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Let's rail for a vibrant city conducive to more interaction

IT CONTINUES to amaze me how often I see people boarding a train and immediately striking up a conversation with someone. More than once I have seen a person sit down and talk business with someone they actually know, perhaps a street trader making a deal with his supplier. With the more usual social conversations, I'm not always sure whether the people knew each other before their encounter on the train. Still, they end up fast friends.

If you want to see real camaraderie, wait for the train to stop for no apparent reason, and everyone will relish the opportunity to moan about the delay; the more frustrated everyone gets with the train, the more relaxed they are with each other.

For all the shortcomings of Cape Town's trains, they provide not just a means of transport, but a truly public space where people can interact in ways that they cannot in many other parts of the city.

The role of public transport in

But there's a lot more to it than passenger interaction. Rendall showed how the MyCTI stations have incorporated public art, expressions of who we as Capetonians, and said he would like to see educational services, information and information on local attractions – something I mentioned here last week.

He invoked the metaphor of public transport as a "variable messaging system" – like the electronic signs that keep passengers informed of where and when to catch the next bus or train, the system itself conveys messages about the city.

The transport system not only provides access to different parts of the city; it sends a signal to investors and ordinary citizens about government's priorities for the city. As Khalied Jacobs pointed out at the festival, roads and railway lines give structure to the city.

Authorities plan these networks based on where they anticipate people need to travel, and hope that private investment follows. But in many cases

investment doesn't follow, because the roads and rail lines were planned with the sole intention of improving urban efficiency through movement, without consideration of what that does to land values and all the other things that investors consider.

Henri Comrie used the example of the foreshore and the area around the civic centre as a part of the city that has been "blacked out" by the infrastructure that so efficiently moves people in and out of the CBD. Though this is a legacy of past thinking, it still affects how opportunities are created – or obstructed – across the city and Comrie suggested that it will take not just technical solutions, but immense political will to create the conditions needed to intensify development in that part of the city. Municipal government wants growth there, but finds itself caught between competing objectives.

There are local examples of transport infrastructure being planned with a broader role in mind. The Green Point

traffic circle is one, where pedestrians and cyclists are able to move freely under the traffic. A place has been created where activity can happen spontaneously and in response to sports or other events in the area. If entrepreneurs are allowed to react to the commercial opportunity that this activity provides, then it stimulates job creation and, in turn, generates more activity.

Pedestrian and cycle paths elsewhere have also been used to stimulate activity, such as along the Liesbeek River, where the path contributes to making the riverside park an attractive place.

The energy of people needs to be harnessed, Comrie says. Too often it is dissipated, as at Cape Town rail station where people are channelled into the "netherworld" under Strand Street.

This is a signal, adds Jacobs, of the prioritisation of private commercial interests over the creation of vibrant public places. For an energised city, we need rebalanced priorities.

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Man About Town
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facilitating interaction was one of the topics discussed on Saturday at the ArchitectureZA 2012 Biennial Festival. Architect Alastair Rendall, whose firm has been involved in designing the MyCTI bus stations, observed that we in SA are not like Londoners on the underground trains who avoid conversation and eye contact with a fierce determination. We have a more communicative culture, and the challenge for designers is to create a public transport environment that facilitates more personal encounters.

Our interactions are part of how we access the city, and the richer these interactions are, the more opportunities we will find for employment, shopping and social fulfilment.