

Urban regeneration - is it viable in South Africa today?

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18 Oct 2018

As cities age, buildings deteriorate and become overcrowded. Residential areas expand further from the CBD, causing commerce to follow, until the city centre is merely a ghost of its former self. Rentals drop, vacancies rise and criminal elements often move in, making an erstwhile vibrant CBD dangerous and unproductive for both commerce and residents. Investor portfolio values drop to a new low, and this is when it becomes clear that there is a need to regenerate the area, or accept a loss and sell out. Regeneration has been accomplished in many cities of the world, including in South Africa.



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Looking at the remarkable changes taking place in Cape Town, Johannesburg and Pretoria, it is obvious that regeneration is both possible and successful, if thoughtfully executed. However, it is essential that local municipal and business leaders buy into the exercise.

A well-planned layout is required

The entire CBD layout must be considered. Allowance must be made for structures like national monuments which may not be altered, yet require a face-lift, bearing in mind that they are tourist attractions. Optimal locations must be selected for hotels, shopping malls and entertainment venues, with sufficient space reserved for open public areas and easy access to transport. Sufficient parking, both street bays and high-rise parking garages, will be required, while traffic flow may need to be changed to single-direction to cope with the traffic volume.

Public transport

Public transport must be assessed and, where necessary, improved upon. Outdated bus transport may need updating with systems like Rea Vaya in Johannesburg, MyCiTi in Cape Town or A Re Yeng in Tshwane. Bus stops and taxi ranks should be modernised and strategically placed to ensure efficient service and increased commuter capacity. Access to all areas of the city is vital for the workforce, residents and visitors. Rail systems are important for transporting the workforce, consumers or cargo; the Gautrain between Pretoria and Johannesburg has proved invaluable, having eased commuter congestion on the highways while reducing traffic in both cities.

A healthy mix between residential and commercial

A balance between retail, offices and residential property is necessary to make urban regeneration sustainable. Overemphasis on the residential aspect is not optimal, for although residents must be able to live in and enjoy the area, the commercial aspect must also be expanded. When urban regeneration and inner-city revitalisation achieve stasis, the rates per square metre on commercial buildings should increase, too. As the rates per square meter improve, further investment is attracted into the area, confirming the success of the urban regeneration.

Reuse of buildings

Tidying up a few old buildings with a fresh coat of paint may increase the general appeal of the area, but will add little to the economic side of urban regeneration. Older buildings need not be demolished; they can be inventively revamped into apartments, hotels or modern, mixed-use entities. Old office blocks become attractive hotels or apartments; former retail outlets become entertainment venues; and outdated factory or warehouse premises become wonderful malls, craft-markets, eateries or cinemas. It takes a little vision as well as some finance, but the rewards can be pleasantly surprising.

Communication

High-speed fibre and internet connections are essential for modern businesses and residents in the area. Service providers often lay down the infrastructure for these communication services at their own expense, normally prioritising areas with an established residential and commercial base. Areas requiring urban regeneration are seldom prioritised. Service providers mainly engage in large capital outlay in densely populated sectors which can support the investment, but people and businesses first need to be attracted to the area.

Informal trade

There is often a plethora of informal trade in a run-down CBD, which one does not want to wipe out completely after regeneration. Regulated hawkers with goods appealing to passers-by, such as fruit, souvenirs and curios, can also be a drawcard. Pedestrians don't enjoy being mobbed by informal traders or tripping over merchandise on the sidewalk, so providing designated trading areas with an appropriate number of operators could prevent problems.

Safety

The general public want to shop and walk through the city in relative safety. Commuters require safety when travelling between their jobs, while shopping and during leisure activities; businesses require 24-hour security and will not remain in an area if crime is prevalent. Taxi ranks, train stations and bus stops are prime target areas requiring security personnel on permanent duty. A metro police force or a central improvement district presence assigned to keep the inner city safe would help to alleviate the reservations of the populace.

Regeneration takes imagination and foresight but can, in time, be financially rewarding. Initial rentals and purchase prices may be low but, as the area improves, vacancies will reduce and consumers will be drawn back, causing the value of the original investments to increase exponentially. A run-down CBD is not good at all, but the glow of success when such an

area is successfully regenerated will spread throughout the entire city.

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