

Reflections on an inner-city dilemma

MICHAEL BLEBY wonders whether a top-down approach will meet Jozi's needs

JOBURG is changing. The city is getting smart red bus stations, road lanes are being set aside for buses and traffic-light cycles are being changed. With the scheduled start next month of the Rea Vaya bus rapid transit (BRT) service, Johannesburg will unveil its latest weapon in the war to bring order to Gotham City, as the city is some times called.

Authorities have employed a range of measures since 1994 — with only limited success — in a bid to arrest and reverse the decline that set in after the apartheid administration threw up its hands and left the city open to the forces of taxis, street traders, immigration and crime that filled the space vacated by organised business. Rea Vaya is the first attempt to link the city's disparate areas — areas previously deliberately separated.

"It's about taking back control. The BRT is part of the process of taking back the city and managing it," says Ludwig Hansen, an architect involved in urban design since 1994. "The BRT is a very positive thing. It connects portions of the city. "It enables a lot of people access to opportunities, be it work or entertainment or education. This whole system starts becoming more integrated."

The city needs something (apart from Batman, who regularly cleans up his own Gotham City). Seen variously as a crime-ridden heart of darkness, a no-go zone and netherworld of hijacked buildings separated by taxi routes, Johannesburg is now also an artistic centre and trendy playground for a hip 'n wealthy, post-apartheid, designer-dressed middle class. Much of the bad has been cleared up, but the roll-out of Rea Vaya raises the question as to whether city authorities have a handle on just what the city is and how to make the most of it.

While the face of this brash mining town has constantly changed since its creation in 1886, efforts over the past 15 years have focused on what to make of a post-Second World War city centre that plays a vastly different role from that for which it was constructed. The forest of buildings seen by drivers speeding along the elevated M2 and M1 highways was an apartheid-era city centre to which middle-class whites would drive in the morning and drive home from at the end of the day.

It was an office-based, daytime, population. With the flight of organised business in the 1980s and early 1990s and official neglect — legal controls of street trading were repealed by the national government in 1991 in a perverse act of resignation — the area was taken over by informal users, particularly taxis and street traders. The city became a destination for immigrants from across the country and the continent. A tour of inner-city streets today shows their precise, if informal, division into Mozambican, Zimbabwean, Nigerian and Ethiopian zones of commerce.

While post-1994 inner-city rejuvenation efforts and spending by key tenants such as banks and mining houses has restored some of the formal "big business" feel, the rest of Johannesburg defies that description.

The inner city has become a sea of informal, small-scale social and economic networks. People live, work, play and educate their kids in an environment primarily designed for office work. This puts great strain on the infrastructure and the people trying to manage it.

“Almost 1-million people occupy the inner-city space daily. It is not designed to accommodate these people and the influx,” says Nathi Mthethwa, Johannesburg’s regional director for the inner city.

In the open on Plein Street, Jerry Hlatsi and other mechanics fix taxis at the Jack Mincer rank across the road. Their biggest problem, according to Hlatsi, is the Metro Police. “They arrest us.”

THE city is stuck between its traditional western foundation and a growing African informality. The failure to resolve this conflict leaves room for abuse and inconsistency. The same Metro cops who prosecute Hlatsi and his mainly Mozambican counterparts in working hours are some of their biggest customers out of hours, says Ismail Farouk, an artist and urban geographer who works in the city. This is the heart of the dilemma facing city policy makers, says Wits University architecture lecturer Hilton Judin.

“There’s this very interesting network in the inner city that has come about by default. It’s not a world-class African city — it’s an African city. That’s what the city should recognise and support.”

How, then, do you develop a city that is the bastard progeny of western father and African mother? Joburg has been through many different attempts to formalise the informal since 1994.

“The strategy in the late 1990s was to recognise the role informal trading played,” says Graeme Read, who started with the council in 1996 and worked as inner-city manager and head of the Johannesburg Development Agency from 2001 until mid-2005.

“We mapped where informal trading was happening — and it was clearly following footpaths of commuters. We aimed to formalise it around taxi ranks,” says Read, now an executive director with consulting firm Kagiso Urban Management.

The first attempt, the 1998-99 attempt to formalise street traders in a newly built Yeoville market in Rocky Street, was not a success. It took the traders away from the foot traffic and a lot of people lost their livelihoods, says Hansen, who designed the market.

A more successful city intervention came with the Metro Mall at the corner of Bree and Jeppe streets, which provided facilities for both taxis and traders. As many as 200000 people pass through it a day, says Hansen, who designed that as well. “The traders and taxis didn’t have a home. We’ve given them an amenity on par with the old train stations. The Metro Mall looks like a station, but in terms of the city fabric, it’s the new station.”

At about the same time the city embarked on a formal R8m refurbishment of Jack Mincer. “There was a rapid decline in levels of petty crime and taxi violence. Associations weren’t competing over space and it resulted in a 45-minute reduction in travel time for commuters,” says Read.

In the changing scheme of city development, however, the tactics need to change as behaviour and use of the city changes.

With the implementation of Rea Vaya and less reliance on taxis in the inner city, such large taxi stations will not be needed, according to Hansen.

“The BRT is, to a certain extent, going to supplant these huge stations. The Metro Mall is already dated. I just think policy has shifted its focus elsewhere.”

But what will come next? Lael Bethlehem, Read’s successor as the agency’s CEO, says Joburg’s mid-1990s crisis came about because inner-city property owners stopped investing in their property. “Where the public environment is allowed to degrade, don’t expect the private environment to flourish,” says Bethlehem. “We undertake catalytic projects in the belief they will catalyse private investment.” And they do. A study prepared for the agency in February says public investment in the Newtown area totalling R188,7m between 2001 and 2008 drew private-sector investment over the same period worth R2,7bn.

It also shows that the agency investment worth R55,7m in Braamfontein over the same period resulted in almost R4bn in private investment.

REA Vaya, which the agency is constructing, will be a similar catalyst, Bethlehem says. “The property prices around these stations are likely to become valuable. We’re getting a lot of calls from developers asking where the stations are going to be situated.”

Yet critics say the city’s focus is off the mark. There is a preference to equate development with construction, rather than adapting facilities to the people already there, they say.

“Lael and them are passing the buck. They don’t have a very good idea what they’re looking at,” says Hannah le Roux, another Wits architecture lecturer. “If you want to do development well, you’ve got to realise it’s got a social life as well as a physical life. You can’t fix one and not the other.”

LE ROUX says the city focuses on the type of developments that suit the banks and mining companies.

“They tend to see the city through the eyes of those big tenancies and not the eyes of the people,” she says.

Keith Busani Khumalo is part of the wider social life Le Roux describes. The 28-year-old Zimbabwean has been a trolley pusher outside Jack Mincer taxi rank for four years. He charges R20 to carry a bag to the long-distance Park City taxi rank. He makes R2000- R3000 a month.

Khumalo is one of more than 100 trolley-pushers who ply their trade in the Joubert Park area. They operate in groups of between two and 20, and base themselves on defined corners. While informal, they operate with rules.

“When you come to a corner, you must call all the guys who are working there,” says Khumalo. “The guys have a meeting. If they agree, you will be installed and you must pay a certain amount to the guys on that corner.”

The fee is about R200, payable over several weeks. Groups chase away nonmembers who try to work a corner out of fear they will be undercut, or that the person will steal a customer’s luggage and disappear, leaving them to carry the blame.

Farouk, who has organised the trolley pushers into offering inner-city walking tours, echoes the criticism that city management does not take the informal life of the city into account.

“Our budgets are being prioritised by physical redevelopment and there is not any money beyond that. It’s a very narrow view.

“We’re not dealing with the crises we’re experiencing down town — homelessness, substance abuse, children not at school. These need to be prioritised.” Mthethwa, however, is unrepentant about the city’s focus.

“Our point of departure is that we need to sustain the current trends in terms of business and community confidence in the inner city,” he says. “There is this growing confidence in the inner city. The infrastructure is there. That’s what the Absas of this world are expecting.”

The city might be maintaining that confidence, but it is not meeting the needs of all its users. In particular, the provision of schools, crèches and other supporting services for the growing city-centre population is severely lacking.

Managing this “soft” city infrastructure is a problem, Bethlehem concedes. The private sector is filling in partly where the public does not. First National Bank opened a crèche for its staff in its Diagonal Street campus in June last year that holds 70 children between four months and six years in age.

THE Affordable Housing Company, a private developer that builds and lets inner-city housing units for between R1600 and R3300 a month, opened its own school in Mooi Street last year. It has 220 pupils between grades R and 7, paying about R300 a month.

But outside the corporate embrace, crèches are rare. Because space is in short supply and bylaws governing crèches are strict, illegal and unregulated ones have sprung up in buildings to meet the needs of the inner city’s working parents. Children are being taught in schools — often registered with the provincial education department — on premises without sufficient electricity or toilets.

“It’s a very delicate balance in terms of how far you go,” says Mthethwa. “What constitutes a modern African city? It cannot mean exposing people to danger.” The debate will continue and the problems will grow. A mayoral initiative launched two years ago aims to build between 50000 and 75000 new housing units in the inner city by 2014.

With the global economic crisis, even more people will head to Joburg to eke out a living. Will schools and other facilities keep pace with the growth? The city will continue to change. Bethlehem foresees a time when trolley pushers do not exist.

“Trolley pushers are a perfectly sensible business opportunity, but you shouldn’t need them because you shouldn’t need people to walk so far.”

Once the city has a functioning BRT as well as centralised taxi facilities, “the need for that service will fall away”, she says.

Despite the concerns of people living and working on the city's streets, the city of Johannesburg is adamant. Having pulled the city out of the grim decline of the mid-1990s, they are determined not to go back there.

"All we want is for these two economies to live side by side, but we don't want the informal sector growing in a way that will result in the formal economy with drawing," Mthethwa says.

"We are competing with other cities. There must be a balance.

"If one sector is suffering, the confidence in the inner city is going to go down."

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