

A Practitioner Essay: Small Town, Big Shakes

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1. Introduction

I am a registered Professional Town and Regional Planner (Pr. Plan A/940/1997), and am presently the Chief Executive Officer of the Atlantis Special Economic Zone for Green Technologies in the Western Cape. I have played a key role in several landmark initiatives, including Cape Town's first post-democracy Metropolitan Plan and South Africa's national urban renewal strategy. At National Treasury's Government Technical Advisory Centre (GTAC), I helped launch a ZAR10 billion fund for township revitalisation—The Neighbourhood Development Partnership Grant (NDPG). I consider myself a creative, collaborative and results-driven leader, passionate about sustainable urban infrastructure, green technology and the green economy.

2. Formative years and values

Before my story about corruption—Small Town, Big Shakes—I must say a few words about my upbringing and my values. Born in 1965, I grew up in a liberal environment and my parents emphasised, through their actions and admonishments, the importance of engaging everyone with respect regardless of race or background. As the youngest in the family, I experienced, in the mid to late 1970s and early 1980s, my older siblings actively engaged in the anti-apartheid movement through student organisation, the labour movement and the arts.

In 1980, I was offered the opportunity to study in Swaziland—now Eswatini—at a school specifically established to show that races and religions could work and live together. The school was Waterford Kamhlaba. Kamhlaba was an additional name given by King Sobhuza II in the 1970s. With his beautiful and poetic use of the Swazi language, the context of its use referenced the fact that the school represented the people of all the earth. The place for all on earth has famous alumni, including the children of Winnie and Nelson Mandela and Bishop Desmond and Leah Tutu. During my time at Waterford Kamhlaba, it became part of global movement of schools (The United World Colleges movement—which continues to thrive and grow to this day) aimed at promoting international understanding and peace through education. It was an incredible and life-changing experience.

This education and experience, along with seeing the erosion of dignity caused by apartheid, awoke in me a strong desire to contribute positively to transforming South Africa into a just and equitable society, less as politician than technocrat. Upon my return to South Africa from Swaziland, I sought a university qualification to professionally contribute to building a future South Africa. I graduated in 1990 with a Masters in City and Regional Planning that was preceded by an undergraduate degree in Economics, Geographical and Environmental Sciences. The year 1990 marked the breaking of flood gates in terms of the inevitable, gut wrenching and sometimes chaotic, process towards the 1994 democratic elections. It was an incredible time! The post-1994 era gave free reign to utopian thinking of the future, but in retrospect, at some distance from the scale of need and desperation of the poor Black majority. The idealism and utopianism were, also in retrospect, radically disrupted by the necessities, vagaries, vicissitudes and betrayals of the post-apartheid statecraft and democratic reconstruction.

3. My story about corruption

In 1997, I was invited to join a new consulting company established by two planning colleagues. Both colleagues were progressive planners with deep roots in anti-apartheid activism and as “non-Whites”, grew up under the boot and garrison of a violent and ruthless state as well as the human devastation wrought by apartheid's spatial engineering. This is a legacy that remains a daily struggle—apartheid is stubbornly post-apartheid too. One of the prominent architects of the apartheid and the post-apartheid, the late National Party President de Klerk writes in his Autobiography, titled *Last Trek-New Beginnings*:

[I] committed myself and the [outgoing] government not to accept any agreements that did not offer reasonable provision for the prevention of domination and the effective protection of minorities; the protection of property...a market-oriented economy with free enterprise and fiscal responsibility; constitutionally protected devolution of power to regional and local governments, and a form of power-sharing (1999, 233).

Reflecting on the outcome of the “Last Trek's New Beginnings”, De Klerk, who shared the Nobel Peace Prize with Mandela, beams:



If little has changed in the white suburbs of Pretoria, it is also true that almost as little has changed in its sprawling black townships. Workers still rise before dawn and pile into minibus taxis, buses, and commuter trains to make their way to their jobs in the city, those who are lucky enough to have jobs. They return in the evenings to their crowded match-box houses. Most of the old problems – crime, poverty, inadequate services, poor education, and unemployment – remain (De Klerk 1999, 233).

The company we founded was MCA Urban and Environmental Planners—a private technical advisory company focussing on green urban infrastructure policy, planning and development. MCA was a small company whose partners were passionately committed—and remain committed—to the values of redress, social justice, equity and democracy; all of which we aimed to realise via value-led and principled consultation informed by the Constitution (1996) and within the four corners of the law. Setting up the company was a real leap of faith. We were young, idealistic and anything was possible in the frenzy and fantasy of democratic reconstruction. The journey travelled in establishing the company and building it up is a story on its own—but we were fortunate to work on and contribute to many of the leading and ground-breaking initiatives in urban development happening in the late 1990s (up to around 2009).

In 2003, government was disbursing considerable funding for programmes to begin tackling apartheid's spatial and economic inequality. As an idealistic and passionate city and regional planner, we aimed at making a difference in regenerating townships and township economies. After the usual competitive bidding process, MCA was appointed to work on an urban development project in a mid-sized municipality (Municipality) in the Northern Cape province.

From the start of the project, we were united by our shared desire to harness the power of place-making/urban planning to guide and shape lasting change and transformation of the built environment. This desire fed on our drive as students and the university experiences in the 1980s, when the state unleashed deadly force under two states of emergency in 1985 and 1986.

For our small company, the project was a milestone contract—a unique opportunity to put ideas into action. The funding for the project was from the national treasury's NDPG to the Municipality, and specifically for the revitalisation of the township. When we were appointed, we were informed by the Municipal employee tasked to run and oversee the project that the decision had been made, whilst considering the bids that the project must be shared 50/50 with local companies on the basis that we had to help build local skills and capacity. We did not question this—in fact, we saw it as an opportunity to contribute and help build skills in this sector. This was the developmental state in action! In retrospect, we should perhaps have questioned the adjudication process and the legal basis for splitting the project award. Our company, however, could not fault the principle of helping to build skills and local capacity.

On being informed of winning the bid (and the arrangement with the local companies), we flew to meet with the municipal officials, present our project plan and approach (and meet the local counterparts). No sooner had we landed on the daily flight from Cape Town than the Mayor called me for a meeting prior to the scheduled engagement with the officials. I reacted to this request with enthusiasm. How positive to meet with a democratically elected ANC Mayor. To me this was democracy in action! In the warm glow of both the developmental state and democracy in action, we thought that the Mayor no doubt wanted to satisfy himself of our credentials, record his expectations of the project and to lend his support to the process—or so we believed. I met the Mayor at a popular fast-food restaurant in the local mall. The Mayor immediately came to the point—the company was to pay a sizeable donation to the ANC via himself. The “donation” was almost exactly the expected project profits. The Mayor also said that the local companies who were to work with us had already banded together to pay their portion, upfront too. I was absolutely floored! My mind went blank as I fumbled for an appropriate response and to hide my utter dismay.

When I eventually found my tongue, I responded, after the long pause, that our company did indeed donate to political parties, including the ANC, however, only through official and transparent fund-raising events and activities. I also said that I would need to get approval from my partners for this. I asked the Mayor to request the “donation” in writing on the party's letterhead for me and my partners to consider. The Mayor left shortly after without interest in the project or our approach. After that, the scheduled meeting with the officials proceeded without any mention of the meeting with the Mayor and the “donation” to the party via him. I met with the representatives of the other companies afterwards. They were all professionals trying to build and grow their businesses. They all complained bitterly of having been “forced” to pay “donations” or be excluded from the project. Some also said this was a regular requirement when winning bids in the Municipality.

Because this was a nationally funded project with funds channelled to the Municipality, I decided to declare the incident of the Mayor and the “donation” to the senior officials in the NDPG office at National Treasury. My intention was to ensure they had knowledge of this and to ensure that no fingers could be pointed to the company if it emerged that other parties had paid to be involved in the project. A few days after reporting the incident, I was (by a chance encounter) introduced to Trevor Manuel, the (former) Minister of Finance. He pulled me aside and said: *‘I heard about the incident in the Municipality and what is going on there. Don’t you worry this is going to be dealt with’*. A week or so thereafter, the Mayor was called to Luthuli House, the ANC party headquarters, and fired.

As it turns out, and as explained by the other companies in the bid, the request for a “donation” from the Mayor was a regular *pattern*. The project continued and we collaborated with the local companies that we partnered with. It was a positive experience. Some Swedish development workers based in the Municipality at the time commended the project and work saying that it met global standards for quality and professionalism. It was an external endorsement we appreciated. However, the cost for the local companies who could not call on a broader range of clients was devastating. One company closed completely.

4. Conclusion: the present and future is in danger

Whilst action was taken in this instance (and provides a good example of how leadership can make an impact), this pattern and approach unfortunately not only persisted, but has grown exponentially over the years in both ambition and impact. Politicians (specifically) demanding payment and misdirecting public funds—to finance their political parties and pay salaries to functionaries—have destroyed municipalities. With it the notion of how a developmental state could use procurement and projects such as ours to build skills and local capability, whilst delivering real value, has been destroyed. What we experienced in Municipality in 2003 was the tip of the iceberg—the early looting and corruption of the democratic developmental state.

Today, we see how organised crime has now also stepped into this “tender” space—with gangs demanding their 30 per cent for local content from contractors. Like with the example of partnering with local companies to build capacity as a positive and developmental step in its own right, the 30 per cent has evolved into a tool for extortion and rent seeking. Localisation through procurement has also been warped, whereby the requirement for a local supplier is used to inflate tender prices—with local politicians taking their cut. One point that I believe is worth making is that in municipal procurement there is undoubtedly “leakage” via the officials. However, the real, large scale, theft is driven by politicians. Instead of exercising oversight, they bend the procurement and contracting processes to their ends. The utter devastation and failure of our municipalities across the country is evidence of the impact of this looting, along with the lost opportunities for real growth and development. I might be called a hopeless optimist, but I remain convinced that the development state can work and it can make a lasting impact in the just transition too. Ethical, courageous, disciplined, and consistent (political) leadership is required to enable it. That, as we have seen, in where the real challenge lies.

I return to the ghost of apartheid—De Klerk’s apartheid normativity in the post-apartheid—and to the desperation of today’s politically enfranchised but spatially excluded. It bears worth reminding our political leaders that there can be no justice without spatial justice. It bears worth reminding of the findings of the Harvard Growth Lab report, ‘Growth Through Inclusion in South Africa’, which notes that in the absence of ‘direct responses to spatial exclusion via urban and housing policies’ (Hausmann et al. 2023, 02), all other government efforts to improve welfare will be marginalised.

References

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