

From a 'wasteland' to a clean, busy town

Shared public space is key to Cape Town overcoming decay and despondency

MICHAEL MORRIS

IN MID-2001, former MP Sheila Camerer wrote a peevish newspaper article about negative international perceptions of South Africa's crime risk.

The gist – unremarkably – was a call for better-resourced policing, but a detail about Cape Town leaps out a decade and a half later.

Camerer noted one of the reasons for "our bad image" in Germany and Austria, in particular, was "extremely negative references" on the countries' official websites.

Germany, for instance warned that "general criminal activities... have not let up, especially in the cities" and – singling out Cape Town – that "the area between the Waterfront and the CBD... should be avoided after dark and during weekends".

Not irrationally, suburban residents from Mitchells Plain to Table View probably would have agreed: parts of the CBD were no-go zones once commuters had gone home.

A man who had the acutest sense of the risks of that time and who remains engaged in fashioning a safe, livable city is Tasso Evangelinos.

In an interview on the 15th birthday of the Central City Improvement District (CCID) this week, its chief operations officer looked back to a very different city and an atmosphere of insecurity that defined its main challenge.

"Crime and grime" was the phrase that captured the target of the new initiative and the model uppermost in everybody's mind was New York City mayor Rudi Giuliani's "broken windows" policy.

It wasn't Giuliani's idea, but social scientist George Kelling's, who reasoned in the 1980s that if you fixed broken windows (cleared litter and erased graffiti), you deterred further anti-social behaviour and petty crime and created an environment inhospitable to serious crime.

Giuliani made the policy a key plank of his mayoralty from 1993 and later studies showed crime declined and continued to drop for the following decade.

In 2001, Cape Town was keen to emulate New York's successes.

"We all had some idea of what the broken-window strategy meant," Evangelinos acknowledged wryly, "but we didn't really understand what it meant for us other than to say, well, we are managing this space... let's get out there."

Cape Town's strategy was modelled on the hop.

"We didn't have e-mail or cellphones with GPS and camera functions... you had a brick for a phone, a clipboard, a pen and a good pair of shoes and you walked the beat, eight or nine hours a day."

The raw data was dismaying: "Dirt and decay, litter, graffiti and a proliferation of 'to let' signs as CBD business fled and property owners lost confidence."

Nobody would want to linger, let alone invest, in an environment summed up with stark economy in the Weekend Argus headline of that time: "CBD: a wasteland."

Yet tackling the small stuff block by block and forging partnerships with the police, city, property owners, NGOs, retailers and even the homeless began to yield results.

They learnt small, daily interventions had a cumulative potential in fostering optimism.

A signal illustration is the CCID's collaboration with the NGO Straatwerk in creating jobs for street people. It began in 2004 with a team of six on a monthly budget of R5 000 and has grown to a R2.1 million-a-year enterprise employing 300.

They focus on what Evan-



THEN: These images from the end of the 1990s show a central city area which a contemporary headline described as 'a wasteland'. 'To Let' signs proliferated and business confidence slumped.



NOW: Supervisor James Mandean, left, with a heap of cigarette butts and Public Safety Officer Zola Nomanyama, right, are part of the team deployed to keep streets safe, clean and welcoming.

PICTURES: SUPPLIED



OPERATIONS OFFICER: Tasso Evangelinos.

gelinos called "aesthetic defects" – damaged paving, unemptied tree wells, blocked drains, broken bollards, graffiti, missing chunks of tar and road markings; too small to warrant constant municipal attention, but which subtly maintain the sense of a cared-for urban fabric.

"The city provides the material. We, through Straatwerk, provide the labour and expertise," he said. Street people are given skills and income and the overall urban atmosphere is enhanced.

In the 15 years of the CCID's existence, the effect of projects of this kind was self-reinforcing.

"In 2000, up to 80 percent of the buildings in the city didn't look good. People didn't want to invest.

Today, it's rare to find a building that has not been upgraded or given a coat of paint in the past five years.

"It has a domino effect – the clientele changes, you get better tenants, the retail offering expands. As a result, we have the lowest retail vacancies in the country for the core of the CBD between Strand and Wale streets of about 3 or 4 percent and an overall vacancy rate of 6 percent.

"And you achieve that by building relationships, understanding that there's no perfect solution – you are often dealing with things you have no control over – but that if you make an effort and are consistent you can achieve a measure of certainty and of making everyone feel that you are walking together."

Fifteen years down the line, enviable headline statistics show a trajectory of benefits: total property valuations in the CBD have risen from just over R6 billion in 2006 to almost R24bn this year.

Perhaps most significantly of all, the number of people living in the central area has grown tenfold, from 750 to more than 7 000.

In the first years, especially, a sharp focus on security cut crime dramatically and the CCID's sustained safety-on-the-streets initiatives – which involve extensive collaboration with the police and the city's law enforcement agency, regular patrols, mobile kiosks and 24-hour monitoring – continue to yield benefits.

Yet, Evangelinos noted, the key to making a better city – the "Safe, clean, caring, open for business" hub of the

CCID's branding – is people and that meant altering perceptions, not least by fixing broken bollards and arresting pickpockets.

But even with early successes in cutting crime, a negative perception persisted.

"You still found tourist hotels urging people to bypass the central city. There was that lingering negative perception."

What changed that was the Fifa World Cup in 2010 and particularly the Fan Walk linking the central city to Cape Town Stadium.

"People had to discover for themselves that this was no longer a no-go zone and we saw an amazing turnaround in perceptions.

"That has only grown since... and we see it in the creation of the 'coffee culture', shops opening up on to the pavement, people feeling comfortable on the street, arranging meetings outside their offices, where before they'd never leave their buildings, they'd commute in and out and that would be it."

Harnessing this change enabled the CCID to step up its activity in projecting the city centre as an attractive, vibrant business and residential hub.

From 2012, it began producing an annual state-of-the-central-city report, which seeks at once to accurately monitor progress and change, identify or explain new projects and sell the city as a key African metropole, "the coastal city of Africa, the world's gateway to the continent and Africa's gateway to Europe, Asia and America".

The ambitions are bold, yet, as Evangelinos emphasised, the basics are daily, incremental, often modest-seeming activities aimed at sustaining the basic requirement; a public environment people voluntarily share.

And this, over the CCID's next five-year budget term, will inform new initiatives – in security, better management of public squares, a directory of city-centre conference venues, extending pedestrianisation and expanding programmes to help the 600 people for whom the central streets are home.

"We'll be sticking to our knitting," Evangelinos said. "We're always looking to add value, but we know what the basics are, the building blocks... and that if you don't look after them, they crumble."

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