

Overview and welcome



Francis Antonie is the Director of the Helen Suzman Foundation. He is a graduate of Wits, Leicester and Exeter Universities. He was awarded the Helen Suzman Chevening Fellowship by the UK Foreign Office in 1994. From 1996 to 2006 he was senior economist at Standard Bank; thereafter he was director of the Graduate School of Public Development and Management at Wits University. He is the founding managing director of Strauss & Co.

In their extraordinary tribute to the bourgeoisie in the Communist Manifesto – and whatever else that tract may be, it is also a tribute to the bourgeoisie – Marx and Engels pointed out that the bourgeoisie had rescued a “considerable amount of the population from the idiocy of their rural life”.¹ For Marx and Engels the city became the locus of all that was modern and progressive, but also alienating. These twin themes of progress and alienation still characterize our thinking on cities. While those who have the means may opt – like Marie Antoinette in the 18th century – to have quasi rural retreats in such idyllic places as Greyton, McGregor, Polokwane or Parys, the majority of South Africans are confined to urban settings; and it is these urban settings that are the subject of this edition of Focus.

The city is intimately tied up with a modernist perspective of social and economic life. Noel Annan, writing about his era, recounts the modernist view of the city. “It was the city that had dehumanized society and established degrading social relationships where human beings lived cheek by jowl yet it had never been so lonely. Surrounded by neighbours they felt insecure”.²

Cities are also the economic and creative hubs that keep countries connected to the globalised world. However, they present ever increasing challenges that need to be addressed if an economy is to grow, and if the society is to remain intact and not to explode under the pressures of class or ethnic or other tensions.

Tony Judt, in his reflections on the 20th century poses the following question: “What do you do with the very large numbers of indigenous, impoverished, disadvantaged, permanently poor people who had moved to industrial cities and without whose labour the flourishing capitalism of the age would have been inconceivable?”³. Thus urban planning was born.

One of the dominant themes of current urban planning is *sustainability*. Increasingly infrastructural development of the city landscape centres on creating urban space that is suitable for human living. This does not mean replicating Haussman’s Paris (the other Parys) but it is an attempt to give due recognition to human needs. And because we have become aware of the polluting effects of industrial civilization, and on ways in which to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, we need to promote creative forms of environmentally sustainable development.

South African cities face particular sets of challenges. These centre on developmental issues which are similar to those found in many other parts of the world. In addition, we also face a particular set of spatial challenges which are the legacy of generations of segregationist and apartheid policies. Thus – while plans for sustainable urban development are on the policy and planning agendas – community protests over service delivery, disputes about councilor selection, mismanagement of municipal budgets, and recurrent billing problems, affect our perceptions of our cities in crisis.

But that is not the only story. **David Everatt** in his review of the quality of life in the Gauteng city region offers a different picture – not one of euphoria but one where careful analysis of data paints a different type of picture. He points out that “we see growing cities striving to meet the post-apartheid challenges, and he adds that while Gauteng is indeed rife with civic protests, this is not the ‘have-nots’ rising up against the ‘haves’. If anything, he says: “it is the ‘have-somethings’ protesting that they want more, and certainly angry with the ‘have-it-alls””.

Lael Bethlehem’s lyrical piece focuses on urban regeneration in the Johannesburg CBD. She argues that many cities in the developed world have seen a steady decline in their inner city environments. This is especially true of the United States where major cities began to hollow out in the 1980s. In the developing world there have been similar examples, although these tend to be more complex, and less often associated with the rise of suburbs. The City of Johannesburg experienced a dramatic and rapid decline in the inner city starting from the late 1980s. It took ten years to reach the bottom of the cycle, by which time a large proportion of the asset value of private properties had been destroyed. In the process, many livelihoods and balance sheets had been decimated. The destruction of value also created opportunities, most importantly for the conversion of inner city buildings to affordable rental housing. This in turn has driven a major regeneration of the inner city, in tandem with the public sector regeneration programme.

Jonathan Olitzki and **John Luiz** pick up on one of the themes which Bethlehem raises as they explore the evolving retail strategies in the Johannesburg CBD. They too emphasize the significance of public-private sector involvement in addressing the challenges which the CBD faces. A picture emerges that, if stakeholders – whether council, property developers, retailers and local residents – feel they have a vested interest in the success of the city, then Johannesburg CBD can be a distinctively African, world class city.

Gwen Theron assesses South African cities as a cultural landscape. She reminds us that cities are not simply dormitories where workers, and managers, exist in order to be economically productive. Rather, cities also embody cultural landscapes which are rooted in the land but which allow for the recognition of values which go beyond matters of design to the spiritual significance of a place. This striving for interconnectedness of all aspects of human life is what makes living in cities possible.

The theme of design is further extended by **Tessa Graaff** who speaks to Cape Town as the *2014 World Design Capital*. Her reflective piece begins with a question: did the award simply allow the city – as a gateway to Africa – to acknowledge its own design excellence, or did it create the chance to start thinking about design, and the benefits thereof? She points out that Cape Town has a great landscape but asks whether Cape Town can be a great city. The challenge for Graaff is to see how being an African city “gives us permission to think differently about solutions and not just adopt western approaches”.

Fanuel Motsepe poses the intriguing but important question about whether our present built environment suitably supports the human rights aims of our Constitution. He unpacks the theme of the South African Institute of Architects’ 2008 Bi-annual Convention and explores how sustainable, humane and inclusionary

the built environment can and should be. He identifies the great challenge facing South Africa as creating a unified and diverse built environment where the multitude of cultural capital and knowledge systems of a diverse society can collectively define a 'truly cosmo-african, afro-politan South African built environment'.

David Lurie, as part of his exhibition *Encounters At The Edge* explores the environments that exist at the edge of the city. For Lurie, Cape Town mirrors many of the problems facing other African cities and many cities throughout the world. His central question is how does the surplus humanity improvise the survival in the city? His photos speak for themselves.

Still in Cape Town, **Ashleigh Fraser** explores issues of Identity in Kalk Bay and Simon's Town. For Fraser, understanding the history that provoked the power and identity struggles is crucial to understand the diverse identities of the region.

We conclude with **Charles Simkins'** futuristic narrative: *Joburg 2038*.

This edition of *Focus* has two review forums (by **Bobby Godsell** and **Gillian Godsell**, and by **Stuart Jones** and **Robert Vivian**) and a review by **Wim Louw**.

NOTES

- 1 Karl Marx and Frederick Engels (1969), Selected Works. Progress Publishers: Moscow. Vol 1. pp 112
- 2 Noel Annan (1990), Our Age: Portrait Of A Generation. Weidenfeld and Nicolson: London. pp 52
- 3 Tony Judt (2012), Thinking The Twentieth Century. William Heinemann: London. pp 334