

Time to rethink Cape Town's unfinished elevated freeway

By [James Wilson](#)

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Demolishing freeways in highly densified urban areas is a massive and costly undertaking. It requires a clear vision, bold risk taking, and a re-ordering of municipal priorities. Taking decisive action helps to move cities away from automotive mobility to a non-motorised liberation that New Urbanism enables. For this reason, it's imperative to reopen discussions around Cape Town's unfinished elevated freeway,



James Wilson, CEO, The Amdec Group

Before the Embarcadero Freeway that ran along the San Francisco waterfront was torn down in 1991, it was known as the Blight of the Bay, cutting off the city from the ocean in a vista-blocking wall of concrete pylons that supported a multi-laned double-decker motorway.

While debate around the hideous eyesore started well before it's opening in 1959, it took a 15-second shakeup from a 6.9 magnitude earthquake on 17 October 1989 to eventually bring part of it down. This fortuitous intervention by Mother Nature served to successfully reconnect the city's downtown area with the bay, as the imposing highway was replaced by an iconic 4km promenade that has become the lifeblood of the city.

Blight

Cape Town has for many years had its own "blight" in the form of the elevated freeways that painfully dissect the CBD and separate it from the 194 hectares of reclaimed land that make up Table Bay Harbour.

Named Solly's Folly after city engineer, Solly Morris, who proposed the structure in the first place, parts of the freeway were literally left hanging when funds for its completion were diverted into projects deemed more important at the time – like the great segregationist plan of the 1970s that saw the establishment of Mitchell's Plain and the displacement 60,000 people who had called the inner city home.

Today, the need to revisit and resolve this urban design disaster has become more crucial than ever. Dr Lisa Kane, an honorary research associate at the Centre for Transport Studies at the University of Cape Town said it best in an article on the history of the freeway, describing it as “a physical manifestation of the struggle for human rights in the making of cities ... a memorial to painful struggles both at home and elsewhere”.

Apart from restoring the connection between the city and the sea by redesigning the urban landscape, there is a very real need to create a space which will bring Capetonians from all walks of life back to the city centre – to live, to work, to socialise and have fun.

Deadly quiet

Various attempts have been made through the years to address this freeway colossus, especially the parts that remain unfinished. However, following the cancellation in 2018 of the City of Cape Town's Foreshore Precinct Project – which aimed to unlock and redevelop the entire six hectare area under the elevated freeways - all has gone deadly quiet. And this despite former Executive Mayor Patricia de Lille's reassurances that the project simply needed a redraft, with its original parameters deemed to be “flawed”.

Not exactly happy news to the six consortiums who spent millions preparing final proposals dealing with both the dire traffic congestion that continues to besiege commuters into the CBD, and the need for affordable housing, nor ultimately the preferred bidder who rose from among them until the city rendered its own initial evaluation criteria as too “vague”.

“ *But perhaps there has been merit in the wait* ”

Capetonians have had a chance to seriously consider, through the initial proposals, what possibilities exist for the redevelopment of the Foreshore; these are largely divided into two schools of thought: leave the freeways in situ and construct a precinct around and between them, or sink them to ground level or underground.

Of the two, the latter seems by far the more appropriate course of action. For decades, countries across the globe have taken deliberate steps to rid their downtowns of monolithic road structures such as these, to ensure that the focus of their inner cities is on lifestyle and people, not cars and congestion.

Take Seoul's Cheonggyecheon elevated expressway which was torn down in 2002 to bring the buried river beneath it back to life as a linear downtown parkway. Staking his re-election on it at the time as both mayor and ultimately president, then-Mayor Myung-Bak Lee called the 10.9km transformation “a new paradigm for urban management in a new century.”

In a similar vein, the City of Cape Town needs to urgently reconsider its own foreshore transformation project. Our city is in desperate need of a brave new vision that aligns with international trends and best practice, one that embraces the future without ignoring our past, one that both recognises cultural diversity and unifies our people.

It's time to reopen the conversation.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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