

Stellenbosch and an appropriate approach to spatial development and management

Spatial plans are mostly technical documents. In terms of the legislation and procedures governing their preparation, they have to address a host of matters, all of which are not of equal importance to all stakeholders. The plan may not resolve all the issues discussed to the same extent; some matters need time to be investigated further, while others are reasonably firm. In its elaboration to meet requirements, spatial plans can become dull, hiding the core message.

We present the critical underlying narrative here and argue that adhering to it, through numerous individual actions and decisions – across sectors of society – is at the core of managing development and land use in Stellenbosch better, at the heart of a better future for all.

The narrative ...

“Stellenbosch is a special place; all of it ... its various settlements, its nature areas, farms, education institutions, its innovative corporations, small businesses, its places to visit, its places to live, its festivals, its history ... its people.

In terms of its space – activities in space, landscapes, and urban places, streets, and buildings – Stellenbosch continues to impress and bring opportunity, joy, and contentment; in different ways, to visitors and residents alike. Many would love to live here, work here, or visit more often.

Stellenbosch has been judged as a place of high opportunity. Numerous factors combine to a recognition that this place can contribute more to growing societal needs, in its region, and our country. If one lives here, the chances are that you can make a good livelihood. Stellenbosch is truly a rich place.

Stellenbosch is harsh on some. Many who live here do not have adequate shelter, or the opportunity to work. Others feel that the time has come to depart from farms, to give up farming. Many study here, but cannot enjoy university life to the full because there is limited residential opportunity for students. Then again, many struggle in traffic every day, on congested roads, wasting time and money for fuel, even if privileged enough to own a private vehicle. Stellenbosch is not that easy on people anymore. Its challenges increasingly impact on all, albeit in different ways.

Citizens respond to challenges differently. Many owners of agricultural land have indicated a desire to develop their land for other, predominantly urban activities. These thoughts already involve a large land area, comparable to the size of Stellenbosch town. Others, tired of waiting for a housing opportunity here or elsewhere – and government support – invade land, staking a claim, the right to a place to live, on virgin land, even if the land is not deemed desirable for development because of its agricultural or environmental value, is prone to risk, or allocated to someone else. Some, with the necessary material means, elect to close themselves off, to obtain a place to live in gated communities, secure from perceived or real threat to body and property.

Stellenbosch grows, both naturally, and because more people are attracted here. Those drawn include the poor, better off, and large corporations. Stellenbosch has a special quality of accommodating hope, good opportunities, and a better life; the perception is that your needs can be met faster, your children can get access to a school promptly, or, your journey to work will be less cumbersome.

However, Stellenbosch grows on top of unfinished business. It grows on top of ways of a past that had not having been fixed, the separation of people, the focus on some as opposed to all; needs not met, exclusion. It also grows on top of limited public resources. While the municipality and other spheres of government collect and allocate funds for service delivery, it is not enough to address backlogs, fix the mistakes of the past, prepare for unexpected crisis (for example, in the form of fires), or meet anticipated future needs.

As Stellenbosch grows, things get worse. In terms of how we manage development and space, we know what direction to take. We know that we should adopt a precautionary approach to nature and agricultural land, we know that we should contain and compact settlements, we know that we should provide more choice in shelter and housing opportunity, and that we should focus on public and non-motorised transport. This knowledge is also embedded in policy, from global conventions to national, provincial and local frameworks, including the Stellenbosch Municipal Integrated Development Plan, the legal plan which directs the municipal budget and resource allocation.

The issue is that we have not implemented what we believe the appropriate policy direction is well. We should ask why. We can answer that achieving in terms of new policy is not easy. It requires new ways of living and doing. Higher densities, leaving the car, more interaction between groups of society sharing public space, more partnership in unlocking development opportunity, and so on.

Even if difficult, it is a matter of now or never. We cannot behave and live like before. We cannot afford to lose more nature and agricultural land, develop at low densities, and prioritise building roads for private cars more than public transport. If we do that, the system will fail. Material wealth will not assist.

Despite difficulties, it appears as if our approach is shifting. Land previously occupied by manufacturing enterprises in critical locations in Stellenbosch have slowly become available for re-use. The potential of Klappmuts to accommodate enterprises requiring large landholdings and dependent on good intra- and inter-regional logistic networks is acknowledged. Landowners realise that overcoming the resource constraints, infrastructure constraints, and the cross-subsidisation required for more inclusive development – the extent of energy needed – necessitates joint work, joint planning, and implementation of a scale and nature not yet experienced in Stellenbosch. Corporations realise that they have broader responsibility – not only in contributing to good causes concerning nature, education, or the arts but in actively constructing better living environments. We realise that we have to enact partnerships to make our towns better.

We also have the benefit of history. In times past, we have, as Stellenbosch, changed our destiny, did things for the better. Starting with an individual idea, a thought, often through an individual, great things were done. With such ideas and actions the town established a university, saved historic buildings and places, launched cultural celebrations with broad reach, safeguarded unique nature areas, provided families provided with homes, begun corporations with global reach. When a fire destroyed homes, they were rebuilt promptly with collective energy and purpose. When children needed schooling, and government could not provide, some established schools.

Often, these initiatives started outside of government, albeit assisted by the government. They were started by those who thought beyond current challenges, without necessarily being able to project outcomes over time in full. They just understood that one step might lead to another. Not all the technical detail was resolved, not everything understood in full. They merely acted in terms of core principles. As matters unfolded and new challenges emerged, the principles guided them.

The new Municipal Spatial Development Framework recognises that the spatial decisions and actions of many make what settlements are. It asks us to understand that plans cannot do everything, predict everything. It asks all to consider action with a few core beliefs, principles, or concepts, geared towards the common good. Specifically, it asks us to consider seven principles:

First, maintain and grow the assets of Stellenbosch's natural environment. Humanity depends on nature for physical and spiritual sustenance, livelihoods, and survival. Ecosystems provide numerous benefits or ecosystem services that underpin economic development and support human well-being. They include provisioning services such as food, freshwater, and fuel as well as an array of regulating services such as water purification, pollination, and climate regulation. Healthy ecosystems are a prerequisite to sustaining economic development and mitigating and adapting to climate change.

Second, respect and grow our cultural heritage, the legacy of physical artefacts and intangible attributes of society inherited from past generations maintained in the present and preserved for the benefit of future generations. Cultural heritage underpins aspects of the economy and differentiates places. Culture is a dynamic construct; forever emerging in response to new challenges, new interactions and opportunity, and new interpretations. Spatially, we must organise Stellenbosch in a manner which also sets the stage for new expressions of culture.

Third, within developable areas – areas not set aside for limited development owing to its natural or cultural significance – allow future opportunity to build on existing infrastructure investment, on the opportunity inherent in these systems when reconfigured, augmented or expanded. Infrastructure represents significant public investment over generations, not readily replicated over the short term. It represents substantial assets for enabling individual and communal development opportunity of different kinds. From a spatial perspective, movement systems are particularly significant. Elements of the movement system, and how they interconnect, have a fundamental impact on accessibility, and therefore economic and social opportunity. Specifically important is places of intersection between movement systems – places which focus human energy, where movement flows merge – and where people on foot can readily engage with public transport.

Fourth, clarify and respect the different roles and potentials of existing settlements. All settlements are not the same. Some are large, supported by significant economic and social infrastructure, offer a range of opportunity, and can accommodate growth and change. Others are small and the chance to provide for growth or change is minimal. Generally, the potential of settlements to help change and growth relates directly to their relationship with natural assets, cultural assets, and infrastructure. We must accommodate change and growth where existing assets will be impacted on the least or lend itself to generating new opportunity.

Fifth, address human needs – for housing, infrastructure, and facilities – clearly in terms of the constraints and opportunity related to natural assets, cultural assets, infrastructure, and the role of settlements. We must meet human need in areas where the assets of nature are not degraded, where cultural assets can be best respected and expanded, and where current infrastructure and settlement agglomeration offers the greatest opportunity. Generally, we can help human need in two ways. The first is through infill and redevelopment of existing settled areas. The second is through new green-field development. We need to focus on both while restricting the spatial footprint of settlements outside existing urban areas as far as possible.

Sixth, pursue balanced communities. All settlements should be balanced. That means they should provide for all groups, and dependent on size, a range of services and

opportunities for residents. It also says they should provide for walking and cycling, not only cars.

Finally, focus energy on a few catalytic areas that offer extensive opportunity and address present risk. Planning cannot attempt to treat all areas equally. Some areas offer more opportunity for more people than others. We need to focus on the areas and actions where a significant number of people will benefit, where we will meet their needs. There is also a need to focus on areas of 'deep' need, notwithstanding location, where limited opportunity poses a risk to livelihoods. Some informal settlements and poorer areas, may not be located to offer the best chance for inhabitants, yet services need to be provided and maintained here. However, significant new development should not occur in these places, exacerbating undesirable impacts or further limiting the opportunity for people to pursue sustainable livelihoods.

Spatial plans are 'partial' frameworks for action. They deal with space. Command of space is not enough to develop or manage a settlement in the interest of all. Each spatial principle, each concept requires parallel actions in other sectors, including how we form institutions for execution, how we transport people, how we fund things, where we focus resources, and so on.

The spatial principles must help us to think through these implications, action by action, decision by decision.”

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