Accelerating the reshaping of South Africa's apartheid cities for greater economic efficiency, environmental sustainability and social cohesion

Concept note – written in the context of Cape Town
but applicable to other South African Cities

May 2011

Synopsis

Most people would agree with the objectives of a more economically efficient, a more ecologically sustainable and a more liveable and socially cohesive city. Various initiatives seek to achieve these goals, but mostly in piecemeal ways. City shape and form plays a major role in all of these three areas. However, the pace of transformation of the shape of the city is very slow. Accelerating the creation of a few high-density multi-use and public transit orientated activity nodes and spines would play a major role in improving outcomes in all three areas. These nodes and spines should have mixed multi-story housing opportunities, include rental stock for lower-middle income households (a key gap in the household market), be linked with good public transit and be mixed-use in character (residential and economic activity together). Attention will need to be paid to land-release (consolidation of land is a time consuming process) and creating the appropriate incentives for private developers (both positive such a tax breaks in certain areas and negative, penalising greenfield development). What may be needed is a lead agency with a mandate to accelerate the creation of these spines in identified priority areas. What is also needed is strong regional planning at the metro scale, with integration of transport and housing. Strong and visionary leadership is required (not only in visualisation, but also in implementation), together with strong cooperation between the City, the Province and National Government.

Premise

1. The social, economic and political benefits of creating a more efficient and socially integrated city are overwhelming and compelling.

   - Substantially lower infrastructure costs (roads and other transport infrastructure, water, wastewater, electricity, telecommunications, community and public facilities and amenities)

   - Much more cost-effective and efficient public transport (higher use intensity)

   - More liveable and safer urban environment and public spaces

   - Increased economic activity, reduced trip times

   - Increased social integration

   - Lower ecological footprint and lower environmental costs (energy, agricultural land, carbon, water)

   - Other intangible benefits of a more connected, networked city resulting from a higher density and diversity of connections

Problem statement

2. The shape of our cities still reflect to a very large extent the spatial, racial and class fault-lines created by apartheid policies, with low-income residential

largely situated on the periphery of cities, middle and upper-income urban sprawl, low overall densities and inefficient and costly public transport.

3. This city shape results in continuing social exclusion and is inefficient – financially, economically and environmentally.

4. Existing use of available mass transport infrastructure is highly inefficient. IN Cape Town, for example, there are far too few people living within close proximity to the southern, northern suburbs and Cape Flats major transit axes to make the existing installed public transport capacity effective, efficient and financially viable. For instance, a double heavy rail passenger service can accommodate 60 000 trips per hour. Single and bi-articulated bus systems in dedicated lanes can accommodate 20 000 trips per hour. If one takes the southern suburbs rail line and ran a bi-articulated bus system along Main Road there is a theoretical capacity of 80 000 trips per hour. Curitiba has densities of up to 400 dwelling units per hectare (20 stories) of middle and upmarket housing abutting its transport spines accommodating bi-articulated bus services at only 20 000 people per hour. In the southern suburbs the heavy rail system is only providing about 15 000 trips per hour and the linear transport services - mini-buses and Golden Arrow, not very much more because they are not in proper dedicated lanes although there is an effort with a bus priority lane in Lower Main Road. Densities along the southern suburbs corridor range from only 7 to 20 dwelling units per hectare so there is potential to significantly increase densities along these transit axes.

5. Unless current development patterns are significantly changed, the negative impacts will become worse over time as fuel costs rise, carbon taxes or caps are introduced and social pressures arising from exclusion increase.

6. The overall pace of change is too slow. Current policy instruments and initiatives are doing too little to promote the necessary shifts in practice at the pace and scale necessary to achieve the desired outcomes. There is a limited vision and sense of what could be possible.

7. There exists a combination of political, financial and bureaucratic interests that favour the status quo and resist change.

   • Ratepayers (and ratepayer representatives) fear being disadvantaged by developments that increase densities or, alternatively, resist social change.

   • Property developers favour green-field developments, often at the periphery of the city, perpetuating the current spatial patterns – land release and approvals are both simpler and faster (compared to higher density redevelopment), and are therefore more appealing and profitable for developers.

   • At an administrative level, development application approval processes are slow, applications for developments that increase densities are often turned down, even within areas identified for increased densities, for reasons attributed to parking concerns, infrastructure constraints, loss of heritage value etc.

   • At a political level, although the draft Spatial Development Framework clearly identifies the development of high-activity spines and nodes associated with public transit routes as a desirable goal, the draft densification policy that would support this outcome has been held back,

and the urban edge policy is tenuous, apparently reflecting a political expression of the above sets of interests.

- At the level of practice, capital intensive and conservative delivery methods favour the status quo and exclude the self-build multi-storey approaches seen in South America, Asia and other African countries such as Kenya. Prevailing interests in the construction, financial and public sectors prefer to retain control over processes resulting in constrained solutions that fail to realise their full potential by harnessing all possible resources.

8. Resistance to the creation of a more efficient and socially integrated city are often based on misperceptions and misconceptions.

    a. A more efficient and socially integrated city will result in a more liveable city that benefits all residents.

    b. Property owners (who are also ratepayers) will benefit from a more efficient and socially integrated city through rising property prices.

    c. Both ratepayers and property owners will benefit from a more efficient city through reduced infrastructure costs and hence rates.

    d. A more efficient city will reduce transport costs, hence increasing the welfare of city residents.

    e. While current development patterns are perceived to benefit the middle classes and the wealthy, this is true only if a very short-term perspective is adopted. The medium and long-term trajectory of current development patterns will result in higher costs, lower quality urban living and likelihood of increasing conflict through social protest. This will be to the disadvantage of all, including the middle classes and the wealthy. Wealthy residents are mobile and will leave.

9. It is possible that the draft densification policy developed by the City of Cape Town proceeded from the wrong premise, setting the goal as higher densities rather than a more efficient, socially inclusive and liveable city. (Higher densities will contribute in an important way to this, but they are a means to an end, not an end in itself.)

Desired outcomes

10. The desired outcomes are:

- Significantly improved functioning and effectiveness of the urban economy, creating enabling conditions for job creation and higher economic growth. (Job creation has to be the number one priority.)

- Substantially reduced carbon and ecological footprint of urban areas and improved environmental outcomes.

- Greater social cohesion. Most people desire social cohesion – who prefers conflict over peace? However, social inclusion (a necessary condition for social cohesion) is perceived to be an anathema to many. The recent events in Kommetjie, Imizamo Yethu and Hangberg are perceived by many to be the inevitable outcome of greater social inclusion. However, this is a misperception. These events arise as a result of exclusion (not inclusion), a failure of urban design (or at least its implementation) to knit together the social fabric for the benefit of all.

Key objectives

11. The following two objectives will contribute significantly to the achievement of the above desired outcomes:

    - ***Significantly accelerate* the development of high-density multi-use activity nodes and spines** in South African, linked to efficient mass public transit along these spines.

    - **Create a much larger pool of multi-story high-density rental stock**, particularly for the "housing gap" experienced by lower-end of middle-income households (teachers, nurses etc), linked into a much greater mixing of income levels and mixed land-use, along these activity spines.

The long terms consequences are not changing are dire

12. The adverse effects of current development patterns will get significantly worse over time as the population grows, urban sprawl continues, fuel prices increase, carbon is taxed and we encounter other resource constraints.

Creating a tipping point

13. The key question is as follows: what will it take to create a tipping point in the trajectory of development in South Africa's Cities?

14. There is a need to build a political consensus around a much stronger vision for the development of a more economically efficient (job creating), environmentally sustainable and liveable (socially cohesive) city; together with a practical means to get there.

15. A key means of achieve this is through the two key objectives defined above: rapid acceleration of high-density mixed-use activity nodes and spines, together with plugging an important housing gap – rental stock.

16. At present there appears to be a lack of a strong enough vision around which consensus can be built. This is the first necessary step.

17. The arguments to support the vision are compelling. However, the biggest obstacle to creating a tipping point is fear from the middle classes and a lack of confidence that development control can be managed consistently and with some predictability. The existing paradigm appears to be more about development control (anti-development) than an appreciation of the benefits of development (more jobs, higher property values etc.).

18. What will it take to create this political consensus?

19. Strong political leadership is necessary to champion the vision. Important constituencies – ratepayers, officials and property developers – will need to buy in to the vision, or at least not sabotage the vision.

20. Momentum needs to be built around the implementation of the vision. This will require a focussed initiative, with a champion and a high level of political support (see above). Important elements could include:

    - A lead agency (this initiative will need a strong champion, with an institutional base)

    - Effective communication (the importance of effective communication cannot be over estimated)

- Integration of housing, economic development and transport planning

  "The built environment professions have long spoken of the need for integrated planning, with limited success in achieving it. When a city plans to encourage higher density development around public transport stations, while the city's transport planners insist on a minimum number of parking bays for developments in the same area, we don't have integrated planning." (R. Williams, Innovation – changing the tools of the trade", in SAICE Journal, September 2010)

- Hard urban edge maintained

- Increase development rights for identified nodes and along high-activity spines through overlay zones and local area density plans.

- Create an initiative that focuses on land-release for redevelopment (consolidation of erven).

- Create financial incentives for developers in designated areas (identified priority activity nodes and spines)

- Create financial disincentives for greenfield development (through, for example, increased developer contributions)

  "Planners can't force private sector investment to go where it doesn't want to go, as ably demonstrated by the lack of growth in some of the nodes identified in the spatial development framework. We need to identify trends that can be amplified or downplayed, depending on how well they support policy objectives and a healthy society." (R. Williams, "Transport system must be driven by trends", Cape Times, 1 November 2009.)

- Develop appropriate financing models for rental stock in mixed income developments. This may need to be part of a national conversation.

- The demonstration effect through early implementation of successful projects and investments.

- Unblock existing constraints

- Incorporation of the principles of walking distance, socio-economic gradient and preservation of suburbia in appropriate places. Walking distance should be the primary ordering spatial principle in the city. This layer seems to be missing in the City's latest SDF at both the metropolitan and sub-district scales. The pattern of integration within the urban villages centred around the nodes should be arranged according to a socio-economic gradient in which there is not too great a jump in levels of living between different communities. The principles of 1) Walking distance, 2) Socio-economic gradient and 3) Functional Integration in which 50% of jobs, shipping, social and recreational opportunities are within walking distance, can become the basis for organizing the range of mixed use housing opportunities proposed along the spines.

- The Development Agency should be capable of mobilising "the city of 1000 developers" with projects at all scales (i.e. from 2 to 1000 units on a small plot of 75sq m to many hectares) and across all income groups (from Breaking New Ground Peoples Housing Process projects of 1 or 2 units through to large mixed use, mixed income projects of several 1000

units) within a wide range of delivery processes (owner builder, private contractor, PPP).