

UCT GSB launches MTN Solution Space in Philippi Village

The Graduate School of Business (GSB) of the University of Cape Town (UCT) has launched the MTN Solution Space in Philippi Village, bringing the university's business resources directly to the communities of Philippi, Nyanga, Gugulethu, Mitchells Plain and Khayelitsha.



[MTN Solution Space on Facebook](#)

With the launch of its first 'community campus' in Philippi Village, the GSB has begun to achieve its long-term goal of getting stakeholders and students to interact beyond the traditional spaces of the university.

Philippi Village is set at the site of the old cement factory, a mixed-use 6,000 m² entrepreneurial development zone situated at the intersection of five of Cape Town's largest townships. Situated 22km from the city centre, the area has a large youth population and high unemployment.

New model

The development is a joint investment by the Bertha Foundation for Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship (founding sponsor of the GSB's Bertha Centre) and the Jobs Fund, with the vision to create economic opportunities for those who are excluded from mainstream development. The Philippi campus offers students, alumni, clients and local entrepreneurs a place to meet and engage. It is a new model for the traditional university space – a two-way engagement between UCT and the community.

“We hope that we bring together people from all walks of life to create an engaging platform to have rich and authentic discussions and to facilitate new connections that wouldn’t normally take place,” says Solution Space manager, Sarah-Anne Arnold. “South Africa needs spaces like these, where collaborative conversations lead to seeds of change and solutions that we need and want.”

For GSB director Associate Professor Mills Soko, the Philippi campus fulfils an important goal: deepening roots in the community and the GSB’s relevance as an African business school while developing more socially relevant solutions to African challenges. “The GSB is widely regarded as the leading business school in Africa, but its location at the V&A Waterfront is far from representative of the reality that the vast majority of South Africans face every day.”

This intention has a physical expression. The old Philippi cement factory serves as a frame for the new building, described as a hub of innovation and entrepreneurship involving the community, private stakeholders, donors, corporate parties and university students. The aim is to reverse the exodus of resources from these townships to the CBD.

Students from Breakwater campus go to Philippi

Though the GSB’s Solution Space at Philippi Village has been operating for a year, the 24 July launch also spotlighted the businesses and initiatives that have started there. “Creating awareness about the possibilities for collaboration, innovation and entrepreneurship that exist in the space,” continues Arnold.

Students at the GSB’s Breakwater campus at the V&A Waterfront attend courses at the Philippi campus. Soko believes, “This ‘transfer’ is essential if students are to become comfortable with uncertainty and paradox in a complex and fast-changing world. Here at Philippi Village, we get to practise what we preach. The reality is that we live in a thoroughly divided country and city from a geographical perspective and that creates a divide in understanding, in connections and in networks and our presence in Philippi seeks to bridge that.

“Being here helps our students to develop empathy and resilience and to open their eyes to wider perspectives – all of which are vital attributes for the modern leader, especially one operating in an emerging market.”

Soko believes that the GSB is able to be more inclusive and involved in developing social innovations by working directly with entrepreneurs in the community.

Arnold adds, “We see this as a development that tries to create different possibilities for all types of organisations. There is a container walk on the perimeter that is front facing for visitors and clients walking by, which, in some ways, is the first step for an entrepreneur to ‘up’ their business and have access to infrastructure. Being here helps our students to develop empathy and resilience and to open their eyes to wider perspectives.”

Mixed space

The Solution Space does not see its role as that of a typical tenant in Philippi Village. “In our first year we’ve prioritised getting to know what the other organisations are doing and what’s working and what’s not, what the community’s needs are, and from there focus our priorities and programmes. What’s exciting about this development is that there is a huge range of opportunities for different individuals to get involved.”

On the ground floor is a range of walk-in centres that assist youth, entrepreneurs and small businesses. For example, the Harambee Youth Employment Accelerator helps youths land their first job. Likewise, the public library offers access to the internet, books and knowledge and the different activities that take place. There are also small offices and space available for entrepreneurs to rent.

As a business incubator, the Solution Space currently hosts three ‘ventures-in-residence’, all addressing different community needs. Blue Door works in early childhood development; Lakheni looks at bulk buying goods for community households; and Discover Ikasi promotes township tourism.

With its campus set up with workspaces, lecture venue, lounge and meeting areas, the Solution Space also provides spaces for creative thinking on entrepreneurship and technology. More than 100 workshops and educational programmes have been held there in their first year. Participants and visitors have included the World Bank, Columbia University, the University of Warwick, George Washington University and Esade Business School.

“We run programmes that give them new perspectives on the work they’re doing; new insights they might not necessarily have thought of sitting in the Waterfront,” Arnold adds.

More recently, a group of students participating in the GSB’s MPhil in Inclusive Innovation programme got together with 15 local entrepreneurs and the World Bank to discuss what inclusive means – and looks like.

Share craziest ideas

Arnold’s team shares this enthusiasm. Solution Space programme coordinator Ndileka Zantsi previously worked as an entrepreneur and consultant and has run several community development projects. “The Solution Space provides opportunities for entrepreneurs and the community; it’s a space for collaboration and where we can create a platform to link organisations and work together to develop the community.”

Solution Space Liaison officer Simnikiwe Xanga says her job is to create connections with everyone who enters their doors, whether schoolchildren, visitors or community entrepreneurs. “The thing I enjoy most is that you get to form amazing relationships. In the small town that I come from [Stutterheim in the Eastern Cape] you learn that relationships are key. And from the outset coming to Philippi was to get to know the people from here and the entrepreneurs and organisations that are based here.”

Speaking from a third-floor perch, Solution Space marketer Sivu Nomana said, “The first time I came here I couldn’t wait to get a view of the whole township. That really touches me that I am here working in this community. My job is about meeting different personalities, sharing ideas and connecting, and trying to bridge gaps the community faces, and which bring about social innovation, trying to make things work better. What I love about our youth is that everyone is self-sufficient and self-driven and the fact that we have this space here does try to assist people that are from here to work best for this community.

“Another thing we’re trying to drive is to be a space where everyone can be themselves and share their craziest ideas. We’re up for that, as long as you are driven to bring about change to your community.”

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