



BUT SERIOUSLY, FOLKS?

Kevin Minter-Brown

Durban's stunning makeover

DURBAN is like a sticky toffee pudding. It's nice, but it gets really, really good when you warm it up.

I've lived abroad in several other cities for many years. When I returned, I had a choice of whether to live in Cape Town or Durban, where I had grown up and had a career before I left.

Cape Town is supposedly the obvious choice. But after giving it a short go, I decided five years ago to come back home to Durbs.

It's for many reasons but a lot of them are because of the sea. The coast. The lifestyle. The spectacular climate.

But you can't pick a city on these things alone. Mostly why you should decide to live somewhere is because of the people. Your people. Other people. New people. And recently I had occasion to meet someone with a grand vision for the city and for its people.

I'm always staggered by the amount of development going on in our metropolitan area.

People online are so occupied with social issues, racism, inequality and inefficiency, that if they just looked up from their screens long enough, they would see that there is transformation, tolerance and mutual growth going on around them all the time. You only have to choose to want to see it.

What I see in Durban – and never mind all the negativity and hostility that lives online – is a culture of progression, of getting on with it, of helping each other to make this city a better place. Oh yes, go on, if you want to find some proof otherwise, you can find that, too, but this column is not about that.

On my radio show last week, we dedicated an hour to talking to one such visionary who, not necessarily on his own, is one of many people and companies transforming the landscape that we live in.

Jonny Friedman is the chief executive of Urban Lime, a company that has purchased about R1 billion in property, most of which was not being used to its full potential, in a state of disrepair or just empty.

Phase one of Urban Lime's long-term vision has included the purchase and repurposing or regeneration of big city properties like 320 Dr Pixley KaSeme street (West Street), the old Nedbank building as well as many other CBD high-rises and warehouses, and also a large chunk of Florida Road. Some of their developments are in partnership with the City.

Urban Lime is not new to this. The firm redeveloped much of the East end of London from back in the early 90s, and are very much a big part of the success of Cape Town's inner city revival.

Much has been, and will be, written about these and other city projects, but the thing that I most liked about Friedman is his commitment to functional redesign of the spaces in between the properties.

The buildings are for the tenants and their customers, but the outside – that's for all of us.

Having visited one of the sites in Florida Road, I am reminded that it's not just about buying properties, fixing them up and letting them out or selling them, but very much about creating social places and lifestyle-enhancers in between. An abundance of research goes into each area's planning to see what the area and its people need most.

From what was once the parking lot behind these Florida Road premises, is slowly emerging an open courtyard with a giant fever tree casting dappled shade over what will eventually be a market-style open-air space with cool mixed tenants.

They are the company that funded the gigantic 15-story mural of Anton Lembede, watching over the main city street that salutes his legacy. A hop, skip and jump away is 320 Dr Pixley KaSeme Street. This ailing former icon was mostly empty, with massive dormant floor space, in a city begging for facilities for small enterprises. Three hundred new tenants have already moved in, or are moving in, now that the building has been suitably revamped. City traders, artists, furniture makers, clothing manufacturers and more now have their own modern, clean, functioning and suitable space to help their businesses flourish. No more working in grubby or barely appropriate conditions, or slugging your wares in and out of town.

This is the city I have chosen. And although I live on the beach up the coast, I travel every day to the heart of the city, and I can already see progress on every other corner.

With other urban renewal projects, like the Morrison Street and Rivertown districts, the Station Drive collective and the expanding promenade, the city is fast transforming from throwing "there's-nothing-to-do-in-Durban" shade around, to having a rather brilliant and unique smorgasbord of options.

Watch this space. And that one. And that one over there, too. In fact, just keep your eyes open Durban, our city is catching up with the coolness we've longed for.