

# Building a better life

**C**ONSIDER these two facts: First, most of the world's finest universities are significant drivers of economic growth, both locally and regionally.

It is therefore ironic that none of these schools make economic impact a key part of their visions.

That, it would seem, emerges indirectly from a focus on excellence in scholarship, the core business of any university. Second, the finest universities are situated in the world's most competitive, beautiful cities that are magnets for the best and most creative professionals, including academics and students. These are the movers and shakers of the so-called "creative class" who thrive on intellectual challenges and urban buzz. So here's the thing: We can safely assume that economic accomplishment is an unintended, unplanned outcome of academic excellence, innovation and high impact discoveries, that take place in the world's most attractive urban environments.

Connect those dots and one thing becomes clear for the Buffalo City Municipality. It needs to embrace the proposition being put forward by the University of Fort Hare, which is to consolidate and grow its metropolitan campus in and around the sleeper site in East London.

This has enormous implications for the economic growth of the city. For the first time the inner city stands poised to host a large, institutional anchor tenant, in the form of Fort Hare. The planning mechanism being used by the university to integrate its activities with the city is an evidence-based urban design framework called a "long-range plan".

Unlike a traditional master plan, an evidence-based long-range plan is designed to enable functional and spatial transformations over the long-term. It is based on a spatial-structural approach to planning and is therefore non-programmatic. This means it provides an integrated and flexible spatial framework for the roll out of built environment projects for a city's development.

The Fort Hare-East London long range plan is based on a few design principles that enable urban vibrancy. These include horizontal and vertical mixed land use patterns, with commercial and retail activities at street level and academic and residential activities on the upper floors. Second, because the sleeper site is spatially extensive, it is broken down into functional districts, or precincts, each with a strong academic and commercial identity. Third, emphasis is placed on making strong spatial connections between the new and existing built form fabrics, in

Support for UFH long-range plan will give East London economy impetus it needs, write **Leslie Bank and Glen Mills**



**A VIEW FROM JAN SMUTS:** With the rugby stadium in the foreground, the railway line into town running down the middle and the sea in the distance, this 3-D graphic starts to imagine the new built form on part of East London's sleeper site. The grey structures represent a new city-campus, mixed-use precincts in and around the city.

the form of streets, walkways, quadrangles, squares and foot bridges.

Fourth, important movement intersections are marked by monuments celebrating the histories of Fort Hare and East London. Fifth, the sequence of spatial districts allows for a flexible phased approach to urban reconstruction which is a hallmark of traditional city growth.

International best practice shows that urban design is a crucial component of urban restructuring and development, especially from an economic and social point of view.

Essentially, an urban design plan needs to provide three things: a spatial vision, a physical plan, and an enabling process.

Any vision for a town must show how the built environment will enable sustainable social, cultural and economic processes. Therefore, a town's buildings, open space networks, movement systems, landscapes and other physical infrastructure need to be integrated in order to provide a holistic and functional living environment.

An urban design framework is essentially a spatial structure that allows the town to "hang together" economically and socially. It also enables the town to develop in a flexible, adaptable and coherent

way. This, in turn, will establish a toolbox of guidelines and principles for creating continuity and difference, as well as community and privacy, at all scales of the built environment. Finally, an urban design plan must be accompanied by a valid process that ensures inclusive buy-in from all stakeholders, so that both public and private interests are satisfied.

The long-range plan will be implemented using a package of design codes and generators. Here are a few to take note of:

- Interconnected and pedestrian-friendly network of open spaces;
- Fabric of continuous building;
- Compact and efficient densities;
- Flexibility and adaptability;
- Well defined districts and a legible spatial order;
- Community and privacy;
- Environment and energy;
- Universal disability access;
- A sense of place;
- A five-minute (400m) walking distance to facilities for holistic urban living;
- Optimised building densities;
- Reduced greenhouse gases.

This project is unique. Why? Because it aims to reshape the East London city centre based on "triple helix" partnerships between the university, business and govern-

ment. The "triple helix" model has achieved success elsewhere in the world as a driver of economic growth and urban renewal.

It therefore needs active participation and close co-operation between BCM, Fort Hare and the East London business community. If these partners find common ground to work together in a city precinct, they will create an urban buzz, which transforms derelict spaces into dynamic, innovative and creative places. And this benefits all.

When this happens, economic growth explodes and universities are transformed from latent assets in the city to potent engines for growth. This could really happen in East London and BCM and a university like Fort Hare could be a vital cog in the process.

Universities generate research and create knowledge that business and government need for innovation, the creation of new products and services, and the reduction of costs. As primary sites of knowledge, production universities are critical hubs for innovations and creators of value. Business and government seek out good universities with strong brands (and Fort Hare has such a brand) as potential partners for joint ventures, which include endowed research chairs, spe-

cialised research institutes and outreach and teaching programmes. Many of these partnerships occur in the fields of science, engineering, technology, humanities and the arts.

There are some dangers associated with this process, especially when universities become clients of the state or business and lose their academic independence, compromise their integrity or act unethically in their research. But, if properly managed, these relationships can radically and dynamically transform East London and Fort Hare for the benefit of citizens and scholars.

We believe that the development of the sleeper site as an integrated mixed use area, where the university acts as an anchor tenant in themed districts – business school, a civic centre, technology and engineering hub and so on – holds the key and will be the catalyst for the economic growth that East London needs.

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By **RAY HARTLE**

**I**T HAS to be one of the special spaces on a hot Cape day – the piece of real estate running along the railway line all the way from Muizenburg down to Simonstown. Today is particularly special, with a steam train coming past, the unmistakable rumble of the engine and coaches – so different from the electric version – felt through your body long before the hooter has been sounded down the line.

"I like this salad. I'm glad I got the salad. I like the sauce not the liver. I never eat, babe, when it comes to liver and mussels, just the sauce."

Sitting on the narrow deck of an iconic Kalk Bay restaurant, the cool breeze will complement the refreshing drink I've ordered. Across the tracks and about 10 paces of sand, a few families are

## In a restaurant, loud's not proud

padding in the warm-ish water. It's midday, but neither the restaurant nor the beach is busy yet, Cape Town's notoriously slow start only just kicking in; except for them, three tables away, every monotonous, nonsensical word tearing through me.

"You polish your food, hey – gone, nothing there? It looks nice though, hey babe? Very nice. Have you tasted the bread, babe? It's got a lot of spice in it – some sort of spice, cinnamon, allspice, like nutmeg maybe, some kind of spice."

Boring, vulgar, nasty, obsessively drilling down into every detail – over two, three, even five courses, loud conversation has replaced smoking as the bad habit of choice in restaurants, says a loved one.

Too right; go into any restaurant – actually, any public space – and there will be some idiot going off at an unnecessary decibel level, about silly, arbitrary things.

Some will describe every morsel crossing their lips, killing any interest you may have had in that particular dish.

There are the lovesick talkers, out with their best friends, hanging out all the dirty linen.

There's another kind who'll turn on their lunch partner right there: "Why do you ask if I'm gay? It's this frickin white hair." And then proceeds a diatribe about how he has this gay look but he really isn't. Do I care? Do I look like I care?

Sometimes, patrons on cell-

phones will step out of line, like the guy in the beachfront coffee shop yesterday closing a deal on a house in Vincent, but they're easily swatted away.

Meanwhile, she drones on, her inanities interspersed with sweet pet names for her partner. We don't hear his responses, so some understanding is lost. Sadly, we're forced to hear her.

"It doesn't even faze me. I'm bringing it up cos it happens all the time. You're such a liar. And you didn't tell me. You didn't tell anybody else. You told Ed."

"I didn't tell. . . ." he begins, but she cuts him off.

"She told me. In your stupidity you told someone else and you're lying even now. And now that she

knows, the whole world knows.

"Why am I going on about this? Because I'm catching you out, that's why. You're not even telling the truth now. That's what so infuriates me about you, my love."

Her partner tries to be sarcastic but her rant continues to roll over him. Eventually, he switches off, an option sadly not open to the rest of us diners.

Most restaurateurs care little for the bad acoustics patrons have to endure, even when there are ways of putting a lid on obtrusive ambient noise. And managers care even less about protecting us from customers who don't know how to keep their lips zipped when out on the town.

Apart from the obvious, like telling them to shut up, we have the choice to move to another table. Or move to another restaurant entirely.