

WIRE CRAFT AND URBAN SPACE: A CASE STUDY OF THE INFORMAL WIRE ART TRADE IN SOUTH AFRICA

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INTRODUCTION

The new economy, dominated by the partnership between high technology and creativity, has come to characterise the world's most successful cities. In the developed countries the nature of this partnership is becoming increasingly clear in terms of the environmental quality and constraints that characterise this. In developing countries, where many people are experiencing the money economy and urban living for the first time and lack the skills or capital to access high technology, they have been forced to develop a huge informal economy in order to try to access urban resources. This informal economy consists of many sectors including transport (the taxi operators), entertainment (shebeens, eating houses), construction (small builders), retail (street hawkers) and others. All of these sectors of the informal economy have their own spatial requirements that need to be properly integrated into the fabric of the city. These include, for example, taxi ranks and hawkers markets. In South Africa there has been considerable growth in the hawking of African woodcarvings, hand made jewelry, ethnic furniture and toys to tourists and others. A component of the trade in creative items to tourists and others is that there is a tradition in rural communities, in the Eastern Cape, of the making of wire toy motor cars for children that has grown into a small informal industry specializing in the making of wire art for sale to tourists and others. The objects produced include children's toys (such as the traditional toy motor cars), jewelry, household objects (hangers for keys, etc) and ornaments. The creators and sellers of these wire art objects have generated a small industry that is able to engage the global economy and has succeeded in creating some wealth for the participants. The creators and sellers of wire art objects and their clients have certain spatial needs including the location of manufacturing and selling points as well as the character of this type of space.

This paper will describe the broad nature of the informal economy in South Africa as background and will describe the nature and extent of the wire art industry in the Eastern Cape in more detail as an example of a creative economic activity in a developing context. In particular the spatial needs of the wire art industry will be identified and the integration of this into cities will be evaluated.

THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN SOUTH AFRICA

Geographers and economists use the term 'informal sector' to refer to work performed outside the 'formal' sector. It includes work such as petty (small-scale) trading, self-employment, casual and irregular work. It is unregulated, relatively labour intensive, exists outside the tax system and is often illegal. Such work is increasing throughout the world especially in developing countries.

There are problems associated with using the term 'informal trade': it suggests that all work can be neatly subdivided into either 'formal' or 'informal', and its use has also encouraged governments and planners to look down on the informal sector thus undervaluing its contribution to a nation's economy. A less value-laden term, such as parallel traders, is often preferred when referring to activities such as that carried out by the woman in the photograph in Figure 1.

The informal sector in South Africa is large, dynamic and rapidly growing sector of the national economy that represents the only hope for wealth generation for many South Africans. Three aspects of the informal sector in South Africa are notable. Firstly, it represents a relatively small proportion of the total economy when compared with many other developing countries; estimates by the United Nation's International Labour Organisation suggest that globally percentages vary from 20% to 70%. For example, in Kumasi, Ghana, the sector is estimated to be as high as 70% of the workforce; in Lagos, Nigeria, 50% and in Nairobi, Kenya, 44%. The figure for South Africa is around 12%. This is because South Africa, with its well developed service, mining and manufacturing sectors, has a large and well developed formal economy, easily the largest in Africa.

Secondly, the South African informal sector is predominantly, but not exclusively, made up of women. This is a direct consequence of the migration of males into the formal sector, which includes mining. There is also marked gender division in informal activity; with women concentrated in low-profit activities (such as street trading, food preparation, childcare and dressmaking) while more profitable work (such as metal production, wood processing and transport enterprises) tends to have male proprietors. There are some indications that an increasing number of men are finding an economic role in the informal sector as well.

Thirdly, with the rapid increase in unemployment in South Africa (now estimated to be around 40% of the workforce), informal sector work is increasing as individuals and families struggle to survive.

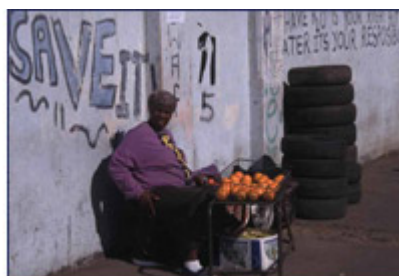


Figure 1: Street Hawker in Umtata, South Africa
(Source: www.geographicalassociation.co.uk)

The woman in Figure 1 is selling a variety of fruit in a street in Umtata. She has either obtained the fruit from a market trader or brought it from her village in the early morning. While her returns will be low, the income from the fruit will have a significant value to her. The woman will have carefully chosen this location in order to maximise her sales, perhaps siting herself near a bus or railway station.

The photograph also illustrates an interesting set of graffiti on the wall behind the woman. 'Save It' in large letters obviously refers to water and, further along the wall, is the additional exhortation 'To have H₂O is your right but to save water it's your responsibility'. (www.geographicalassociation.co.uk 11.05.2005).

The informal sector is an important and growing sector of the South African economy that generates wealth and employment for a significant number of otherwise unemployed people.

WIRE ART MANUFACTURING AS A PART OF THE INFORMAL SECTOR

The informal sector of the economy in South Africa consists of a number of categories of activity. These include transportation (mini bus taxis, etc), security (car guards, etc), food selling (fruit and vegetables, fast food, etc), clothes and haberdashery (T-shirts, caps, bags, etc), general services (car washing, gardening, etc), building activities (plastering, house painting, etc) and hand-craft items (carvings, paintings, basket weaving etc). The production of wire art items and their selling belongs in the category of hand-craft items. These are items that are produced by hand, usually in the townships or in rural areas, often based on traditional skills that have been adjusted to meet the needs of the contemporary market, and that are sold mainly to people from outside the traditional community. Other examples in this category would include traditional African musical instruments (drums, mbira's, penny whistles, etc), African carvings in wood or malachite, chess sets, leather goods, traditional furniture, African jewellery, knitted, sewn and woven items, and wire art items.

Wire art is a cottage industry based on hand-craft production and with the products mostly being sold from open street markets. A small number of wire art objects are also sold in formal tourist orientated shops and art galleries.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF WIRE ART IN SOUTH AFRICA

Wire art is a distinctively Southern African art form whose history is hidden in the unrecorded past. It is not possible to give a definitive history of wire art, as it has not been documented. Some authors claim that it originates in Zimbabwe and Zambia (Donlon, 1999), but if the origin of wire art lies in the ready availability of cheap industrial galvanised wire then this cannot be so and the origins must lie in South Africa, the first country in the region to develop commercial farming with fenced off lands. This process dates from the ready availability of cheap industrial galvanised wire around the middle of the nineteenth century. It is true, of course, that predating this, there are exquisite examples of the use of hand crafted precious metal wire in pre-industrial African jewellery and art (Oxford Museum of Modern Art, 1990). By its nature, however, this latter use of wire was very limited. This pre-industrial use of wire probably meant that a skill base existed in the African communities so that when they had access to cheap industrial galvanised wire, they were able to exploit this to the full.

From interviews with community elders it seems that community opinion is that wire art originated in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa in the Nineteenth Century (1). This is based on oral history and is supported by the fact that it was in the Eastern Cape in the nineteenth century that white farmers and black tribesmen met for the first time, and that it must have been here that black Africans were exposed for the first time to cheap industrial galvanised wire. What is true is that at present the production of wire art is spread throughout the Southern African region, "these toys, or pull-push toys, have a well-established history in the region extending in a broad swath down into South Africa and to the Cape" (Donlon, 1999).

Originally the makers of African wire art produced items of a utilitarian nature, especially toys for their children. Latterly, with the growth of tourism in the region there has been an increased emphasis on the production of items for sale to tourists. Jon Donlon (ibid) says that "For convenience here, it can be said that two general areas of fabrication seem to exist: the domain of those items which are made for indigenous *in situ* use and the domain of items which are essentially market-driven, largely by tourism. Both of these categories can reflect

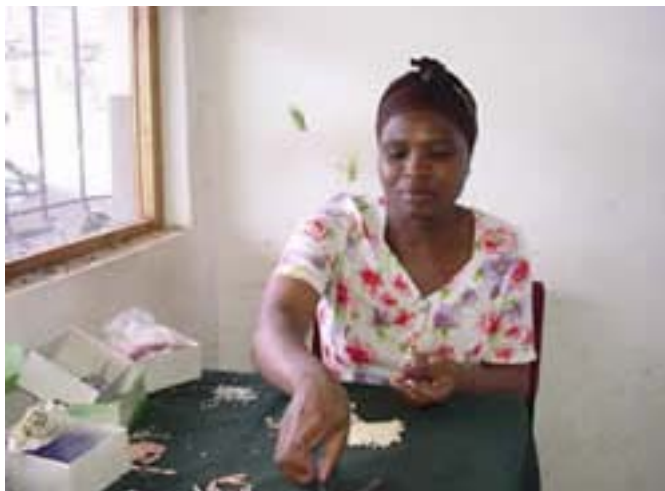
traditional and contemporary production. While traveling in the region, we encountered both what might be called "traditional" objects—baskets, containers, "coasters," decorative vessels made with either flat or round metal wire, and sometimes with both. One sort of woven wire vessel was a copy of a reed basket, yet fabricated with metal. Importantly, by virtue of being vessels, these objects exhibited intrinsic utility. A second, and growing cell of cottage industry (presumably stimulated largely by tourism growth) is the hand manufacture of objects explicitly designed to be wire wrought and to appeal at least in part to European design notions. Simple comparison-contrast allows one to see the difference between decorative, tourist-driven objects and useful toys. These main categories converge (as when the wire object is just as likely to be played with by a local child as collected as a gee-gaw or bibelot by a visitor) and they diverge (as in the case, we assume, of cute wire objects unlikely to be "playful," such as fish shaped soap dishes). Children's toy push cars, made of wire but free of any commercial concern, are easily observed being played with apparently everywhere. "

WIRE ART MANUFACTURING

The manufacturing of wire art objects takes place in townships and in the rural areas in informal cottage industries (2). Many small businesses are based on this and both manufacture and sell from the same premise. A room in a township house, a garage or a rural hut will all suffice. A simple workbench and basic tools including pliers, a hammer and a carpenter's vice are all that are needed. The basic raw materials include galvanised mild steel wire of various gauges, but generally around 1,5mm diameter, and a variety of coloured beads. This is hand-craft production based on skill and enterprise and demanding little capital outlay and low technology.



**Figure 2: Wire Art Craftsmen
(Source: Fairtrade South Africa)**



**Figure 3: Wire Art and Beadwork Craftswoman
(Source: Fairtrade South Africa)**

The socio-economic basis of these enterprises is private entrepreneurship in the overwhelming majority of cases, but there are a number of community based undertakings, many funded by aid agencies. “Vuka Creativity” and the “Streetwires” project, both supported by the Fairtrade organization are two examples of assisted enterprises. “Streetwires is a community upliftment project that seeks to empower unemployed and homeless South Africans and create opportunities where previously none existed. Streetwire's motto is "Think global, act local". By providing the training, support and raw materials necessary to enable people to channel their natural creative abilities into the most African of all art forms - wire art - Streetwires is helping to ensure a brighter future for many formerly destitute South Africans” (www.fairtradesouthafrica.co.za 12.07.2005).

WIRE ART OBJECTS

The objects that are produced by wire art craftspeople range from objects intended for use in the local community to objects intended for sale as curios or art objects in the general tourist market (Magnin and Soullou, 1996).

Objects intended for use in the local community include children's toys, especially the ubiquitous model car, various types of containers and baskets, candle holders, key hooks and portable radios. The production of these items depends on the need and demand in the local community and is only partially market orientated.

Objects intended for sale in the general tourist market include a range of items, including utilitarian objects such as candle holders and key hooks as well as sculptural and decorative objects such as animal figurines. The following are illustrations of some of these objects.

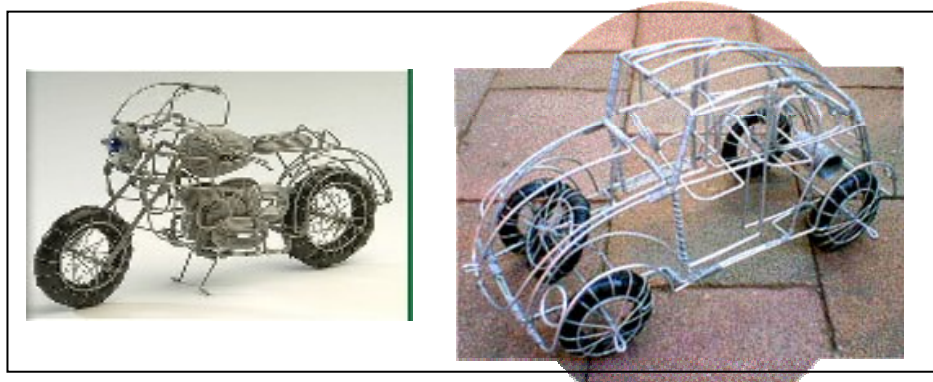


Figure 4: Wire Motor Bike and Wire Beetle (Source: www.simplybaskets.co.za 11.07.2005)

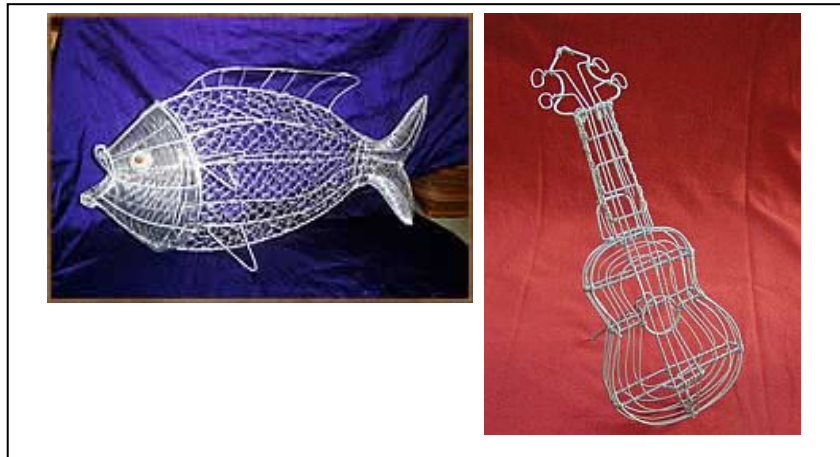


Figure 5: Wire Fish and Wire Guitar (Source: www.africancraftsmarket.co.za 13.07.2005)

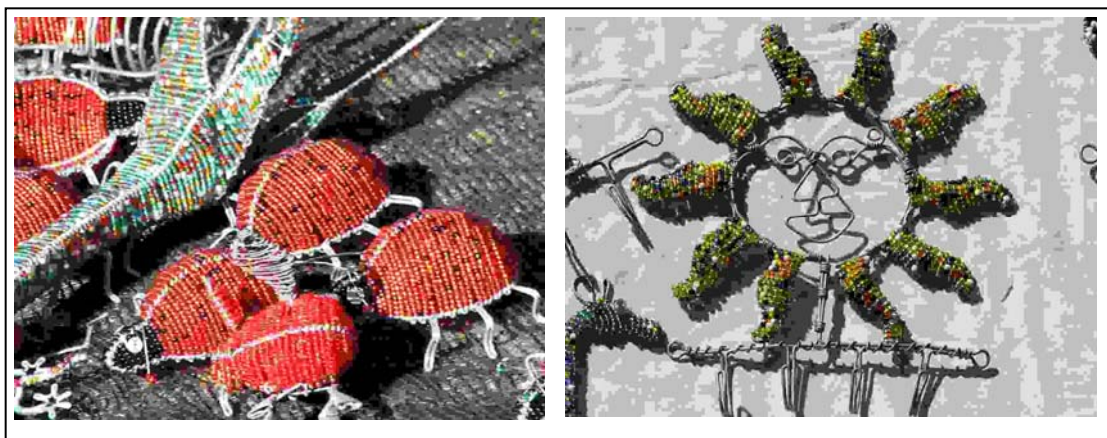


Figure 6: Wire and Bead Beetles and Wire Sun and Key Hooks (Source: G McLachlan)

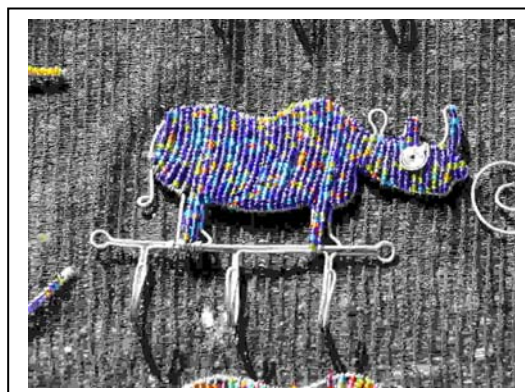


Figure 6: Wire Rhinoceros and Key Hooks (Source: G McLachlan)

WIRE ART SELLING

The selling of wire art takes place all over Southern Africa, wherever there are street markets, especially those catering to the tourist market. In the Eastern Cape there are a number of these informal markets. One of the most famous is the informal roadside market on the Southern entry to the small town of Cradock which is run by crafters from the nearby Michausdal township who produce a number of items amongst which are their well known model windmills. Amongst other well known markets are the Farmers Market in the village of

Bathurst, the High Street traders in Grahamstown, the Beachfront market in Port Elizabeth and the Eighth Avenue market in Walmer. There are also markets in East London, King Williamstown/Bisho, Umtata and in many other towns and villages in the Province.

The Beachfront market in Port Elizabeth is a good example of an informal market that includes wire art traders and that is aimed at tourists (both internal and international). This market is located in a prime position on the main metropolitan playground of the urban beachfront. It is a linear market stretching for around one kilometre along a pedestrian route. The setting is both picturesque and vibrant, and the market is highly accessible and safe. Traders are allocated a demarcated site of approximately six square meters where they display their wares either on tables or on blankets on the ground. There are approximately 240 traders of whom 11 (4,5%) trade exclusively or mainly in wire art. Of these 11 traders 6 are from South Africa and the remainder from elsewhere in Southern Africa.



Figure 7: The Beachfront Informal Market, Port Elizabeth (Source: G McLachlan)

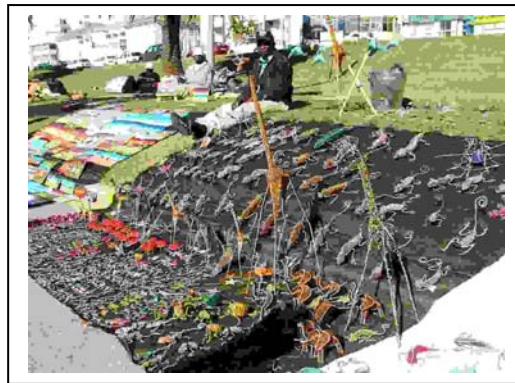


Figure 8: Beachfront Wire Art Trader (Source: G McLachlan)

In addition to these informal markets, there are a number of commercial curio shops and art galleries that service the tourist market and that stock and sell wire art. In the Eastern Cape there are a number of these galleries and curio shops, they include amongst others the Wezandla Gallery, Afro Dizzy Curios, Matopi Products and the Bushpig and Wildlife Gallery all in Port Elizabeth, Creative Touch in Port Alfred, African Adventures and Pula Pula in Graff-Reinet, and the Dolphin Beach Indoor Flea Market in Jeffreys Bay. These are all privately owned commercial businesses that either enter into supply contracts with wire art craftspeople or who buy wire art on an ad-hoc basis. These formal businesses are all housed in commercial buildings located in busy and accessible parts of their respective towns or cities.

WIRE ART REQUIREMENTS AND SUSTAINABILITY

The production of wire art by the informal sector in Southern Africa is a unique craft that has developed into an informal market orientated economic activity in response to the opportunities offered by the expanding tourist market. This is an opportunity that has been seized by the most disadvantaged people who through their own initiative and development of a traditional skill have carved out a modestly lucrative market.

The manufacturing of wire art takes place in informal cottage workshops in the townships and rural areas of Southern Africa. Here there are no special spatial needs except for convenient, secure domestic scale workspace in close relation to the place of residence of the craftsman.

The market for wire art exists because of two factors. Firstly, both internal and international tourists with their essentially European tastes find these African wire art products desirable, in other words, there is demand. Secondly, there are a number of spaces in the cities where these items are sold that are acceptable and accessible to these tourists and to the sellers. The Beachfront market in Port Elizabeth is an example of this where its location in relation to hotels and the cities prime beaches as well as the general security of the area all contribute to its success. The many other spaces where wire art is sold are all characterised by their close proximity to major traffic routes, their accessibility to pedestrians, their location in relation to commercial activity of some kind or another, and their general sense of safety and cleanliness. The essential spatial needs of sites for the selling of wire art can be summed up as visibility, location, accessibility and security.

Small-scale entrepreneurs acting on their own produce most of the wire art, but some of the production and selling is supported by non-governmental agencies. Small-scale entrepreneurs sell most of the wire art, but formal galleries and curio shops sell some of the wire art. Co-operation both formal and informal, between the wire art craftspeople and these institutions can assist in expanding this small industry.

Most essentially at the local level city governments need to recognise the tenacity, the energy and the value of the wire art industry and to plan spatially and organizationally for its survival and growth. In doing this they will be harnessing the vital energy of many people and creating much employment at little cost.

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