How five city blocks along Cape Town’s Voortrekker Corridor offer a window into the challenges of achieving spatial transformation in South Africa’s cities
A BRIEF HISTORY

Established in 1845 as a hard-pack road, Voortrekker Road was the first major arterial road connecting Cape Town to the northeastern hinterland. In the 1860s, a new railway line tracked the path mapped by the road, the distinctive suburbs and settlements established along Voortrekker Road. Maitland is the oldest. Named after Sir Peregrine Maitland, a former governor of the Cape (1844-47), Maitland was once referred to as a “rising suburb.” Best known for its abattoir (built in 1914) and cemetery (founded in 1888 and the resting place of early Cape Town’s illustrious white citizens), Maitland experienced a boom in the post-war years but slipped into decline when construction started on the N1 highway in the 1950s.

Voortrekker Road acquired its current name in 1938 in advance of a centennial re-enactment of the Great Trek inland of white settlers that passed along what was then known as Maitland Road.
Despite significant gains, notably in the areas of essential services and social welfare, South Africa remains a country indebted to its colonial and apartheid past. The social and spatial fragmentation characterising its cities is a potent reminder of how tacit ideologies of the past—along with their material signifiers—continue to structure present-day inequalities. South Africa’s built urban environment, broadly speaking, is characterised by low-density urban sprawl and highly unequal land distribution patterns. The endurance of this model disproportionally affects the urban poor, as well as hobbles government in the provision of efficient services. Overcoming the material legacy and infrastructural deficit of apartheid represents one of the key challenges facing South Africa.

South Africa’s democratic government was slow in responding to the challenge of transforming cities through land re-use initiatives, in particular through urban densification. In 2006 the National Treasury announced a new grant for “spatially targeted” investments in under-developed neighbourhoods aimed at addressing the spatial legacy of its racist past. Fifty-five municipalities across the country’s nine provinces have tapped into Treasury’s special financing mechanism, known as the Neighbourhood Development Partnership Grant. The grant is conditional on municipalities demonstrating spatial targeting of public investments, services, regulations and incentives to optimise overall connectivity. Cape Town, a city widely viewed as spatially untransformed and still socially segregated, has recognised the potential of this grant as a catalytic tool to create a more inclusive and integrated city.

The City of Cape Town has identified three transit corridors for spatial targeting and investment: the Metro-South East Corridor Integration Zone (MSECIZ), from Khayelitsha to Maitland Station on the Blue Down Road Corridor Integration Zone, which will provide a rail link between Khayelitsha and Bellville, and the Voortrekker Road Corridor Integration Zone (VRCIZ).

The aim of these projects, details of which were released in the 2012 Spatial Development Framework, is the creation of an “inclusive, integrated and vibrant” city. Both these integration-zone projects piggyback on existing transport infrastructure. As researcher Mercy Brown-Luthango details in a recent African Centre for Cities (ACC) research report on the Voortrekker Road Corridor, “Greater synergy between urban development and mobility through densification, and the provision of quality public transport is considered to be central to the spatial and social restructuring of the city.”

However, what does it mean to be a poor citizen on the receiving end of a top-down planning initiative? How does the ideal of densification and affordable housing dovetail with the reality of Cape Town’s developer-driven property market and persistent inequality? Is there a disjunction between planning and lived reality in Cape Town? Can South Africa’s oldest city be transformed?

Where along Voortrekker Road are those acupuncture points? Where are the obstacles to transformation? Moreover, where are the successes stories? Motivated by these questions, and informed by Brown-Luthango’s details in Cape Town’s transformation agenda, I set out on a sense of walks on the western end of Voortrekker Road to explore the realities of densification and urban improvement.

The road is an unremarkable walk that crosses four, possibly five city blocks, and takes all of ten minutes, or thereabouts, to complete. Less when the train is late, which is often according to the young township residents who use Metrorail to journey to Maitland, a working-class suburb in Cape Town, for a better education. To improve, it is not only students of Maitland High School who use the train station, but also laborers. Some work at the large bioculture and food processing plants, like Albany Bakery, Tiger Brands and Alpen Foods in neighbouring Ndabeni, a large industrial estate founded on the remains of a state-owned farm!

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Known as Uitvlugt that in 1901 was repurposed to house expelled black residents of Cape Town. However, that is a different history, and also walk.

The walk to Maitland High heads in the opposite direction. It begins at Maitland station on Ferndale Drive, and heads back in the direction of Table Mountain before turning right onto Station Road. From there it is a straight walk across four, possibly five suburban blocks to the high school, a prison-like structure with caged windows. Major sights along the way include architect CH Smith’s Edwardian-style town hall, a vestige of Maitland’s brief-lived independence as a municipality (1902-13), as well as the New Apostolic Church on Royal Road. Opened in 1933, a time at a time it restrained modernism in Cape Town, this brick-and-stucco church is located directly opposite the high-school, in an area increasingly defined by an assemblage of new medium-density suburban homes. Depending on how you look at it, the walk down Station Road takes in another major sight: the Voortrekker Road. Established in 1844 as a hard-pack road, Voortrekker Road was the first major arterial road connecting Cape Town to the northern-eastern hinterland. In the 1860s a new railway line tracked the path mapped by the road. Of the distinctive suburb and settlement established along Voortrekker Road, Maitland is the oldest, formed after Sir Peregrine Maitland, a former governor of the Cape (1844-47), was Maitland was once referred to as a “rising suburb.”

Best known for its allotment (built in 1914) and cemetery, founded in 1888 and the resting place of early Cape Town’s whaling fleet. Maitland experienced a boom in the past two years but slipped into decline when construction started on the N1 highway in the 1990s. Voortrekker Road echoed its present-day name in 1938 in advance of a ceremonial re-enactment of the Great Trek with re-enactors on the Great Trek island of white settlers that passed along what is now known as Maitland Road. According to one report, coloured youths stoned the procession. Voortrekker Road has long possessed an impiolate.
Outlier

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At the point where the walk crosses Voortrekker Road, there is a tented stall. The proprietor mainly sells fresh produce: here, a single banana costs R2. Further west down Voortrekker Road, neat its start, there is a café operated by specialist wholesaler Cool Bananas.

The same brisk trade at Cool Café costs R4. The price differential is explicable and lays testimony to the complex and diverse nature of the economic fortunes of residents across the various neighbourhoods that constitute the so-called “Voortrekker Road Corridors”, new housing estates. Quizzed about their behaviour, one student told People’s Post: “Most of us come from the township and we don’t even leave the house with a meal in our stomach, so that’s why you see [students] running to the shop and stopping before we go into school.”

One student, Cindy Lethundi, told how she travelled to Maitland by train from the outlying township of Khayelitsha. Erratic train schedules aside, Lethundi’s morning routine was a top-down planning initiative? How does the ideal of densification and affordable housing dovetail with the reality of Cape Town’s developer-driven property market and persistent insecurity?

What does it mean to be a poor citizen in Cape Town? How does the current population mix shape the city’s urban fabric and mix, are ideas, whether they have to do with population density or crime. “In the city, these regions: insecurity. This complaint escalates the further east one travels along Voortrekker Road. In September 2018, Kensington and Factreton identified by their lanyards bearing access-control blocks, these modern-day clerks work at a new call centre owned by specialist UK outsourcing firm Capita. This part of Maitland, for instance, is contiguous with Salt River and abutting the Black River, is distant from the area around Maitland train station. It has noticeably gentrified, inaugurating a vogue for fair whites and other connoisseurs coffees along Voortrekker Road. Even Bills Meat Centre, opposite Nazir Essa’s dental practice, has a big espresso machine to make the magical black elixir.

These houses, some dating back to the early twentieth century, recall a time of urban expansion and low-density garden suburbs reserved for particular racial groups. During the period of high apartheid (1948–90), Maitland was a whites-only enclaves with a separate identity. Since 1994 this suburb of 10,000 has seen a shift in its racial make-up. Unlike neighbouring Kensington and Factreton, whose 26,000-strong population mostly self-identify as coloured (91.5%), Maitland’s current population is now mostly coloured (49.9%) and black (41.7%). Escalating home prices have made rental arrangements more common place in Maitland. In Kensington and Factreton it is the opposite: rentals only constitute about a third of tenancy types. The new wave of older security fixtures crowning most of the houses and businesses on the walk between the train station and Maitland High speak to a pervasive complaint about life in all-tribe these regions: insecurity. This complaint escalates the further east one travels along Voortrekker Road.

Coast of the micro-scale challenges buttress the ACC’s broader findings about the area around Maitland High School. These stories speak to on-going difficulties in this high-poverty area, with, most occasions I just make the bell and arrive late for class. Shrugging

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these houses, reads “Sexy Town”. All of which makes walking through Maitland a nervous exercise. This fact is essential to register. Big ideas, whether they have to do with population density or crime. “In the city, these regions: insecurity. This complaint escalates the further east one travels along Voortrekker Road. In September 2018, Kensington and Factreton identified by their lanyards bearing access-control blocks, these modern-day clerks work at a new call centre owned by specialist UK outsourcing firm Capita. This part of Maitland, for instance, is contiguous with Salt River and abutting the Black River, is distant from the area around Maitland train station. It has noticeably gentrified, inaugurating a vogue for fair whites and other connoisseurs coffees along Voortrekker Road. Even Bills Meat Centre, opposite Nazir Essa’s dental practice, has a big espresso machine to make the magical black elixir.

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1-7: Various scenes captured by the author during his walks through the Voortrekker Corridor. The photographs show different housing developments in the corridor, contrasting the quality of services available in each area. It demonstrates that the residents of the informal settlement are willing to pay rates and taxes if that means they will get a better quality of services delivered by the council.
The language of technocratic planning can be a slippery term, commonly used by office bearers and urban practitioners to drive their agenda. "Developing it [the pool] is the answer. It needs to be developed into a community hall type of thing where different activities can take place, like a hub for the community." Development is a noun, but it also denotes an action. The exclusionary logic of apartheid, which was as much an architectural and planning event as a social phenomenon, institutionalised racial and spatial fragmentation and undermined the atomised form of South African society. Under pressure to leave the Voortrekker Road corridor, the mayor's committee for development projects promoted in the Voortrekker Road Corridor. Both developments make good case studies of shifting urban trends in the face of entrenched resistance to densification among older residents.

The inflex of young laundry-wearing workers into Maitland has noticeably improved Voortrekker Road's coffee culture, expanding the options beyond Broadway,/Cinematograph and Deon, a decades-old local institution. But it has not noticeably changed residential patterns. Johannesburg as a whole is more diverse than those in Factreton as aspirants of residents were more widespread alienation among city officials has debated the viability of rental as a tenure option," notes the ACC report. Gabieba Jordan, an estate agent with Meggar Property in Maitland, confirmed that there has been an uptick in rental enquiries from Capita employees. However, safety and security remains a concern. The more upwardly mobile tend to opt for neighbourhoods like Goodwood. Jordan added. The new developments on Maitland's north-western edge have, however, proven popular.

Rental for a two-bedroom unit in Royal Maitland is currently priced at around R8500. Apartments at The Square on Tenth, a private residential complex in Kensington, are slightly less. Completed in 2012 and located near an existing residential area, the complex is developed by Maitland fashion entrepreneur Farrell Suntre. The residential block is a radical departure from Kensington's existing residential typology, which is characterised by low-rise, low-density and suburban. In 2012, Suntre described the development as "a flagship for the area." The plan is to offer urban planner Walter Brown-Luthango.

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The abandoned public swimming pool at the corner of Royal and Essex roads is a physical embodiment of the micro-scale challenges of transformation. For much of the past decade, residents have been complaining about this site, located close to Maitland High. The pool facility fell into disuse around the time of the 2004 opening of Royal Maitland 1.
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authorities. The community shows signs of a fragile permanence. Washing is hung out to dry on weekends. On Sundays, men sit at a makeshift table and play cards. A wooden lean-to is fitted with a TV aerial.

This pattern of formal/secure and informal/insecure living is commonplace across the length of the Voortrekker Road Corridor, where backyard dwellings and shack settlements coexist alongside more durable homesteads with a full complement of basic services. There are seven informal settlements in Maitland and Kensington. One of the smallest is located on a wodge of land we have between the railway and Maitland’s historic cemetery. The site is sparsely occupied. It has a single tap installed next to a block of two concrete flush toilets. As is the pattern across the region, its occupants survive from doing piecework work. Some residents have lived at this site for over a decade. Its proximity to Cape Town’s CBD is its chief virtue. The city habitually removes residents, but many return. “We don’t want to be moved,” resident Denvel Pigland writes ACC’s Mercy Brown-Luthango, has been the People’s Post. “They must provide us with services here. These shacks are our homes.”

Backyard rentals are a particularly difficult class of resident to access, in part because they are hidden from plain view, making them easily exploitable. Among the respondents canvassed by ACC researchers, most expressed a willingness to pay the city for better services directly. “The one consistent finding across the three study areas and across different housing types,” notes Brown-Luthango, “is a willingness to pay for better services if these were to be provided by the City.”

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and violence. As Brown-Luthango states in her report, there is a need for recognition of “more holistic planning” to address these issues.

Civil society engagement and community involvement here is vital. “This perhaps points to some of the shortcomings of the current strategy for the Voortrekker Road Corridor, which seem to be highly centred on economic efficiency and the need to address crime and violence from that perspective, without a concomitant focus on the social drivers of violence and crime,” offers Brown-Luthango. So the pool remains, for now. This cipher of struggle and change is a short walk from Voortrekker Road. The walk, which might initially seem unremarkable, crosses four, possibly five city blocks, and takes less than ten minutes.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS


It also draws on various reports in People’s Post (2011-17) written by journalists Tauriq Hassen, Tiyese Jeraj and Luvuyo Mjekula, notably Hassen whose reporting was especially valuable.


This research project would not have been possible without the valuable support of the French Development Agency (AFD)

The project was also part of the Mistra Urban Futures programme, funded by MISTRA (the Swedish Foundation for Strategic Environmental Research) and SIDA (the Swedish International Development Cooperation Agency)