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THE SIGNIFICANCE OF SACRED SPACES SUCH AS ISIVIVANE AT FREEDOM PARK

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ILASA/IFLA AFRICA CONFERENCE
26 SEPTEMBER 2025

INTRODUCTION

- Freedom Park was intentionally designed with deep grounding in **indigenous knowledge systems (IKS)** to honour the spiritual, cultural, and historical essence of African heritage.
- **Isivivane**, our national shrine, stands not merely as a landscape feature, but as a deeply symbolic spiritual site rooted in African indigenous knowledge systems.
- Spaces such as **Isivivane**, are not only architectural spaces, but also spiritual expressions that connect visitors to the ancestors and the collective memory of the nation.
- Therefore, it is more than a physical location it is a sacred space of remembrance, healing, and connection.

ISIVIVANE

The central feature of Isivivane is a circle of 11 boulders, each one carefully selected and placed with spiritual intention:

- Nine boulders which were sourced from sacred sites across the nine provinces of South Africa, symbolising the spiritual and cultural presence of each region.
- The tenth boulder stands in honour of national government, representing the collective will of the South African people and the democratic state that emerged from struggle.
- The eleventh boulder represents international solidarity paying tribute to the many countries and movements across the globe that supported South Africa's liberation struggle during the dark days of apartheid.
- However, the spiritual power of the site extends beyond the stones. The selection of trees, such as the Umlahlankosi (buffalo thorn), which is traditionally used to retrieve the spirits of the departed, and the ceremonial entry and exit points, each hold deep symbolic meaning.
- Isivivane encompasses various other elements like 'lesaka' and 'lekgotlä'.
- As visitors enter Isivivane, they are encouraged to remove their shoes a customary act across many African cultures to acknowledge the sacredness of the ground they are stepping onto. The only exception to this protocol is for soldiers, who "live and die in their boots", a symbolic recognition of their unique place in our national narrative.
- It is here that we reflect on the pain of colonisation and apartheid, and the price paid for our democracy.
- It is also here that we embrace the healing process, as we journey toward reconciliation and national unity.

ISIVIVANE



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HOW VISITORS RESPOND TO THESE SPACES

The responses we receive from visitors to Isivivane are as diverse and layered as the South African society itself.

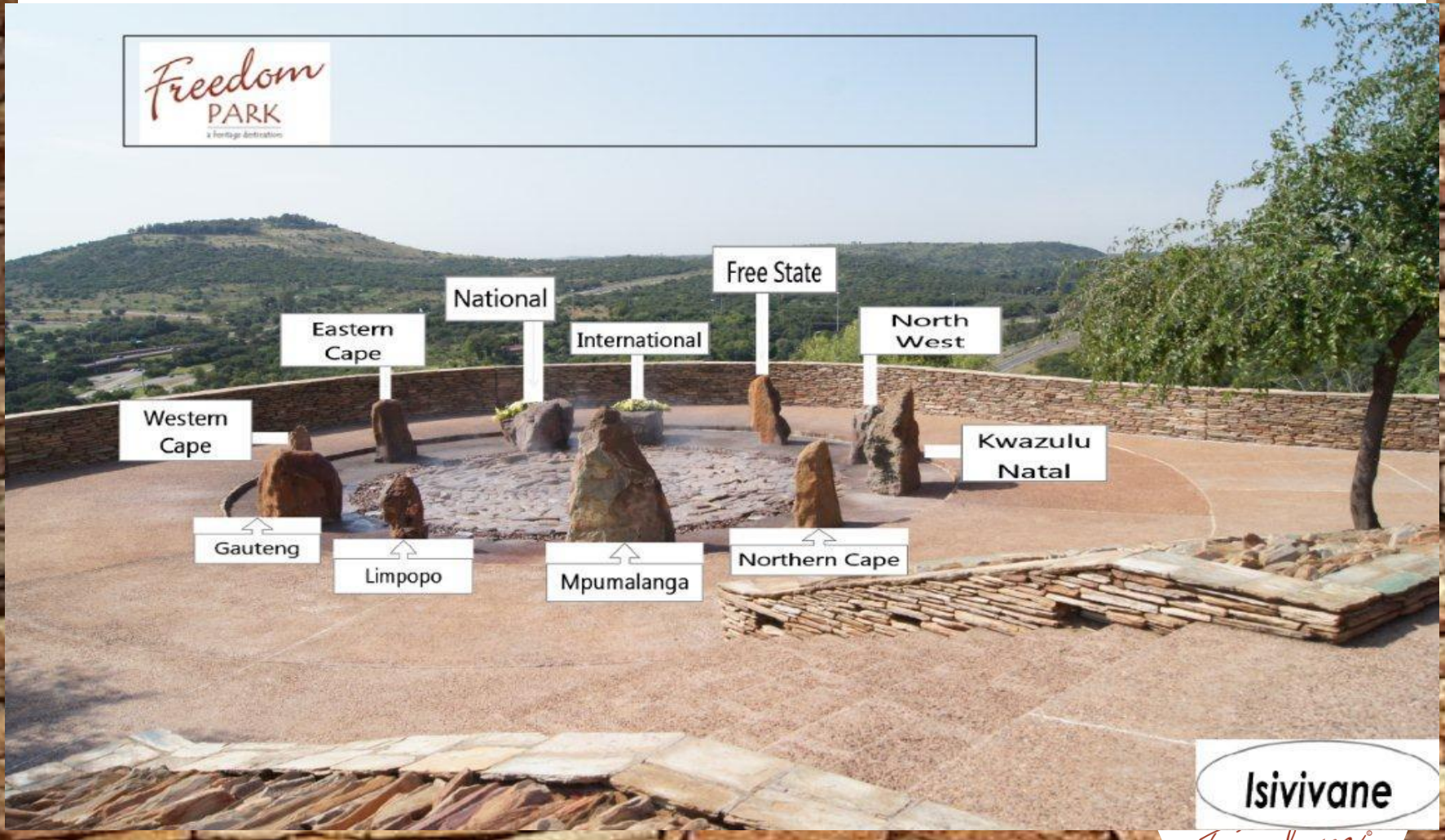
- **Respect and Reverence:** For many, the space offers a profound sense of connection, healing, and identity. People often share how moving it is to be in a place that honours African spiritual traditions a rarity in many formal public and institutional spaces.
- Some describe the act of walking barefoot as **transformative**, grounding them both spiritually and emotionally, particularly after washing their hands at the exit symbolising the cleansing of burdens, and a renewed energy.
- **Curiosity and Learning:** Others, especially international visitors and younger South Africans, approach these spaces with curiosity. They may not initially know the cultural protocols but often seek guidance from custodians or guides. This creates an opportunity for education and dialogue.
- **Mixed Reactions:** There are also instances where visitors, due to different cultural or religious backgrounds, engage with the spaces more as “tourist attractions” than sacred sites. This sometimes results in behaviour that may unintentionally disregard cultural protocols.
- **Scepticism:** Some visitors, particularly those unfamiliar with or raised in opposition to African spiritual traditions, experience discomfort or scepticism. There are moments when guests hesitate to remove their shoes, questioning the practice or interpreting it through a religious lens, which can lead to misunderstandings.
- A challenge we continue to face is the misconception rooted in colonial stereotypes that Isivivane is “a place for Sangomas.”

SOME OF THE PITFALLS ASSOCIATED WITH USING INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE IN CONTEMPORARY PUBLIC SPACES

The integration of indigenous knowledge into contemporary public spaces while powerful, does not come without its challenges and complexities.

- Firstly, there is the risk of **superficial appropriation**. Without deep consultation and authentic engagement, there is a danger that indigenous knowledge can be reduced to symbolic decoration, stripped of its sacred meaning.
- In designing Isivivane, we were deliberate in ensuring that every element from stone to soil, from tree to ritual, was guided by indigenous wisdom keepers.
- Another challenge is the **commodification** of sacred practices, particularly in spaces that also function as tourist attractions. When visitors arrive with a “sightseeing” mentality, there is a risk of disconnecting ritual from meaning, turning spiritual protocols into performative moments. It is a delicate balance, offering access to a diverse public while protecting the integrity of sacred knowledge.
- There is also the tension between **inclusivity** and sacred protocol. Public spaces are meant to welcome all, yet sacred spaces often require specific behaviour, belief systems, and respect for ritual. How do we design for both? At Freedom Park, we navigate this by providing clear information, offering choice, and upholding respect as our guiding principle. Those who wish to participate are invited in. Those who do not are just as welcome to observe from the margins.
- **Authenticity and Custodianship:** If indigenous spaces are not continuously guided and interpreted by knowledge bearers, there is a danger of losing authenticity. Sacred practices need to be protected from being “museumised” or treated as static.
- Finally, indigenous knowledge is not **universal** even within African communities. Practices vary by region, language, and lineage. There is no “one-size-fits-all,” and so any use of indigenous knowledge in public design must be approached with sensitivity, humility, and continuous dialogue.

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Western
Cape

Eastern
Cape

National

International

Free State

North
West

Kwazulu
Natal

Gauteng

Limpopo

Mpumalanga

Northern Cape

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WAYFORWARD

- Isivivane is more than a feature of landscape design it is a living, breathing expression of our collective memory, our pain, our healing, and our hope.
- Its creation was a political, historical, spiritual, and cultural act in an effort to return African spirituality to its rightful place in our national consciousness. The journey of integrating indigenous knowledge into public space is not an easy one. It is fraught with historical tensions, cultural misunderstandings, and the weight of centuries of erasure.
- But it is a necessary journey one that reclaims space, restores dignity, and reimagines what public places can mean when they reflect the souls of their people.
- As we look to the future of landscape architecture in South Africa, may we continue to centre indigenous knowledge, spiritual authenticity, and cultural respect in our work not as decorative additions, but as foundational pillars of our shared identity.

THANK YOU



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