

Designing communities that work

Now is the time to decide how to make Cape Town's World Design Capital title real for everybody, writes **Edgar Pieterse**

Having won the prestigious World Design Capital (WDC) title for 2014, bestowed biennially by the International Council of Societies of Industrial Design, Cape Town is expected to host six signature events that will draw the crème de la crème of the international design fraternity. In other words, think the landmark Design Indaba writ large.

Pulling that off will be a feat in itself but, fundamentally, that aspect of the WDC is about the city's outward face to the world. I would like to draw attention to an agenda for embedding the WDC event in communities – facing inward if you will.

The biggest design challenge that Cape Town faces relates to unemployment. The best way to make the WDC status meaningful for the majority of Capetonians would be to turn the power of design thinking to the root cause of poverty, pervasive social violence and persistent social divisions: structural economic exclusion manifest in un- or under-employment. The latest employment data indicates that almost 30 percent of the labour force is unemployed.

However, drilling down into this aggregate statistic, unemployed levels for the 15- to 24-year-old cohort edge closer to 50 percent. As the National Planning Commission Diagnostic Report published earlier this year suggests, this is unprecedented for a middle-income country. And as a structural feature of the economy, it is a force that erodes everything else that South African society is trying to accomplish.

Against this backdrop, I can now see a number of interesting dots emerging across the national and local landscape that can be connected to present an unprecedented opportunity to think in much more audacious terms about the unemployment crisis in relation to human settlement dilemmas.

The first issue to understand is that most unemployed youth live in awful neighbourhoods – or informal settlements, townships (including backyarders) and so forth. Not only are living conditions in these areas often marked by deficits and a bleak



RESTORING PRIDE: Enhancing and maintaining the public spaces, parks and playgrounds in poorer areas can help to improve the sense of well-being among residents there, the writer says.

landscape, they also tend to breed routine social dysfunction such as drug abuse, intense social violence, parental disconnect from children's education and so on. It is important to understand the need to simultaneously transform the living environments of excluded youths, implicating the education system and social structures, and to create opportunities for them to experience work.

By this I do not necessarily mean a formal job but, rather, an opportunity to access the embodied meaning that comes from getting up in the

morning with the knowledge that one will be doing something of value and that it will translate into an income, which of course represents a measure of autonomy.

My core proposition is to make headway with this country's unemployment crisis by making the most disadvantaged neighbourhoods more liveable. How?

At the moment, the government invests considerable money into poor areas through the public housing subsidy system, various infrastructure subsidies, bus and rail

subsidies and social development investments in education, health and various public amenities.

However, despite these channels of investment, the net outcomes remain deeply disappointing. If these investments are reconsidered to firstly unlock collective energy and entrepreneurship, employment and the fundamental renewal of these neighbourhoods, a number of interventions are possible.

The fundamental shift required is to persuade municipalities that instead of ensuring that all house-

holds have access to basic services, with an eye on either providing an RDP house or full-scale upgrading of a shack, it may be more important to first enhance the spaces that can make collective action easier, especially trading, production and exchange. As household incomes rise and capital circulates more intensely at the neighbourhood level, it becomes important to also raise household living standards. This is not to suggest that basic services should not be provided, but rather to draw attention to the need

to consider the overall package of investments into a neighbourhood, ward and district to ensure that household income and assets are raised as quickly as possible.

At present, the bulk of municipal investments go into household infrastructure with the public and economic realm remaining an afterthought, and certainly not coherently connected with basic service investments within an overall integrated community development framework.

Once this mindset is in place, it becomes possible to focus on community-based job creation. It is clear that community-based public works need to be upscaled urgently. This must be done with an understanding of the connections between the provision of basic services, community development, local economic development and environmental sustainability. Community works programmes can be categorised into four types: care economy, green and public infrastructure, cultural and art sector, and the construction and maintenance of public facilities.

Care economy: with the nature of the burden of disease in poor communities, there is a massive need for sustained home-based care, which can also provide an entry rung for unskilled people to get involved with health and well-being occupations.

Green and public infrastructure: one of the paradoxical features of most townships and established informal areas is the existence of parks, pavements, sports fields, community halls, libraries, and public spaces around transport nodes and intersections. However, these are in a terrible state. There is much that can be done with relatively little money to clean, restore and embellish these spaces through well-designed community works programmes.

The critical issue, though, is positive use and maintenance. Municipalities can arguably achieve a very rapid improvement in the liveability and well-being of poor settlements if these assets are restored and maintained. At best, such infrastructure could become

the source of community pride and create a favourable climate for increased household, private and public investment.

Sports, art and culture: if young children, especially in poor communities, can be equipped with opportunities to master various artistic and cultural skills, it will dramatically improve literacy and numeracy. Furthermore, cultural identities and democratic pluralism can be substantiated when children and youth have opportunities and skills to define themselves in the public domain. These can also help counter-balance anti-social pressures such as drugs and alcohol.

Public works: this includes the construction and maintenance of public infrastructure such as schools, clinics, roads, multi-purpose centres and libraries. If the need for around-the-clock security and surveillance of such infrastructure is added, many community works hours can be consumed for the majority of poor communities.

At the core of this paradigm shift in community development work is the designing and equipping of new layers of intermediaries, who can initiate and "choreograph" these various modes of community works. Also, they need to ensure sensible connections with over-arching planning systems.

These interventions need to reinforce and strengthen community-government partnership and interface bodies, for instance community policing forums, health care forums and parent-teacher associations.

However, for such formations to function optimally, it is essential that the government establishes for every municipality a citizenship academy. These would need to equip each community activist and works manager with a range of hard community organisation, management and planning skills. Without these skills, communities cannot really be empowered to take charge of their neighbourhoods.

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