

Youth Speak Out: The Decline in Public Spaces

By Yonela Gebengu

28 August 2025

Public spaces such as parks, playgrounds, and libraries were once the centres of community bonds, building solidarity and friendliness, over the past decades support for these civic spaces have declined and have turned to places of danger and harm, especially for women, youth and children.

When these spaces have declined an entire neighbourhood can be affected, less communication and trust among people, human interaction, social engagements and dialogues have also been affected when such spaces are not being used by the public.

We spoke with Tyler, a youthful individual who lives in Johannesburg, said there isn't enough information about public spaces to the general person; what they are; or that they exist and how they can benefit society. Tyler is one of the many people who attended the reopening of Johannesburg City Library on 09 August 2025. The library had been closed for 5 years, disadvantaging inner-city residents.

The neglect of public spaces comes as a direct result of there being little to no information about how public spaces can be useful to citizens. This lack of information leads to a lack of interest and thus fosters neglect. I guess it starts with providing citizens with information first about how useful public spaces can be to them. I guess this will inspire curiosity amongst the public. And then actually engaging the public with interest-based events, giving them access and freedom to use these spaces. Then, it is up to the citizens to decide how they wish to engage with them

I think it's so important for civil society to get involved in public discussion and forums like council meetings etc. Not only to hold local authorities accountable, but also to keep abreast of what's happening in their communities so that they can step in where necessary when things begin to fall apart.

Ward Councilors are the closest representatives that communities have to directly engage with their local government. And thus, they should be constantly engaged in the issues of the community. It means that communities use their preferred channels to regularly follow up on projects, request progress reports on issues and engagement from their representatives.

On 16 August Khanya College held a Study Group Session at Workers Museum Cottages, focusing on public spaces and why they are important to working class communities.

Youth individuals who hold Creative centres, OVCs, arts and cultural spaces around Johannesburg townships shared their thoughts and how they feel around their communities, spaces that are being neglected, and how they can use their voices to overcome such issues.

Blessing Tsakane from Sakha Kids Arts Centre said citizens don't care and respect their public spaces, they should take the first commitment to ask why such places are closed and are they operating during weekends if not why?, public spaces are useful to all of us and take responsibility to hold each other accountable, respect and love our public spaces - we can also hold local councillors accountable, taking pictures, and videos and create spaces to learn about why the public spaces re important to us.

This article was submitted on 22 August 2025. You may republish this article, so long as you credit the authors and Karibu! Online (www.Karibu.org.za), and do not change the text. Please include a link back to the original article.