

THE FUTURE OF THE CAPE TOWN FORESHORE

On April 14th an exhibition opens in Cape Town's City Hall on the possible futures of the foreshore precinct. It is a World Design Capital project. The professionally curated exhibition shows the culmination of a year of work by students of the Faculty of Engineering and the Built Environment (EBE) at the University of Cape Town, as well as material showing the history and development of the foreshore area. The idea for this student involvement came from Transport for Cape Town, and was captured in an MoU signed in late 2012 between the Mayor of the City of Cape Town and the Dean of the Faculty, Professor Francis Petersen.

The project offered a unique learning experience to the students of EBE in two ways – both of which are essential to the education of built environment and engineering professionals in the 21st century. The first is that students are given the opportunity to work on 'real life' problems and issues and to use their creativity to produce multiple ideas and innovations in response to these issues. The second is that they do this as far as possible in an interdisciplinary way by interacting with other students across disciplinary boundaries. 'Situating learning' through 'critical design thinking' embeds vitally important graduate attributes in EBE students which will stand them in good stead as future professionals in a diverse, rapidly changing and challenging world.

The foreshore precinct offers a wonderful opportunity to think about very different futures for this part of the city, but with an eye on what coming decades might bring in terms of climate change and resource depletion and the need to shift towards cities which are less-car dependent and more sustainable and socially inclusive. The precinct lies on the edge of the city's primary business and tourist hub, yet it is dominated by elevated freeways (and some partially completed sections) from an earlier car-oriented age leaving a strategic part of city derelict and blighted. Earlier connections between the city centre and the sea, with unique public spaces such as the old pier, were severed in the process. Port development reinforced this disconnect, creating an industrial and concrete-laden 'backyard' on some of the most valuable land in the city. From time to time over the decades the prospect of 'completing the freeways' has been resuscitated; civic protest and lack of sufficient justification for this kind of expenditure has stopped it each time.

Students were urged to think how this part of the city could be different. Could the freeways be significantly changed (or demolished) and replaced with vibrant social housing, bustling markets, sea-front restaurants and cafes and well-planned public spaces? Could Cape Town re-establish its old connection with the sea? Students had plenty of precedent to draw on for their ideas. Across the US and other parts of the world, cities have been dismantling their inner city freeways as part of public-transit oriented and pedestrianised urban renewal projects and replacing them with improved city fabric and even new 'smart city' ideas. Professionals from a number of City of Cape Town departments gave generously of their time to support the project and give students feedback on their ideas. The exhibition at the City Hall displays a wealth of exciting possibilities for the foreshore precinct and is an important reminder of the opportunities foregone by not taking this part of the city seriously.

The interdisciplinary nature of this learning experience was also important. While it was not possible at short notice to change timetables and form all students into cross-departmental teams, connections were made wherever possible. Ultimately some 600 undergraduate and post-graduate students from architecture, urban planning, landscape architecture, urban design, property studies, quantity surveying, and civil, electrical and chemical engineering took part. Many students were exposed to what other disciplines did for the first time. One important reason for poor city functioning all over the world is because municipal line-function departments do not work together in an integrated way. The silo-ed nature of professions and departments starts in universities where disciplines are similarly segregated. Yet it is increasingly recognized that innovation and creativity works best when people from different disciplines come together to brain-storm about real-world problems. In various parts of the world new schools of 'design-thinking' are being established to bring together exactly these ideas of live projects and interdisciplinarity.

Professor Vanessa Watson: deputy dean of the Faculty and co-ordinator of the Future Foreshore project.

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