

Neil Fraser looks at city pride

Contributed by Neil Fraser
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Neil Fraser

COUPLE of comments arising from last week's Citichat on Braamies: Firstly, I had an irate call from a representative of one of the major corporates that has invested heavily in the upgrading and in its own accommodation in the area. He felt that I had painted too rosy a picture of conditions in the precinct and that maintenance and general urban management were sorely lacking.

Secondly, had lunch at the Nerina Trojon on Wednesday, 2 July - I wrote about this new eatery before it opened a couple of months back, but this was the first occasion I have had to visit it. Great décor, great food - another value add to the inner city and to Braamies in particular.

Heard Mike Mills (from radio station Classic FM) refer to the Johannesburg metro area recently as "trench city". With new entrants into the telecommunications field ripping up roadsides for their cables which emerge like orange spaghetti at every pavement corner, trench city isn't a bad description. Add to that the rapidly deteriorating roads, and the car dealers must be doing well in realignment and repairs to damaged suspensions to compensate for their drop in sales.

Courts and citizenship

Wrote about the Constitution Hill Trust just over two years ago when it had its inaugural fundraising dinner and was delighted to attend the second such dinner at the end of last week. The trust was established with four basic objectives, the first two of which are:

(i) To secure the preservation and development of Constitution Hill as a heritage site symbolising our constitutional democracy; and

(ii) To make provision for educational programmes to be conducted at or in respect of Constitution Hill for the purpose of educating South Africans on constitutionalism, human rights and democracy; and thereby to promote respect for constitutionalism, democracy and human rights.

Maybe we should all club together to ensure that a neighbouring despot attends this programme! On second thought, it would be a complete waste of our money, he doesn't even know how to spell the words!

This year's function centred on fundraising to ensure the ongoing achievement of these two objectives - the evening resulted in a doubling of its target to R4-million. Well done! It was also used to honour three persons with the first Constitution Hill Trust Awards, and who better to honour than Ma Albertina Sisulu, George Bizos and Arthur Chaskalson? Each deservedly received standing ovations. In the midst of all the current issues that appear to reflect so badly on various aspects of our country's governance and jurisprudence, it is gratifying to be reminded that we have these great models who led the way and are still an influence in our society.

If you haven't been to the hill recently, please take some time to visit it and have a good look around the Fort. It has been undergoing a large amount of meticulous restoration work and even the ramparts have been cleaned up and replanted while work has also started on restoring the adjacent Governor's House. The whole complex is starting to look really great.

What I want to reflect on however, is the trust's programme to expose our children to the critical issues of constitutionalism, human rights and democracy. Since the opening of Constitution Hill, I think over 6 000 children have attended these programmes. They are taken through an interactive journey engaging with the past and present realities of South Africa and the hope that our Constitution brings to the future.

The trust also funds the training of teachers who accompany and expose the learners to these issues. Cyril Ramaphosa, the chair of the trust, told of how the Constitution Hill "experience" was not merely an educational one but was profoundly moving for teachers and learners alike. Certainly it equips our youth and future leaders with the critical basic understanding of what these three words - constitutionalism, human rights and democracy - that have been quite tarnished lately, mean for our present and future generations. This is a programme that should be compulsory for every single schoolchild from Lusikisiki, Laingsburg or wherever.

City pride

While at the dinner I was approached by a young man who introduced himself to me as a friend of Pule, who wrote the passionate letter about the city that I included in Citichat two weeks ago. In our discussion, the issue of "city pride" came up and the great need we have for all people to understand why the city was established and the journey it has taken, warts and all, what makes it tick, what is important and why it is a symbol to its citizens just as Paris and Rome and Prague are to those freed from previous tyrannies.

The problem is that so few people know or are interested in these issues. Yet monthly, sometimes weekly, I take Joburgers and visitors through the city and end up with comments like, "Wow, we just didn't know about that or that this is actually happening to move this city with all the incredible pains of childbirth through its revitalisation stage to a world-class African city!" Sure it's easy to sneer at this undefined objective when you are confronted with pictures of toyi-toying Johannesburg metro police officers and hear so-called leaders making reprehensible statements and read of drunk judges - hey, the world has its problems and these are no reasons to tear our hair out and dress in sackcloth and ashes.

Let's get off our butts and do something. We want citizens who have pride in their city and understand their heritage, even if they dislike the rotten aspects of it. We need to show them what it was all about and ensure that the youth of Johannesburg are exposed to the city and learn some of its fascinating history, both the terrible things that happened and the wonderful. That is why Constitution Hill is so incredibly special - it is so rich in symbolism and meaning, representing as it does the triumph of good over evil, right over wrong, freedom over repression; so does the city in its own way.

The World Cup in 2010 is a great opportunity not just to create infrastructure and invest in projects we always have needed but couldn't afford, but to change the attitude of ordinary people - it's time for a massive Pride in our City campaign!

High court precinct

The second occasion of last week, and one which underlines for me my earlier comments, was the official "opening" of the urban environment upgrading work around the High Court in Pritchard Street.

In 1892 this was Church Square following the building of a small Dutch Reformed Church on the site. It was quite quickly replaced with a larger building and was later bought by the government. The open area next to the church was renamed Government Square. Subsequently, it was again renamed, this time to honour Carl von Brandis, who was the first landdrost of Johannesburg.

Farmers and prospectors camped on the balance of the square and it later also housed the city's first synagogue. In front of the church building was a row of shops, including a cycle shop owned by the Hunt Brothers - later to become Williams Hunt & Co. Then the mining camp's first school was built next to the church. The church building itself was utilised for different activities during its life - it was a bakery, a lecture hall, a polling station during elections and the offices of the Rand Aid Association.

When the government announced its intention to clear the site for the building of law courts there was a strong outcry. However, as usual, the government wasn't particularly interested in what the people had to say and demolitions began in 1909.

Directly north of the court a fire station had previously been built and remained as Fire Brigade Headquarters until 1932, when it was demolished to make way for the Jeppe Street Post Office. This was built between 1933 and 1935 and was, in fact, the central Witwatersrand sorting depot for post carried by mail-trains, mail-ships and air carriers, hence the wording above the main entrance, Per Terram, Per Mare, Per Aera.

The law court building that was built, called "the new law courts", was completed in 1911. A newspaper report of the time recorded that "few branches of the public service have been more badly housed throughout South Africa than the High Courts of Justice but in no town has the provision been inferior to that in Johannesburg".

The report then went on to say: "However, the new buildings in process of erection on Von Brandis Square will be worthy

of the purpose they are to serve. They will be dignified, commodious and well equipped in every respect. Externally the building, which is to cost one hundred and thirty five thousand pounds, will be very handsome, its elevations being designed according to an adaptation of the Italian renaissance, still the style will be restrained, avoiding over-ornateness.

"The designers of the New Rand High Court (the Transvaal public works department) have seen to it that there shall be nothing wanting to meet the convenience and enhance the comfort of judges, counsel, solicitors, jurors, witnesses and (last, but by no means least in these days of advancing humanitarianism) the prisoners ... Henceforth judges will dispense justice in a building worthy of the dignity of the law, and worthy of the great and growing city which it is to adorn."

This building contains some unique features, such as its stained glass window and coat-of-arms, the latter one of only two in the city (the other being in the Rissik Street Post Office). These two coats-of-arms were only in existence for a short time, having been superseded by the Union of South Africa coat of arms. The floor also is embedded with brass strips providing the accurate standard measurement of 100 Cape feet.

It wasn't long before the building became too small to cope with rapidly increasing volumes of legal work and major internal alterations were undertaken to increase the number of courts to 10. Joey's dramatic population explosion continued to put pressure on the courts and temporary facilities and judges' offices had to be temporarily provided elsewhere.

Eventually a new high-rise modern building containing additional courts and judges' offices and so forth was slotted between the post office and the "old" Supreme Court, forming quite a dramatic backdrop to what Van der Waal in *From Mining Camp to Metropolis* describes as "the horizontal blocklike shape with its accentuated corners, and the dominant section of the main entrance with its enormous dome".

Deterioration

But, along with the rest of the CBD, the area around the court started to severely degenerate during the early 1990s. A taxi rank in Von Brandis Street, informal traders and a high level of grime followed. By the end of the decade many of the advocates housed in the two major office buildings to the south of the court had moved to Sandton and the future of the area was under severe strain.

An informal improvement district was established to provide security and cleaning but this could be no more than a holding operation. Lawyer/property investor Gerald Olitzki (the visionary behind the Gandhi Square upgrade) believed that the area could be revitalised in much the same way as Gandhi Square, by bringing together the various property owners in the area and the council for funding. A number of designs were developed and an in-principle agreement reached when the two legal office blocks were sold - Innes Chambers to the government to house the prosecuting authority and Schreiner Chambers to a consortium of investors.

The sale put the project considerably back in time and negotiations had to start afresh. Eventually the Johannesburg Development Agency took the lead and with money from the public and private sectors (ApexHi, Old Mutual and Pitje Chambers) undertook the job of regenerating the area. Pavement upgrading, new lighting and street furniture, including a striking street clock designed by Lewis Levine have had a positive effect on the area. But the most impressive feature of the upgrading has been the change to the position of the severe fence around the High Court building to provide some

badly needed open space on the corner of Pritchard and Von Brandis streets.

The statue of Carl von Brandis on this corner was, in fact, the very first public statue to be erected in Johannesburg, an event that took place in 1894 when the city was eight years old. Boy, that statue has seen changes! Interesting too to look at the differences in technique between the statue and that of the Mahatma on Gandhi Square. I think Von Brandis looks like an aged rap artist with his microphone in his hand - sorry, I know it's a bit irrelevant, but hey!

Cheers, Neil

A tribute to Nelson Mandela

This day-long bus tour takes place on Saturday, 12, 19 and 26 July, to celebrate Madiba's 90th birthday. Each tour is limited to 40 people.

The tour includes:

- A visit to the house in Alex where a young Mandela lived in the 1940s.
- A visit to Liliesleaf Farm, hidden away in Johannesburg's northern suburbs, which became the high command of UmKhonto we Sizwe. The tour will re-live the police raid on the farm, on 11 July 1963, which resulted in the Rivonia Trial in which Mandela was sentenced to life in prison.
- A visit to the Johannesburg Fort, where Mandela spent time as a prisoner. At the jail, A Prisoners Lunch will be served on tin plates, with coffee in tin mugs.
- There will be a quick look at the treason trial, in which 156 prisoners opposed to apartheid, including Mandela, tell their story.
- A visit to Vilakazi Street, Soweto, the only street in the world that boasts two Nobel Peace Prize winners as residents - Nelson Mandela and Desmond Tutu.
- Time permitting, the bus will drive past the home Madiba occupied during his tenure as president.

The cost of the tour is R320 each and booking is at Computicket, on 083 915 8000 or 011 340 8000, or through the Computicket website.

Meet David Forrest at Sunnyside Park Hotel, 2 York Road, Parktown at 8.30am for departure at 9am. For more information, telephone Eira Bond on weekdays between 9am and 1pm on 011 482 3349.

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