Executive Summary: FutureHood

- The premise of this project is that urban governments are failing to solve the legacies of apartheid-era planning and regulation with de facto power residing in large engineering departments of local governments driven by narrow sectoral concerns. *SA City Futures* leverages small-scale urbanism to reimagine future neighbourhoods in three South African cities;

- Its innovative workshop methodology blends three key elements: Urban Form (built environment), Urban Sim (data projections) and Urban Narrative (personal storylines) that in turn inform design skins for neighbourhoods in 2030, conceived by people who live or work there;

- We came to understand that the middle space sought between this methodological triad also has intangible indicators - conversations, signage, anecdotes and other ephemera - that formal processes struggle to capture and this was a key challenge in designing the iterative methodology;

- The first workshop is about sensing place, focused upon a neighbourhood walk that is led by participants to a series of their favourite spaces; it was found that many 'favourite' sites held a kernel of duality and deep sense of ambivalence but there was also an element of positive surprise and discovery, especially when participants learnt what was meaningful to others;

- The second workshop is about speculation or wild ideas around the future recalibrated with some reality constraints and finally manifested onto a scale model of the neighbourhood; it was found that 'secret spaces', information mostly known to locals, were often the key to what was valued in a neighbourhood and these hidden transcripts (James Scott) also reflected themselves in the final proposals for the future;

- Outcomes in this synthesis report are interpreted employing the metaphor of a body: Urban Form as skin (physical space), Urban Sim as heart (reality constraints) and Urban narrative as breath (urban commons), each with a present and future temporality;

- A key finding is this kind of imagineering process can prove an invaluable source of insight and intelligence for government planners and NGO researchers but if this is the primary purpose of the exercise, it will dilute and distort its integrity as well as its focus: its value lies in a power to uncover deeply personal experiences, feelings and desires about the neighbourhood to unlock a more grounded, meaningful and genuine conversation among residents to establish a common agenda for the future that needs to also hold onto a strong aspirational core;

- Relating the project to a broader context, there are a number of problems with formal systems of community participation in terms of the formulation of IDPs, SDFs and ward-level plans -- from technocratic jargon to coarse planning frameworks -- and projects like SA City Futures help pick up on what matters at a micro or walkable level;

- FutureHood may in theory help enable effective participation by better equipping participants to deal with official processes but this is not its primary aim; the project is more experimental and radical, rooted in a belief that ordinary citizens can be equipped with basic skills and perspectives that can empower them to think beyond the parameters of the given and terms of engagement established by official discourses -- and this can be both fun and profound;

- The 2030 collective visions that participants engender through a methodology like FutureHood is a speculative genre that in the literary world would perhaps be called "true fiction" -- participants wishes, however wild they may seem on the face of it, can ring true.