17

DEALING WITH SUSTAINABILITY

MARK SWILLING

"I have known all along that the further we move away from April 27th 1994, we'll become increasingly normal and more ordinary, shedding our well-deserved sense of specialness which we earned from our 'miraculous' transition ... I am disappointed that we do not appear to have succeeded in defining the terms of our ordinariness. Our own brand of ordinariness ought to work at a higher level."

Njabulo Ndebele, *Cape Argus*, 3 April 2003

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As we live in, move through, see, smell and hear the city all around us, we experience an extraordinary tension between its seemingly fixed 'sunk-in-concrete' structure and the incessant movement, noise, activity and flow. While it looks the same every day, it never stops moving. When we imagine our city, we think of its structure and physical place (and even beauty) but we live every day in the nooks and crannies of our homes, workplaces, means of transport and our leisure-time places. City living is always about being somewhere else, and yet in the same place all the time.

But what changes the city? How does it shift in character from being one thing to another? When do we say, 'Our city has changed'? And how do we imagine this change coming about? Are we even aware that 'the-city-as-structure' is changing? If so, do we like what is happening? Should other things be happening and, if so, who should be making these things happen? Do we think our children and grandchildren will be able to live in our city in fifty or a hundred years from now? These may seem like strange questions, but in many ways we live out these questions every moment of every day as we traverse the capillaries and interstices of the city.

Are we aware that between 1977 and 2006 the size of Cape Town (in land area) increased by 40%? Nearly half of what is now Cape Town has been built in the last 25 years. This remarkably rapid rate of urban change is reflected in names of new suburbs that every Capetonian now takes for granted as part of everyday urban life: Parklands, Sunningdale, West Beach, Blouberg Sands, Dunoon, Sunset Beach, Sunset Links, Summer Greens, Milnerton Ridge, Milnerton Racecourse, Marconi Beam, Phoenix, Joe Slovo Park, Welgedacht, Oude Westhof, Van Riebeeckshof, Kleinbosch, Plattekloof, Glenwood, Durbanvale, Vierlanden, Durmonte, Uitzicht, Goedemoed, Pinehurst, Sonstraal Heights, Langeberg Ridge, Kleinbron, Bonnie Brae, Bloekombos, Wallacedene, Vredekloof, Okavango Park, Blommendal, Fisantekraal, Protea Village, Zevenwacht, Kalkfontein, Soneike, Delft, Mfuleni, Wesbank, Wimbledon, Happy Valley, Philippi East, Khayelitsha (Harare and Southern 2/3), Nomzamo, Lwandle, Weltevreden Valley, Browns Farm, Vrygrond, Hout Bay suburbs and Imizamo Yethu, Sunnydale and Capri (Sun Valley area).

The icons of this suburban growth are not the streets or community character, or the architectural inspiration of the buildings or the green spaces between them. If we want to take visitors to see the 'streets of Cape Town' we go to the Bo-Kaap, or Sea Point or Kalk Bay. But the icons of the 'new Cape Town' are the malls and industrial areas: Century City, N1 City, Cape Gate, Somerset Mall, Longbeach Mall, the V&A Waterfront, Westgate Mall, Access Park, Khayelitsha Mall, Killarney Gardens and Montague Gardens. Yes, there are also investments in spaces for more public engagement than malls – Convenco, Newlands rugby and cricket, the V&A Waterfront, Urban Park (Cape Point to Table Mountain), Greenpoint Stadium, and revamping the central city – which together play a much bigger role in reshaping the symbolic significance of what could be called Cape Town's urbanism.

AN UNSUSTAINABLE MESS

But as things change, so much just remains the same. The city consumes 900 hectares per annum of undeveloped land (equal to 3600 soccer fields), but still 20% of the richest residential property owners occupy 41% of the residential land area. For the estate agents who market the northward-spreading suburbia along the Atlantic seaboard to white families fleeing increasingly multiracial Cape Town suburbs, the implicit message is always very clear: Democracy means that blacks will take over the city, so be prepared and move here. In reality, the black majority are confined to increasingly densifying 'townships' that have effectively become the centre of the Cape metropolitan area that now stretches from Atlantis up the West Coast to Somerset West to the southeast. Landlocked by increasingly costly industrial land, it is not townships that get pushed onto the peripheries of the metropolitan area but rather developments for the burgeoning spatially dispersed lower middle classes that generate the 20% returns on investment for developers who have burnt their fingers in both luxurious developments for the rich and mass housing for the subsidised poor. Of the 20 000 or so new residential units each year that get built in Cape Town, roughly two-thirds are for the poor (mostly subsidised) while the remaining third is for the private market (mostly 'lower' and 'middle' middle classes). But this is woefully inadequate: the housing backlog for the urban poor is nearly 300 000 units, while every estate agent knows that there is an undersupply of housing for the 'lower' and 'middle' middle classes. The upper middle class and elites are oversupplied, hence the diminishing returns on investment at these levels since at least 2005. Basil Read is putting together a development for 14 000 units near Durbanville on the N1; unsurprisingly this includes subsidised housing, 'gap housing' and lower middle class housing because this is where it is still possible to make 20% or more returns on investment.

As argued in Chapters 4 and 5, the massive and rapid urban growth of Cape Town has not been coupled to investments in the kinds of urban infrastructure, energy and transportation systems that are appropriate for a world that is running out of atmosphere, water, oil and sinks for liquid, solid and airborne wastes. To make matters worse, low-density urban sprawl has effectively required massive public investments and de facto subsidies continuously to extend the infrastructures that

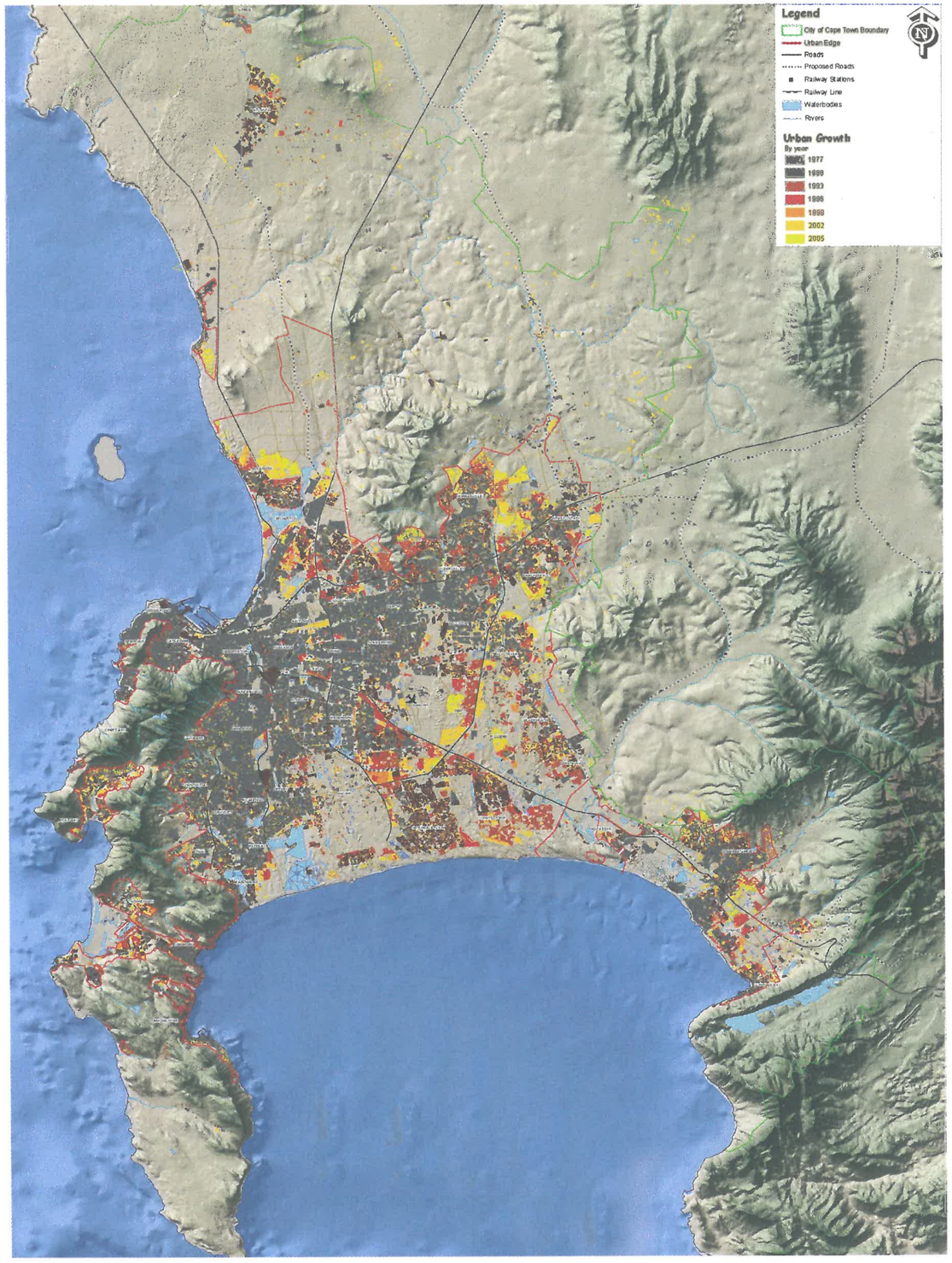
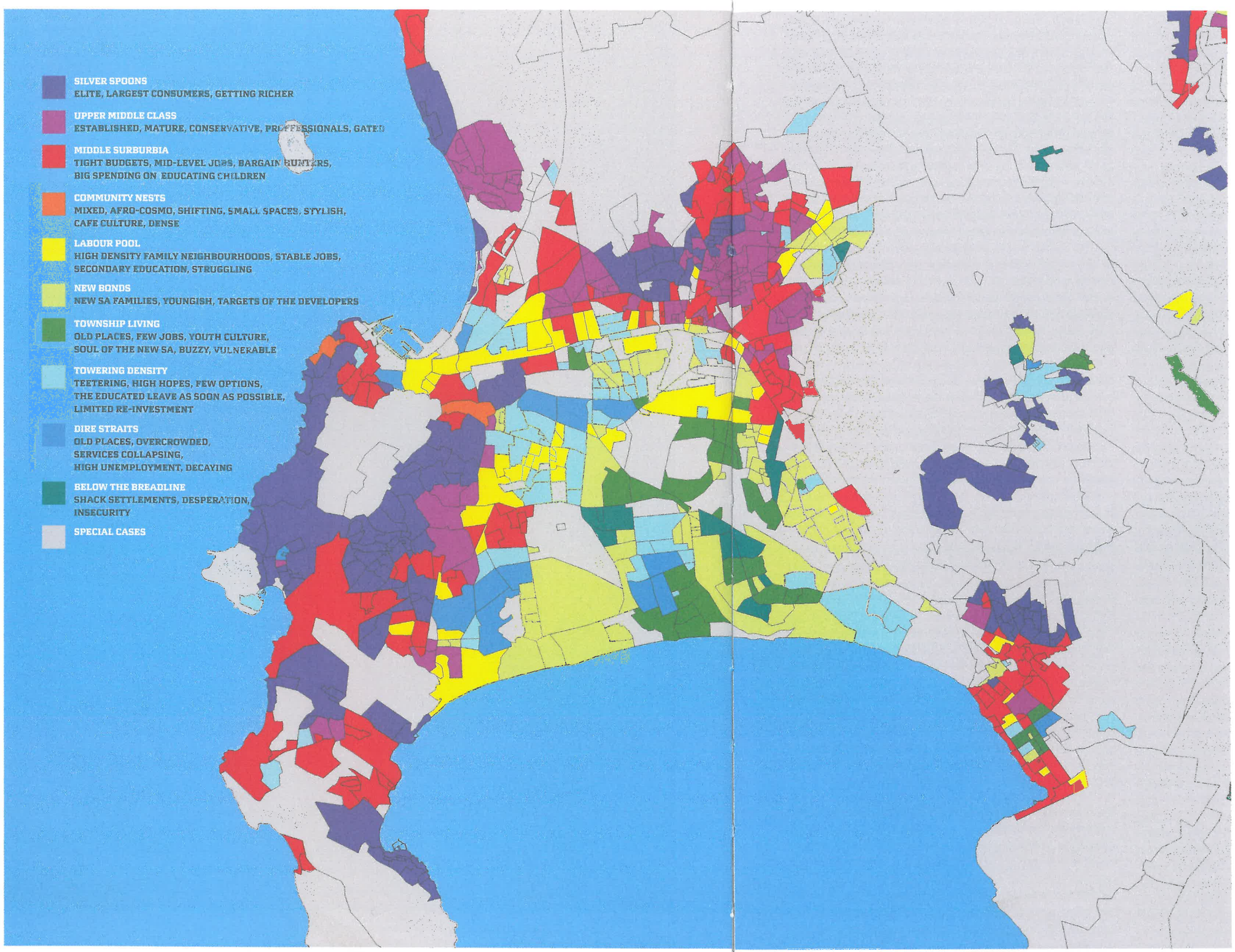


FIGURE 17.1: **CAPE TOWN'S GROWTH, 1977–2006**
SOURCE: **CAPE TOWN 2020 VISION**



carry the resources that contemporary city living and working require – roads, electric cables, sewage pipes, water pipes, telephone cables, fibre optic cables, stormwater drains and, in a few places, railway lines. These are the infrastructures that conduct the resource flows through the city with sources and sinks on either end, and the connections to these flows is what we call 'service delivery'. But who designs these infrastructures? What technical criteria are used? Are these technical criteria ever questioned through social or political processes? Or is it assumed that engineers know better, so what they propose must be the best option? Maybe it is time to question whether the 900 hectares per annum that gets sliced and diced by these infrastructures is the best use of our resources. Maybe there are other ways of managing the flows of sewage, water, electrons, stormwater and data through our urban system that are cheaper, less resource-intensive, more environmentally friendly and easier to operate. Where is the public debate about these technical criteria? How many researchers investigate the claims made about how best to design and construct infrastructures that lock us into particular modes of movement, electricity consumption, waste disposal and leisure?

So the most obvious questions that any reasonable person can ask is: Who is to blame for this mess? Why did 'they' let this happen? How come this was 'allowed' to happen? Why was no one watching?

EMERGENCE

What is interesting about these questions is not that we hear them every day, but rather that they assume that the city is a structure that

FIGURE 17.2:
RESIDENTIAL CLASS STRUCTURE OF CAPE TOWN AND SPATIAL DEVELOPMENT PATTERNS, 1977–2006
SOURCE: **KNOWLEDGE FACTORY (PTY) LTD**

is 'planned' and that somehow there is an omniscient group somewhere that makes all 'the decisions', either fully aware and conscious or not of the long-term implications. The same people who ask these questions would immediately deny the possibility of such a phenomenon. But in this denial lies an admission that these questions are not, in fact, real questions at all. They simply reflect a failure to understand what is really going on, and how the city actually works.

An alternative way of thinking about urban development is that it is not a derivative of a grand plan or the result of specific 'big decisions' but the outcome of a large number of smaller decisions that get taken every day by officials, politicians, developers, consultants, planners, architects, bankers, citizens, estate agents, house buyers, marketing agencies, major providers of electricity and water, sewage and solid waste engineers, ratepayer associations and protest groups as they engage one another over a wide range of partially understood issues that have more to do with short-term interests and beliefs than long-term outcomes or strategic visions of the future (whether positive or negative, depending on who you are). What if we are all unwittingly locked into path-dependent developmental trajectories that implicate us in outcomes that are not in our interests and that we generally dislike? This image from The matrix may be going much too far, but it does conjure up a very different understanding of how we get into our messes from that of asking questions in search of an ultimate cause of it all. To this extent, the line of thought here helps create the intellectual basis for a more shared responsibility for the past and therefore the future. Let's dig deeper into a few examples to imagine how it all works in practice.

ENTER: THE DEVELOPER

Probably the most significant driver of urban development patterns in Cape Town over the past 25 years has been the speculative role of the private developer. The classic mode is easy to follow. The developer buys up cheap land and then retains the services of a consulting company (normally a well-established consortium of urban planners, architects and engineers, who have usually worked together for years) to develop a plan for the site and secure all the necessary development rights (quite often on risk if the developer is a regular client). This can take anything from two to six years, especially if scoping reports and environment impact assessments are needed to rezone the land in highly contested areas. Apart from the capacity for taking on substantial financial risk, the role of the developer is limited to specifying the financial return required from the sale of the assets that get created.

The real storytellers are the urban planners and urban designers, who have to invent the story for a greenfield or brownfield site (one that never has been built on before, or one that has) taking into account the nature of the locality (inner or outer city, coastal or inland, high or low density, richer or poorer), any strategic plans for the area that may exist, local cultural and developmental dynamics, geophysical characteristics and, most importantly of all, so-called 'market dynamics' normally as articulated by key market agents such as estate agents, consumer marketing companies, market survey companies, local business interests or ratepayer associations. Once the story is constructed, the developer is responsible for putting together a package of working capital (often short-term costly debt for the duration of the construction period that gets spent on physical construction), long-term low-cost debt (normally for bonds), and equity (structured in various complex ways for medium- to long-term returns). The developer packages the funds by 'selling' the story developed by the planners and designers to the funders. Once built and sold, the developer moves on, exiting the story, which then gets taken over by the operational interactions of municipal officials, home owners, estate agents, retail investors and operators, and – in the case of cluster developments like Century City – by private management entities that secure the boundaries and create a managerial class that has a vested interest in protecting the story.

FINANCIERS OF THE DEVELOPERS

The rise of the large-scale private developer to a position of key driver of urban development is due to the fact that these economic agents have considerable resources to finance the long-term process of story development, rights acquisition, construction, marketing and selling. This, however, would not have been possible without the consolidation of the banking sector into large centralised institutions with an interest in disbursing large amounts to as few operators as possible for the maximum interest rate at the lowest possible administrative cost and risk. But bankers did not passively make mechanical decisions in response to developers; they were heavily involved in discussions, workshops and written texts that captured their own normative assumptions about the kind of city they wanted to see develop.

Their strategic calculus at work is, of course, the financial value of their portfolio of assets and the locational dynamics of these assets. Investec, Old Mutual, Nedbank, ABSA and the other owners and funders of major regional malls like Cavendish Square, for example, are unlikely to be a particular sympathetic audience for anyone wanting to build a low-cost housing project in the next-door property. As the project manager of a socially mixed development, this writer was frequently called by bank managers who were required to approve bonds by prospective buyers, and the key question often went like this: 'But aren't there also people with housing subsidies living there?' (read 'black people' if the applicant was white, or 'Why isn't everyone a bond holder?' if the applicant was black). This mix of class and racial stereotypes by key decisionmakers was embedded within the financial flows that were released by bankers for use by developers to make the urban landscape we now live in.

The rise of the developer and the banker as the key drivers of urban development (reflected most clearly in the work of the South African Property Owners Association over the past 25 years, as an organised network that built the discursive consensus) has resulted in the decline of the architectural profession and local government officials and politicians as the key visionaries and storytellers of city futures. It has been argued that architects have given up their autonomous artistic and moral duty to imagine cities for qualitative living in order to become the hired guns of the developers and bankers. This act of professional intellectual suicide has given the bankers and developers access to the storytelling capacity that they lacked. After all, every banker knows that besides a good financial plan the next most important ingredient for a bankable property development is who the architect is. This is simply code for a vast discursive transformation (involving and implicating the architectural schools) that has tamed the architect, making it clear that professional advancement into the ranks of the select few deemed 'good architects' means knowing what makes 'good commercial sense' (read: a design that a banker will regard as bankable).

This author has tried many times to sell a socially mixed ecologically designed high-density development idea for the Old Cement Factory site in Philippi; the standard response from both developers and bankers is 'Interesting, but this has never been done before.' This sentence is enough to sink the project because what is really being said is that the project is too risky. If it has been done before, it can be benchmarked and the risk assessed. And this is how new urban forms, practices and approaches are repressed, and why the architect has to be tamed. The solution, of course, is for public sector funders like the Public Investment Corporation, the Development Bank of Southern Africa and the Industrial Development Corporation to lead the way, freeing up architects and urban designers to imagine more creative alternatives.

EXIT: PUBLIC LEADERSHIP

Taming local governments to become compliant approvers of developer-driven property developments has been more complex but the outcome is similar. Because South Africa became a democracy during the heyday of global neoliberalism, local governments that wanted to shape the trajectories of urban development directly by interventionist methods were always on the defensive. When they were hit by a barrage of claims about the virtues of the market punted by the property development industry, the media, financial institutions and national government, local government officials and politicians who subscribed to a purposive progressive vision all found themselves undermined and wearied by endless engagements. The enormous energy-sapping complexities of the local government planning and procurement system (especially the Municipal Finance Management Act) contributed to a sense of bewildering defeatism. After all, isn't it so much easier just to respond to development applications rather than put in the extra energy to design positive futures and, most difficult of all, get them adopted as spatial development frameworks and neighbourhood development plans? Add to this the much-loved tactic of professional consultants of cynically and subtly belittling the assumptions of what were perceived to be inexperienced and idealistic officials and politicians, and the end result is a gradual set of compromises that accommodated rather than contested the logic of the market as represented by the developers and bankers.

It would, however, be a serious mistake to assume that the scenario painted above explains the way all urban development in Cape Town has worked over the past 25 years. It may be true when it comes to explaining Century City (although this was a commercial failure at first) or the suburbanisation of the Atlantic seaboard, but it is simplistic when it comes to explaining the role of the Cape Town Partnership and revamping of the central city, or the development of the V&A Waterfront, which was the brainchild of David Jack who was employed by the City of Cape Town before resigning to head up a highly effective public-private partnership that created what is now Cape Town's most significant public space.

This V&A Waterfront development is an example of what many senior politicians and officials have considered over the years, but never pulled off – namely a role for the state as strategic planner, urban imaginer, and acquirer of development rights which, once secured, are set in place as the framework within which developers are invited to act, but now not as the imaginers; they are merely the implementers of a predetermined vision. This, since the 2009 elections, is what the Democratic Alliance-led Western Cape provincial government together with the Democratic Alliance-led City of Cape Town and Cape Town Partnership is intending to put in place as an alternative to the traditional developer-driven approach. The motive is clear: to remove the high levels of uncertainty and risk in the developer-driven approach that has tended to scare off investment in Cape Town in recent years.

There is, of course, a more community-based progressive alternative to both developer-driven and state-led urban development strategy. There are a number of low-income subsidised housing developments in Cape Town that started off as land invasions led by organised residents who eventually formed alliances with groups of officials employed by national, provincial and local government who were able in various ways to support the bottom-up energies of the community groups. Occasionally, key politicians have intervened to facilitate these pacts. These community–officialdom partnerships, which are often informally built up by professionals employed by NGOs, can be hugely effective in creating an alternative form of urbanism that is more consistent with the values of the constitution and the goals of every integrated development plan since 1994.

NEW STORYMAKERS

The Cape Town Partnership (CTP) is a Section 21 company (in essence, an NGO) that was constituted by the property development sector a decade ago to look after Cape Town's central city. Funded by contributions from building owners and an annual grant from the City of Cape Town (CCT), the CTP has acted as an effective development facilitator for the central city. Given that it was constituted by the property development sector, it is not surprising that one of the primary aims of the CTP was to reconcile returns on investment in central city properties with a wider set of developmental objectives with citywide significance, including job creation, residential accommodation, access to transport, tourism, public safety, cultural development and the creation of a distinct inner-city urbanism (or lifestyle). Besides facilitation and policy lobbying, the CTP set up City Improvement Districts (CIDs), which are block-level structures funded by an additional levy collected by the municipality as part of the rates on the properties. This extra levy is handed to the CTP for use by the CIDs. The CIDs coordinate various measures at block level to control traffic, security, street trading, cleansing and infrastructure maintenance and repair.

Many stakeholders give credit to the CTP for facilitating the turnaround of the city centre into a place that attracts rather than sheds investments into an area that is reasonably safe, sociable, diverse and accessible. It has been estimated that R30 billion worth of investments are planned for the central city over the five years starting in 2008. Led by Andrew Boraine, who has a history in the anti-apartheid movement and was the first post-apartheid city manager of Cape Town before serving as a senior official in national government, the CTP managed to build and promote a compelling and reasonably progressive inclusionary story about the central city that was more than just a convenient construction to legitimate and sell short-term investment opportunities. Ideas and strategies were researched, debated by stakeholders, discussed with CCT officials and politicians, and then used as the basis for building durable long-term engagements and partnerships. By building institutional capacity for managing this process over a prolonged period of time, the CTP has attempted to consolidate a durable developmental discourse for the central city that has become the shared point of reference for a significant cross-section of investors, developers, urban designers, architects, property owners, citizens, CCT and provincial and national government departments. There are, however, some major problems.

The most serious challenge for the central city is that the Department of Public Works (national and provincial) and state-owned enterprises like Transnet, Metrorail and Eskom have worked independently, often ignoring requests to engage strategically in a developmental process with other stakeholders. The properties within the city centre owned by Transnet and the Department of Public Works (provincial and national) hold the key to a really successful integrated strategic approach to future development there. For example, the MEC for Public Works, Robin Carlisle, has estimated that the properties owned by Public Works alone in the city centre could be worth R45 billion. Eskom supplies one-third of Cape Town with electricity, but refuses to even provide data about these services, never mind participate in strategic development thinking.

There is a clear line of sight between the weekly walking tour of the central city that Andrew Boraine leads and the R30 billion or so that may well be invested there. It is highly unlikely that the normal operations of the property market would have generated this result. The property development sector understands this; it is the idealistic economists who don't.

Besides the CTP as a new actor in the property development sector, there are also a number of increasingly effective NGOs with links to organised communities that are facilitating an alternative discourse to the developer-driven approach. Scattered across Cape Town are examples of low-income housing developments that originated in self-organised action by communities themselves, often working with officials in government (who either do so in a collaborative spirit or reluctantly under pressure). Many have been facilitated by social movements such as the Federation of the Urban Poor (Fedup, previously known as the South African Homeless People's Federation), or by NGOs such as the Development Action Group. A typical trajectory commences when a community either occupies land (such as the Victoria Mxenge development near Philippi), or the land it has occupied is targeted for development on the assumption that the community will get relocated elsewhere (as in the Joe Slovo settlement today). Usually with the support of professionals employed by an NGO funded by grant funds from various local and international sources, the affected residents – quite often, but not always, organised into what could be called a 'community' – resist threats to their continued occupation of the land and then offer alternatives as to how it can be developed in line with their own interests.

Although the outcome depends heavily on media exposure, political connections, leadership abilities and the nature of broader alliances, inevitably along the way there are protracted sets of meetings between local government officials, community leaders, the support NGO and, on occasion, lawyers representing different parties. Punctuated by breakdowns, protests, petitions, alliance building and sheer inefficiency in getting things done, these processes require a level of leadership capacity within the communities that rarely exists. There is virtually no investment by any major stakeholder in the development of this capacity, yet every single development that attracts a government subsidy must by law 'involve the community'. Indeed, even government agencies such as the National Development Agency (NDA) that fund development have no strategy to support community-based organisations (CBOs) – and these government bodies should be the key facilitators of participation. Only blue chip NGOs have the capacity in the first place to take delivery of funds from the NDA, thus reinforcing disempowerment of CBOs. Further, unlike many parts of the developing world where regulatory regimes governing land use and occupation are far more relaxed or more dysfunctional than in South Africa, the South African system is extraordinarily complex and slow and thus easily abused by officials and politicians who want to obfuscate what is really possible and wage successful wars of attrition. Where there has been success, it has depended on three factors: a reasonably consistent and capable community leadership, ongoing professional support, and an official or group of officials or a politician who is prepared to champion the project and see it through all the way to the end.

The Witsand development up the West Coast is a remarkable example of a low-income housing development that was made possible by housing subsidies facilitated via the CCT. Due to effective, albeit protracted, collaborative arrangements between a well-organised community that benefited from significant investments in leadership capacity, committed officials and a key politician that championed the project (a city councillor), a very interesting development was possible that included some important sustainability innovations funded from within the available subsidy (North-South orientation, insulation, roof overhangs, solar hot-water heaters).

CONCLUSION

Cape Town is going through an extraordinarily rapid urban growth and transformation process. This is not driven from the centre, but is emerging from a vast array of deals as all sorts of interests and stakeholders engage each other through conflict, negotiation or collaborative action. Although frequent party-political changeovers have made it impossible to formulate and adopt a clear long-term strategic framework for the city, this has not prevented developers and communities securing approvals for projects that have made things happen. Not all that happened as a result contributed to greater equity, less poverty and more sustainable resource use, but it did unleash enormous developmental energy across the city. Since 2005, however, there has been a process within the CCT of slowly consolidating a long-term vision at metropolitan level that is then broken down into district-level plans. This is surely a positive development because otherwise it will be impossible to constrain the developers who will continue to pursue sprawl on the peripheries and low-density developments, thus placing the entire urban system at severe risk. How a shared metropolitan development strategy empowers homeless and landless communities remains to be seen. But the lessons are clear: unless these communities take matters into their own hands and restructure property values via organised land invasions, it is unlikely that significant tracts of well-located urban land will become available for use by the urban poor at affordable levels. This also makes it easier for progressive officials and politicians to find a gap for pro-poor interventions that really start to reverse the legacy of apartheid. Maybe the time has come to take up Ndebele's challenge to take our own brand of ordinariness to a higher level.

ENDNOTES

[1] Sarah Calburn, South African architecture has hit a brick wall, *Mail & Guardian*, 5–11 July 2009.

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