. “Some of the inner city’s lowest socioeconomic areas boast the most graffiti and street art. For the communities of those areas, and specifically the kids, art is a luxury – it isn’t in schools; there’s no money for art supplies – and so graffiti and street art, more than any other art, impacts their lives. Having worked in these communities, I know how proud the residents are of them,” she says.

The wall tells the narrative of the place and each artist’s experiences with it. Involving members of the community was essential, says architect Lorenzo Nassimbeni. “As an outsider I’d never be able to capture the story and the magic of a place like this.”

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