

HELEN JOSEPH AND FLORIDA ROADS ROCK

We need more 'sticky streets'

Koyi Mchunu

THE battle over who controls the future of urban spaces rages on, with politicians and planners trying to keep up with a growing population's demand for affordable housing, plentiful and safe public spaces, jobs, affordable public transport, and well-maintained parks.

It's a constant tug-of-war, but it's beautiful, and it's the reason why people love living in cities, even if they're not the sanest, most peaceful or most beautiful places on Earth. Well, at least some of them.

On Florida Road I settle down next to the window of a café. Starbucks is buzzing with caffeine heads (including yours truly) having a mid-morning fix; some are sampling pastries and cakes.

The scene is repeated a couple of kilometres away on Helen Joseph (Daventry) Road at the Bean Green Coffee Roastery and no doubt other not-so-salubrious joints around town.

Less than a kilometre away, a stroll down Florida Road reveals many elements that are on everyone's wish list for a decent local street: a handful of excellent cafés and restaurants, hardware shop, chemist, baker, greengrocer, a pub, deli and butcher.

What is really fascinating about this is that it is not a glamorous location. Some up-market housing, yes; both are just socially mixed areas.

So how are Florida and Helen Joseph roads pulling it off? What lessons for Mahatma Gandhi and similar streets downtown, if any?

In a nutshell, how do we create what urban planners call "sticky streets" – a phrase popularised by the Canadian planner Brent Toderian.

Depending on who one chooses to believe, the city council would rightly point to an enabling local area plan.

There is also the urban legend of a mafia recycling their hard-earned cash in pubs and restaurants.

Finally, there are actions of a bunch of committed small businesses owners, some of whom live in the area and have a vested interest in the well-being of their neighbourhood.

Equally essential ingredients include redefining and re-designing streets, and the less tangible aspect of believing in the goodwill of people.

Toderian noted that there is little or no conversation at all about how people use and enjoy and love streets, and how



Performers break-dance on the streets of Durban's Florida Road during one of the precinct's First Thursdays, a monthly showcase for local talent and venues. Part of reclaiming urban spaces is about acknowledging that cities are co-created by a multitude of actors from diverse backgrounds, says the writer.

PICTURE: MARILYN BERNARD

lingering should be a measurable definition of success for a greater street.

There is something to be said about the phrase, "growing up in the streets", without the perverse meaning that tends to be associated with it.

It denotes this notion of stickiness about the streets.

Streets are places for hanging out, mindful of the "pocket pickers" and lurking monsters, real or imagined.

Holden Avenue, which connects Florida and Montpelier roads, is taking the notion of stickiness to another level.

It is home to the aptly named Love Coffee, a delightful joint reminiscent of Coffee Tree in my adopted neighbourhood of Glenwood. A section of Holden Avenue has been claimed back with brick paving, which creates a pedestrian-friendly atmosphere about the surrounding shops.

Part of the strategy involves acknowledging that cities are co-created by a multitude of actors from diverse backgrounds. For example, Jan Gehl imaginatively synthesised psychology and architecture to re-energise planners' approach to city living.

He railed against what he called "bird s****" architecture and towers dropped in from the heavens by globe-trotting architects, and championed the pedestrian and the cyclist.

Along Helen Joseph Road, restaurant owners spotted a bit

of "stickiness" for themselves. The forecourt gardens have given way to chairs and tables for customers to stick around.

Contrast this with the sterile towers of flats thrown up by speculative builders at the far end of the infamous Point Road. At the foot of each is an empty space – clean, manicured and without any human presence.

Preserving an area's informal spaces is also important. They give vitality to otherwise ordinary streets and provide venues for interaction.

At the corner of Bulwer and Helen Joseph roads sits a handful of men making handcrafts. Similarly, at the corner of Florida and Gordon roads is another space that accommodates a diversity of activities including exercise in the afternoons and skateboarders.

One of the enemies of stickiness is overzealous regulations. There was once a time when West Street, mainly the corner with Field Street, was the space to be midday on Saturdays just before the shops closed, for any self-respecting young man on top of his game.

Yes, there was a time when downtown Durban shut down, and it was a signal to move towards the then Indian section, hand-in-hand, to watch movies in cinemas until early evening.

Life was good, or so we thought. You knew where you belonged and what time it was, otherwise you were rudely

reminded. The notion of sticky streets is also up against formidable challenges in the form of the internet, the seemingly ubiquitous and sanitised shopping atria, and pervasive and palpable fear of being the next victim of crime.

There is no doubt we live in a time of technological and scientific genius, and the spectre of violence has also become part of living.

The combination of these factors has meant sacrificing communities for convenience and safety. We have rather inadvertently, I convince myself, allowed our fascination with technology and fashionable, more often inappropriate, design concepts to ruin the fabric of our cities.

I have never been a fan of neighbourhood militias of any sort, including street committees, which suggest notions of Nimbyism or Lulu. (For the uninitiated, Nimby stands for Not In My Back Yard, while Lulu means Locally Unwanted Land Use.) This could also include people we do not like.

If the CID/BID (City and Business Improvement Districts) model continues to proliferate, the commons that make a city great may completely be at the disposal of a single class, one inherently opposed to discourse and organising.

What was once an emergency measure by business owners in cities with a dwindling

tax base has become a power play for the future of urban space. Originally they were intended to take over certain services that cities were no longer delivering at all or sufficiently, like refuse collection and policing.

Notwithstanding the perceived and real benefits associated with CIDs/BIDs, the jury is still out.

What goes on along Florida and Helen Joseph roads on the one hand, and Holden Avenue on the other, represents a spectrum of interventions aimed at creating stickiness, each suited to the particularities of the place and time.

I suspect the less tangible skill of observing and documenting human behaviour that the great Jane Jacobs was renowned for may be one of the means for unlocking the not-so-secret to stickiness, together with an enabling regulatory framework, and an energetic small business community.

Let us forget, a sceptical dose of urban legend in the form of the Mafia may also be necessary. All understand that one cannot force people to come to a place, only make places where people want to go.

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