

The cost of looking away: how civil apathy is fuelling the steady erosion of Gauteng public infrastructure

by Phindile Kunene

In 1996, we moved into our new home – one of the first RDP housing projects embodying the democratic state's promise of "a better life for all". The settlement was unremarkable: rows of tiny, identical houses stood in a barren landscape with no trees, parks or street names. My siblings and I often got lost trying to find our house. Still, it was a home, something that had eluded us for too long as we moved from one backyard to another and then to the new "squatter camps" mushrooming across Gauteng.

Lately, I find myself remembering those early days in Vosloorus Extension 28. One memory lingers. We were playing in the streets when we noticed a group of elders quietly removing the bricks that lined our pavements; they saw an opportunity to enhance their private spaces.

We ran home to our parents, hoping they would join in. To our dismay, they refused. Once the pavements were gone, residents had to navigate water pooling on the streets after heavy rains.

This episode stays with me because it is at the nub of one of the key contests in any democracy: the tension between private interests and the common good. The destruction of public infrastructure in Gauteng is emblematic of this tension. While media attention has focused mainly on Johannesburg, the decay runs across the province.

Public infrastructure – traffic lights, guardrails for bridges, manhole covers, and street lights – is stripped and sold. It's a relentless cycle of construction and deconstruction: whatever gets fixed today is defaced tomorrow.

In Ekurhuleni, a pedestrian bridge linking Katlehong and Thokoza to the industrial complex of Alrode has been stripped bare, with vandals helping themselves to steel from the guardrails.

Nearby, major roads have barely a single working traffic light. In 2022, Ekurhuleni spent more than R120m replacing stolen and vandalised traffic lights. The situation is so dire that the city is permanently converting some intersections into stop signs.

This steady erosion of infrastructure has profoundly affected the quality of life in Gauteng. According to the Gauteng City-Region Observatory, 36% of residents cite crime as their biggest problem.

Satisfaction with public services has plummeted – only 15% of residents believe their neighbourhoods have improved, down from 31% in 2014. Less than 30% are satisfied with basic social infrastructure, such as street lights and parks.

This decay is not lost on young people. During Youth Lab's SA Youth Manifesto consultations in 2024 – young people from all over Gauteng made it clear that though public parks are abundant, many have deteriorated into hubs of illegal activity – drug use, public drinking and gambling. Swings and seesaws are hardly usable as scrap metal thieves strip everything for a quick buck.

In response, the government is exploring a range of technical fixes to curb this assault on public infrastructure. Recently, Gauteng roads and transport MEC Kedibone Diale-Tlabela said the authorities are considering discontinuing the use of copper, fortifying structures with concrete, adopting surveillance tools, and inviting private sector collaboration to curb scrap metal theft. But can technical

Genuine citizen engagement the missing piece at centre of reclaiming our cities



The decay of our streets is everywhere, says the writer. /Antonio Muchave

solutions alone address a crisis that is as much about values and collective responsibility as it is about law enforcement?

The public's usual response to this wreckage is that "the fish rots from the head", that the decay around us mirrors the corruption of the political elite. While true, this response reveals our cynicism. We have become accustomed to looking away or blaming the government while destruction unfolds around us. Deferring to politicians to clean up the mess is a lost opportunity to place public interests at the centre of reclaiming our cities. Genuine citizen engagement is the missing piece.

Public awareness plays a vital role in other parts of the world facing similar crises. In Los Angeles, where scrap metal thieves target fire hydrants, a combination of co-ordinated law enforcement, stronger infrastructure protections, and active public involvement is key to deterring these crimes. Social media, websites, billboards, and dedicated reporting lines are all part of the strategy.

A similar approach is needed here. The scale and nature of this theft demand that it become a top priority at community, business and trade union meetings, school assemblies, church sermons, and community radio stations.

This call could easily come across as giving the government a free pass. That's not the case. At its core, it challenges the excessive individualism and lack of respect – the "guluva-for-himself" attitude – that has permeated our society.

We need to collectively craft a new moral order regarding our responsibility.

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