By 1996, when the project was commissioned, the main Railway Station had long been moved from the center of the City to the Warwick Triangle area at it’s western edge. Black commuters were the primary commuter rail users and, under apartheid, the motivation was to remove them from the city.

The consequence was that the area around the station rapidly became a hub of commercial activity, primarily trading from the city sidewalks, public open spaces, and any other viable location where there was opportunity to do so. Trading was unstructured and unregulated and rapid growth put infrastructural services under pressure for which they were not designed.

Sidewalks were unwalkable, refuse was generated quicker than it could be collected, drains continuously blocked, and pedestrians were knocked down as they tried to cross increasingly busy streets. Much of this was happening in the area of and between the new
Berea Station, the Early Morning and Fresh Produce City Markets, the emerging 16-seater mini-taxi ranks, and adjacent bus terminuses.

At the same time, influx of people from rural areas was increasing rapidly. The city was being evacuated by its previous predominantly white business and residential population and the void was being filled by the newly urbanising. The urban economy, society and culture was transforming.

On the one hand there was a vacuum. On the other, pressure. This is a condition of great opportunity.

One of many examples of the newly legitimised urban economy, culture and society was the prescription and trading of traditional medicines; traditional equivalents of doctors and pharmacists. Without a defined location, this growing specialist industry was rapidly occupying sidewalks in the area and, because of market demand, blocking pedestrian through-movement and contributing to the clogging of the pedestrian environment.

Stretching up from the city side, in the location of the Victoria Street Market, were two incomplete and abandoned freeway splines; their radii apparently too tight for their purpose which was to reduce in and out bound traffic from the Warwick area by bridging over it.

iTrump [Inner City eThekwini Regeneration and Urban Management Programme], an entity of the eThekwini Municipality, saw the opportunity of extending an existing piece of abandoned infrastructure to create an above-ground pedestrian linkage from the Berea Station, across Market Road and drop it down at the busy on-grade pedestrian intersection at the entrance to the Early Morning Market.

In this single move, unviable, unsafe and unsustainable volumes of pedestrian movement at ground level would be relieved; the specialist prescription and trading of traditional medicine would be consolidated, from which would emerge a location and product based identity for the sector; a cultural practice would be assertively validated; and another piece of a unique emerging urban society would be added.
Bottom up management structures were put in place so that this community was organised, could formally relate to and engage with the city authorities, supportive infrastructural services provided, and self-organised safety and security could be achieved.

‘Ecology’ means the mutually beneficial relationship between different organisms and their environment. With minimal intervention, intimate integration of and between all stakeholders, and an inherent respect for the validity of traditional cultural practice, the conditions for a sustainable urban ecology were to be provided. With very little resource, city government was catalysing a powerful urban evolution.

The brief to designworkshop:sa was to design consulting rooms for the Izinyanga [traditional doctors], trading spaces for the Izangoma [traditional healers and traders], and the bridge and stair connection from the end of the abandoned freeway to the ground at the entrance to the Early Morning Market.

The process required a degree of understanding of, and feel for, the traditional medicine ‘industry’, its heritage and cultural context; the relationship between the Izinyanga and Izangoma and their customers; and the physical environment that would enable these relationships.

There was also an up-front understanding that, if they are not going to end up as extended corporate shopping malls that serve only to further concentrate wealth in the hands of a few, the inherent attribute of ‘city as an accessible market’ was going to be a fundamental driver for the project.

Continued on Panel 2.