

SMART DECISION-MAKING NEEDED: PARAGON

April 29, 2021



“All our cities and towns need to be smart cities. We suffer the effects of a lack of systems thinking. President Ramaphosa should encourage and build a culture of smart decision-making in all our towns and cities. That would change South Africa.”

In March this year, President Cyril Ramaphosa revealed that the proposed Lanseria Smart City “is now a reality in the making”. With South African cities and towns fast deteriorating at an infrastructure and service delivery level, the new Smart City, according to Paragon Group Director Henning Rasmuss, is just “papering over the cracks”.



Paragon Group company, Paragon Architects South Africa, under Director Thulani Sibande, has achieved great success with projects such as the recent Shell House conversion in central Johannesburg.

The urgent problems faced by South African cities, from deteriorating infrastructure to rapid urbanisation, are primarily social and economic in nature. According to Henning:

1. We need to create work for people, so that we have citizens who have the ability to build a life.
2. Architects need to generate local work opportunities by critically interrogating how things are made and constructed, and where the materials come from that go into building elements.
3. To counteract the job-destroying effects of our recent period of de-industrialisation, we need to deploy South African-made products where we can.

Where should the focus be?

One obvious solution to South Africa's housing crisis, for example, is to repurpose existing buildings.

Henning adds that there has been a huge sell-off of properties as listed and unlisted funds under cash-flow pressure liquidate parts of their portfolios to raise cash. This has resulted in many property transactions, with noticeable changes in ownership groupings, and a trend towards conversions.

Indeed, the group has been converting office stock into residential projects for the past seven years. Henning adds, "We have completed a few thousand units in Johannesburg in that particular market. Linked to that are student housing projects, but they have their own risk and funding structures." This has been a large part of Paragon's built work, as it diversifies from being perceived as 'office building' architects."

Meanwhile, Paragon has also been working on low-rise and mid-rise apartment towers in Accra, Cape Town, Dakar, Johannesburg and Nairobi.



A view of the Luanda Waterfront, renewed over a few years up to 2015. The project included a traffic flow re-organization, rebuild of the Inner City sewerage system, and cleaning of the harbour to include health and wellness benefits for the whole city. A good example of systems

thinking and infrastructure integration. Project design by South African multi-disciplinary company SMEC / Engeang.

Affordable Housing shortage

“Much of what prevents access to housing lies not in the design of the units or in the technology of construction, but in the entire delivery chain. We need better systems thinking across the board.”



Henning Rasmuss, Paragon Director, argues that one smart city in Lanseria or elsewhere is going to do little to change anything about how South Africa functions.

Looking at the broader affordable housing shortage, Henning points out that this is much more an affordability issue than it is a design issue, because of the limited range of routes to property ownership and a limited range of financing models. While the Sectional Titles Act protects end-user clients from fly-by-night developers, it excludes small and emerging developer players from the sectional title market, creating a high entry barrier for potential developers.

“South Africa is good at crisis management, but systems thinking is not one of our national strengths. This is a large part of all of our current crises,” asserts Henning.

Visionary thinking needed

Where are the visionary clients, those who think outside of the site boundary of their allotted land parcel? Perhaps the Lanseria Smart City is an example of such a visionary project, but Rasmuss remains unconvinced.

“Perhaps we should not talk ambition down. Let the architecture arise from the individual business cases. That’s what Johannesburg has always been good at: value engineering the best out of what is available . And that is what the Paragon Group does best as a Johannesburg-inspired practice,” concludes Henning.

Our sincere thanks and appreciation to Henning Rasmuss, Director at the Paragon Group for sharing his insights and views. For more information, please visit: www.paragon.co.za.

Main image: A view of the colonial-era National Bank of Angola, with the new Museum of Money (Museu de Moeda) in the foreground.

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