

Beyond the Crossroads: The Evolution of the Phuhliso Neighbourhood Heart

{This article is part of the #WriteYourFutureSA series and is loosely based on case study research the author conducted for his PhD thesis in the early 2020s in the Khwenxurha (previously known as Mooiplaas) area. It is written from the perspective of a person living in the year 2036 and involves fictional characters. Contact info@afesis.org.za if you would like to write and submit your own #WriteYourFuture article.}

Beyond the Crossroads:

The Evolution of the Phuhliso Neighbourhood Heart



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By Ronald Eglin, PhD

As I sit at a locally owned coffee shop overlooking the square at the heart of our neighbourhood hub in the year 2036, reflecting on the journey that has brought us here, I am struck by the sheer vibrancy of this Phuhliso Crossroads Hub. The name Phuhliso, meaning evolution or development in isiXhosa, was chosen to signify that this crossroads is no longer just a transit point but the primary engine for the socio-economic development of our community.

This strategic location, situated near the intersection of the N2 and the road to Kei Mouth, has allowed us to capture the energy of the region's main transport routes and channel it into a thriving community centre. Far more than just a cluster of retail shops and a transport interchange, this integrated neighbourhood hub also accommodates a small business support centre and serves as the primary hub for a wider regional mobile market circuit.

My name is Nomsa, and I joined this municipality as a junior planner in 2026. I arrived just as the community was embroiled in a fierce debate regarding the future of the Khwenxurha area, which many then still called Mooiplaas. My very first assignment was to facilitate discussions about the location of a proposed public transport interchange. That experience became the foundation of a decade-long effort to guide the emergence of a neighbourhood heart that actually serves its people. Looking out across the hub today, I see a place that has transformed from a dusty, chaotic intersection into a place of order, safety, and profound community identity.

The catalyst for this entire evolution was a controversial application in the mid-2020s to build a petrol garage on nearby communal land. While the private developer had initial support from a small group, the broader community and the municipality rejected the proposal because it did not conform to our agreed development principles. We recognised that placing a garage in isolation would lead to spatial sprawl and fragment our agricultural landscape. More importantly, it failed to address the urgent need for a vibrant node to revive an area that felt dead after dark, offering no options for late-night shopping or safe entertainment.

Instead of simply saying no, the municipality and the national government collaborated to purchase a farm right at the strategic N2 intersection. This allowed us to locate the garage in a way that supported a new government-funded taxi rank and a commercial shopping centre, providing the essential seed from which the rest of the node grew. This proactive intervention provided the necessary infrastructure to address the lack of night-time activity and attract private sector actors who saw the value in a consolidated, highly accessible hub.

The physical reality of the Phuhliso Crossroads Hub is defined by its commitment to pedestrian-centric design. At the very centre of the node lies the Village Square, a space intentionally designed as a series of outdoor rooms. Unlike traditional commercial centres that are surrounded by vast parking lots, we tucked the vehicles behind the buildings, allowing the square to function as a protected social sanctuary.

The square is defined by comfortable seating, indigenous shade trees, and local ornamentation, including intricate mosaic work on the low walls and paved walkways that reflect the beadwork and traditional patterns of the local Khwenxurha heritage. This unique community character makes it clear that you are in a place 'owned' by the people rather than a generic shopping centre. This square is the soul of the hub; it is where elders sit to watch the world go by, where children play near the central water feature, and where the community gathers for evening events.

The hub functions as a complete urban environment. One of the most significant shifts in our thinking was ensuring the node remained active and safe at night. Through the clever use of multi-purpose spaces, the hub never truly sleeps. There are things for the community to do day and night.

The same areas used for market stalls during the day transform into vibrant social spaces for evening dining and community meetings. This effectively saves costs by allowing different activities to be accommodated in the same footprint at different times. Safety and security have been achieved not through high fences or aggressive policing but through the principle of "eyes on the street".

By integrating the rental accommodation for nurses, teachers, and officials directly into the upper floors of the commercial buildings, there is a constant, natural presence of residents overlooking the square. Combined with bright, solar-powered street lighting and a community-led patroller programme operating out of the safety and security office, the hub has become the safest public space in the district.



The infrastructure supporting this growth is as innovative as the spatial design. To accommodate the expansion of the hub and the high-density residential units, we moved away from traditional, high-maintenance sewerage systems. We developed a series of eco-friendly, decentralised water and sewerage treatment plants that use biological filters and reed beds to process waste.

These plants not only save on municipal costs but also produce treated water that is recycled to irrigate the communal gardens and the intensive agricultural allotments nearby. This sustainable approach has ensured that as the node grows, it does not place an undue burden on our limited natural resources.

The development of this node was never a master-planned project imposed from above; it emerged through the careful application of local socio-spatial development principles that we adopted to guide all decisions within the Khwenxurha area. These interlinking principles, such as settlement nodes, public transport networks, local markets, and economic support networks, ensure that each new intervention helps make the node more whole.

For example, the settlement node principle encouraged us to consolidate activities at a single point of high accessibility, ensuring the hub acts as a magnet for both private and public investment. By following these principles, we have created an environment that reflects the community's vision of a self-reliant and productive neighbourhood, where every new building or service supports those already in place.

The economic heartbeat of the hub is further supported by the small business support centre, which has been instrumental in the success of local entrepreneurs like Zanele. Her business, Khwenxurha Harvest Co., is a successful agri-processing enterprise that takes raw produce from local smallholders, such as spinach, maize, and chillies, and processes them into high-quality dried goods, sauces, and frozen packs for the onsite supermarket.

Zanele often notes that the advice she received went far beyond basic bookkeeping. The centre's mentors helped her design a just-in-time logistics system to coordinate with the mobile market and provided critical guidance on food safety certifications and eco-friendly packaging. By using the hub's subsidised factory and office space during her first year, she was able to invest her capital in specialised machinery rather than overheads.

During my recent interviews for this case study, I spoke with a regular commuter named Lwazi. He told me that he used to spend nearly forty per cent of his monthly wages on transport just to do basic banking and shopping in the city. He said that now he can step off the taxi from work, visit the mobile banking unit or the supermarket, and be home with his family in minutes, having saved both time and money that stays in the village.

This ease of shopping and working locally has fundamentally changed the social fabric of the area. Furthermore, the hub has provided a significant boost to our coastal tourist towns like Haga Haga and Kei Mouth.

By consolidating major commercial and logistics activities at the crossroads, we have protected the quiet, residential character of the coastal villages from over-commercialisation. The node serves as a logistics and supply base where tourists can stock up on locally produced goods before heading to the coast.

The mobile market programme has also evolved into a sophisticated circuit, operating as a moving heart for the region. These various mobile facilities move to a new village every few days, servicing residents directly in their own local areas.

Furthermore, we are in the final stages of establishing a new tourism information centre that will operate as the official gateway to the Wild Coast. This centre is more than a desk for brochures; it is a sophisticated orientation hub that introduces visitors to the unique cultural and ecological heritage of our region.

Local small businesses in each village can strategically sell their products and services at these gatherings, knowing that most of the community will be present to access the wide array of private and government services on offer. This predictable schedule ensures that after a month, the mobile market completes its circuit and begins the next cycle afresh.

These multi-purpose units carry local produce, mobile banking, and government advice offices, ensuring that essential services found at the crossroads, such as agricultural support and digital food safety certification, are accessible to everyone on the circuit in the Khwenxurha communal area.

As we look toward 2040, our focus is shifting to ensure the hub keeps up with the times by accommodating more advanced Information and Communication Technology (ICT).

While we already provide free high-speed Wi-Fi, we are currently upgrading the resource centre to include a GeoAI lab where local youth can use satellite data and agentic AI tools to map soil health for farmers and manage local land records.

This digital layer is becoming just as important as the physical roads, allowing our rural community to participate in the global digital economy.

We also have advanced plans to build a new regional hospital adjacent to the node, a facility designed to anchor Khwenxurha and the surrounding area as a premier retirement destination.

By providing high-quality, specialised medical services within the communal heart, we are ensuring that our growing elderly population, many of whom are former urban professionals returning to their roots, can enjoy a comfortable, secure lifestyle with the peace of mind that top-tier healthcare is on their doorstep.

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The story of the Phuhliso Crossroads Hub proves that when a municipality and a community work together to guide development based on shared principles, prioritising pedestrians, multi-purpose efficiency, and ecological health, a place can grow to be more than the sum of its parts. It becomes a vibrant neighbourhood heart where the collective spirit of the people finds its true expression.



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