

Art & About in Johannesburg

Johannesburg may seem like the quintessential urban jungle, but in and around Africa's economic engine you'll find plenty of green spaces filled with public art.

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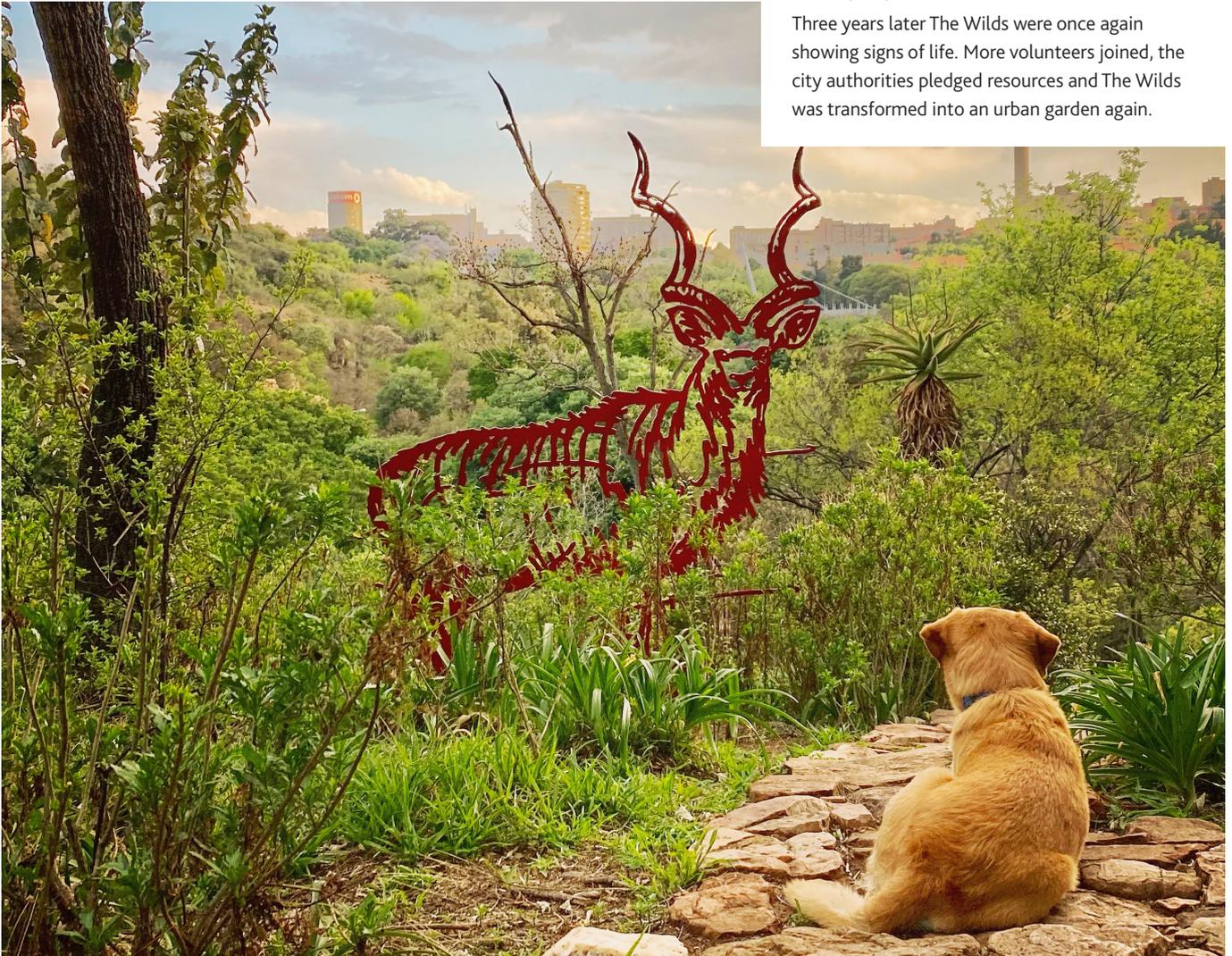


It began in 2014, with a dog named Pablo.

Pablo needed to be walked, but when artist James Delaney looked out of his window at the park known as The Wilds, he inevitably drove elsewhere. Back then The Wilds lived up to its name; a 40-acre warren overgrown with bushes, where paths were unkempt and locals feared to explore far beyond the gates.

So Delaney decided to make a change, by starting small. On his weekend walks with Pablo he'd take along pruning clippers, trimming branches that had fallen on pathways and cutting away the dense foliage to let sunlight wash in. The light made the park feel safer, and the clear paths encouraged more visitors. Inspired by the volunteer-driven regeneration of New York's Central Park, Delaney encouraged others to join in, and with a small exhibition of in situ owl sculptures he found visitors flocking to get involved.

Three years later The Wilds were once again showing signs of life. More volunteers joined, the city authorities pledged resources and The Wilds was transformed into an urban garden again.



Today, the change is nothing short of remarkable. From an abandoned urban wasteland, to date more than 2,000 volunteers have contributed their sweat and energy to improving this remarkable corner of Houghton. In excess of R1-million in donations and fundraising has been collected to spend on infrastructural improvements, and the Friends of The Wilds group now counts more than 4,000 members.

But it's the art, as much as the glorious green garden that draws in both locals and visitors to visit The Wilds.

Local mosaic artists have decorated the park's drinking fountains, now repaired after being dry for decades, while artist Gordon Froud created a sculpture installation of orange beacons in the East Wilds.



But it's the animal artwork of Delaney that has created the biggest stir amongst visitors to the park. Delaney has exhibited in Johannesburg, Philadelphia and New York, and has so far installed a menagerie of more than 100 sculptures across The Wilds. They are particularly striking for their unique artistic approach, of metal cut-out sculptures based on Delaney's signature charcoal sketches.

Today, much of the joy in wandering The Wilds is a chance encounter with the works Delaney has scattered across the park. Along your walk you might bump into a family of red kudu, perhaps a klipspringer or duiker. Monkeys abound, and there is even a rare pangolin to be spotted if you keep your eyes open. But the most talked about inhabitant is certainly the pink and yellow giraffe that stands ponderously on Giraffe Lawn. Surrounded by picnicking families and curious visitors,

this life-size sculpture is clearly visible from the roadway that bisects the park, a towering lighthouse calling visitors to come in, walk, and rediscover The Wilds now that they have been tamed.

While Delaney has revelled in creating an urban wilderness for locals and travellers to discover, sculptor Anton Smit journeys into the mystery of the human form.

Working largely in the media of metal and stone Smit has for decades been a powerful force in South African art. Through his extended career he has exhibited in all of South Africa's leading galleries, and had his work admired from Rome to Singapore, and Amsterdam to New York, where a striking public installation graced Grand Central Station.

But it's his own sculpture garden, which opened in 2003, that is perhaps the most charming destination to discover the sculptor's monumental body of work.



Smit's three-hectare Sculpture Park is set on a high plateau overlooking the Bronkhorstspruit Dam Nature Reserve, and is far and away the cultural highlight of this quiet corner of Gauteng province. Situated less than an hour from OR Tambo International Airport, it's an ideal day-trip for fleeting visitors and a popular outing for art-loving locals.

Smit is most famous for his unique perspective on the human form, which often emerges as a fractured and fragmented vision made permanent in bronze and stone. Across the Sculpture Park visitors can admire and engage with these thought-provoking works, from stand-alone statues to the monumental 'Wall of Revelations'.

"It doesn't represent the narrative or try to tell the interwoven stories of Revelations or pretend to issue any prophetic warning," explains Smit. "Rather, it deals thematically with the emotional impact of Revelations on the human race, all the spiritual drama wrought by so much upheaval."

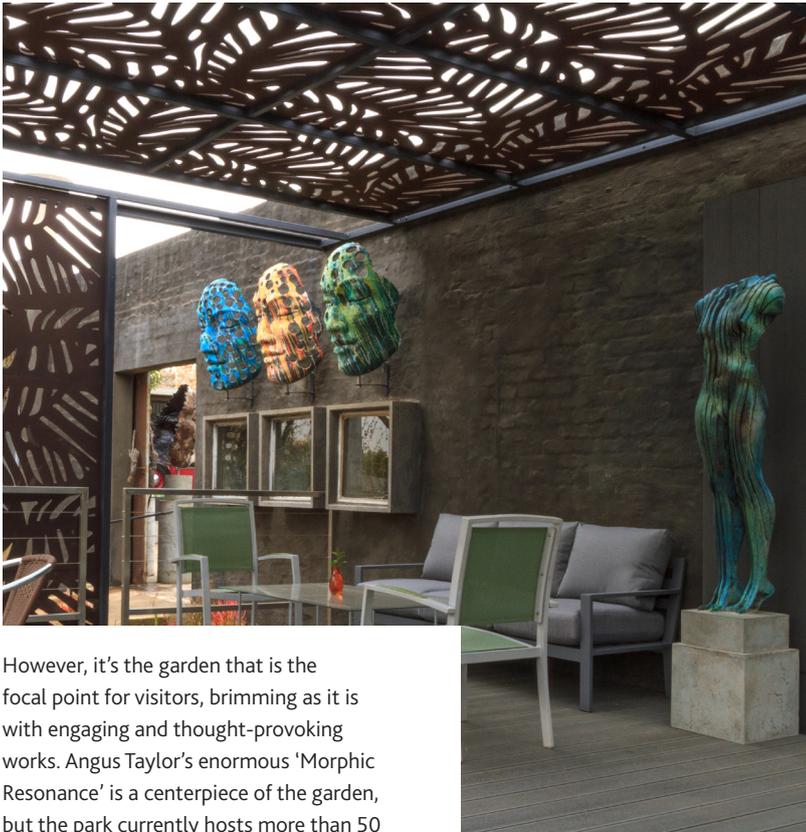


With dozens of works carefully placed amid natural rock formations, succulent gardens and manicured lawns, it's a wonderful space to while away a few hours. The on-site gallery also offers a range of Smit's work for sale, while the Art Café dishes up a compact menu of light meals and drinks.

To the west of Johannesburg, the Nirox Foundation has become a creative crucible for a diverse selection of South Africa's most acclaimed contemporary artists, providing a range of open-air and under-cover spaces that have hosted more than 300 groundbreaking installations since the Foundation was formed in 2006.

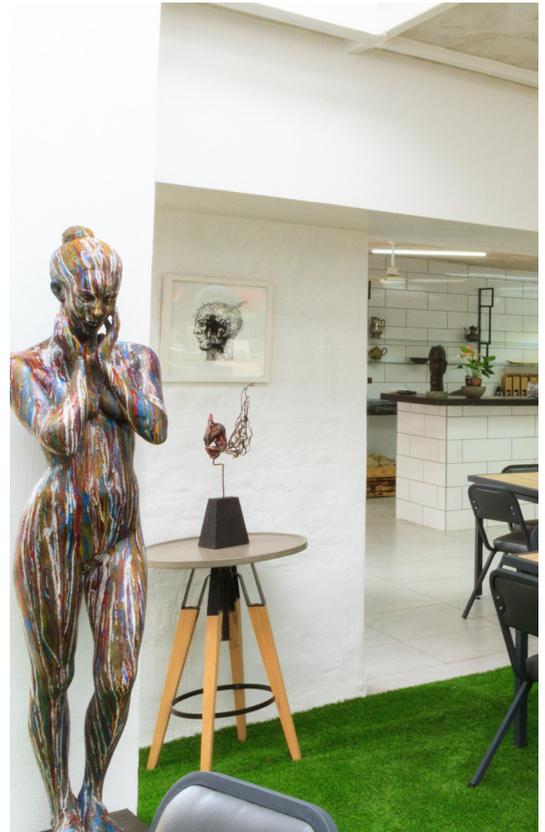
Situated in the Cradle of Humankind, a World Heritage Site, the Foundation's sprawling 30-hectare sculpture garden rests on the Blaauwbankspruit River and adjoins the 1000-hectare Kkatlhamphi Private Nature Reserve, a wilderness of riverine forests and golden Highveld grasslands populated by antelope and birdlife.





However, it's the garden that is the focal point for visitors, brimming as it is with engaging and thought-provoking works. Angus Taylor's enormous 'Morphic Resonance' is a centerpiece of the garden, but the park currently hosts more than 50 permanent and long-term installations, with at least one large curated exhibition on the roster each year.

Much of the park's new work comes courtesy of an innovative residency programme, which sees global artists living



at the residence within the Park, becoming enmeshed in the cultural life of the city and, on departure, leaving behind an artwork.

The permanent and temporary exhibits are usually complemented by a diverse programme of workshops, concerts and live art exhibitions, and while COVID-19 has brought many of those to a temporary halt the November 2020 opening of the Park's exciting new restaurant has brought yet another reason to visit.

'And then there was fire' bills itself as a wood-fired grill and tapas café, with a beguiling menu that wanders from hearty prime cuts of grass-feed beef to globally-inspired small plates.

With tables spilling out onto a shaded terrace, surrounded by green lawns and inspiring artworks, there are perhaps few better places to escape the hustle of the city for a few hours, and to fill both body and soul. 🌿

