

Princess Vlei is a green area centred on a lake within a suburban area of Cape Town, South Africa. A 'vlei' is a lake or a marsh in the Afrikaans language. In the Table Mountain range that forms a magnificent backdrop to the vlei is the Elephant's Eye cave, where legend has it a princess of the Khoisan, the original inhabitants of the Cape, was held hostage by Portuguese sailors many centuries ago. The lake at Princess Vlei was formed by her tears.

Many 'coloured' people in Cape Town trace their ancestry to the Khoisan, and the vlei is a repository for and a reminder of this heritage. It sits between areas designated as white and as coloured under Apartheid, a social and economic division that still persists today. Many coloured people from the neighbouring areas reminisce about visiting the vlei as children. The vlei was cut off from these areas in more recent times by a major road, itself a piece of Apartheid architecture separating communities from each other. The vlei today is a neglected though still beloved site.

Now, local community groups are seeking to use Princess Vlei to reconnect communities to each other and with nature. A proposal for a shopping mall on the banks of the vlei, contested in court and through activism across Cape Town, has galvanised a movement to develop alternative proposals for the site. The principle group leading this campaign is the Princess Vlei Forum, a voluntary association of community members and organisational representatives, professionals and individuals concerned with the appropriate development of Princess Vlei. The Forum has developed a framework for a 'People's Plan' for the park, which proposes a combination of nature walks, farmer's markets, concert stages and educational and recreational facilities.

A proposal to refine this plan through community participation has been short-listed for World Design Capital 2014, for which Cape Town is the host city. In contributing to this process, and in response to the PlayScapes brief, we, a group of designers and artists, have developed some specific proposals for the site at the request of the Princess Vlei Forum.

# THE FOUR ELEMENTS

# IMAGINE PRINCESS VLEI







Though neglected, Princess Vlei is used for a variety of activities today. The principle activity is the popular national pastime of the 'braai', or barbecue. There are some publicly-provided concrete fire structures for this, in a broken-down state, around a carpark area. People also find their own sites under trees spread out across the scrubby Eastern banks of the Vlei, often picnicking next to their cars. A few people fish in the lake. There are also baptisms on the weekends, an activity which has been taking place at the vlei for generations, and which draws people from different communities across broader Cape Town and even across the country.

The consistent 'lean' to the trees on the site testifies to the pervasive, seasonal South Easterly wind which blows across Cape Town in summer. Apart from the trees, much of the Eastern side of the vlei, the area already in most use and most accessible to neighbouring communities, is sand and grass. Dotted around are occasional weathered logs brought onto the site. Down by the waters edge, reeds grow, and water birds such as pelicans and cormorants can be seen. To the southern end of the site, a project to rehabilitate the vlei with indigenous vegetation is underway, as part of a project called 'Dressing the Princess'.

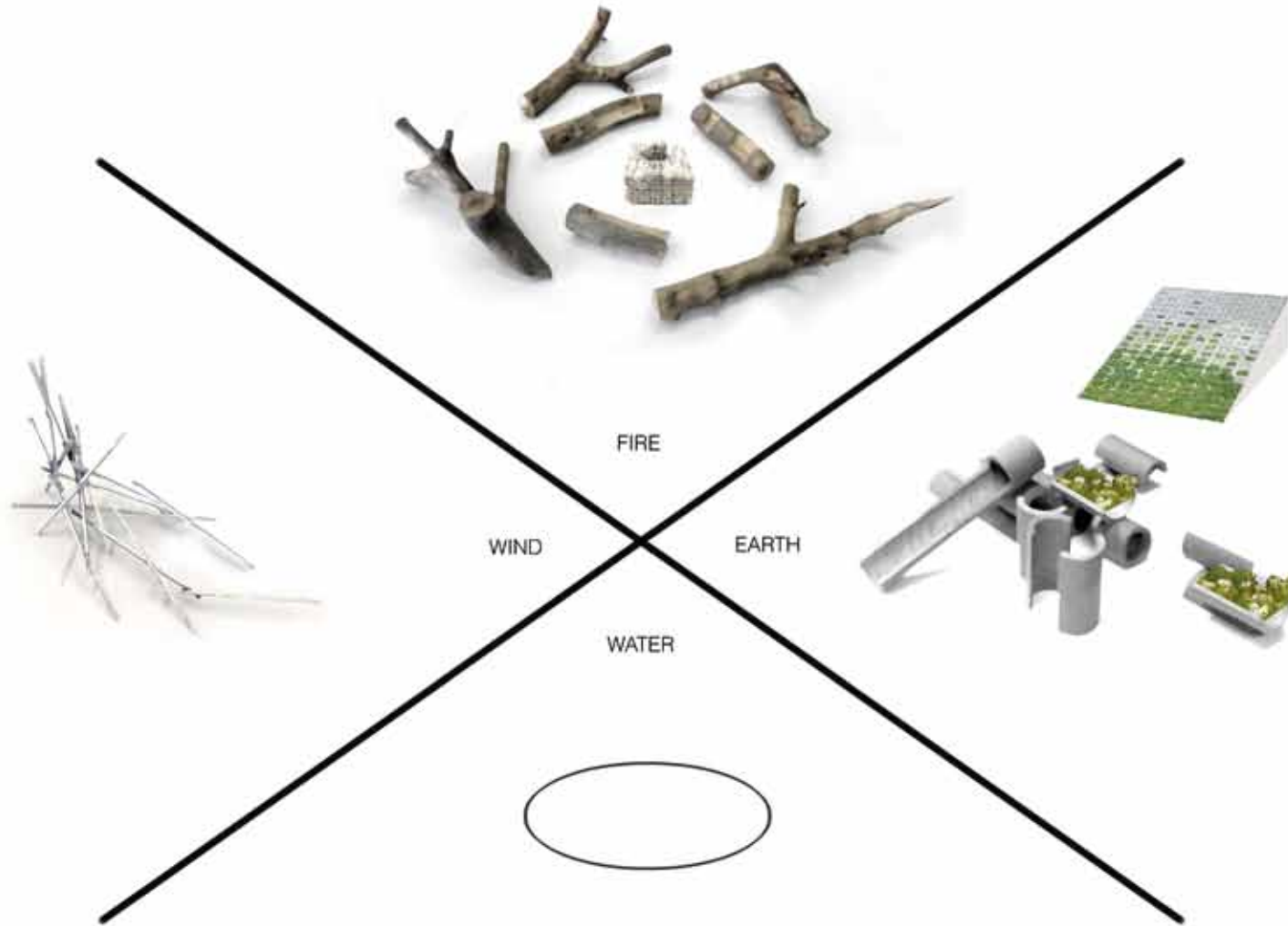
These four interventions, described on the next page, go from a hilltop to the South-East, across the banks of the vlei, and into the water. In our proposal, we want to reflect aspects of the site as it is now, as well as aspirations for its future. We intend the structures we propose to sit lightly, so that they are movable and malleable, and not an obstacle for future developments. They are also intended as discussion points for communities and interested parties around the development of the vlei.

On the southern edge of the site is the Jolly Carp, a community centre which is an active part of the Forum, and which hosts concerts, food markets, and educational and community-building activities. A demonstration permaculture garden is used as a teaching tool, and for food growing by local people. An ethnobotanical garden contains traditional medicinal plants. Children play in tree houses and on wooden playthings carved by a Zimbabwean sculptor who works on the site.

We propose four interventions on the site, towards the southern end of the vlei, where they are accessible through the Jolly Carp, and continue the existing 'Dressing the Princess' project.



200 m



## The 4 Elements.

We arrived at the 'Four Elements' (wind or air, fire, earth and water) as a rough organising principle for our proposals, as it reflects a reverence for nature and a sense of the site as sacred, that resonated well with the Princess Vlei Forum. While associated with Classical thought, seeing the physical world as composed of four or five elements is found across cultures.

**Wind** - The wind in Cape Town can be unpleasant, especially on an open, sandy site as Princess Vlei is today. We seek to change people's (especially children's) relationship to the wind, through having it generate sound. Our proposal here is for a sculptural climbing frame made of hollow galvanised metal poles, 4 metres in length and approx. 10cm in diameter, bolted together at intersections. Holes or slots drilled into the upper poles act as 'flutes' in the wind, based on traditional aeolian instruments. The lower poles can be 'tuned' with

internal divisions, and beaten to make sound. Children can swing on and climb the structure. The overall form reflects children's play in building stick structures, or even 'Pick-Up-Sticks'. The structure encourages physical activity and collaborative music-making, and has educational potential component in demonstrating principles of physics and musical instruments.

**Fire** - Gathering around open fires is already a popular activity at the vlei. We propose a larger, communal fire area, which evokes a story-telling space. In the words of hip-hop activist Emile YX?, a member of the Princess Vlei Forum, the legend of the princess is one of the stories 'I wish to tell my children sitting on the vlei banks, so that they can feel at home'. Elephant's Eye Cave which appears in the legend of the Princess, is visible from our proposed site for this component. The central fire structure is a custom gabion that can contain rocks from

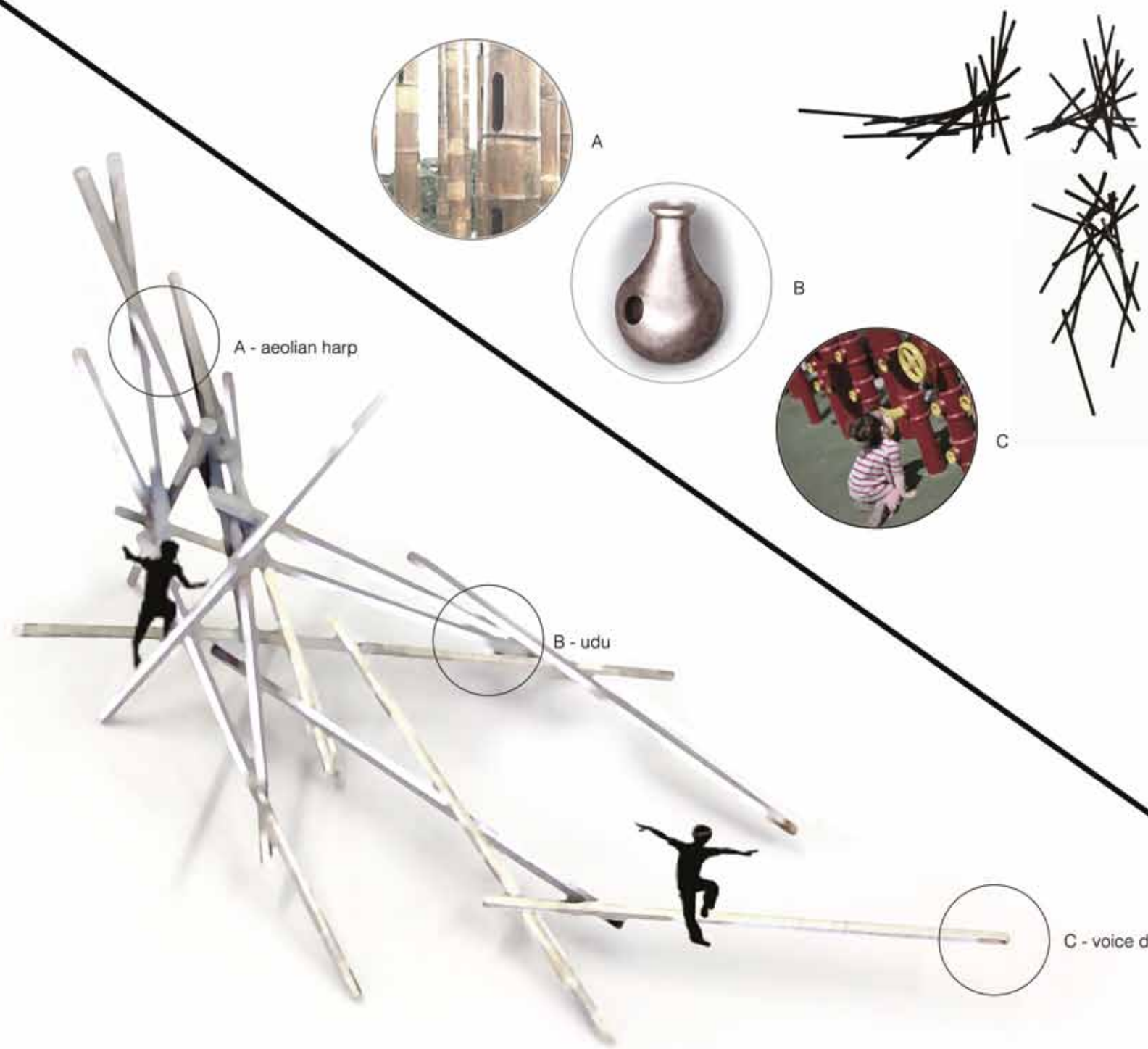
the site or crushed concrete. The logs and tree branch structures can be taken from felled trees in the Table Mountain national park, and carved by the resident sculptor at the Jolly Carp. In our plan, single logs are carved into crude seats, while steps are cut into larger branching forms for children to perch in. Forms of fish and local animals can be carved into them too.

**Earth** - Our proposal for the element of 'earth' plays on the mass-produced concrete forms already used on the site, to produce new structures. It draws on earth as metaphor for solidity and strength, and can include earth planters, or be partially embedded in a hillside. Mass-produced concrete forms are unattractive to steal - a threat on this site. Pipes and half-pipes can be combined to make perches, hideouts and slides for children. The concrete surfaces can be softened using mosaics executed by children from neighbouring

schools. Frameworks for plants and creepers can be used to grow plants over concrete, and resonate with the programme for 'Dressing the Princess'.

**Water** - Water presents many options for intervention, catering both to people and to wildlife on the vlei. We are proposing a floating island for wild birds. These are an existing technology, installed at locations in South Africa and internationally. It would provide opportunities for people to view wild birds, as well as a facility for the birds. We are also looking at the possibility of providing a jetty or stairway into the water for baptisms - this structure would have to be developed in consultation with baptism groups and other interested parties to be useful. The sound sculpture and climbing frame proposed for the element of wind is the main focus of our proposal for PlayScapes, and is described in more detail on the next page.





# Windscape

Our 'WindScape' sculpture makes use of the natural topology of the site, placed on a low hilltop exposed to the wind. From there it is visible to passing vehicles and pedestrians on the road bordering the vlei, signalling that development is taking place on the site.

The overall design is replicable across sites, and is an organic form that can be altered and built onto. It is scalable in response to what we find out from use. It uses low-cost, readily available mass-produced components from the fencing industry, or from lighting or electricity pole production. The overall size of the structure is economical in relation to the material used in its construction. The poles could be coloured or patterned to echo the reeds and plants found on the site.

The design uses linear, ubiquitous forms in a fresh, organic arrangement. The metal poles reach for the sky, moving from mostly horizontal to roughly vertical as it climbs the hill. Its form communicates the connection from earth to sky, reaching into the air - like iron filings in response to a magnet. The upright poles are somewhat reminiscent of organ pipes, communicating its musicality. The sound-generating holes or slots which generate sound from the wind could be highlighted with colour.

For the potential user, banging on a pipe with a stick is a basic kid's activity, which here would be rewarded with a range of sounds, produced by divisions hidden inside the pipes. Components (such as internal compartments) can be welded together in basic metal-working workshops. Can be built by local construction companies, and even assembled onsite with the help of communities.

We will work with local teacher and musician Brendon Bussy who has made aeolian instruments for several years, in designing the structure. Brendon consulted to the local public sculpture project Jetty Square which makes use of aeolian instruments.