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JOHANNESBURG: CORRIDORS OF FREEDOM

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It was a typically balmy evening in Melville, a suburb of Johannesburg. The community hall was packed to the rafters with local residents, most of whom held professional occupations. They were well equipped with facts, market rationality and self-interest. On this February night, the object of their scorn and frustration was a panel of planning consultants and senior managers from the City of Johannesburg metropolitan government. The agenda was the proposed "Corridors of Freedom" that are meant to snake through their neighbourhood, which will translate into an intensification of land-uses triggered by the BRT trunk route infrastructure.

Like many other cities around the world, Joburg metropolitan government has come to the conclusion that the most strategic way forward is to intensify key nodes and arteries in the city to optimise land-use and to facilitate more efficient patterns of growth through better public transport infrastructure. However, in the case of Joburg, the political stakes are considerable because this agenda is meant to deliver, according to Mayor Parks Tau, "…a comprehensive transformation of our spatial destiny, and a break from our Apartheid past of spatial, social and racial segregation; a past premised on prejudice and division" (Tau, 2014). The mobility corridors are seen as the essential catalyst to drive a long-term spatial and social transformation process across the city.

The residents and businesses of Melville and surrounds were having none of it. They could see the reasons behind the Corridor approach but they could not understand why they had to be the first

site of experimentation. In other words, a classic NIMBY response: "go ahead, experiment – but not in my backyard!" Whilst the public consultation dragged on, a tall, quiet observer sat in the back rows taking it all in. At a certain moment, the figure rose from his seat and made his way to the stage and it was only at that point that the participants, including the officials, realised that Mayor Mpho Parks Tau had been in attendance for some time. Once he had the microphone, he made an impassioned plea to the attendees that they had to realise that the status quo was simply untenable; that it was impossible for middle-class residents to think they could live out their days undisturbed whilst the state had a duty to right the generational wrongs of the past. Tau asserted that they should be appreciative of the fact that the City of Joburg was being thoughtful and strategic and not resorting to populist techniques such as land expropriation. In fact, the self-same residents complaining stood to benefit, according to Tau. They would receive additional land rights and benefit from the massively consolidated public investment into the area. According to officials present, his intervention decisively shifted the tone of the meeting.

This small anecdote reminds one that long-term strategic thinking demands clear strategic intent rooted in evidentiary analysis, matched by bold incremental interventions that create a definitive pathway, plus inspiring leadership, public persuasion and the resources to act. This is a tall order in most cities, but particularly difficult in the context of South African urban legacies and contemporary obstacles to social and spatial transformation.

Twenty years after political freedom was attained, South African city governments are trapped in a wicked bind. The more they make strides in reducing material poverty by attending to basic needs through investments in water, waste, sanitation, energy and housing, the more spatial and income inequalities are exacerbated. In light of the Apartheid-era racist politics of deliberate under-development and exclusion of black populations, the democratic government had to prioritise attending to basic services and public housing. The public housing programme involves the provision of a fully subsidised 42m2 free-standing house for all households below an income poverty line of ZAR3200 p/m (£180). Beneficiaries acquire the house and the title deed associated with it. However, the subsidy must cover the costs of the internal services, land and materials for the structure. Since land is at a premium, the only affordable location for these housing estates is low-value peripheral land.

The public housing programme has been extremely successful on its own terms. Since 1994, more than 3.8 million subsidies have been processed and more than 2.8 million public houses have been built. The net effect has been an intensification of an already sprawled urban form; greater barriers between working class and middle-class suburbs; greater disjunctures between work opportunities and where the working classes live; and an entrenchment of monofunctional and low-quality urban environments for the poor. At the same time, middle-class and elite areas have undergone the clichéd transformation of consumption spaces across the world: a concentration of shopping mall retail combined with a proliferation of over-priced coffee shops and boutiques, reinforcing narrow cultural aspirations.

This patterning of the built environment and urban landscape is further over-determined by a number of profound structural trends. Most importantly, unemployment remains stubbornly above the 30% mark, reaching 50% for youth. Inequality is stark: the Gini-coefficient for South Africa is 0.69 and reaches 0.75 in metropolitan centres. The economy is essentially post-industrial, which makes it almost impossible for the majority of young black people to access formal employment, reinforcing a cycle of economic exclusion, spatial isolation, cultural alienation and intensifying urban divisions – inter-linked dynamics that do not lend themselves to quick-fix or populist solutions.

As a consequence, urban governments in South Africa are confronted by a number of competing imperatives: to reduce material poverty, enhance economic growth, facilitate access to urban opportunities, maintain and expand infrastructural investments for the parts of the city that keep the formal economy turning over and for those excluded from economic opportunity, to ensure democratic participation, confront environmental sustainability imperatives, and act with speed and focus so as to improve the city. These pressures are further complicated by an endless and contradictory set of legislative and policy demands placed on city governments, making it virtually impossible to act with strategic intent in relation to an argument about long-term imperatives. However, this is exactly what the Corridors of Freedom initiative of the City of Joburg represents.

"Corridors of Freedom" is an evocative title for the flagship initiative of the City of Joburg to systematically drive spatial transformation over the medium- to long-term. It is essentially a transit-oriented development approach that attempts to steer future growth along specific corridors that connect a variety of interchanges and nodes. At these mobility nerve centres, the intention is to aggressively promote "mixed-use development such as high-density accommodation, supported by office buildings, retail development and opportunities for leisure", according to the city's promotional materials (Tau and Bloomberg, 2014).

The title obviously plays on the idea that twenty years after democratisation, the majority of city-dwellers do not experience complete freedom because they remain spatially isolated from urban opportunities. It taps into the ideological discourse of the ruling African National Congress party and is meant to pre-empt deep-seated frustration about the lack of visible change in the built environment to benefit poorer communities.

CoF is significant in the larger South African urban management landscape because all municipalities have been claiming a commitment to spatial transformation for the past two decades but hardly any have been able to demonstrate how they can achieve it. This is largely because of the cluster of

interwoven factors discussed earlier, but also due to an inability to engage pragmatically with real-estate and infrastructural investment dynamics. CoF reflects a maturing confrontation of urban growth dynamics and it is for this reason that the initiative may yield more positive results than efforts that have gone before it.

Since 2008, the City of Joburg has been producing and updating a unique urban management technology called the Growth Management Strategy. The GMS is primarily designed to capture a fine-grained understanding of land-value shifts. The Planning Department maps all new planning applications, including rezoning or subdivision, onto a geographical information system of the metropolitan area. This data makes it possible to correlate where demand clusters in space and how it correlates with need. This dataset is then correlatedagainst a series of investment and development priorities that stem from the long-term Growth and Development Strategy and the term-of-office Integrated Development Plan of the metropolitan government. Based on a detailed analysis of the contrasts and disjunctures between these two dynamics, the GMS proposes a "prioritisation hierarchy" that seeks to support both market demand where it coincides with the spatial corridors of the municipality and spatial pockets that require urgent investment to alleviate chronic poverty or establish investment bridges to the economic core of the city.

The kind of analysis and prioritisation provided by the GMS makes explicit political choices and trade-offs possible. Most importantly, it compels the municipality to confront how it engages pro-actively and critically with market dynamics, without losing sight of how best to sustain regional economic dynamism. Through such engagement it is able to shift the debate away from "creating an enabling environment" for private capital, to one where representatives of the private sector are asked to indicate how they are contributing to long-term integrated development objectives. Conversely, this tool also makes it explicit that it is not possible to invest everywhere in the same way. This is of course always the case but with a tool such as the GMS, it becomes possible to have a democratic debate about the reasons for ranking, which in theory enhances accountability and strategic focus. Significantly,

Joburg has so far kept the GMS as an internal tool instead of opening it up to public access and scrutiny.

There is of course great political risk associated with being transparent. It invites all of the constituencies who feel they are not adequately prioritised to come to the fore. Those who are "lucky" enough to fall within the priority zones may disagree with the nature of the investments being proposed. For Mayor Parks Tau, opposition to his agenda is not confined to the predictable interest groups who are used to benefiting from the status quo, but also comes from a number of constituencies within his own political home. His party is divided on how best to effect redistribution and empowerment of the poor. Some argue vociferously that the lion's share of the metropolitan government's investment should be restricted to areas of abject poverty and inadequate services. Furthermore, greater taxes and redistributive measures should be imposed on elites and the middle-classes to pay for such a programme. They find his nuanced argument for doing both unconvincing and distracting. These dynamics are rendered even more volatile by a proliferation of public demonstrations – and sometimes riots – to protest against the alleged lack of service delivery and/or unresponsive government in the townships of Johannesburg.

There can be little doubt that the Corridors of Freedom initiative of Joburg is one of the most important and thoughtful public interventions to systematically transform the spatial dynamics and trajectories of South African cities. It is based on a suite of long-term diagnostic and forecasting instruments that contributes to more astute planning and urban management. Specifically, it is able to cohere diverse sectoral investments and agglomerate them in specific territories that could induce new spatial path-dependencies for the city. This makes Joburg one of the most significant test beds for experimenting with a new generation of governance technologies on the African continent. However, it is too soon to speculate about its societal traction and popular appeal. Regrettably, long-term imperatives such as spatial transformation are difficult to evoke and those who advocate for short-term gratification will always find an outlet in our sound-bite era.

References

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