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South African telephone wire art as a catalyst for community engagement: A case study in collaborative exhibition design

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Abstract

This paper analyses the co-curatorial role in *iNgqikithi yokuPhica/Weaving Meanings: Telephone Wire Art from South Africa*, an exhibition launched at the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) in Santa Fe in November 2024. It examines how collaborative, dialogical, and multidisciplinary approaches foster engagement in exhibition design, focusing on South African telephone wire art from KwaMashu and Siyanda. The exhibition exemplifies New Museology by embracing collaborative curation and shifting authority to community participation. Its narrative is deeply rooted in Siyanda's artistic legacy, tracing the evolution of telephone wire art from traditional forms to contemporary creations such as *izimbenge* (wire baskets). New Museology and the Ecomuseum model serve as foundational theoretical frameworks, emphasising shared authority and community empowerment. A multimodal, participatory research methodology—including auto-ethnographic reflection, observation, interviews, and documentary analysis—underpinned the curatorial approach, reinforced by ongoing community consultation and rigorous ethical considerations. A central aspect of the exhibition is its innovative use of "museum atmospherics". The physical environment was meticulously designed, directly influenced by the artworks, to create an immersive visitor experience. Key zones—such as *isibaya* (honoring elders), iNingizimu Afrika Entsha (reflecting post-apartheid identity), and "Making Hard-Wire and Soft-Wire" (featuring interactive and tactile elements)—alongside augmented reality integration, significantly enhanced visitor engagement. The paper evaluates the exhibition's impact, highlighting MOIFA's cultural sensitivity in applying the Ecomuseum paradigm. Ultimately, this exhibition stands as a significant model for future inclusive initiatives, demonstrating how community engagement projects can inspire culturally sensitive museum practices in South Africa and prompt a rethinking of the museum's public role. MOIFA's ongoing plans to expand its documentary's international reach and develop educational components for South African schools further reinforce this claim, illustrating how exhibition design and artifacts can effectively educate and build communities.

Keywords: Design, new museology, ecomuseum, museum atmospherics, wire-art, co-curatorship

Introduction

This paper presents an analytical account of my co-curatorial role in *iNgqikithi yokuPhica/Weaving Meanings: Telephone Wire Art from South Africa*, an exhibition launched at the Museum of International Folk Art (MOIFA) in Santa Fe on 17 November 2024. The exhibition showcases works from the David Arment and Jim Rimpelspach collection, supplemented by loans, new commissions,

and MOIFA's permanent holdings, with a primary focus on artists from KwaMashu and Siyanda. MOIFA's commitment to amplifying cultural origins and community voices led to the appointment of guest curator Elizabeth Perrill, who assembled a diverse team—including local weavers, Indigenous knowledge experts, historians, filmmakers, and myself. This collective approach embodies the principles of New Museology, shifting curatorial authority from traditional institutional frameworks toward active community participation.

Figure 1: Ingqikithi Yokuphica/weaving meanings, telephone wire art from South Africa exhibition entrance (image by Addison Doty 2024; courtesy of MOIFA)

Context: Siyanda's artistic legacy

The Siyanda informal settlement, established in KwaMashu, Durban in 1988, began transforming in the early 1990s as post-apartheid land reforms converted a buffer zone into a vibrant new community. Named Siyanda (our community is growing) by rural job seekers building makeshift homes, its primary aim was to establish an Inkatha Freedom Party (IFP) stronghold against UDF and ANC factions. This shared background and political awareness fostered a unique community, where rural upbringing contributed to a highly regulated environment (Makwarela & Ebrahim 2018, p. 57).

By the mid-1990s, Siyanda had become a hub for telephone wire basket weaving. The financial gains from basket sales enabled residents to build permanent homes and foster informal entrepreneurship, though some still reside in government housing. Elliot Mkhize—a KwaMashu resident and night guard in Durban—emerged as a pivotal mentor, teaching hardwire weaving techniques to combat poverty. Leveraging workplace connections, he accessed sales outlets and sourced discarded materials. Having learned grass weaving at Ndaleni Art School in the 1960s, Mkhize transitioned from stick weaving to wire baskets, carving out a unique niche in the art market (Perrill, Gigaba & McEnaney 2024, p. 48). Others, like Jaheni Mkhize from Greytown, shared soft-wire skills with job seekers. Today, Siyanda remains Durban's epicentre of telephone wire art, with generational knowledge transfer and global recognition. This rich socio-artistic landscape framed our collaboration.

The evolution of these telephone wire baskets—traditionally known as *izimbenge* (beer pot lids)—is a focal point of the exhibited collection. The exhibition traces the development of various weaving techniques and showcases over-sewn coil artifacts used to create sacred and utilitarian objects, including drinking and storage vessels, beer pot lids, and intricately woven sieves (Klopper 2008, p. 173). Historically, these items were sometimes embellished with beadwork, originally using natural materials and, by the 18th century, imported European seed beads (Nettleton 2015, p. 1). The exhibition celebrates later objects from the 1900s, made of telephone wire, and features current weavers to demonstrate ongoing explorations in urban settings.

Figure 2: Siyanda township (image by Elizabeth Perrill 2023)

Theoretical framework: New museology and the Ecomuseum

The exhibition's foundation lies in two key theoretical models: New Museology and the Ecomuseum. New Museology promotes shared authority and social engagement, moving away from traditional, top-down curatorial practices (McCall & Gray 2014). By actively involving artists and community members as collaborators, this project exemplifies a truly participatory museum practice. The Ecomuseum model complements this approach by focusing on community empowerment and the transmission of culture beyond a static collection (Davis 2007). Through the use of documentary film, ongoing consultations, and a deep respect for South African perspectives, this project transforms the museum into a dynamic heritage space. It redefines the museum's role, prioritising local and global identities, collective agency, and social ecology, ultimately positioning the institution as a facilitator of living heritage.

Research methodology

We develop this exhibition through a use of a multimodal, participatory research methodology that combined several key approaches to deeply engage with the community. As a Cultural Curator, I immersed myself in the artist communities of Siyanda and KwaMashu. Through workshops, meetings, and weaving sessions, I gained insight into their cultural practices and community dynamics, which allowed me to be both a participant and an observer. I used reflexive journaling and self-analysis to understand my role and influence as a co-curator and Indigenous Knowledge Expert. My close relationships with the artists made it easy to conduct both structured and semi-structured interviews with artists, community members, museum staff, and other experts. These interviews gathered rich narratives and perspectives on the exhibition's impact.

Formal interview questions were often developed collaboratively with the lead curator and film team, which led to more open-ended questions that encouraged authentic storytelling. A core part of this project was a collaborative curatorial practice. Our team planned and documented all meetings, and we all participated in planning, decision-making, and community consultations. This constant dialogue between museum professionals and community experts was crucial to the exhibition’s evolution and provided valuable research material. A documentation of the museum installation videos by Gone Fishing Productions served as both a research tool and a way to authentically represent community voices. It helped shape the exhibition's narrative and reinforced our participatory curatorship approach.

We collected a wide range of data, including video recordings, photographs, exhibition materials, and observations of community interactions. This multimodal approach provided a comprehensive understanding of the project's impact. The project's analysis and decision-making were guided by theoretical frameworks, specifically New Museology, Ecomuseum theory, and participatory museum practice. We also strictly adhered to ethical protocols throughout the project, ensuring informed consent and cultural sensitivity were central to our process.

Collaborative foundations and evolving curatorial roles

In 2023, Perrill invited me to identify telephone wire artists in Siyanda, leveraging my local connections and prior collaborations. My responsibilities included facilitating introductions, conducting interviews, translating agreements, and preparing artists for filming, ensuring their narrative agency shaped the exhibition's framework. Initially working alongside Indigenous Knowledge Expert Ntombifuthi Mwimule, I later assumed a central leadership role, consulting directly with artists and expanding my curatorial responsibilities. My background in museum studies, cultural insight, isiZulu fluency, and weaving experience enabled strategic exhibition development and conceptual planning.

As Cultural Curator, I served as the primary liaison between MOIFA and the artist community. My role included contributing towards the video documentary content, coordinating entrepreneurship workshops, and guiding artists' participation in the International Folk Art Market. To ensure cultural relevance and accessibility, exhibition labels were translated into isiZulu (with input from South African co-curators), and MOIFA provided Spanish translations for Santa Fe's Spanish-speaking community. This inclusive approach enriched interpretation and fostered participant pride.

The exhibition title in isiZulu, initiated by the Indigenous Knowledge Expert team, is particularly illustrative. According to Gigaba, the title is broken into two poetic expressions: *iNgqikithi* (the essence), and *ukuphica* (weaving, and riddle). This collectively refers to engaging with the deeper meaning of the collection and sets the tone for accommodating the involved community's voice (Perrill, Gigaba & McEnaney 2024, p. 44). Capturing such linguistic nuances serves as an educational approach that invites non-isiZulu speakers to learn a different way of understanding meaning, while simultaneously fostering language as a source of pride. This aligns with MOIFA's mission statement: "to shape a human world by connecting people through creative expression and artistic traditions". Such foregrounding of the community's voice and agency demonstrates a commitment to honouring the involved community and situates MOIFA within the Ecomuseum paradigm.

Figure 3: Cultural curator preparing the artist Zodwa Maphumulo before the documentary shoot in Siyanda (image by Elizabeth Perrill 2023)

Exhibition design and museum atmospherics

Kotler (1974) coined the term "atmospherics" in marketing, defining it as "the conscious designing of space to create certain effects in buyers". He argued that the physical environment—including sensory elements such as lighting, sound, and layout—can be intentionally managed to influence consumer perceptions, emotions, and behaviours. Building on this, Hooper-Greenhill (1999) emphasised that an exhibition's space, design, and content are fundamental to facilitating informal cognitive learning during a museum visit. Forrest (2013, pp. 201–216) further adapted retail and marketing theories from Baker and Bitner, developing a comprehensive framework for understanding the museum experience. Drawing from Bitner's (1992) "servicescape" concept and Baker *et al.* (1994) on environmental cues, Forrest categorized influences into external variables (e.g., architectural style, exterior decoration, signage) and internal variables (e.g., spatial arrangement, grouping of exhibits, display design, colour schemes, lighting, sound, aromas, temperature, and visitor comfort).

These atmospheric cues are critical, as they not only shape the meaning of stimuli but also trigger emotional responses in visitors, significantly enhancing the inherently personal and subjective museum experience. In the context of this exhibition, my auto-ethnographic, practice-led methodology—prioritising collaboration, cultural sensitivity, and community empowerment—demonstrates how the museum atmospherics framework informed our specialised design strategy. Spatial configuration, lighting, and the positioning of artworks were meticulously considered to optimize both aesthetic impact and visitor appreciation. Dedicated display areas were carefully conceived, with lighting focused and adjusted to enhance the tactile qualities, colours, and details of each piece, aligning with Kotler's concept of "atmospheric effects" to influence visitors' experiences and learning processes. The exhibition's design emphasised collaboration, dialogue, and multidisciplinary engagement, creating an interactive environment where the objects' aesthetic qualities shaped both narrative and visitor experience.

The integration of augmented reality (AR) technologies represented a significant innovation, enabling seamless strategic planning through digital modelling. Curatorial and design teams could digitally simulate and visualise personalised exhibition spaces before installation, facilitating cross-continental collaborative decision-making and experimentation with layouts and visitor flow. This ultimately enhanced accessibility and immersion. The exhibition was organised into seven distinct zones, each inspired by the process and aesthetics of telephone wire weaving. Architecturally, the space featured unique insertions and colour-coded walls as thematic guides, moving away from the traditional "white cube" gallery. These choices, including video projections and a hands-on activity section, enhanced the sensory experience and deepened engagement.

Since the exhibition is ongoing and audience interviews have not yet been conducted, this analysis focuses on the collaborative process and evolving curatorial framework. The aim is to investigate how South African telephone wire art acts as a catalyst for community engagement, with particular attention to how the physical artworks inspired the exhibition layout and atmosphere. To illustrate this, I will focus on Zones 1, 5, and 6, which most effectively integrate weaving processes and aesthetics to amplify the exhibition's meaning and support the concept of museum atmospherics.

Figure 4: The exhibition plan in augmented reality, floor plan by Lila Pickus 2024 (courtesy of MOIFA).

Zone 1: Isibaya—at the centre of the home

Zone 1, Isibaya: At the Centre of the Home, serves as the exhibition's entry point. A convex niche subtly diverts visitors to both entry and exit walkways. Upon entering, visitors encounter two walls displaying clusters of baskets made with various techniques, preparing them for the exhibition ahead. The main space is accessed through a large, partitioned pine-green half-circular wall, drawing visitors into its concave side. A semi-circular couch invites them to sit and view a projection featuring leading weavers sharing historical narratives. This wall, serving as a screen, becomes the focal point—the core of the exhibition's contextual narrative.

Figure 5: Zone 1, Isibaya: At the centre of the home (image by Addison Doty 2024; courtesy of MOIFA)

The symbolism of *isibaya*—the cattle enclosure at the centre of the traditional home—invites viewers to honour elders, mirroring rituals that celebrate ancestors or living spirits believed to reside within the enclosure. Just as cattle and granaries are safeguarded within the *isibaya*, the audience is symbolically directed to salute the artists as community treasures (Frescura & Myeza 2016, p. 204). The design also references the weaving process: soft wire weaving typically begins at the rim and finishes at the core, while hard wire techniques start at the core and move outward. Although the exhibition space is not disc-shaped, the audience's movement—entering from one point and exiting from the opposite bend—emulates a spiralling, hooking, and looping weaving process, bringing the thematic cycle full circle.

Figure 6: Documentary video shot of Ntombifuthi Magwaza Sibiya that is projected on Zone 1 (film still by gone fishing productions 2023; courtesy of MOIFA)

Zone 5: Iningizimu Afrika Entsha (the New South Africa)

Zone 5, iNingizimu Afrika Entsha (the New South Africa), visually and conceptually embodies the ideals of unity, diversity, and transformation associated with post-apartheid South Africa. The gallery's golden-yellow backdrop and pine-green exhibit label highlight the brightly coloured wire baskets, whose hues mirror those of the national flag introduced in 1994. These colours—black, green, gold, red, blue, and white—signal a break from Eurocentric symbols, representing a new era of inclusivity and reconciliation (Ray 2024). A smaller, immersive section features a diamond motif painted in a lighter shade, echoing the geometric patterns found in many of the baskets and referencing the diamond shape as a symbol of resilience and value. The minimalistic geometric motif on the wall, integrated with the art, creates a contrast that emphasises the intricate wire artworks, making them stand out in a vibrant atmosphere.

The motifs and colours resonate with national pride and reconciliation. Some baskets in this zone depict iconic moments, such as the South African rugby team's victory, symbolising the integration of previously excluded groups into the national narrative. The diamond-shaped patterns and vibrant wire colours metaphorically echo the weaving process, illustrating how diverse cultural threads are interlaced to create a unified national identity. This zone, therefore, becomes a powerful space for reflecting on the ongoing journey of the "Rainbow Nation" and the role of art in shaping collective memory.

Figure 7: Zone 5, Iningizimu Afrika Entsha (the New South Africa) section and Vincent Sithole's We Are the Champions Rugby World Cup 2007 (left: photo by Addison Doty 2024; courtesy of MOIFA, right: gift of David Arment and Jim Rimelspach, David Arment Southern African Collection, IFAF Collection, MOIFA, FA.2024.12.233)

Zone 6: Making hard-wire and soft-wire

Zone 6, titled Making Hard-Wire and Soft-Wire, is designed as an interactive and tactile environment that invites visitors to engage directly with the processes and materials of telephone wire weaving. This zone serves as a dynamic space where the craft is demystified, foregrounding the creative process over the finished product and fostering a sense of shared discovery.

Figure 8: Zone 6, Making Hard-Wire and Soft-Wire (image by Addison Doty 2024; courtesy of MOIFA)

The spatial arrangement encourages exploration and learning through a variety of features, such as the Interactive Workstations. Separate stations are set up for both hard-wire and soft-wire weaving methods, allowing visitors to observe videos of demonstrations and experiment with weaving designs. The exhibition supports this by featuring a Hands-On Activities section, where a table with chairs invites visitors to become co-creators of the exhibition. On the table are discs printed with concentric lines, echoing the round shape of the baskets. Visitors use coloured pencils to design their own basket patterns on paper charts with faint outlines. These designs can then be hung on display rows using pegs, encouraging reflection and metaphorically stepping into the weavers' creative process—mirroring how artists typically begin by sketching their designs before weaving.

Another section is dedicated to Material Displays. This consists of an installation featuring rolls of telephone wire material in various colours, illustrating the evolution from traditional telephone wire to current wire types, opposite the hands-on activities table. Visitors can touch samples pinned longitudinally on a counter, feeling the different textures of original telephone wire, as well as the current synesthetic and galvanised wire used in the artworks.

Lastly, the exhibition features Multimedia Elements. There is a small screen that plays videos of artists explaining and guiding viewers through both soft-wire and hard-wire weaving processes. Additionally, a wall-mounted display showcases arrested moments of the weaving process, capturing key stages and techniques. The delicate nature of these process markers requires careful protection to prevent mishandling. This feature enhances visitor understanding by allowing visualisation of the transformation from raw wire to finished basket, deepening appreciation of the artistry and technical skill involved.

This zone also serves as a platform for intergenerational knowledge transfer, where traditional techniques are demonstrated alongside contemporary adaptations. Continuous interaction with artists throughout the exhibition's development was crucial in accurately capturing these processes, highlighting the importance of the Cultural Curator's role in bridging artistic knowledge and museum presentation. Overall, Zone 6 exemplifies the exhibition's broader commitment to community

engagement, education, and participatory museum practice, transforming visitors from passive observers into active participants in the cultural narrative.

Figure 9: The public's telephone wire basket design as part of the museum showcase in Zone 6 (image by Muziwandile Gigaba 2025)

Evaluating impact and community engagement

MOIFA demonstrated remarkable sensitivity to cultural nuances by consistently consulting and involving the South African community throughout the exhibition's development. This approach empowered the artists and redefined museum practice, positioning MOIFA as a relevant, democratic institution that enables communities to address the political and economic contexts shaping their art. The exhibition's credibility was significantly enhanced by incorporating video interviews, direct observations, and cross-cultural dialogues, contributing greatly to a core aspect of atmospheric design by balancing visitor experience. This participatory model exemplifies New Museology, where the museum facilitates and shares authority rather than making all decisions independently.

This commitment to shared authority aligns particularly well with the Ecomuseum paradigm. As Heritage Saskatchewan and the Museums Association of Saskatchewan (2015) explain, the "eco" in Ecomuseum refers to a system of interactions, relationships, and interdependence. In this context, MOIFA served as a central point, bringing people together to elevate the profile of living culture and local heritage, ensuring that the exhibition was well-received by both its community of origin and the intended audience without compromising any party's perspective. The Santa Fe community also played a vital role by contributing donations that supported film production, artist travel, and community-focused workshops. Their engagement highlights a collective understanding of the museum as a dynamic learning institution that benefits all. In addition, we had a valuable collaboration with a US university intern who was fully integrated into the project. She gained significant experience and enjoyed working with the library staff to plan for the eventual archiving of our work after the exhibition closes. This commitment to inclusivity was further underscored by providing multilingual labels in English, Spanish, and isiZulu, accommodating both international and local audiences. Although the museum is based in Santa Fe and the exhibition targets an international audience, the Ecomuseum framework ensures that the living heritage of telephone wire art is presented with dignity and in a setting that echoes the community from which it originated.

Building on the understanding of Ecomuseums as community museums (de Varine 2006; Heritage Saskatchewan & Museums Association of Saskatchewan 2015), MOIFA's approach extended this concept by serving both the local Santa Fe community and the South African community of origin. This demonstrates a commitment to broader needs, moving beyond the traditional museum model focused solely on its immediate context. One key advantage of community (eco)museums, as demonstrated in this exhibition, is their interactive nature. Unlike traditional educational models that rely solely on objects as carriers of knowledge from the institution or a single curator to the public, Ecomuseums function as two-way mediums. Here, the practical knowledge and experiences of community members are actively exchanged with the specialised expertise of professionals, often through collaboratively developed exhibits. This ecomuseological process fosters shared understanding and collective planning, integrating cultural dimensions into broader development efforts (de Varine 2006).

This exhibition has thus demonstrated how museum atmospherics is a dynamic system that can influence visitor well-being, learning, and restorative experiences. Considering how multisensory design can be central to creating emotional and cognitive engagement, how far can we go to improve this further within the South African context, assuming the collection would be exhibited within its country of origin? In the broader South African context, questions arise about the evolving roles of local museums: Do most still symbolise colonial repositories, or are they transforming into spaces genuinely shaped by the communities whose heritage they hold? Since the fall of apartheid in 1994, African people have gained public access to museums, and exhibitions like *Weaving Meanings* could thus serve as a valuable reference point or inspiration for similar initiatives, potentially encouraging local museums to demonstrate a similar high degree of cultural sensitivity and community integration.

Figure 10: Zone 6, Making Hard-Wire and Soft-Wire, university intern Melissa Ferguson engaging with an in-gallery radial symmetry design activity (Image by Addison Doty 2024; courtesy of MOIFA)

Exhibition outcomes, challenges, and recommendations

Although MOIFA does not systematically collect direct feedback from visitors, I recommended implementing more structured audience assessments. According to the education office, fifteen educational institutions visited the exhibition between its opening in 2024 and April 2025, with over 15,000 general visitors attending during this period. Kemely Gomez, a bilingual education officer, observed that visitors engaged physically, tactilely, and intellectually, with the hands-on basket design activity becoming a particular highlight (Gomez 2025, personal communication). These positive outcomes suggest the exhibition was successful and could inform similar efforts in South Africa.

However, several challenges and limitations arose during the exhibition's development. One of these was artist unfamiliarity and language barriers. Artists often expressed unfamiliarity with the museum environment and its role, alongside facing language barriers, which complicated their direct engagement. I played a role in explaining in depth the museum's role and theirs as active participants. Another challenge was differing artistic interpretations. Being involved in this project made me aware that most artists struggled to articulate an "intended" context for their designs, expressing that they do not typically reflect deeply on their work beyond its practical purpose. While many appreciated seeing their creations from a different perspective, some primarily viewed their work as a means of livelihood rather than as an aspect of cultural production. It became my task to expose them to the broader and multifaceted roles of their work in order to gain more context about their creations. In my view, this should be an ongoing provocation conducted with sensitivity, without intending to alter their worldviews, to enrich future exhibitions.

As a co-curator, being involved in this project was a learning curve. My personal challenge involved learning to weave in order to understand the language and process of telephone wire weaving. This hands-on experience was crucial for conceptualising and highlighting nuances I might otherwise have overlooked. The exhibition resulted in intergenerational aspirations. For instance, in one workshop, artists' children were invited to accompany their parents to learn about the open-ended nature of weaving and entrepreneurship. While encouraged to participate, the majority expressed a preference for studying and pursuing traditional employment over dedicating their lives to weaving. This reflects individualistic aspirations shaped by modern community demands, contrasting with the livelihoods of their parents and neighbours.

To build upon this project's success, a key recommendation is to encourage more structured interviews with museum staff and visitors. This intentional effort to gather feedback will help assess reception and engagement, allowing for continuous improvement and a better understanding of what is already working well. Now that the involved artists, during our informal encounters at the exhibition opening, visit, and panel discussion, have seen and experienced the museum's role in supporting their voices and encouraging their involvement in decision-making, they will hopefully gain confidence to participate in similar future collaborations.

Figure 11: Siyanda weavers accompanied by their children during the entrepreneurship workshop, having a photoshoot session with Simanga Zondo post documentary film (image by Muziwandile Gigaba 2023)

Conclusion

This exhibition underscores the transformative power of collaborative artist engagement and highlights the vital role of curators rooted in community immersion and cultural sensitivity. By

involving artists not merely as subjects but as co-creators and knowledge bearers, the exhibition enabled a dynamic and authentic expression of the cultural meanings embedded in telephone wire art. This approach reinforces the idea that curatorship extends beyond administrative or aesthetic decisions to facilitating meaningful dialogue and shared authority—an essential practice in South Africa's evolving post-apartheid museum landscape. The emphasis on intergenerational knowledge transfer, exemplified through interactive zones featuring traditional and contemporary weaving techniques, underscores the importance of preserving artistic legacies while adapting to new contexts. This dimension sustains cultural heritage and inspires younger generations to engage creatively, even as their aspirations diversify.

From an exhibition design perspective, the incorporation of tactile, participatory, and multisensory elements demonstrates how museum atmospherics can enhance visitor learning and emotional connection. Hands-on activities, material interaction, and digital augmentations demystify the craft and democratize access to cultural knowledge, making it relevant and engaging for diverse audiences. These design principles provide a replicable framework for museums seeking deeper community engagement through inclusive, sensory-rich strategies. The lessons learned offer valuable guidance for South African students and emerging curators by presenting a practical model of New Museology and Ecomuseum principles. The exhibition shows how to navigate challenges such as language barriers, artists' unfamiliarity with institutional settings, and differing artistic perspectives with empathy and flexibility. Furthermore, the balance between honouring tradition and fostering innovation provides a template for curators aiming to facilitate cultural transmission while maintaining contemporary relevance.

Key recommendations from this exhibition include tactility as a curatorial and educational tool. This exhibition demonstrates that encouraging direct physical interaction with materials empowers visitors to connect more deeply with artistic processes and meaning. Collaboration and shared authority as foundational practices is another recommendation. These foster trust, mutual respect, and richer narratives, essential for culturally sensitive exhibitions that resonate with both artist communities and audiences. Lastly, the Ecomuseum model's focus on community agency and living heritage is fundamental in conducting such collaborative initiatives. Exhibitions should embody the interconnectedness of place, people, and practice, serving as active platforms for cultural empowerment and continuity—not merely as display sites. Together, these approaches offer South African curators and students a robust framework for creating exhibitions that are culturally grounded, participatory, and adaptive—strengthening museums as dynamic spaces where heritage is preserved, lived, and shared across generations. Such practices contribute to the ongoing transformation of museums and enhance their relevance within South African society.

Looking ahead, a significant question remains: If this exhibition were to travel within South Africa, which museum could best host it, and could its unique atmosphere be faithfully recreated in a way that honours the collection's South African origins? Bringing the exhibition to the communities where the artists live would deepen cultural awareness and reinforce the collaborative spirit at its heart. The exhibition's title, *iNgqikithi yokuPhica* (Weaving Meaning) and referring to the essence or deep foundation—aptly captures its exploration of the profound significance of South African telephone wire art.

The exhibition team is also exploring ways to make the full documentary accessible internationally and to develop an educational component for South African schools. This initiative will begin as a pilot and ultimately integrate into art programs nationwide. In a broader sense, this exhibition weaves together diverse strands of meaning, collaboration, and cultural exchange, serving as a model for

future projects that aim to engage communities through inclusive, dialogical, and multidisciplinary approaches.

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