

Urban renewal: The physical manifestation of innovative thinking

 By Gil Sperling

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There are few environments where the impact of innovative thinking and a departure from the conventional is more apparent than amidst an urban renewal project; nowhere else is decay so starkly juxtaposed against regeneration and modernisation through cutting edge design.



Jonathan Liebmann, founder and CEO of Propertytu. Image supplied.

But you don't need to travel to SoHo in London, the Meatpacking District in New York City, or Porto Maravilha in Rio de Janeiro to experience this for yourself. Within the heart of Johannesburg's dilapidated city centre exists a hub of innovative urban renewal known as Maboneng, which means 'place of light' in Sesotho. The name was bestowed on the area by Propertytu, under the guidance of its founder and CEO, Jonathan Liebmann.



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Regenerate, rebuild and transform

After returning home from a year spent in Europe, Liebmann yearned for the urban culture of inner city living he had experienced while travelling. However, instead of packing his bags to go back, he decided to recreate that experience in his hometown of Johannesburg. “

The city had fallen into a state of urban decay after 1990 as residents and businesses decentralised to the new CBD of Sandton and its neighbouring suburbs,” Liebmann told attendees. But like most business mavericks, rather than conform to the norm, Liebmann chose the unconventional route and looked to build his property development business around what was a growing trend globally at the time, namely urban renewal.

“My vision is to bring the city back to life; to regenerate, rebuild and transform part of the city into a mixed-use district that serves as a hub for cultural and commercial exchange,” he explained. To achieve that objective Liebmann knew he needed scale. So, in 2008 his company purchased the old DF Corlett construction offices and warehouses, and Liebmann moved into the building. He was 24 at the time but says that meant he had the energy and blind ambition to try something that many others wouldn't.

As per his preferred approach, he collaborated with experts in their fields to make it happen – in this instance, architect Enrico Daffonchio of Daffonchio and Associates Architects. Together they converted the industrial space into a cutting-edge city destination as part of the company's first urban renewal project, Arts on Main.

The gentrification of central Johannesburg

This marked the beginning of the gentrification of central Johannesburg as Liebmann's vision for the area broadened. “I wanted to transform the entire area around Arts on Main into a fully integrated mixed-use community, with a comprehensive and mixed-income residential offering,” he explained.

Without knowing it at the time, Liebmann penned a strategy similar to that of other business visionaries, like Elon Musk's Tesla business plan. His strategy was to first drum-up demand through exclusivity. “Phase one targeted the high-end market, with a scant supply of exclusive apartments that not just anyone could afford. The second phase included a greater supply of more affordable units but still catered to the upper-end of the market. This attracted people who appealed to the broader aspirational market, which we are now catering to with a surge in the number of living spaces with a median price of R500,000.”

However, more than merely plaster over the proverbial cracks and convert eyesores into functional, liveable spaces, Liebmann concentrated on creating a grassroots renewal of the precinct's culture.

A cultural shift fuels prosperity and sustainability

“Urban renewal is about more than just new or improved infrastructure or innovative structural design. A cultural shift is what ultimately fuels the prosperity and sustainability of a city. This is why Propertuity seeks to apply innovative thinking to ensure cultural integration through urban planning and regeneration. Only then can we ensure the sustainability of the area and an improved quality of life for the people who live and work here,” continued Liebmann.

One way to achieve this is through the application of technology. The company developed an app called Flow, which serves as a platform to foster collaboration and benefit the community. “It connects landlords and tenants in Maboneng and allows residents to log and report faults for rapid resolution. We've also introduced Flow currency to the platform that can be spent in the community, which we use to incentivise and encourage good behaviour and engagement,” explained Liebmann.

In addition, Propertuity has planted over 1,000 trees and laid over 20,000sqm of pavement to make the precinct more attractive. The company commissioned art installations and murals around the area, and have created functional, vibrant spaces, including walled and rooftop gardens, sports areas, outdoor gyms, and even a pre-school. These facilities uplift and inspire the community in the precinct.

Today, Maboneng spans numerous city blocks and includes iconic residential and mixed-use spaces such as Hallmark House, Artisan Lofts, Main Street Life, 12 Decades Hotel, The Main Change, Revolution House, Fox Street Studios, Market Up, The Craftman's Ship, the MOAD urban museum, and Drivelines, which is a residential development offering units made from shipping containers. And the area keeps growing in accordance with Liebmann's vision.

Next phase of Jo'burg's regeneration

"To date, we've created a broad mix of retail, restaurants, office and industrial workspaces, and art studios, along with 1,500 residential units, with the additional residential bulk coming online soon through developments such as Joburg Rising, Rivers of Steel and Vuja De. But our biggest project is yet to come."

For the next phase of Jo'burg's regeneration, Propertyu recently concluded a deal with Atterbury Property to buy the old jewellery district to construct Dual City. It's an audacious plan that will extend Maboneng another city block, bringing an additional 4,000 residential units online and more than double Propertyu's current footprint. This planned development will also deliver missing amenities such as shops and a major gym and will pioneer urban farming in the area.

What started out as a vision to renew and revive the old CBD one block at a time has grown exponentially into one of the most prolific and inspirational success stories in this country. And I believe this ability – to turn vision into reality – is the indelible message that SHiFT attendees were left with as they watched Liebmann stride off into mid-town Johannesburg to a new development site.

Many businesses currently find themselves at an inflection point. Everyone from brand managers to C-suite executives understand that the business environment is changing. They know they need to innovate within their organisation and adapt to remain relevant in today's digitally-driven marketplace. Yet to do so requires bravery and boldness in leadership, like that shown by Liebmann. His success is largely predicated on his steadfast belief in his vision, and in his dogged pursuit of those goals.

Blank canvasses

In downtown Johannesburg, rundown, derelict and often hijacked buildings are seen as eyesores by most, but to Liebmann, they're blank canvasses, ripe for reinvention with some innovative thinking. And while this manifests in physical structures, his values and ideals are also sparking a paradigm shift among those who live the experience he is creating.

And, it's not just those living and working in Maboneng who are influenced. So too are those who visit this inner-city district, many of whom leave inspired. It's a vivid and powerful lesson in how leadership can shape a culture of innovation within an organisation.

Yet how many of us currently look at our industries or businesses and see only the cracks? If more business leaders instead considered these as opportunities to innovate, primarily through the application of technology, then they too could become champions of industry reinvention or business regeneration.

Maboneng was also the backdrop for the fourth event in the SHiFT series of workshops presented by Popimedia, which aim to help shift the thinking of senior marketers around design, marketing and business in the digital age.

ABOUT GIL SPERLING

Gil Sperling is cofounder and co-CEO of Flow, a proptech company that goes straight to the source of the largest social platforms in the world - to match people with property.
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