Spatial development in Stellenbosch

In 2013, the Stellenbosch Heritage Foundation published proposals for spatial development for Stellenbosch. Later, the Foundation submitted it to Stellenbosch Municipality for a spatial development framework. These proposals, here summarised, is still relevant today.

Stellenbosch, on the border of a metropolis, but with a vibrant small-town character, has an excellent university, a progressive business environment, and is surrounded with scenic beauty. It is a privileged town, with assets that should enable it to compete well with towns of similar size in South Africa and elsewhere in the world.

It is also a town that does not provide essential services of an acceptable standard to all its residents. Lack of political consensus and a low level of trust across different neighbourhoods make it challenging to plan forward and introduce innovation.

The unresolved problems in Stellenbosch need more than the resources of the local authority. However, much goodwill, knowledge and resources are available. We suggest that many small ideas and actions can collectively provide the power to make a big difference in our response to problems, to deliver the future of the place where we choose to live.

Contextual issues

The idea of a spatial development framework is based on notions of good neighbourliness and on the belief that it is possible to have a stable, equitable and long-term management of the commons, those assets in which we all share. We favour this approach, even though many studies and observations contradict such optimism. The ecologist Garret Hardin has pointed out that, when a resource is held jointly, self-interest encourages individuals to deplete it. Rather than protecting the asset, people will often undermine the collective long-term interest by over-exploiting the common asset. To restrain such short-term self-interest, we need common sense plans that appeal to our better selves.

The zoning scheme, an instrument for allocating rights and deciding how human beings live in alongside one another spatially, was a result of conflict between social classes around the principle of private property. In South Africa, this social and legal
construct had a complicated history, especially when rights were allocated, transferred or withheld unfairly. The spatial development framework, which aims to ensure long-term planning for the good of everyone, has to work in coordination with the zoning scheme, which focuses on acquired rights and short-term use.

The integrated development plan (IDP) is a central management document. It should ideally be a project management plan for long-term direction, yet it is often reactive because the immediate needs are urgent. The different plans serve different needs and thus create tension, but it is possible to do the right things urgently and still do it efficiently and sustainably.

**Strategic perspectives and process**

The strategic aims of the Municipality for long-term spatial planning are interconnected nodes; car-free living; inclusive economic growth; optimal land use; guarding of resources; security of food and agriculture and preservation of built heritage and landscape. The vision formulated by the Municipality is that Stellenbosch is the innovation capital of South Africa. We support these worthy aspirations.

However, there are significant gaps between the ideal and practice. Few of the support service systems in the Municipality are currently integrated. There also are more pervasive bugs in the system, in the form of processes, practices and myths that will continue to frustrate growth and renewal unless they are dealt with systematically and comprehensively. Actual performance must support claims of innovation; the claim to be the innovation capital must be earned through effort and by attention to detail.

An inclusive approach to planning is a challenge, given the political fragmentation and low levels of trust in Stellenbosch, but is of no use to avoid it. As a community, we need to engage, accommodate and transform. It is not sustainable to use politics or race to retreat into our fixed positions. We need to summon our collective power to think, reason and understand, to create conditions for connecting and for imagining a liveable Stellenbosch for all. Every community is eventually also a network of power relations. It is normal. Therefore a long-term community plan must implicitly find where the power is to affect situations.

**Urban design**

In Massive Small, the influential urban designer, Kevin Campbell, current best practices in urban design. Amongst these are:
• Look at a city or town as an organism, rather than as an artefact. Take care of the conditions for growth, and a city will grow.

• In looking for growth, politicians and officials often focus on “wow”, and neglect the fabric of a place. Cities that focus on the fabric of place hold out better against economic collapse and support growth longer.

• A big city plan is the power of many small actions that are allowed to happen.

• Smart cities depend on smart citizens. Focus on people (the organism) as much as on infrastructure (the artefact). Cities that attract talent sustains growth.

• The resilient city grows from how the city liberates talent and the society. The city that develops results from its ability as an organism, system or idea, is the city that will survive.

• Urbanism is a condition making. The best way to ensure smart cities is not to build it top-down. Smart growth happens when leaders and city managers focus on creating conditions for growth. To allow this to happen, city managers must first deal comprehensively and systematically with problems in the system.

**Best practices for Stellenbosch**

Translated to Stellenbosch, these best practices imply:

Adapt the approach to development plans. Let the master plan suggest and enable, rather than prescribe and determine. Allow the system to manage itself and to learn from its actions.

• While we still need big ideas, we can implement many small actions in the meanwhile.

• City managers need partners from across civil society and political parties. Measure the number and quality of partnerships across civil society, professions and business that can achieve results, which the Municipality on its own cannot deliver.

• The critical policies that make transformation possible are town competitiveness; stable communities; and sustainable development. Each of these needs innovation and attention to detail to realise change.
• If Stellenbosch strives to be an innovation capital, it should measure itself against competitive, knowledge-intensive towns elsewhere.

• To build a stable community, create conditions and spaces where people can enjoy a dignified life. If we rely on numbers when we provide low-cost housing, we forget that we deal with future communities.

• The present pattern of growth in Stellenbosch is not sustainable. We have not worked out the cost to the environment, services and economy of urban sprawl, the mostly opportunistic spreading of living areas.

• The present pattern of growth of the University of Stellenbosch is not sustainable for the town of Stellenbosch. Stellenbosch University should grow, and be a leading university on the continent. It is a core asset and an essential part of life in Stellenbosch. However, the recent pattern of growth is also a barrier to the bottom-up transformation of Stellenbosch. While the University grew much faster than the town, without providing accommodation and infrastructure, the cost of rented living space in the town centre in Stellenbosch became the highest in the country. The relation of rent to own is also skewed if measured against other towns and cities. The majority of lower- to middle-income workers who earn their salaries in Stellenbosch live elsewhere. The typical housing cycle is broken, as the existence of Stellenbosch. Well managed, it could provide sustainable growth for a long time. If we lose the unique fabric of the Stellenbosch landscape, by not doing what is appropriate, we will eventually lose the momentum of growth.

• Finally, measure. Planning and policy-making in Stellenbosch are too often not appropriately quantified. The Municipality should aim to quantify core issues, such
Lessons from local incidents

Four recent local episodes provide a foreground for local spatial development considerations.

Khayamandi, 14-15 March 2013

In a fire in Khayamandi on the night of 14-15 March 2013, 1341 informal houses were destroyed. Emergency services had barely commenced giving aid when inhabitants started clearing up and rebuilding.
Within a week 65% of the houses were rebuilt. These simple facts reflect great adversity and hardship, but also resilience. Inhabitants who collaborated in the urgent rebuilding did so because they needed shelter. Their actions also were an indication of underlying anxiety about their claim to the land on which they had settled. Those inhabitants who delayed building were also aware of the possibility of losing precious square meters or parts of square meters to adjacent neighbors. By rebuilding with urgency and in haste, the residents repeated many mistakes. The new structures are as prone to future fires as those destroyed. Land use did not improve; it will be as difficult as before to provide services. It will also be as difficult as before to transfer titles, which could be a way to create wealth.

How then should the energy of residents be directed to reduce the risk of fires and other dangers; to create more dignified living conditions; and also provide community space? What is the plan that should inform this? And the process? There is a role for local government and citizens to ensure that informal settlements can over time grow into neighbourhoods.
The Municipality does not have the resources to supply houses fast enough and should not plan as if they will suddenly have the capacity. Incremental upgrading carries a heavy emotional load, for residents and also for officials, for whom the present process of building houses constitute an easy administrative process. Yet all the statistics show that this mode of housing delivery is neither adequate nor sustainable. When walking or driving through Khayamandi to the northern end, the new municipal built houses is a visual confrontation and a confirmation of the overwhelming shortcomings of the political and planning ideas that still drive housing provision.

Upgrading, rather than eradication, is a critical idea in the National Development Plan. To enable improvement, the administrative process of housing delivery must become a human process, involving the community and local partnerships. It requires a multi-disciplinary approach, which is difficult to manage, but necessary.

It is sensible to give communities a sense of ownership. Immediate, massive and continuous improvement is possible when we provide the community with technical assistance to plan and improve their environment. We must do it.

**Assets in the historic core**

As long as twenty years ago, when street cafes were first 'allowed' in the town centre, the Municipality planned to make Church Street pedestrian friendly. Several plans and designs emerged. The Municipality did not implement any of it.

In 2012 a group of property owners in Church Street started the Church Street initiative, to the environment pedestrian friendly, sociable and well managed. Within weeks they changed the direction of traffic towards the historic church at the upper end of the street, improving both traffic flow and small commercial growth. The project stalled once again, to some degree because of a single vocal objector.

Church Street today is still one of the most vibrant streets in the Western Cape, but it can become more so without significant cost, in capital funding or in time, to the Municipality. Other landscapes, such as the Rhenish Complex and the Braak are also not used to potential. With partnerships, these landscapes can be made available to the community and unlocked as assets that benefit all.
The Weides

In recent years the Weides changed from a suburban neighbourhood to a neighbourhood characterised by rapid development of high-density student housing. This development followed on the exploitation of a presumed zoning regulation gap first by one developer, and then by others. Some, but not all, of the new developments were innovative and sensitive to the fabric of the neighbourhood. As a whole, the further development of the area was mostly opportunistic. It did not help in solving critical problems in the town, such as traffic and the disruption of the housing cycle. It instead added to the disorder. Some residents of nearby neighbourhoods, such as Ida’s Valley and Cloetesville, also felt let down by the Municipality, who informed them as they that development of housing schemes was on hold, as
municipal infrastructure was at capacity, yet significant redevelopment occurred in the Weides. The Municipality should have guided new growth in the Weides through planning and good urban design principles; instead, it was in no small degree reactive, ad hoc approvals by officials under pressure.

**Applying the lessons**

Stellenbosch is still mostly thought of as a town, though it is in many measures already a city.

It is not advisable, or possible, to resist growth in Stellenbosch, or to deny that it will happen. To imagine that we stop growth or that the old settlement model will somehow accommodate the growth that is needed to integrate informal settlements is to risk isolation and social instability. To ensure sustainable growth, that will build on the fabric of a place, and allow for diverse and livable neighbourhoods, we may need to embrace the idea of Stellenbosch as a city, in its identity a part of both the Cape Town Metropole and the greater Winelands.

While the land size of the town grew almost tenfold in the past seven decades, the population density is today still lower than it was in the seventeenth century. Stellenbosch does not yet have a model that requires new development to contribute adequately towards solving the traffic and infrastructure needs that follow from sprawl. Thus we subsidise a type of growth that is financially and ecologically unaffordable. We should instead create conditions for development that will attract talent, normalise the housing cycle and allow sustainable urban transport and infrastructure.

A spatial development framework that could withstand opportunistic pressure on the common interests will enable the Municipality to be a facilitator and enabler, rather a contractor and enforcer. The is the role of progressive municipalities in the new world economy.

The community should support the city managers to:

- Facilitate and manage many small actions to get to the big plan. The system now discourages initiative; it punishes even minimal risks.
- Focus on ways to use and unlock the talent and potential of the community.
- Take tourism, a critical economic driver seriously and take it to grassroots to enable expansion of the number and diversity of destinations.
• Create conditions that will attract talent.

• Innovate city management. De-bug the system systematically and comprehensively. A system that works and simple, robust rules allow city managers to create self-organising systems and delegate power to communities.

A scenario

To create conditions for sustainable growth, which may solve some of the unintended consequences of the opportunistic growth of previous decades, we need exploratory scenarios for the long term, as well as flexible policies and processes for the meanwhile.

As an illustration, we offer an outline for one scenario, which could be researched and tested against other scenarios.

The railway line and also the nearby routes for traffic passing through Stellenbosch constitute an enclosing western boundary for the historic core. It is also one of the barriers that prevent integration of outlying neighbourhoods. If the railway line is dropped one level through town, from entrance to exit, with funds such as those that have been made available for upgrading of roads to Stellenbosch, it could provide conditions for developing a smart, sustainable, high-density, multi-use district between the present railway line and the Planckenberg river and along Merriman Avenue to Bird Street.

With local light carriages and more stations, and complemented by underground parking, we could develop a high-density district that runs from Vlottenburg through the Droë Dyke south of Stellenbosch Farmers Winery to Khayamandi and Cloetesville, with light industrial nodes towards Koelenhof in the north. It will also enable further public transport nodes leading uptown (in which taxi owners using smart technology could, and should, play a role) as well as a pedestrian-friendly historic town centre.
A high-density, multi-use district with adequate public transport and development conditions that ensure smart, green construction and urban design would also stimulate economic activity and integration of Khayamandi and Cloetesville.

Such a district will be a distinct improvement on opportunistic sprawl. Ideas to keep the town either small or predominantly sub-urban will not normalise the housing cycle, relieve congestion on the roads, fund maintenance of infrastructure, preserve heritage or provide essential services of an adequate and sustainable level to all residents.

In trying to imagine our future, which is what long-term spatial planning is, we need to respect the existing fabric of a place, while also imagining and embracing the potential for change and growth.

**In summary**

Our core proposals, for clear, simple rules to manage our shared resources equitably and sustainably, and for freedom that will allow the many small changes that will make a big difference, are grounded in common sense. We need a bias towards action to do it.
The Stellenbosch Heritage Foundation promotes sustainable heritage conservation.
and innovative urban design. It has been an active, independent non-profit organisation since 1959.

Today’s best innovations will endure as our future collective heritage.
www.stellenboschheritage.co.za