

# Initiation Site Development in Khayelitsha, Cape Town: Addressing the Challenges of Urban Initiation While Preserving Tradition and Culture



*This project report is part of an ongoing research program by students of the WPI CTPC to explore and develop options for sustainable community development in the informal settlements of South Africa. For more information please go to:*

<http://www.wpi-capetown.org/>

*The following is an executive summary of a full project report that has been implemented as a website available at:*

<http://wp.wpi.edu/capetown/homepage/projects/p2010/initiation-site-development/>

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## **ABSTRACT**

The initiation ritual is a ceremony that symbolizes the transition from boyhood to manhood for many South African males of the amaXhosa, amaHlubi, and abeSuthu ethnic groups. It is an important tradition during which young males are circumcised and taught to be responsible men. The ritual has been practiced for hundreds of years in rural areas. However, in recent years, the initiation ritual has spread to urban environments, and with this shift, this sacred process has faced many challenges, including insufficient areas of suitable land and a lack of safe health practices. Through research of the cultural context, interviews, and analysis of the only formal initiation site in Cape Town, the team assisted in preparing a plan and an implementation strategy for the development of the Good Hope College Initiation Site in Khayelitsha; a sign of the City of Cape Town's commitment to the formalization and reservation of land for the sacred ritual of initiation.

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## PROBLEM STATEMENT

The initiation ritual is a ceremony that symbolizes the transition from boyhood to manhood for the males of the amaXhosa, amaHlubi, and abeSuthu ethnic groups known collectively as *abantu*. This sacred ritual is an important part of traditional culture that has been practiced for hundreds of years in rural areas of South Africa.

Each year, young males walk away from the familiarity of their homes, and go to the bush where they are circumcised, and left alone to their thoughts and to heal. In the following four to six weeks, the initiates must learn of their new responsibilities and protocols to which they must adhere as men in their communities.

The ritual inspires social cohesion and cultural pride. Failure to undergo this process can lead to serious social consequences for the males of the South African *abantu*. In urban environments where lack of space and unsanitary conditions exist, the risks that boys will face to gain the privilege of marriage, the respect of the community, and the right to become a man through initiation are heightened (Mavundla, 2010).

In the last two decades, there has been a mass migration from rural areas of the Eastern Cape Province to urban areas of the Western Cape Province driven largely by the need to find employment, and the desire for a higher standard of living (Central Intelligence Agency, 2010). This migration has created challenges in

maintaining the initiation tradition, and the urban *abantu* community has been forced to creatively adapt to a rapidly changing social and cultural environment. Many migrants reside in townships and informal settlements on the outskirts of Cape Town. One of these townships, Khayelitsha, is located 30 km from the centre of Cape Town, and is home to a shifting population of between 500,000 and 1,000,000 residents comprised largely of *abantu* people who have migrated from the Eastern Cape (Alex, et al., 2007). Many young males cannot afford to travel to the Eastern Cape to partake in the traditional initiation ceremony, and so the initiates must find the most appropriate area they can in these urban townships.

In most areas experiencing rapid urbanization in South Africa, little land remains secluded and undisturbed for proper initiation use. Instead, informal sites with little privacy that are subject to dumping of trash and grazing of livestock are chosen for this sacred ritual. Even when these boys find desirable land, challenges of initiation still remain. The male will face three of the largest risks during his first day of initiation—AIDS, bacterial infection, and botched circumcisions. Health complications of the initiates arising from botched circumcisions and improperly sanitized blades by irresponsible *ingcibis* (traditional surgeons) are common. In 2007, there were 100 hospital admissions reported in the Eastern Cape due to initiation health complications (Meissner, 2007). These complications included transmission of viruses, bacterial infection, penile

amputation, and sometimes death. The City of Cape Town has recently developed a task force to plan, develop, and operate formal initiation sites to provide space and reduce the risks associated with initiation.

## BACKGROUND

During the summer and winter breaks each year, thousands of males in South Africa typically between the ages of 17 to 23 undergo the traditional ritual of initiation (City of Cape Town, 2009). On the first day of initiation, boys are circumcised by a traditional surgeon (*ingcibi*) who is appointed by the family, and are left in seclusion for four to six weeks. During this time of seclusion, initiates live in huts (*ibhomas*), traditionally made of reeds, but currently made out of plastic (Afolayan, Funso, 2004).



During this time, the initiates must learn the responsibilities that have been passed down for centuries by knowledgeable men who are trusted and respected in the community, called *ikhankathas*.

Historically, and in most parts of the Western Cape and all of the Eastern Cape Provinces today, the ceremony



was not carried out within the boundaries of a fenced region. The government was not involved. As the high rate of hospital admittances, reports of infections, and mortality due to initiation became known, the provincial government in the Eastern Cape passed the 2001 Circumcision Act (Karl Peltzer, 2008). However, this initial legislation did little to reduce the number of health complications and deaths. In the Western Cape, where initiation often takes place in urban, rather than rural environments, no action was taken by the government.



In 2005, concerned citizens of the township of Langa asked the City of Cape Town to help preserve their informal initiation site. The City responded, and the Langa site subsequently became the first formal initiation site in the Western Cape, providing a fenced in area reserved for initiation, with a shower and the requirement that initiates receive a physical examination and follow a list of regulations enforced by a paid site manager and volunteer site committee.

In 2009, the Western Cape and City of Cape Town government sought to address the continuing economic, social, and health challenges that face the *abantu* youth who undergo initiation. An *indaba*, or gathering of concerned community members, city and government officials, and tribal elders discussed the need to formalize initiation sites in the Western Cape to help ensure the safety and security of their youth, and preserve sites for initiation. The City of Cape Town responded to the needs of the initiation community and made a verbal commitment to provide formal initiation sites for the boys of the townships such as Khayelitsha. In order to further these efforts, the City of Cape Town established an Initiation Task Team comprised of community leaders, elders, traditional surgeons, municipal and provincial government officials, and other major stakeholders with the goal of developing sustainable, safe initiation sites throughout the municipality.

In 2010, the designation of land for 11 formal initiation sites around the City of Cape Town was announced. Of these sites, three are active informal initiation sites in Khayelitsha. With the ideas of the initiation community at the forefront, the City of Cape Town set a goal to formalize the second initiation site in the Western Cape in 2011, modelled after the Langa site.

### **MISSION STATEMENT AND OBJECTIVES**

The purpose of this project was to assist in the preparation of a plan and implementation strategy for the de-

velopment of the Good Hope College Initiation Site in Khayelitsha on behalf of the City of Cape Town's Social Development Department. Several main objectives were identified to achieve this goal, including:

- Explore the changing culture of initiation in South Africa
- Research and assess existing initiation sites
- Develop a site layout, infrastructure plan, preliminary tender documents, and management plan for the Good Hope College Initiation Site

### **METHODOLOGY**

The team worked in Cape Town for two months in late 2010 with guidance from former City of Cape Town City Planner Basil Tommy, to achieve project objectives. During this time, the team attended an initiation *indaba* and worked with city officials from several departments. The team spoke with Langa Initiation Site officials, a senior manager of the Western Cape Department of Arts and Culture, a traditional surgeon, an Eastern Cape Health Official, and Kirstenbosch Garden personnel to identify and further define the elements essential to the design of the Good Hope College Initiation Site.

To gather information about the changes in initiation culture and to gain a better grasp of the City of Cape Town's vision for the proposed Khayelitsha site, the team first attended the annual initiation *indaba*, or gathering, of city officials and *abantu* representatives discussing the

initiation ritual. The team was able to meet several key contacts and learn more about the importance of initiation in the *abantu* community. In order to understand the challenges and conditions of existing sites, the team visited the Langa Initiation Site. The Langa Initiation Site is a respected site known for its history of no fatalities. A series of site visits and discussions with Langa Site personnel did, however, identify existing challenges. From these discussions, the team gained an understanding of the complexities surrounding initiation; the social and political relations between government and *abantu* members in the communities, as well as the challenges that face the site committee, site manager, and the city officials who are associated with the Langa Initiation Site. This research was informative in making our Good Hope College Initiation Site recommendations.

Analysis of the Langa site that was later used to plan the Good Hope College Initiation Site included an assessment of the following:

- Condition and effectiveness of the concrete palisade fence, constructed by the City to secure the site and provide privacy
- Site access for cars, pedestrians, and emergency vehicles
- Geographical features and vegetation used by initiates for screening purposes
- Irrigation system, parking, water taps, and shower facilities

- Challenges such as trash dumping, rubble dumping, and vandalism
- Management structure and practices.

The team met with Zolisa Pakade, the Department of Social Development project manager responsible for the formalization of the Good Hope College Initiation Site, to discuss the **City's initiative, budget, recent progress, and challenges.** Major topics discussed in this initial meeting included fencing, topography, and city ownership of land.

The team visited the Good Hope College Initiation Site, which is currently being used informally, four times during their time in Cape Town. Photo documentation was utilized on-site to later identify and analyze geographic features and areas where initiates currently construct their huts so as to define site borders that encompass these areas of interest. Once site borders were known, fence location, site access, amount of fill needed to create a level ground for fence construction, and location of showers and latrines were determined.

With development of preliminary plans underway, the team learned that almost half of the land that had been planned for in the initial site design created by the team for presentation to the Department of Social Development was owned by Denel, a state-owned manufacturing company. The team therefore met with the head of the Department of Social Development, Lungelo Nokwaza, to discuss the issue of land ownership.



Following this meeting, city officials helped the team determine that full development of the city and Denel owned land was not feasible given that the process to purchase or lease Denel land will create lengthy delays in the project. Thus, a two phase development plan was proposed that initially develops the City-owned land in phase I, followed by the Denel owned land in Phase II, if it may be purchased or leased.

Information was requested and received from city departments and private contractors for the preparation of specifications and prices for palisade fencing, tree planting, irrigation, water supply, and dropped curbing for vehicular entrance onto the site. At the conclusion of the eight weeks in Cape Town, the team arranged to meet with Lungelo Nokwaza to present the site proposal and discuss the proposed design, cost estimates, management plan, and implementation plan to be applied in the months following our departure.

## RESULTS

Through research conducted, the team came to understand the importance of the culture surrounding initiation. It was stressed in nearly every encounter that initiation is a fundamental part of *abantu* culture and social identity for males. Using this knowledge, the team understood that major changes to the initiation ritual would not be accepted. The team made recommendations only after discussion with members of the initiation community. The first step taken was to visit the reputable Langa site to understand why this adaptation of the ritual is widely accepted by **initiates' families, traditional leaders, and government officials** alike, as well as to identify challenges that formal initiation sites face.

## LANGA INITIATION SITE FINDINGS

While at the Langa Site, it was noted that structures such as showers are necessary and should be unobtrusive in appearance, that a site should take on a forest like appearance, and that organized site management that enforces rules and regulations, and community involvement has led to a safe site for the initiates at Langa. However, the most important feature at Langa is the concrete palisade fence. Over the years, this gated fence has helped preserve the ritual of initiation, while exposing challenges. Barring cases where gates have been left open, the site has been left untainted by trash dumping, cattle grazing, and the cutting down of trees for firewood. However, the fence has been vandalized in two lo-



The Langa Initiation Site

cations to make a shortcut to avoid walking around the site. The fence has not since been repaired out of concern that it will merely be broken again, and grants consideration when designing the Good Hope College Initiation Site.

## GOOD HOPE COLLEGE INITIATION SITE PLAN

Using the Langa Site as a model, the team developed a site plan and development strategy for the City of Cape Town Department of Social Development. A budget of R300,000 has been reserved to contribute to the development of the site during the first fiscal year of construction, ending in June 2011. The recommended plan encompasses 8.2 hectares enclosed by a 1241 meter perimeter. The plot of land recommended for enclosure encompasses a valley and hills that initiates can use for screening. As seen in November 2010, initiates set up their huts in the valley during summer season because the walls of the valley provide screening and seclusion. Likewise, the



hills provide the initiates with dry ground during the wet season, helping to prevent discomfort and infection. Concrete palisade fencing will surround the site and run along Spine Road and Mew Way and

connect to an existing fence owned by Denel that currently exists on the west side of the proposed site.



From conversations about dumping of trash, vandalism, and the preservation of the initiation site, fencing was determined to be essential to the success of the Good Hope College Initiation Site. All whom were spoken with about fencing agreed that it is necessary and will discourage inappropriate use of the site. While the cost to fence the site is high at R210,630, Concrete Palisade fencing is not easily broken, and cannot be easily sold or used for housing, as is the case with metal fencing.

A concern noted at the Langa site that may apply at the Good Hope College Initiation Site is that the fence may be broken by people who wish to cross the site, rather than walk around it. This vandalism may be prevented by leaving the pedestrian gate open during the day, and locking it at night, but is not a permanent solution, and will require further consideration by the site committee.

Vegetation on the inside of the fence

provides additional screening, but cannot prevent people from entering the site, and may be cut down for firewood. The *Rhus crenata*, *Metalasia muricata*, *Ficus natalensis*, and *Brachylaena discolor* will be planted along the site perimeter for screening. These were chosen from a substantial list of vegetation, compiled in a consultation with Kirstenbosch Gardens personnel for their ability to grow in Khayelitsha, where there are strong winds, sandy soil, and a high water table. These bushes are not likely to be cut down for firewood, and will be accepted by city officials and *abantu* community members alike because they are indigenous to South Africa.

While fencing and hedges provide screening, geographic features of significance were also considered. A small hill located in the western

region of the proposed site should be enclosed by the site fence to maintain the privacy of initiates given that the entire site may be viewed from the top. However, at the current road reserve of 20 meters, this is not possible. The team requested to the Department of Transportation that the road reserve be reduced from 20 meters to 10 meters in order to include the hill and increase the area of usable terrain. This will reduce the amount of fill that is necessary to eliminate the steep grade along Spine Road on which the fence will be constructed. This will significantly decrease the total cost of the project.

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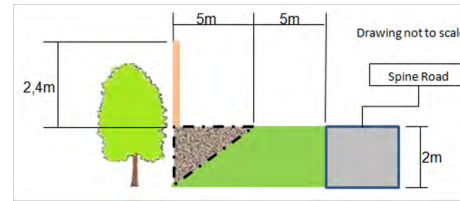
## SITE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

Given that a portion of the proposed site is controlled by Denel, we propose the site be developed in two phases. Phase I will use 3.8 hectares of City-owned land, during which time the City will negotiate the acquisition or lease of the Denel-controlled land with the National Department of Public Works. If these negotiations succeed, Phase II would add 3.8 hectares of Denel-owned property and 0.6 hectares of adjoining City-owned land, reserving a total of 8.2 hectares for initiation use. There will be no additional cost to enclose this land,

excluding labor, given that part of fencing used for Phase I can be transferred. The total cost for Phases I and II would be approximately R692,000. The R2000 increase in cost is due to the additional vegetation needed for screening. The team estimates that approximately 55 initiates per season can utilize the phase I site and approximately 120 initiates per season can utilize the site once it is fully developed, extrapolating from the estimated usage of the Langa Site, as provided by the Langa Site Manager. The acquisition of the Denel-owned land by the City is a distinct possibility, given that its topography renders it unsuitable for most commercial uses and given the provincial **and city government's support for** initiation initiatives. Of the estimated

R690,044 for Phase I, nearly 30% is based off a contractor's projected allowance of R200,000 given for the fill needed along the southern border. Given the high projected estimate for fill, alternatives were analyzed.

## ALTERNATIVE FENCING PLAN



Two alternatives are proposed to address the financial challenge of filling the area along Spine Road. Alternative recommendations include the proposal of a site with a further reduced road reserve, and a proposal where no fill is used, and the fence is placed on the bottom edge of the slope in front of the trees planted for screening. This alternative requires that trees be fully grown in before adequate screening would be present on site, however, it will be substantially less expensive if fill is not used, and in both situations, will still provide screening and enclose the hill, previously discussed. Both alternatives require that trees, rather than shrubs, are planted to aid in screening.

Construction of the initiation site proximate to Good Hope College in Khayelitsha is expected to commence in the months that follow our departure. **The team's work is expected to lay a precedent for subsequent development of the two other informal**

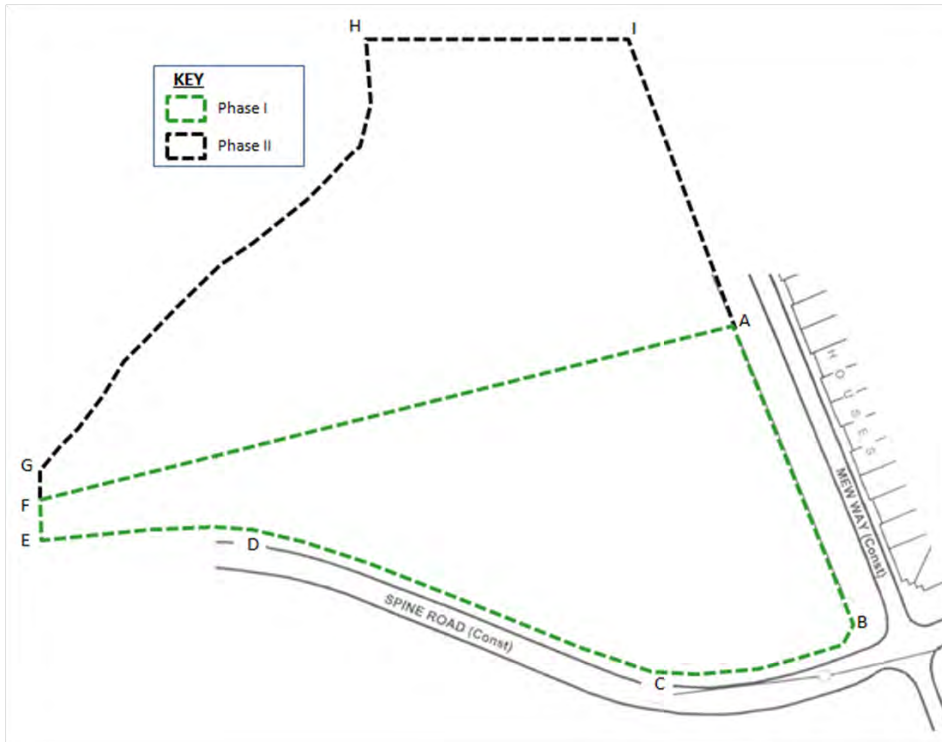
initiation sites located in Khayelitsha.

## GOOD HOPE COLLEGE SITE MANAGEMENT PLAN

The Good Hope College Initiation Site management shall consist of an initiation site committee, site manager, and associated government officials. The Good Hope College Initiation Site Committee will consist of 6-7 volunteer members, and is based off of the Langa Initiation Site's model. These members will need to create awareness in the community about the initiation season, and hold a meeting where the steps to be initiated are outlined. It is advisable that the Good Hope College Initiation Site Committee follow the Langa Site Committee's lead, and recommend trusted *ikhankathas* and *ingcibis* to the community.

For safety reasons, the Good Hope College Initiation Site Committee needs to require that all initiates who undergo the ritual provide the *ingcibi* with a medical certificate that affirms their health status. Provision of the certificate to the surgeon prior to the date of circumcision (the first day of initiation) is suggested.

A site manager is also needed to manage the site throughout the year. The site manager is responsible for registering initiates, overseeing the site conditions, controlling access to the site, and enforcing site regulations.



## PHASE I COST ESTIMATES

Project cost estimates including both capital costs and management and operational costs are based on data provided by relevant city departments, contractors, and consultants. Some have been specifically calculated for the project, while others are based on estimates of similar work undertaken in other projects, and have been increased to acknowledge inflation. Costs for Phase II are not included as it cannot initially take place, and increases the cost by only a negligible margin.

## CONCLUSION

The team has gained an understanding of the importance of initiation for the *abantu* of South Africa and the complexity of the social and political relations between the government and *abantu* in urban communities that the development of a formal initiation site entails. We expect that the research and planning that has been completed will ease the process of formalization for the Good Hope College Initiation Site and that our project will provide the City of Cape Town with a set of methods and recommendations that will aid in the future formalization of other initiation sites. The team believes that with our methods and recommendations, and the acceptance of the initiation community, the initiation ritual will be sustained in urban environments throughout South Africa for years to come.

Item	Number of Units	Unit	Unit Cost (Rands)	Total Costs (Rands)
Fencing	1 003	metres	210	210 630
Gates	1	Estimate	6 800	6 800
Fill	800	metres <sup>3</sup>	250	200 000
Shrubs	502	4 kg. bag	12	6 024
Trees	101	20 kg. bag	60	6 060
Irrigation	1	System (estimate)	192 990	192 990
Water supply	1	System (estimate)	17 600	17 600
Showers	1	Shower	50 000	50 000
Curb drop	1	Estimate	6 000	6 000
<b>Total Cost</b>				<b>*690 044</b>

\*Annual costs not included: Langa Site Manager currently earns a est. annual wage of R15,0000



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