

PLACE-MAKING AND THE BUFFALO CITY UNIVERSITY-CITY PROJECT

East London is situated in the Eastern Cape's Buffalo City Metropolitan Municipality and is home to at least four higher education institutions. But is it truly a university city? The HSRC is working with the Buffalo City Metropolitan Development Agency to find ways to transform it into a space where people have a strong sense of belonging, a sense of place. By *Prof Leslie Bank*

Place-making is a new buzzword in the global urban development industry, especially in large, former industrial cities. Its ascendancy has been linked to ongoing processes of de-industrialisation in the global north and the associated need for spatial, economic and social restructuring to revitalise depressed industrial and suburban neighbourhoods. However, given that these cities are often not just crumbling at the fringes, but hollowing out at the core, inner-city renewal has become critical for big-city place-making and smart-city growth.

A dedicated HSRC research group has developed a research and engagement agenda for place-making and development at various levels in South Africa. It is engaged in township heritage and tourism projects; human settlements formation and housing-delivery projects; and urban-precinct development projects. It has also embarked on a major effort to understand current migration and settlement dynamics through a place-making perspective, in a new book, *Migrant Labour After Apartheid* (HSRC Press, forthcoming).

In relation to precinct development, the group has focused primarily on

the city-campus axis as a potential site for urban renewal, smart growth and inclusive development. In 2018 and 2019, the theme group published two books in this field, *Anchored in Place: Rethinking Universities and Development* (African Minds, 2018) and *City of Broken Dreams* (HSRC Press, 2019), which explore the complex relationship between universities and city building in South Africa. The group has also written regularly in the media advocating the transformation of "town and gown" relations to better align the activities of South African universities with the growth and development agendas of neighbourhoods, cities and regions across the country.

Approached by Buffalo City

As a result of this research and advocacy work, the CEO of the Buffalo City Metropolitan Development Agency (BCMDA), Bulumko Nelana, approached the HSRC to assist the agency in turning Buffalo City into more of a university city. Nelana expressed the concern that the presence and concentration of higher education in the city did not seem to be playing a catalytic role in the growth and development of the urban economy there. In fact, he noted, persistent disruptions associated with #FeesMustFall

protests in the inner city had negatively affected the municipality's image as an attractive place of investment.

In the book *Anchored in Place*, the researchers showed that, although quite a lot of activity was already happening informally to connect campuses and city neighbourhoods, most of it had taken the form of real-estate projects driven by the private sector and the "enlightened" self-interest of universities seeking third-stream income. One of the missing links in the emerging efforts was leadership and guidance from the municipal authorities in developing the place-making agenda.

Through a series of meetings, it was agreed that the overall goal of the project should be to define what a place-based university-city project would mean in practice and what interventions might be made to bring it to fruition on the ground. The first phase of work involved broad consultation with stakeholders, which included a meeting convened by the local development agency and the HSRC in East London in November 2018 with potential triple-helix partners in business, government and the higher education sector, as well as from civil-society forums and professional organisations. At

the meeting, various government agencies, including National Treasury and the Housing Development Agency, made presentations and committed themselves to support the university-city development initiative.

The HSRC team then assessed how the BCMDA's idea of "university-city" development could be operationalised. The team scanned a wide range of approaches and projects internationally in the context of the specific issues, opportunities and challenges faced in East London, particularly in the inner city where most of the knowledge institutions were located.

The role of anchors

By January 2019, the team came up with a clear "anchor-plus" proposal. The proposal took the form of a model, adapted from the work of the [Brookings Institution](#) in Washington on inner-city renewal and precinct development, in which universities and hospitals in the inner-city precincts serve as catalysts for urban regeneration by playing the role of "anchors".

In downtown East London, the team subsequently identified four higher education institutions – the Buffalo City Technical and Vocational Education and Training College and satellite campuses of the University of Fort Hare, Walter Sisulu University and the University of South Africa – and three hospitals – Frere Hospital, Life St Dominic's Hospital and Life East London Private Hospital – as anchor-catalysts for an inner-city, place-based university-city precinct. It was agreed that the district chosen as the knowledge and innovation hub in the city should be promoted through a city improvement district programme of place-making development interventions.

The "plus factor" in this case would be the high-profile, proposed re-development of a so-called "sleeper site", a 13-hectare empty tract of former Transnet land in the city centre, as a key part of the potential innovation district. It made sense to integrate the new university-city project with the plans for the "sleeper site", which included a potential

university-business-government (triple-helix) technology park and other smart-city interventions.

The developmental and physical scope of the project had to be defined and registered as part of Buffalo City's Built Environment and Performance Plan for 2019-2020. This involved a new set of engagements with the city planning office, at which the existing plans for inner-city regeneration had to be adjusted to accommodate the plans for the BCMDA university-city knowledge and innovation district and the city improvement district project.

Based on collaboration

After several meetings, an agreement was reached on the nature of the intervention for 2019/2020 and it was sent on for budgetary allocations. In line with place-making development methodology, the inner city-campus development initiative was not framed as a master plan to be rolled out in a top-down way; it was framed as a set of guiding principles and a model for implementation, structured around values that form the basis of partnerships and collaborations for place-based development.

A steering committee of representatives of all the inner-city anchor institutions, together with business representatives and the leaders of the various line departments in the city, was charged with taking the project forward, under the guidance of the BCMDA. The methodology also entailed constant monitoring and evaluation to ensure that strategic targets are

met, budgets are spent appropriately and mutually agreed projects are delivered.

Having laid the foundation for the transformation of the inner city, the BCMDA and the HSRC are currently engaged in discussions on how to take the project forward. This engagement provides an example of how the HSRC is using world-class research and analysis of development best practice to influence and shape new, innovative development projects at the local level in South African cities and regions.

University-city precincts as quality places

University-city precincts should be places that people care about and want to be in, but which are not exclusive and exclusionary. They must become places that have a strong and identifiable *sense of place*. Most people feel that way about their homes. In this regard, places with a strong sense of place may be described as *quality places*. These are places where people, students, lecturers, doctors and businesses want to be. They are vibrant, unique locations, which are interesting and visually attractive, often featuring public arts and creative activities. They are people-friendly, safe and walkable with mixed uses; the dimensions of the built environment in these places are comfortable relative to the street and feature quality façades.

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The old Wool Exchange Building was the centre of the wool trade in the Eastern Cape from 1930, when it was built, until 1981, when wool trading was moved down the coast to Port Elizabeth. In 1982 it was purchased by Rhodes University to serve as a satellite campus. It currently serves as the East London campus of Fort Hare University. **Photo:** Bfluff