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City Planning commentary on the proposed River Club Development

I am emeritus professor of City and Regional Planning at the University of Cape Town. I have taught city and regional planning masters students in the School of Architecture, Planning and Geomatics since 1980, prior to which I was located in the Urban Problems Research Unit (UCT) which during the 1980s focused on planning for post-apartheid and integrated cities.

The spatial arguments put forward by the developer are flawed: there is no over-riding spatial logic which suggests this is the best possible location for the development (with Amazon as the anchor tenant). The developer admits that the proposal is a paradigm shift from previous metropolitan and district plans which envisioned the site as open and natural space, and has argued that the site is developable. From this perspective any piece of open land can be argued to be developable given a certain level of intervention (in this case highly negative) in environmental processes and ecosystems. The developer has started with the pre-conception that the site can generate significant profit and from there has put forward a set of arguments which attempt to justify the proposal in terms of spatial principles contained in the MSDF and the Table Bay District Plan. Many of these arguments are highly questionable from a spatial planning perspective.

There is no reason why a development of this size, nature and use should not go ahead and create the jobs and rates revenue it claims, but there **is no planning reason why it should go ahead on this site**. Cape Town has significant quantities of minimally used open land. For example this development could be located on the Wingfield site close to the intersection with the N1 or on the Voortrekker Rd Corridor. This site is no longer used by the Defense Force, is earmarked for mixed use development in the new Table Bay District Plan, and is currently subject to calls from housing NGOs to be developed for affordable housing and associated uses. Wingfield is a significantly more accessible site than the proposed one, is directly related to the primary MSDF economic corridor and would provide accessible jobs for a dense surrounding and new population. This example is given to demonstrate that there is nothing inherently correct about the River Club site for this new development, in fact there are no doubt many other sites that would meet the claimed advantages of the development far better and would result in higher levels of spatial transformation and integration. The Athlone Power station site could be a further example.

However, starting from the developer's untested assumption that the River Club land is the best site for this development, the proposal goes on to make a number of erroneous claims.

- It is claimed that the site is strategically located as it is close to the CBD and Paarden Eiland and will support surrounding corridors such as Main Rd, Klipfontein Rd and Voortrekker Rd, and is close to public transport routes. These claims are all incorrect. A simple spatial calculation will show that the site is well removed from these nodes and corridors as well as being unrelated to IRT or BRT routes and bus stops. For a new development to directly support these corridors it would need to be very much closer and even contiguous to them. Research on the establishment of corridors and TOD routes indicates that mixed use and higher densities need to be within a walkable distance of a corridor. TOD planning for the Voortrekker Rd Corridor takes this into account.

Further, the new development is designed as an introverted set of buildings with open space buffers separating it from major adjacent routes. Even if the development had been close to an existing corridor, this feature would have precluded it from reinforcing corridor development. Finally the proposal suggests parking at ground floor level which will create 'dead' edges and an environment directly opposite to that envisaged by corridor development. This is identified as a problem in the Urban Design response in the Report to the Municipal Planning Tribunal.

- It is claimed that developing the site will address socio-economic disparities and will contribute to affordable housing. Cape Town currently has a housing backlog of 358,000 units. In 2011 47% of households earned below R 3200pm and this may well have increased post-COVID. The new Western Cape Government Inclusionary Housing Policy (2021) is aimed at the 'gap' market of households earning up to R 26,100, which at 25% of income would allow R 6525pm for rental or a bond. The proposal suggests 6000 sq m of the development will be used for inclusionary housing. The claim by the developer that this will address socio-economic disparities and contribute to affordable housing is vastly over-inflated. The numbers of units possible within 6000 sq m is very small even if units are tiny (less than 200 units at 30 sq m each) and would need to be very basic to justify the possible rental or bond amounts regarded as targeting the 'inclusionary' market. This contribution to Cape Town's socio-economic disparities is a 'drop in the ocean'. The more predictable outcome is that more expensive units will be provided which will by-pass the gap market.
- The position of the proposal on the impact of changing the current 'sense of place' of the area is ambiguous. There is recognition in the proposal that the development will change sense of place and view corridors significantly, and yet that is not regarded as a problem. The interpretation of 'sense of place' in the proposal suggests that it is purely subjective (some people will want to hold on to the existing sense of place, others will appreciate a change) and may even be an age-related: older people are used to more suburban environments and favour smaller scale buildings and developments. Further, the proposal suggests, the new development may be more consistent with a 'cityscape'. This section of the Report has been drawn up by professionals who clearly do not understand the concept of 'sense of place'. This concept has its roots in the writings

of Norberg-Schulz (1980)¹ yet the term has become central in contemporary planning, architecture and landscaping. It has also found its way into the principles of the National Heritage Resources Act (the need to conserve historical settlements and townscapes, and landscapes and natural features of cultural significance 3(2)). Aspects of natural and urban landscapes and views which are unique to their context and contribute to the quality of the environment need to be identified in the planning process to shape and inform planning proposals. It is not a subjective exercise. Moreover, enhancing this uniqueness has important social and economic benefits: in the case of Cape Town it underpins the significant tourism sector of the economy, contributing large numbers of jobs. In the case of the River Club site and surrounds 'sense of place' is not difficult to define. It is informed by the relationship of the site to Table Mountain (visual connection); the functioning of the riverine system and its wetlands as an edge between intense urban development in Observatory and the Metropolitan Open Space System which links ecosystems across the city (functional connection); and the contrast and connection between built and open public space, allowing recreation, solitude, retreat and a psychological link to nature (social connection). Cape Town's urban identity has been structured over a long period of time by the mountain, the coastline and the riverine system, with the confluence of the two riverine systems on the River Club site being particularly powerful. These enduring elements of the city form have powerful spiritual and place qualities which need to be preserved. Disregarding these can turn Cape Town into another Dubai or Shanghai simply in the interests of developer profit.

The cultural value of the site has also been highlighted by many objectors to the plan. To suggest, as the proposal does, that any piece of land could be filled with buildings to add to a 'cityscape' shows a complete disregard of good planning principles.

- I have not commented on environmental or heritage aspects of the proposal as these are outside my area of expertise.

In sum the nature of the proposal for the River Club site is, in my professional opinion, of poor and insensitive quality and should be reconsidered.



Professor Vanessa Watson

¹ Christian Norberg-Schulz, *Genius Loci: Towards a Phenomenology of Architecture*, New York: Rizzoli, 1980