

Background note: Socio-economic aspects of town planning

The talk will discuss the role of over-regulation in the built environment and propose some solutions through the discussion of case studies. The focus will be on town planning and engineering standards that are either archaic or ill-suited to facilitating the development of good, lasting urban form in Namibia.

On the surface Windhoek appears to be a first world city. There is (relatively) little traffic, it is clean, houses are generally in good repair, and have accesses to a high quality of services. In part, this is a result of the regulatory framework that guides development. Current regulation means that only people with access to sizeable incomes or credit are able to participate in the property market as they are the only ones who can afford to pay the high costs required.

This in turn means that a large part of the population is explicitly excluded from the right to own property. These regulations play a critical role in the continuation of spatial, economic and social segregation in Windhoek. They have also hindered access to services and the development of local economies and skills, that would stimulate growth to allow poorer communities to improve their livelihoods. The current regulatory framework therefore does not allow the poor to be acknowledged, keeps them on the periphery and actively suppresses their economic and social upliftment.

The imposed set of standards can only be bypassed by those who have the resources to motivate alternative forms of development with local authorities to get concessions from punitive standards. Often times it is only worthwhile to develop large pieces of land where it is feasible to undertake these negotiations and where there is some freedom to create space away from punitive regulations. These developments are generally driven by an incentive to generate profit, and therefore can often only cater to the segment of the markets that can afford them. The affordability, profitability, creation of 'quality' space and resultant demand for these developments out of the public realm is further testament to the failure of public standards.

Finally, the enforcement of these standards pushes up the costs of providing infrastructure and services for the city, contributing to a deficit that runs into the hundreds of millions.

About the speakers:

Martin Mendelsohn is a Namibian urban planner. He is involved in various urban and regional planning projects throughout Namibia and is employed by Urban Dynamics in Windhoek. He completed his masters in city and rural planning in 2015 at the University of Cape Town. Martin is a strong proponent for the targeted deregulation of town planning and land management systems and believes that this is one of the missing keys to unlocking sustainable social and economic growth in Namibia.

Leon Barnard founded Leon Barnard Architects in 1996. It has grown into the leading architectural practice in Namibia with 27 staff and is now called Barnard Mutua Architects.

Mr Barnard initiated the Windhoek Corridor Urban Project which is a public transport ring-route to connect the greater Windhoek area and give more equitable access to all residents, thus making the city fairer and contributing to reducing the socio-economic divide. The project sought to create urban collectors and public urban squares along a multi-mode transport route. More recently Mr Barnard initiated the Windhoek Riverwalk Project, which will connect the eastern and western suburbs of the city along refurbished riverbeds and in doing so creating jobs and businesses along an active urban park edge. Planning the implementation of the Riverwalk together with the City of Windhoek is on-going.

Mr Barnard initiated Urban Master Classes in a bid to promote a consciousness around urban issues and the value of urban design. So far two 3-day workshops have been held in Windhoek with participants from across the built environment sector including government and developers. These have been well received and more are planned.