

NEWS RELEASE

UP Architecture students and Melusi residents build together for community improvement



Sara Mojapelo, caretaker at the COPC Clinic, is proud to have played a role in the MYDO 2 co-design project.

PRETORIA - A new timber-clad youth centre in the Melusi informal settlement west of Pretoria – one of two new structures designed by [University of Pretoria](#) (UP) Architecture Honours students in partnership with local community members – received a Maverick Prize at the recent national [Timber Design Competition](#).

This small meeting place of about 6.6 metres by 3.2 metres – which was once an abandoned shack – enables the [Melusi Youth Development Organisation](#) (MYDO) to offer many more important services to the sprawling community via what's been named its MYDO 2 Building.

The MYDO 2 co-design project took off when residents and [UP Architecture](#) students joined forces to dream up ways of improving Melusi residents' living conditions. They then started designing and building together on two projects: an extension of the youth centre and an addition to the neighbouring Community Oriented Primary Care (COPC) Clinic. Thanks to their team effort, community members can now socialise in the newly erected timber-frame satellite youth development centre, and take shelter at a dignified waiting area when they visit the clinic.

The timber-frame buildings were designed in such a way that they can be easily disassembled, removed and relocated elsewhere if the settlement is upgraded. According to [Jason Oberholster](#), Director of the [Unit for Urban Citizenship](#) in UP's Department of Architecture, even the concrete footing centres used to anchor the buildings into the ground can be moved.

UP's community engagement footprint in various informal settlements in Gauteng extends back many years. In Melusi, it includes involvement in the COPC Clinic, providing healthcare and other services to the local community, as well as a collaboration with the neighbouring MYDO.

"Through our lengthy needs analysis process and discussions with community representatives, we learnt about the real need for two structures: a sheltered, private waiting area for patients who visit the clinic, as well as an extension of the youth centre in the isolated western part of Melusi," Oberholster says. "The new clinic space can now also be used for outdoor screenings and health talks, to extend the clinic's operational abilities."

Sara "Mamthembu" Mojapelo, Caretaker at the COPC Clinic, is proud of her involvement in the process. She says the people of Melusi are very thankful for the new addition, as it allows clinic services to continue even on rainy days.

"Adding value isn't about how much you do – it's just about choosing to do something," she says.

Extending the reach to youth

The process for creating MYDO 2 centred around designs developed by community members working with UP Architecture Honours students. The concept grew out of careful site analysis and a desire to create "something responsive" and tranquil, according to some of the students involved.

Oberholster says everyone involved should be proud – especially after this inspiring collaboration received an honourable mention (Maverick Prize) at the third annual Timber Design Competition, organised by the York Timber Chair in Wood Structural Engineering at UP.

The involvement of UP Architecture students and staff is part of the Co-Creating Wellness and Human Dignity Research Project run by the Unit for Urban Citizenship in UP's Department of Architecture. The project is supported by the South African Agency for Science and Technology Advancement (SASTA), a business unit of the National Research Foundation, through funding received from the Department of Science, Technology and Innovation (DSTI).

According to Project Lead and Head of the UP Department of Architecture [Prof Carin Combrinck](#), the multi-year transdisciplinary collaborative project aims to address complex socio-spatial challenges within informal settlements in Tshwane. Senior researchers from various UP faculties, honours and master's students in Architecture, interns and community field researchers have worked together in Melusi since 2023. Their endeavours started with regular workshops to thoroughly assess the real needs of the community in terms of health, well-being and socio-spatial justice.

The settlement was extensively documented, and the built environments and social issues mapped. Faculty

members, students and community representatives then worked together as a 'CoDesign studio' to actively shape, inform and design building plans, before starting to erect the two timber-frame structures together. In the process, students gained valuable first-hand lessons about the building process and project management.

Prof Combrinck says such a participatory approach ensures that the voices and needs of the community are directly heard.

"These interventions not only meet immediate community needs but also contribute to incremental urban upgrading, reflecting both academic rigour and practical relevance. It also teaches our students more about community involvement," Oberholster adds.

Manuals available for free

As part of their commitment, the students drew up building manuals for the two structures, publications which are open source and thus available for free to those who want to replicate their builds.

Co-created community action plans, as an extension of the participatory process, have also been drafted. Prof Combrinck believes these will go a long way in informing the Tshwane municipality's plans for the settlement's future, and could help relieve systemic inequalities reflected in the proliferation of informal housing areas.

"The action plans were developed based on the community's needs, challenges and strengths, and how they see the future of Melusi. The plans serve as tangible frameworks for addressing spatial injustice in ways that reflect the lived realities and aspirations of the community itself," she says.

"With such plans in hand, community members can now provide meaningful proof of their needs when engaging with the local municipality. We believe this will help tailor service delivery, possible upgrades, and other endeavours accordingly, to help relieve the burden of incremental informal settlement upgrading."

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>> [Watch a video about the Melusi project](#)

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ABOUT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA

The University of Pretoria (UP) is one of the largest contact and residential universities in South Africa. Spread over seven campuses, it has nine faculties and a business school, the [Gordon Institute of Business Science](#) (GIBS). It is the only university in the country with a [Faculty of Veterinary Science](#), which is ranked the best in Africa. UP

has 120 academic departments and 92 centres and institutes, accommodating more than 56 000 students and offering about 1 100 study programmes. It has the most academic staff with PhDs (70%), NRF-rated researchers (613).

The [2025 Times Higher Education \(THE\) Impact Rankings](#) placed UP 7th globally for Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 17: Partnerships for the Goals, recognising the University's leadership in building impactful global collaborations. UP also ranked 41st in the world and 1st in Africa and South Africa for SDG 16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions, and maintained its position as the second-highest ranked university overall in both Africa and South Africa.

The 2025 Times Higher Education subject rankings placed UP first in South Africa in the fields of [Accounting](#) and [Finance](#); [Architecture](#); [Electrical and Electronic Engineering](#); Law; Sport Science; and Veterinary Science. UP's Faculty of Law has been ranked as the top law school in Africa for a remarkable eighth consecutive year.

In the [2025 QS World University Subject Rankings](#), UP is ranked in the top 100 in the world in Mineral & Mining Engineering (41), Veterinary Science (51–60), and Development Studies (51–100). Six UP subjects are ranked No. 1 in South Africa: Mechanical Engineering, Veterinary Science, Mathematics, Accounting & Finance, Business & Management Studies, and Economics & Econometrics.

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