



TTIA MEMBER ARTICLE

City Changes – Port of Spain

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They say 'the road to hell is paved with good intentions' and this expression comes to mind when reviewing the various development plans, action plans and strategic plans which have been commissioned for Port of Spain and which seem to all fail at the level of implementation and now lie gathering dust.

In the meantime there is a continuing degradation of the City and a widening schism between the well heeled and the underclass who cannot even share the same public space.

Worldwide there is increasing understanding that effective and meaningful planning in the developing world can only be realized with community partnership and participation rather than 'top down' planning imposed by well meaning planning professionals (both local and foreign). This does not mean a one day public relations exercise in explaining the established policy to the lay public, it means setting up the framework and resources for communication, expression and exchange of knowledge; participation in allocation of resources i.e. developing a consensus for the establishment of priorities, which will in turn address and inform appropriate and supported policy and action.

Asad Mohammed who is a Professor of Planning at UWI has written an essay (published on the net) entitled 'Participatory Planning in East Port of Spain' which describes a recent initiative for participatory planning in Sea Lots, Laventille and Gonzales. It would appear that strong community groups do exist that have a profound understanding of their physical environment and how to improve it, but who have a strong distrust for government departments that appear to promise much, but have not the resources to implement and enforce their policies.

It is disturbing to read that the East Port of Spain Community Planning Centre which was officially opened in January 2002 and intended to be the physical 'representation of central government's commitment to the inclusion of communities in the decision making process as it impacts on their communities' has closed down due to lack of funds and that the process was 'starved of financial and human resources'; that there was 'no budgetary allocation for the exercise' and that the process lacked political and administrative support from the local government bodies responsible for East POS'. One wonders if central government realizes that there is a direct connection between the rise of juvenile crime and the systematic disappointment of these communities.

There can be few among us who can hold their head high, filled with civic pride on showing visitors around our capital city. Despite the kilometers of print written every day in the newspapers bemoaning the state of the nation and new initiatives promised from government, what we are experiencing are piecemeal multi-million dollar developments which do not serve the city as a whole. There is a lack of public interest or support for the widespread regeneration of Port of Spain to provide safe, shaded and well designed facilities which we can share as a people. By these resources I mean the creation and maintenance of shaded promenades, pavements, benches, hard and soft landscaping, play areas for children, street cafes etc which can link parts of the city to create a more user friendly and welcoming environment. Colin Laird's Brian Lara Promenade set an



TTIA MEMBER ARTICLE

example, which should be followed up. Instead we have land reclamation in areas perceived to give high value returns for developers and rising floodwaters back into central Port of Spain. If this continues the City will become a 'no go' area for the middle classes – is this our Vision 2020? Glasses please!

We need to promote activity in the City that encourages people of different ages and backgrounds to share a common experience and to strengthen civic ties. On a recent trip to Santa Domingo I was struck by how the old part of the City was being upgraded – not as some superficial Noddy-town tourist venture- but by the residential population, local commerce and central government working together. It was possible to walk in the streets without being hassled and sit on concrete bench under a Samaan Tree and simply watch children playing and people walking by.

One model we could look at for the regeneration of our City would be C.A.B.E. This is an acronym for the Commission of Architecture & the Built Environment which was set up in the UK in the 90's and which was underwritten by a private developer, Stuart Lipton rather than a government agency.

Their stated values are: -

“We believe that good architecture, landscape architecture, urban design and spatial planning:

- * have a positive impact on every person every day, enriching our culture, raising our spirits and making life more fun
- * breathe life back into places suffering from economic and social decline, restoring community identity and civic pride and attracting investors and visitors
- * help deliver better public services, through a direct impact on the quality of healthcare, education, welfare services, etc
- * promote value for money by reducing the lifetime costs of buildings and improving their performance
- * help to reduce crime and anti-social behaviour by creating places that foster community ownership and eliminate physical opportunities for vandalism, violence and theft
- * promote more environmentally friendly ways of living”

This organisation has spent the best part of 10 years building up the evidence that good design creates economic and social value, so that investment in good design is seen as a necessity, not a luxury – i.e. It is best value that counts rather than lowest cost.

Perhaps we could make a start by building a physical model of Port of Spain which could be displayed in a public building. This model could show clearly in a different colour those developments/schemes/buildings which are currently being undertaken or which have approval from T&C Planning, so that we can all see what is being proposed and how it affects our capital. It would also be a physical object one could walk around and could have some level of interactivity to engage



TTIA MEMBER ARTICLE

the public interest. This could be located in the new National Library which is a fine example of building that embraces its surrounding and adds to our enjoyment of the City.

We could also lobby our respective MP's regarding the urgent requirement for adequate funds to be allocated to the respective government departments so they can effectively enforce planning laws and support new initiatives. The consequences of ignoring these issues will lead to greater degradation of Central Port of Spain and further development of 'green field' sites, leaving a hole in the heart of our capital City.

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