

Walking with dignity: the Rickshaw Renovation Project

THE Rickshaw Renovation Project is a collaboration between the Durban Rickshaw Pullers' Association, the Business Support, Tourism and Markets Unit of eThekweni Municipality, and staff and students of Workspace — a work-integrated learning graphic design studio, in the Department of Visual Communication Design at Durban University of Technology. This project aims to renovate 25 rickshaws, as well as the outfits and headdresses worn by the rickshaw pullers, who work along a road commonly referred to as the Golden Mile. This historical road was formerly known as the Marine Parade and is a popular tourist destination. Lined with hotels and blocks of flats, the road is also the site where Zulu craftswomen ply their trade under the cover of recently constructed shelters.

At the beginning of 2011, research conducted at the Durban beach front indicated that these poorly adorned rickshaw pullers were struggling to make ends meet. The rickshaw carts were in disrepair and the beadwork on the rickshaws deteriorated. Interviews with the rickshaw pullers indicate that an average income of R15 000 per annum is generated by each puller, with most of that income being generated in December during the festive season. Approximately 10 rickshaws operate at any given time during the low seasons of the year, and the other 15 rickshaws operate from kwaNongoma during vacation periods in March, July and December.

The rickshaw service and the retail of beadwork and curio items manufactured by the local craftswomen, are ostensibly reliant on foreign tourism and sporadic visitors in the province from other regions of the country. Qualitative research revealed that Zulu craftswomen, who worked alongside the rickshaws, had through socialisation, appropriation, fashion and westernisation, transformed their products based on the forms and colour conventions of traditional beadwork found across KwaZulu-Natal, into a homogenised design form. Further research revealed that much of the design found on the rickshaw carts and on the pullers' outfits had undergone a similar fate. Much of the original design was based on the beadwork convention of the Mandlakazi and Suthu clans found at kwaNongoma, a region in central Zululand from which the rickshaw pullers hail.

In response to this research, students and staff of Workspace at the Durban



University of Technology, eThekweni Municipality, and various other sponsors, have undertaken to renovate and restore the 25 Durban rickshaws and their respec-

tive pullers' outfits. It was decided that the rickshaws were to be redesigned to represent the various Zulu polity identities on the premise and that this would

serve to broaden public awareness of these respective identities. Each rickshaw will be designed differently based on the colour and beadwork convention of each

polity or geographic area within KwaZulu-Natal. Interviews were held with the curators of various art centres and museums across KwaZulu-Natal, and students were each allocated a region on which to base the design of a rickshaw.

The first prototype rickshaw was to be based on the kwaNongoma region as most of the rickshaw pullers originate from this area. William Sibiya, a sixth-generation rickshaw owner from the Mandlakazi clan at kwaNongoma is involved in the design process. In some instances, modern materials were used to renovate the rickshaw, headdresses and pullers' attire in an attempt to make these items lighter and weatherproof. Conveyor or belt off-cuts, sufficient to repair all 25 rickshaws, were donated to reline the rickshaw wheels, and an apron and imblaselo, traditional Zulu trousers, were made in the kwaNongoma colours. The new prototype is now actively being used on the Durban beach front. Rickshaw pullers now have renewed optimism and Lawrence Khoza, a rickshaw owner, remarked when reflecting on the project: "I see William Sibiya now walks with dignity. This project has given us some hope." — Supplied.

Rickshaws crowding the streets in 1902. PHOTO: SUPPLIED