



MARVELLOUS MOSAIC: Trinder Square has been transformed into an enticing family leisure space with artworks that include imaginative mosaic benches

PHOTOGRAPHS: FREDLIN ADRIAN

Colour, creativity transform Central

PE's historic Bird Street precinct gets vibrant new lease on life thanks to artistic explosion, writes **Devon Koen**

BOB Marley and Mother Teresa may not have been the likeliest of neighbours – but these days you can find them chatting away alongside each other in a magical artistic pocket in Port Elizabeth.

Steeped in history and stretching back to the time of the ostrich barons, it is now a tree-lined stretch of the city adorned with the works of local artists.

This is Bird Street 2016 – the Central precinct which has witnessed a revitalisation appreciated by locals and tourists alike.

Once a thriving business hub jam-packed with Edwardian buildings dating back to the colonial times, the area which forms part of the Route 67 tour almost fell into ruins and became known in recent years as the city's "red light district" but has since benefited from a dedicated move to improve its multi-textured cultural heritage.

Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University's Mary Duker, who took Weekend Post on a tour of the area, said Bird Street was rich in history, with connections to the time of the ostrich barons.

NMMU's Bird Street campus houses the School of Music, Art and Design (SoMAD), and Duker – who is a senior lecturer there – said there was a fair amount of connection between the school and what happened in the inner city.

A number of NMMU students both past and present had been actively involved in the "re-contextualisation" of the area, she said.

SoMAD has worked with the Mandela Bay Development Agency (MBDA) in the development of Route 67, which represents the 67 years former president Nelson Mandela fought for social justice.

"We did a lot of work in the second phase of the development of Route 67... there is a collective of student work including the mosaic carpet at the Donkin Reserve and a number of sculptures," Duker said.

Just a stone's throw from other historical landmarks in the Central precinct, including the Edward Hotel and Trinder Square, Bird Street has become a bustling hub for artists to showcase their work.

The Andy Warhol-esque mural on the corner of Bird and Deare streets is a clear example of artistic creativity which complements the rich diversity of the inner city.

"It showcases the diversity of the people living in Central," Duker said.

Just a few metres down the road is the old Trinity High School building, damaged by fire, which now boasts images of human rights activists embossed in the building's windows, with quotes from the likes of Mother Teresa and Bob Marley.

"[It is] a social, engaged environment [which is] rewarding to the people of the inner city," Duker said.

The re-envisioning of the precinct was aimed at making it a "living area".

Trinder Square, once a squalid space inhabited by drug peddlers and the like, has been given a dramatic facelift and emerged as an open space for families to gather and where children can play.

The metal and stained glass



FUN FOR ALL: A metal and stained glass mural in Trinder Square

sculpture situated on the corner of Bird and Trinder streets overlooks a playground for little ones to enjoy while parents and guardians laze on mosaic benches created by SoMAD students and graduates.

Each of the five mosaic-laden benches is designed to represent flowers indigenous to the Port Elizabeth area, including lily of the valley, clivias and strelitzias.

"Whereas parents were once afraid to let their children play anywhere further than the parking lots in the surrounding complexes, children can now play safely here," Duker said.

Almost directly opposite Trinder Square is NMMU's art gallery, contained in the same Edwardian building as SoMAD.

The venue, which once housed

the Marist Brothers School, has been renovated, while retaining many of the original features including 19th-century fireplaces, original window shutters and hand-sanded wooden floors.

The spiral staircase at the building's entrance is reminiscent of mid-19th century opulence, while the art gallery incorporates both a contemporary and 1800s ambience.

The back wall of the gallery is particularly special in that it was stripped bare of layers of paint to reveal the original look of the three converted classrooms which make up the gallery.

The school also incorporates an instrument repair room with a truly whimsical feel.

The artists' drawing room on the upper level has an authentic aes-

thetic air, while the sculpture garden exudes art-world nuances.

Several art studios take up the back courtyard where senior SoMAD students can create their work.

Postgraduate art student Bamyane Lethu Ngxale, 31, speaks to "the abuse of power and the socio-political landscape of the African immigrant" through his work, while fellow artist 28-year-old Siyabonga Ngaki's artistic expression represents how power and money perpetuate corruption.

Ngxale said working in Bird Street, because of its location, was great for artists.

"I'm inspired by the informality of Central. It's a little Africa... and our work revolves around xenophobia, so interacting with the people around us is like doing research.

"You experience things you never knew about by interacting with people from around Africa," he said.

Ngaki said: "I have so much freedom there and am able to keep my artworks in a place that is much safer than where I was working previously."

The art gallery is open to the public on weekdays and is a space where art lovers, students and graduates are constantly working and viewing the myriad art on display.

"We are not trying to recreate history. Rather, we harness it," Duker said.

NMMU's art gallery in Bird Street is open to the public from 9am to 3pm Monday to Friday.

To book a tour through Route 67 contact the Donkin Visitor Information Office on (041) 585-8884 or e-mail bookings@route67tours.co.za

E-mail your view to
weekend@timesmedia.co.za



BRIGHT AND BOLD: Art EC, the EPSAC Community Art Centre



ARTISTS' EXPRESSION: Inside the NMMU art gallery



STORIES TOLD: Images of human rights activists in the windows of the former Trinity High School in Bird Street