



Design Beyond the City: UJ Architecture Students Engage Rural Communities in Mpumalanga



On 12 August 2025, the Department of Architecture at the University of Johannesburg (UJ) embarked on a groundbreaking site visit to Ekukhanyeni (formerly Kwaggafontein) in Mpumalanga. This initiative brought together 55 second-year architecture students, five lecturers, and key stakeholders including representatives from the Thembisile Hani Local Municipality (THLM), Mpumalanga Economic Growth Agency (MEGA), tribal council chief iKosi Magodongo MS Mahlangu, and community members.

The visit formed part of the second-year design studio's semester project, which interrogates rural spatial typologies and former Bantustan landscapes in South Africa. Students explored the Kwaggafontein Industrial Park, engaged with municipal and traditional authorities, and visited Mafu Secondary School to share insights about studying architecture at UJ. What began as an information session evolved into a lively exchange, with matriculants showing keen interest in architecture and higher education opportunities.

Learning Beyond the Classroom

This hands-on experience aimed to resituate the architectural studio beyond urban contexts, exposing students to the socio-economic and cultural realities of rural South Africa. By walking the streets, meeting local leaders, and observing governance structures, students gained a nuanced understanding of how design decisions intersect with history, policy, and community life.

Lecturer Nomalanga Mahlangu reflected:

"The urban-centric nature of architecture school needs to be interrogated, especially in South Africa where we are still grappling with the consequences of the former Homeland system. This project resituates the undergraduate architectural studio."

Her colleague, Carmen Songabau, added:

"Real learning truly happens outside the classroom. Our recent field trip offered students a profound opportunity to step into the real world of spatial dynamics and community-centered design."



Cultural Exchange and Governance Insights

The day concluded with a cultural engagement at the Ndzundza Mtshabi Royal Residence, where iKosi Magodongo emphasized the importance of blending traditional techniques with modern innovations and preserving cultural heritage through architecture.

“We outlined the importance of preserving cultural heritage through architecture and blending traditional techniques with modern innovations,” he shared.

Impact and Future Outlook

This initiative underscores UJ’s commitment to human-centered learning, fostering architects who design with empathy and contextual awareness. By bridging academic theory with lived realities, the Department of Architecture continues to shape practitioners who can respond to South Africa’s diverse spatial challenges.

