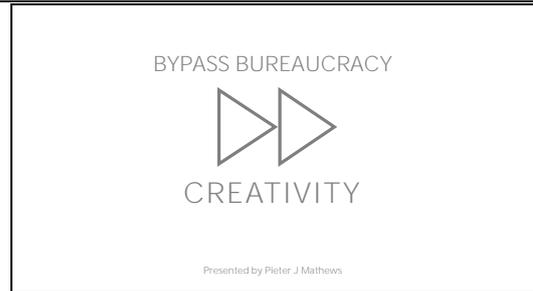


# TEDx Pretoria 2016 – Pieter J Mathews

## I love Pretoria's Wackiness



Welcome to Pretoria, my **beloved city**; the **administrative capital** city of South Africa, and home of embassies and the diplomatic corps. Did you know that Pretoria has the **second most embassies** and foreign missions after Washington? Pretoria is a bureaucratic city that struggles to come to terms with its past – living with the legacy of a community divided by **Apartheid**.



**Pretoria is unfairly perceived as boring, dull and lacking creativity.** The city does not have an ocean, or a flat-topped mountain, but what it has is **people with an amazing creative undercurrent** it never flags or brags about. Their creativity is **the city's currency**.

Today I would like to **share** with you the outcomes of an **initiative of mine** that started in 2012. This initiative sidesteps bureaucracy and places the city's creative people on the centre-stage.

Creative citizens are very valuable **assets for any city**.

Many cities have creative festivals or Biennales, for example Sydney, Sao Paulo, St Petersburg...

A prime example is **Venice** which hosts the prestigious **Venice Biennale**.

**Over 500 000 people visit the biennale each year.** These festivals **attract visitors, generate revenue, create employment** in the construction and tourism industries and eventually become key in the **regeneration** of that specific city.



**My story** today starts in this very same city. Venice can be considered a mecca for Architects especially with its bi-annual Architecture Biennale. **My opportunity to visit came along in 2012** when our architecture firm Mathews and Associates Architects was invited to design a light installation in the central courtyard of the Palazzo Bembo. The installation depicts the concept sketches of the then completed Nellmapius bridge. (As if Venice does not have enough bridges and lights.



The next day, all alone and very tired, I took a seat on some steps near St Mark's Square for lunch. **A poster** across the street struck up a conversation with me: The poster urged me to take the creative discussions of the past few days in Venice back to my own city, Pretoria. No doubt posters have power to talk and even to instruct a person.

It was an **A-Ha moment**. In that inspired moment, the seminal idea was planted.



I knew the potential of our creatives and what it could do for our city.

Of course we had to go over the top – we wouldn't do a simple art project; **we would organize Pretoria's very own biennale!**

Would it work? No harm in trying. My brain said no but my gut and heart said something else. Stubborn children always do what their parents say is impossible/foolish...



It would be the **world's first and only un-curated DIY Guerrilla Biennale.**

tilte tussen 3 woorde verduidelik elke word Uncurated means no gate keepers anyone welcome, DIY quite self explanatory and Guerilla meant pop up without permission



In reality, the idea was preposterous!

We **managed to pull-off** the inaugural 2014 Cool Capital Biennale. What started as a **passion and pet project**, quickly **mushroomed** to include over **1000** residents, together with private business owners and academic institutions.

at that time art and creativity was last on the list of the City Council, so we had to go it alone guerrilla style



Any movement needs an insignia or logo. We derived Cool Capital's from our beautiful city plan. The map of our city became our insignia behind which we could rally.

It represents connections between people and the choice of purple quite obviously refers to Pretoria's colours.



# GUERRILLA

Years of planning go into a biennale – choosing the organizing committee, requesting permission, negotiating with various stakeholders, obtaining the funds... In South Africa, you might as well double that time –

The **only workable solution** was to skip the bureaucrats and approach the creatives directly. Pressing the fast forward button. I believe politicians often sow division, but creative people bring about social cohesion. **We weren't going to wait. It was time to press the fast-forward button.**



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So, we told a small group to do just that and **Cool Capital kicked off - with a bang and a great opening** on the 29<sup>th</sup> of August, 2014, nearly two years after my aha-moment in Venice.

An interesting fact you might enjoy - Our opening night was the coldest 29<sup>th</sup> of August recorded in 30 years. We asked for a **cool** capital, but didn't expect sub-zero temperatures. Luckily the cold couldn't keep the people away.



The Biennale was unofficial and entirely unprecedented. We were not tasked with it and nobody had any pre-determined expectations.

We were just a **bunch of renegades** who had taken it upon ourselves to organize it. The city was our **playground and laboratory**, the citizens, spectators, contributors, sponsors all joined in to make it memorable. If you wanted to wrap Oom Paul in tinfoil, we said 'Who is stopping you?'



So the citizens of Pretoria took creative hands. **We did not wait for permission.** We intervened and created pop-up, temporary guerrilla installations that require no formal permission and would make lasting impressions; all **engaging, and with high impact.**

One such powerful pop-up intervention was the blindfolding of the 55 struggle heroes at the National Heritage Monument, where a school decided to blindfold the struggle heroes with positive messages so that they would not be able to witness the current political turmoil.



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**Taking initiative implies acting without being asked;** however, in our world of do's and don'ts personal initiative is heavily impeded. Cool Capital gives people **"permission" or rather an excuse; even when the authorities haven't.**

By sidestepping bureaucracy we could start to **colour** our city with murals and street art.

**(By the way, we did inform all our city officials, only exactly a day before the intervention was scheduled to take place!)**



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Not all art installations were **temporary and pop-up.** Permanent street furniture (benches) and sculptures where **donated by private companies** to improve the urban environment.

In this pop-up and unofficial way, we are **taking control of our spaces,** we just hired a crane and delivered all the public benches to strategic sites in the city without any paperwork.

Cool Capital is empowering citizens to take responsibility for the city they want to live in.



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Beautiful and thought-provoking sculptures, part of the legacy of Cool Capital, still adorn our city. These additions to public sculpture in the city strengthen our claim that Pretoria is the sculpture capital.



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Interesting to note, this guerilla approach saw the **creatives taking the lead** with the **sponsors and businesses following.** After seeing the potential and success, **bureaucrats** also came to appreciate Cool Capital to such an extent that Cool Capital officially represented **South Africa at the 2016 Venice Biennale.** **I thank the Department of Arts and Culture for their support in this regard.**



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[2. DO-IT-YOURSELF]

## DIY

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Permission *unofficially* granted, who are the people who implement all the initiatives under the umbrella of Cool Capital?

The answer is simple – anyone who volunteers. People like you and I. Any group, individual, school or institution - like these youngsters making a statement about bad design at fountains circle, the gateway to our city. **Once a green tranquil threshold**



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Initially, we had a difficult task making everyone understand that nobody was going to take charge, provide funds or allocate assistance to realize a single project. The responsibility lay solely with the person or group who came up with the idea.

All we could do was to **encourage, facilitate, provide a platform and connect people who wanted to make a positive contribution.** That is the mission of Cool Capital design activists.

On this Biennale poster, the **sculptor and his family** erected this Sculpture piece themselves. DIY fashion



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Luckily, Pretoria is blessed with assiduous people who like to get things done and see results. These **Creative Activists who use thought and imagination to change our world**, increasingly frustrated by the inefficiencies and hurdles present in most South African cities, decided to stop talking and complaining, and instead **do something.**

If you struggle to cross a road, make a roll-up Zebra crossing.



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The participants have proven to us that **a lack of funds** is no excuse to sit back. "*n Boer maak 'n plan*" as we say in Afrikaans. Roughly translated, that means '*a pioneer makes a plan in spite of a lack of resources*' - Necessity is the mother of invention.

Limited budgets brought about novel creative outcomes:

Two artists from Mamelodi transformed their environment with a simple stone spiral for the enjoyment of an entire community.

In another instance, artists used inexpensive chalk to create a moment of beauty in the city.



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I think it is important to understand that the impact of Cool Capital lies in its **collective leverage.** Under constraints like lack of funding, creativity blossoms and we are forced to turn to our neighbours for assistance. Projects such as these have a crucial role to play in **improving social cohesion** in South Africa.

This community got together and started to garden in a sterile park using tyres and donated plants and materials to green ambush an unsightly public park.



Cool Capital is successful because it operates under the fundamental principles of a **gift economy**: People give their time, ideas and resources, and if everybody gives a little bit we end up with a lot.



This idea of a **Gift economy** is still a very strange concept to sell. This sculptor donated this magnificent sculpture piece and invited the community to help give it colour. In my eyes, he achieved more than the tangible outcomes – social cohesion being the greatest spin off.

**Many people or groups do not have funding and we help facilitate sponsors where we can. Clever marketing managers have begun to understand that tangible outcomes mean more than a newspaper advertisement that eventually lands up at the bottom of the budget cage.**

[3. UNCURATED] any one welcome, no gate keepers.

## UNCURATED

If you need to press the Fast forward button on any creative project; A WORD OF ADVICE: Stay clear of committees and meetings (and managers!)

Cool Capital is not interested in judging participants' proposed projects. No rights and wrongs. All projects are welcome, although you should realise that **when putting your idea out there in the public domain, or literally on the street like this group did, anyone is welcome to, and will judge. Do not try this at home.**



Cool Capital acts as a platform from which initiatives can be launched, realized and celebrated.

Its intention is to truly democratize creativity by giving each and every one the right to be creative and express their creativity. A group of school kids made some letters and wrote a love poem to Pretoria filming it with a drone. Projects such as these **bring creativity into the public realm**, making it an accessible part of everyday life.



The uncurated nature of Cool Capital brings a new dimension to art and design – it becomes **less academic, and more playful**. If art cannot embrace the humorous, how can it add value to our lives? Art and creativity can even intrigue dogs and their owners. The international artist William Sweetlove also took part in this year's Biennale with his pop up show for dogs in a park in Groenkloof.



Having **fun** and putting a smile on the mind is central to the idea of Cool Capital.



Our uncurated flagship project for 2016 is called **Saadjies** meaning seeds or pods. We invited anyone interested to submit a small sculpture piece that would fit in with the theme. We received more than 100 artworks with which we sculpture bombed many cities, taking our initiative outside the borders of Pretoria. We even sculpture bombed Venice. The collection will travel around the country, so look out for this novel approach to sculpture. Bringing sculpture outside the gallery space and into the public realm. Instagram #saadjies if you want to see it in the virtual world.



People know best what is needed and appropriate for the spaces they study, work ,live and play in. and interact what will be loved and taken care of for future generations. The best way to upgrade an urban environment is by allowing the inhabitants of that neighbourhood or school to take ownership of their space.

These pupils are transforming their learning environment by providing seating, art and legacy at the same time.



Cool Capital allowed us to look at our city with new freedom .To interpret old and historic symbols in new light. Even if the light is pink (showing the softer side).



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Cool Capital is a **think-tank** in which to test ideas. It creates an environment for people to discover their talents.

These University students experimented with the notion of home, space, place, belonging and identity in this temporary installation.



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With creative freedom the people of Pretoria will lead urban regeneration and social cohesion, creating the city we want to live in.

These Art learners proved with the creation of the bottle arch and following pathway filled with the girl's interventions can indeed change our world. The Girls learned to weld with this project (something I think that is not allowed, but they thoroughly enjoyed their new skill).



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*'Never doubt that that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has'* – MARGARET MEAD.

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Cool Capital mobilized the citizens of Pretoria to **take control** of their immediate environment by **creatively engaging with present day issues**.

Together with our dedicated team at Mathews and Associates Architects, our in-house organisers Carla Taljaard and Jana Kruger, our volunteers, creatives, groupies and sponsors, I will continue to do so in Fast Forward mode.



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Most international biennales start small and develop into events attracting people from all over the world. My dream (and I hope yours too) is simple and achievable: let us inspire our own citizens, let us re-imagine our city and make it even more memorable to live in.



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I want to live in a memorable and creative city and I am not going anywhere.

