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Arise decolonial town planners!



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Throughout history, major events have shaped town and regional planning and the built environment sector. The world's population has been increasing exponentially, with estimates of growth at 174% between 1950 and 2010. Between 2010 to 2050, this figure is expected to rise by a further 38% to reach a global population of 9.6 billion. And all these people need to find somewhere to live, leading to many settling in uninhabitable and downright dangerous places. Those migrating to cities and towns find themselves having to settle in the peripheral areas of towns and cities, far away from economic activities and opportunities. These areas are usually uninhabitable pieces of land which are exposed, vulnerable and prone to natural or man-made disasters.

This phenomenon has been unfolding in South Africa since 1970, with rural-urban migrants creating their own cities within cities – what author Doug Saunders referred to as “arrival cities”. These cities are driven by unprecedented migration, with their main feature the lack of social

amenities and access to basic infrastructure. They are poorly planned and expose weak governance in the cities and towns where they spring up. Because these “arrival cities” are inhabited by mainly poor and vulnerable groups, the impact of any disaster is severe, often devastating, and often leads to dramatic social changes. This should not come as a surprise. This is evident when looking at how ancient cities responded to disaster, as well as at the impact of events such as the world wars, major environmental disasters, cholera outbreaks, the Spanish flu, and even the recent Covid-19 pandemic. Cities and towns evolved and were redesigned and reimagined to respond to these challenges.

This also impacted the way urban planning has evolved. All these disasters required an urban management strategy, and an innovative, new response and intervention to restore disaster-stricken cities, towns, and settlements to some sort of normalcy.

In South Africa, these challenges have been compounded by the legacies of apartheid and colonial spatial planning, where access to facilities and infrastructure was based on affluence and race. Besides the loss of lives and homes, this disaster has amplified the lack of infrastructure and the destruction of what little infrastructure existed. Because these dormitory townships were designed with the intention of controlling the movement of Africans, they were not designed as complete settlements or neighbourhoods that facilitate good quality urban life.

Since 1994 several scholars have written about South African cities and towns that have developed along the lines of the anti-city form. These cities and towns have engraved in them apartheid, colonial and capitalistic ideologies. As these cities and towns grew, and continue to grow, so too did their population, increasing the demand for proper and adequate infrastructure provision, proper planning, proper urban management, and governance. As became evident with more and more people migrating to the cities, this led to a deterioration of living and health conditions, resulting in a greater need for social amenities and general infrastructure provision.

This was aptly captured by President Ramaphosa recently during his oral replies to questions in the National Assembly 3 November 2022 when he said:

“The spatial inequality in our country is one of the horrible legacies of apartheid and of our past because it, to a large extent, resulted in the poverty as well as the inequality our people face. Yes, you are right, when we got off the starting blocks of democracy and started providing housing to our people, we started by just expanding away from our cities and towns instead of densifying and bringing poor people into the city. All over the world, and in many places in the world, poor people live inside and near the cities. We have just exacerbated the situation by moving them outside the city. You mention a very good concept of mandatory inclusivity of spatial planning. That is precisely what we are beginning to focus on. So, densification in the end is the answer.”

In the end it is local government that usually owned the land in the vicinity of towns, who oversee town planning. Another problem of course is that skills such as town planning are short and far between. We just don't have good town planners like the Romans did, the Romans were great town planners, and they were able to build cities. If you look at the development of cities, civilization was around building cities. That human was able to move forward...”

All of these are a stark reminder for local government elected officials, town planners and built environment practitioners on why town planning, urban management, urban governance, and structured settlement planning matters for a country like ours. However, these intractable challenges provide us with an opportunity to overhaul the apartheid city's urban morphology and to develop cities that are safe, cities that care, cities that are accessible, cities that are just and cities that are equitable. Therefore, there is need for a pragmatic and systematic approach to resettlement and the establishment of townships based on a concept of mandatory inclusivity of spatial planning.

From the Council for the Built Environment (CBE)'s perspective, we see the mandatory inclusionary process of densification as a call for an “urban safety valve”, especially for the poor and marginalised members of our society. This requires a better and structured decolonial planning and governance regime, as encapsulated in Chapter 7 of the Constitution, and in the Bill of Rights. At the core of the mandatory inclusionary urban development is local government which exists to solve local and societal challenges and provide basic infrastructure services.

Therefore, the CBE’s call is for town planners to be at the centre of this new way of doing things. It is now time for town planners to lead the dismantling of apartheid spatial geography. Town planners must also leave behind all the dogmas they learnt in universities and be intentional in responding pragmatically and systematically to challenges facing communities. They must reimagine settlements from a decolonial perspective, and they must work collaboratively with non-state actors. Town planners must be committed to encompassing long-term development objectives for a different kind of South Africa, which involves participatory planning, and inclusive governance and urban management. These town planners must have an ingrained appreciation of the concept of mutual learning and creating platforms for myriads of voices – the voices from the hinterlands, the voices they might not necessarily agree with but that are important in resolving the challenges confronting communities. These challenges call for technically equipped advocates: town planners who are located within communities; town planners who appreciate local and indigenous knowledge; town planners who work with and advise communities. This is the new cadre of town planners who will assist the country.

Arise town planners.

Arise decolonial town planners!

ENDS



About the CBE:

The Council for the Built Environment (CBE) is a Schedule 3A Public Entity that reports to the National Department of Public Works and Infrastructure. It is a regulatory body established under the Council for the Built Environment Act 43 of 2000 (the CBE Act) that coordinates the following six Councils for the Built Environment Professions - Architecture, Landscape Architecture, Engineering, Property Valuation, Project and Construction Management, and Quantity Surveying – and through memoranda of understanding these include Town and Regional Planning, Land Surveying, and Environmental Assessment Practitioners.

The CBE was established for the purpose of instilling good conduct within the Built Environment Professions, mobilising transformation in the Built Environment Professions, protecting the interest of the public and advising the South African Government on Built Environment related issues.



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