

Breaking down barriers to build bridges: UCT partners with City of Cape Town for WDC 2014 initiative

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The Faculty of Engineering and Built Environment (EBE) at UCT has partnered with the City of Cape Town to develop innovative ideas to resuscitate a neglected part of the central City - the north Foreshore precinct.

A World Design Capital (WDC) 2014 initiative, the Future Foreshore project is a first for both the University and the City, and is seeing students from different departments in the faculty collaborate to unlock the potential of the derelict area.

Following an exhibition of the student projects in April 2014, the City will then decide how to take the project forward.

Professor Vanessa Watson, Deputy Dean of EBE, says that the project came about at the end of 2012 when the University was approached by the City of Cape Town's Department of Transport with a proposal to work together on a vision for an area of the city to go forward as a WDC project. "We saw it as a great opportunity for us to partner with the city on a live project, but also to try and pull all departments in the faculty together on an interdisciplinary project - this has never before been done on such a large scale, with over 250 students and five departments participating," she says.

The faculty identified the north Foreshore precinct, an area that is characterised by neglect with unused open spaces and the remnants of an older freeway-building era, as offering the most potential for positive outcomes.

"We recognised the area's great possibility to become a vibrant, mixed use area, open and attractive to all Capetonians, demonstrating principles of integration and sustainability, and as a site for the possible re-establishment of the historical link between central Cape Town and the sea," says Watson.

Student work on the project was started in January 2013, following the signing of a memorandum of agreement between the City and the UCT EBE.

"In briefing the students, we specifically left it open for them to explore many different projects - rather than saying that there's one solution - in order to seek a creative approach to the problems plaguing the area, in particular the raised and unfinished highways.

"To do so, students are exploring the area from the city's point of view - assessing what role the Foreshore could play in the future of Cape Town, while at the same time recognising the fact that it is a derelict part of a city with wasted but valuable land," says Watson.

For the first six months of the university year, Architecture Honours level students as well as City Planning, Landscape and Urban Design Masters students worked on this area to come up with ideas, with input from others studying Construction Economics and Management.

The baton was then passed to Civil Engineering students - working with Construction Management, and Electrical Engineering students, who are now taking the initial ideas to the next stage.

"Through this we are encouraging important interdisciplinary learning as students in each department draw on, and make use of, information and ideas developed in other departments and programmes. We're also holding cross-faculty student presentations and talks to expose students to the perspectives and insights from disciplines other than their own. Moreover, students engage with the Cape Town Municipality, NGOs, consultants and other interest groups around the project," says Watson.

Rebecca Vaughan, one of the Masters students in Regional Planning who worked on the initiative during her first semester, says that the project has been exciting and she is eager to see the city take the initiative forward. Vaughan's proposal looked to drop the Foreshore freeway and sink the railway lines from the direction of Woodstock - thereby opening up 31 hectares of unused space. It also included the development of the Culemborg District which would provide a further 30 hectares of land.

"The area needs people - so I considered how to open up the area to enable the creation of more affordable housing, which in turn would create a more 'normalised' area, not just one that people drive through to work, or on their way somewhere else. In designing this, and in taking the project forward, there are many different elements to take into account. Public transportation issues, parking issues, spatial planning - this is why inter-departmental communication within UCT and in the City and with other interested parties is so important," she says.

Watson says in the same way they are promoting interdisciplinary work in the University, the Future Foreshore project is an opportunity for line function departments in the City to collaborate, in the partnership-driven, legacy spirit of the WDC.

"Representatives from the different City departments have been giving wonderful feedback. Some have commented that they rarely have the opportunity to think about big visions for the future of Cape Town or communicate across departments - so they appreciate this opportunity. At the end of year our students will move onto something else, but we wanted to leave something embedded in the City that could be taken into a full project: and opening up ongoing communication will allow them to take the project forward" she says.

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