LIFE

URBAN REJUVENATION

Plan for legal precinct to revive Joburg's squalid inner city

A new precinct planned around the high court in Joburg is yet another plan to fix the decayed CBD. But can this work, where previous plans haven't? And can it really lure the lawyers back from Sandton and Rosebank?

BL PREMIUM

04 AUGUST 2022 - 05:00 *by* MELODY EMMETT



Picture: Freddy Mavunda

The urban decay around the high court in Joburg has long been a festering sore in the city's centre. Now there are plans to develop a court precinct that is clean and safe.

Roland Sutherland, the deputy judge president of the Gauteng division of the court, says new Joburg mayor Mpho Phalatse deserves credit for the operation.

"She is the only mayor who appears to have actually followed through on her undertakings," Sutherland tells the FM. "She came to see us, which is very rare, and a couple of MMCs [members of the mayoral committee] have come to inspect. So this is something with legs at last."

START THE CONVERSATION

Have your say. Leave a comment below and let us know what you think.

BE THE FIRST TO COMMENT ↓

Crime, litter, squalor and traffic congestion have become the daily reality in the area surrounding the high court, one of the busiest in SA. It's part of the wider decay in inner city Joburg, and a central reason why so many large companies have fled for the safer climes of Sandton and Rosebank.

The legal fraternity was no exception. The exodus of the past 20 years has resulted in an estimated 150 advocates in the city centre, while there are now 1,000 at the bar in Sandton. That hasn't stopped the wheels of justice from grinding in the centre, with thousands of lawyers, judges, witnesses, litigants and ordinary citizens coming into the area every day.



Roland Sutherland. Picture: Freddy Mavunda

“We have a particular problem in Von Brandis Street,” says Sutherland. “Prisoners come in there and you can’t have a paddy wagon full of dangerous criminals being brought into a situation where they are trapped in congested traffic. We have had some pretty terrible jailbreaks downstairs and we are hypersensitive about this now.”

The new city administration has been engaging with those directly involved in the precinct.

Will this new plan work, when others haven’t?

Nkuli Mbundu, the city’s MMC for economic development, describes a plan that includes safety, cleanliness, management of informal traders, economic development and good governance.

But as you can imagine, persuading potential investors of the new administration’s zero tolerance for corruption and maladministration takes up a lot of his time, given how so many past pledges have amounted to nothing.

Informal trading is a major challenge, he says. It “has sprawled beyond the limits for which the city can provide support”.

This means the garbage collectors can’t cope, it puts the metro police under strain and health inspectors are stretched. “The sector has bloated beyond the city’s capacity,” Mbundu says.

From the 12th floor of his office at the court, Sutherland points out streets and landmarks. It is a bird’s-eye view of the problem.

I see a chaotic mix of cars, taxis, traders, car guards, passers-by — and litter.

And yet there is also vast improvement.



Carl von Brandis statue. Picture: Freddy Mavunda

“The place is looking absolutely pristine. The [metro police] have done a marvellous job in making good the mayor’s promise” says Sutherland.

He points to the statue of Capt Carl von Brandis, one of the city’s earliest pioneers, at the corner of Pritchard and Von Brandis streets. “Six months ago there was more rubbish around that statue than one truck could remove.”

Mbundu says that over and above the 1,800 metro police officers deployed in the city this year by the department of safety & security, his department has also financed the deployment of additional officers to focus on enforcing bylaws.

The plan for the cleanup encompasses a number of blocks and includes walkways, green areas and mechanisms for restricting and diverting traffic.

The section of Pritchard Street in front of the court will become a piazza. When crowds gather outside the court, people need to be accommodated rather than squeezed onto the pavement, or forced to walk in the traffic, says Sutherland.

Transport links are key to the proposal: taxis, city buses, Gautrain buses and tuk-tuk taxis will connect the high court precinct hub to the Gautrain, the metro railway station, and taxi ranks.



A hijacked building next to the high court in Joburg. Picture: Freddy Mavunda

“The half-street of Von Brandis that is no longer necessary is an ideal place for a tuk-tuk rank, which can run from here to the Gautrain,” says Sutherland. “Many counsel and attorneys come through from Sandton. They either take an Uber or walk the distance under not very safe conditions. A tuk-tuk connection would be the perfect solution.”

There are many courts and legal offices that need to be connected — including the high court, Constitutional Court, the magistrate’s court, and the deeds office. A rapid transport system will connect them and

also the Civic Centre in Braamfontein and the Gauteng legislature in the old city hall.

David Hertz, chair of Werksmans, one of the top five law firms in the country, welcomes the plan.

Every law firm, he says, has experienced criminal action in and around courts, he tells the FM. “Our people have been accosted, things have been stolen, they have been held up. Thank God no-one has been hurt, but there is a higher level of crime in and around the courts.”

A precinct, he says, would be a welcome solution.

Can law firms be lured back?

But whether this leads to law firms returning to the inner city is another thing entirely.

Asked about this, Hertz says it’s not impossible.

“Once we were all in town. If there were a revitalisation of the inner city and a move back towards physical presence, anything is possible. But let’s be practical and realistic, most law firms and advocates take leases for an extended duration, usually a decade or more,” he says.



Picture: Freddy Mavunda

As a result, most law firms wouldn't consider it for some time — if at all.

Sutherland believes it's possible — but it will take a generation for the legal profession to return.

Mbundu is more confident of the legal fraternity returning than the financial services companies that have also fled to Sandton. "The courthouse is downtown. It is an anchor and there is still justification for them to come to the inner city," he says.

Belinda Echeozonjoku, the MMC for development planning, says R2.5m has been set aside for the planning of this inner-city revitalisation project.

She points out that the overhaul is likely to lead to a steep reduction in the number of informal traders. Under the new informal trading policy, they will need permits, and will be allowed to trade only in demarcated areas.

Addressing the symptom, not the cause

Those hoping this is a precursor to the return of the middle class will be sadly disappointed, however. Middle-class shoppers, for example, won't find what they're looking for in inner city Joburg today.

"There is no point in being nostalgic," says Sutherland. "We are looking at something new — a market that is derived from people who come in to do business rather than live here."

What there *will* be, under the plan, are legal bookshops, computer-supply shops, banks, photocopying and courier services, restaurants, cafés and fast-food services. But even that will be some advance from the current state, where there's just one coffee shop in the area that is patronised by the legal fraternity.

Heritage architect Brian McKechnie, who refurbished Innes Chambers opposite the court as part of the Activate Architecture team, says: "As good as the justice precinct looks on paper, if it is not managed, it is going to be worse than it is now."

McKechnie is sceptical of the new vision.

He says the city does not need another compelling initiative that addresses the *symptoms* and not the *cause* of the totally mismanaged larger city environment. And the proposed precinct shies away from the current character of the city.

"Joburg is a very cosmopolitan African city now and I don't see that the plan acknowledges this," he says. "It takes a complex and nuanced approach and I just don't see that they are acknowledging a lot of critical issues."