

SPATIAL TRANSFORMATION IN SOUTH AFRICA: A PIPE DREAM?

A TODES

Professor of Urban and Regional Planning, School of Architecture and Planning;
University of the Witwatersrand; Email: Alison.Todes@wits.ac.za

ABSTRACT

The newly democratic South Africa in 1994 inherited sprawling, fragmented towns and cities with deep racialized spatial inequalities. Post-apartheid planning has embodied ideas of 'spatial transformation': the restructuring of space towards greater equity, efficiency, spatial justice and resilience, enabling more equitable access to jobs, livelihoods and urban services. This has included emphases on urban compaction and densification; promoting residential opportunities for low-income groups close to areas of economic opportunities; developing transport linkages and connections across the city; greater income and land use mix; and the transformation of former black townships particularly through activating economic development in these spaces. Policy and legislative frameworks in support of new approaches to planning have consolidated (although there are still gaps), while spatial development frameworks embodying these ideas have been developed with increasing sophistication and levels of detail, at least in metropolitan areas. There has also been some implementation of innovative projects, policies and processes addressing these ideas, although some have had complex outcomes. Yet 29 years later, South African cities still bear hallmarks of apartheid, and in several respects, the extended, fragmented and unequal spatial patterning of South African towns and cities has intensified.

This presentation will provide a reflection on where we have come with regard to spatial transformation, and how and why spatial transformation of the sort initially anticipated in policy has been constrained. It points to the significance of the institutional and political environment; prevailing economic conditions and levels of inequality; the role of various stakeholders, as well as market forces in shaping what planning is able to achieve. While older expectations of spatial transformation might indeed be a pipe dream, more could have been (and could be) achieved. Yet the discourse of failed spatial transformation neglects the spatial changes that are occurring - we see new patterns of densification and intensification alongside growth on the edge; shifts in the racial spatial patterns; inner city change; the growth of informal economic activities and spaces; informal TOD around taxi ranks; new land use mixes; and the growth of economic activities in townships and new high streets. These could be better supported and managed.