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Liberty Life House,
Pietermaritzburg,
A Stucke Harrison projects
redevelopment for syndicated ownership,
by Stucke Harrison Architects.
Photograph: Clive Stewart, Durban.
Opportunities for Urban Revitalisation: The Development of Transport Land

Basil Brink and Robert Downs, Architects, Protekon, S.A. Transport Services

INTRODUCTION

AND DEFINITIONS

In the First World development of transport land in co-operation with private enterprise is not a new concept.

In the U.S.A., Europe and Japan various types of commercial facilities have been created over, adjacent or under transport systems and structures.

Therefore an awareness of the opportunities for commercial development offered by transport land needs to be created and a systematic modus operandi in attempting such development established.

"Transport land" refers to land which is owned by a transport or local authority, generally a public body, and includes the space above or below such land.

"Air rights" refers to the right to use and control a legally described volume of space at a stated elevation relative to a primary transport facility for functions other than transport.

"Airspace" - a separate legally described volume of space at the surface or above (transport) land.

"Commercial development" or "development" refers to commercial undertakings or buildings on transport land financed by private enterprise and serving purposes other than transport. These developments may include or contain facilities required by the landowner.

COMMERCIAL DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSPORT LAND

Combined commercial and transport development is not a new concept. Shops, for example Ponte Vecchio (Florence) and Rialto Bridge (Venice) were incorporated with and over transportation routes and during the 17th century housing integrated with bridges such as in Paris's Pont Notre Dame and London Bridge. Hotels have been built alongside railway stations from the earliest days of steam travel (St Pancras, Liverpool Street, Charing Cross, Holborn Viaduct, Gare Montparnasse). Without demolishing existing buildings, new facilities may be developed in an established context where passenger flow as well as established transport modes would contribute to their viability.

The possibility also exists of connecting urban districts which have been separated by transport routes. In South Africa development under or over city streets has resulted in connecting individual buildings and city blocks (e.g. Smal Street Mall and the Oriental Plaza in Johannesburg and the Adderley Street underground mall in Cape Town). Development over existing stations and railway lines could result in the contiguous growing together of previously separated districts.

The implications for urban revitalisation are considerable, given the prime locality of existing railway and roadway infrastructures in city centres.

In South Africa the concept of private sector development on publically owned transport land has been given impetus because of:

* The need to improve and revitalise transport networks and to encourage the use of public transport by the creation of multi-modal efficient transport nodes.

* Lack of finance available to the public sector.

* Market forces increasing the value of urban land.

* The diverse development opportunities which are available.

* Taxation - Rates and taxes on Public Sector owned land have become payable to the local authority.
Opportunities for Urban Revitalisation

- Income incentive for the land owner (lease income) and local authority.
- Successful precedent set by other countries.

KEY FACTORS FOR DEVELOPMENT OF TRANSPORT LAND

Profit/income

The incentive for profit or income is a prime motivation for the development of transport land. Both the landowner and the lessee benefit when the transport or local authority can offer a site and the private financier can provide funds to improve the landowner’s facilities.

In South Africa, the rise in spending power of black people, coupled with the high usage of public transport, creates attractive opportunities for commercial development at existing transport termini.

Feasibility

The development of transport becomes more feasible as urban space becomes more limited and site assembly more costly.

The economies of scale operate to favour large structures because the technical constraints and requirements generally demand costly solutions for newly constructed “sites” over transport facilities.

Developers in valuable CBD areas tend to be big institutions both capable of financing large projects and desirous of making long-term investments. In England, leases of 130 years are not uncommon.

Impact

The large scale of the developments has a great impact on the urban environment, e.g. the economic upgrading or revitalisation of the immediate environment, increased load on existing infrastructure and services, as well as the creation of new urban gateways. In addition, where a transport facility is bridged, the social character of the surroundings is sometimes altered in that community districts which previously were separated and severed, are now reconnected.

However, where the scale of the development is not appropriate to the environmental context, environmental impact could be negative.

THE ROLE OF SPECIALISTS

Town planners, architects and urban designers ("specialists") can infuse new life into transport land; firstly, by providing a specialised service, (of which five types are defined below) secondly, by the co-ordination of these specialised efforts and thirdly, by approaching this task in a systematic way.

There are five ways in which specialists can give new life to, or influence the development of transport land:

1. As a professional employed in the public sector, whose could be to:
   i) Produce "in-house" work and development proposals.
   ii) Brief, co-ordinate and evaluate the work of professional consultants who have been appointed to complete a project.
   iii) Project management.

2. As a researcher into aspects related to the development of airspace, for example:
   i) Design research - precedent and design guidelines for buildings and structures on or over transport land.
   ii) Research into structuring/guiding the complex process of developing transport land and evaluating alternative proposals.

3. As an architectural/urban designer in a practice, who may be appointed by a local authority/land owner or by a property developer/investor to prepare schemes or feasibility studies.
Opportunities for Urban Revitalisation

4. As a "development catalyst" who acts on his/her own initiative to identify development opportunities. He/she sells the concept to the developer or investor who becomes the future "client", and as a development team they are responsible to the land owner.

5. As an advocacy specialist who could represent groups attempting to influence or amend planning decisions e.g., to preserve historic buildings or sensitive ecologies which would be affected by a proposed new transport route.

IMPLEMENTATION

The need to reduce the burden of unused and under-utilised assets prompted British Rail to establish the British Rail Property Board. It has successfully leased or sold its land or airspace to private enterprise in order to stimulate development, realise income and create a better environment.

Similarly, SATS has established a Business Development Section for promoting and implementing development on its properties.

Enquiries in this regard may be directed to Mr. "Buzz" Louder, Business Development Section, AYK Building, Johannesburg. Tel. (011) 773-7880.

PROJECTS FOR THE DEVELOPMENT OF SATS LAND

The authors were involved in the urban design, as well as the provision of a new multi-modal terminus at Germiston station. A shopping centre, which has been up and running since June 1989, was designed and constructed here with private sector investment on leased SATS land. The above projects were featured in Planning 107, January 1990.

Current projects being considered by the SATS architects in Johannesburg include:

- the redevelopment of the Johannesburg station complex
- development of SATS sites in Newtown, Braamfontein and Faraday
- taverns incorporating mini-museums in historic station buildings to revitalize station precincts and stimulate investment.

Some of the urban design and architectural projects on the development of SATS land which have been completed at the University of the Witwatersrand include:

- proposals for the redevelopment of the Johannesburg station and environs, by Messrs Bannie Britz and Sydney Abramowitz, Architects (1987)
- development of Westgate station, by Ms Adina Bregman (1989)
- development of an urban parkway including Braamfontein station and a new railway museum, by Mr Mark Hanson (1989).

CONCLUSION

Effective development of transport land requires the systematic co-ordinated efforts of specialists, property owners, local authorities as well as representatives of the public.

Owners of transport land, whilst encouraging the private sector to initiate, plan and realise the development of their property, should attempt to maintain a reasonable balance between serving the public interest and pursuing profitability.

Therefore, with the present policy of reducing the public sector's spending in South Africa, it is both sensible and advantageous to develop transport land in partnership with the private sector.

The ideas and approaches put forward in this article are solely those of the authors, and in no way reflect or intend to reflect policy and (envisaged) procedures of the South African Transport Services.