

"Men about Town" - CAPE TIMES, 6 JUNE 2011

Yesterday was World Environment Day. For Caron von Zeil, every day is "Cape Town Environment Day," as she works tirelessly at figuring out how to make urban life compatible with the environment that sustains it.

Through the Reclaim Camissa project she has championed for a number of years, Caron is exploring ways to take the city forward, to overcome its social limitations, by drawing from its ecological and cultural roots. The concept is astonishing when one considers that it has the potential to address a wide array of urban challenges through a single-minded focus on one element of the city: its water resources.

The basic idea is to 'reclaim' the water resources that have been buried and built over in the name of urban efficiency. These water resources can be uncovered or brought to the surface, depending on the local context, and reconnected with urban activity. She and her colleagues have developed ideas for specific sub-projects at different locations on the rivers, finding ways to capitalise on local conditions through an understanding of how the watercourse can change the way people see and use the city.

Through extensive research, she has unearthed aspects of the past that illustrate how the rivers were part of city life, culture, work, play, ritual and connectedness. They also had practical, economic functions in supplying water and power. By revealing this heritage, she has opened a window on the future.

Our city now is at an impasse in terms of social direction. We are struggling to shed the damaging social engineering of the more recent past, and current political leadership has failed to inspire the citizenry with a new vision.

Looking further back, we can learn more about the forces that brought about the city. We can see our connection with the land and the sea, and our dependence on the entire ecosystem. By restoring these water resources and rivers and creating projects around them that reintegrate them with urban life, we reveal stories of healing and celebration, of sharing and connection.

These stories are an inspiration for a new way of looking at urban infrastructure at a time when Cape Town sorely needs social and economic transformation.

Reclaim Camissa creates a framework for boosting tourism, creating jobs, and enhancing the amenity of public spaces. It can become a vehicle for education and environmental awareness. It can create navigable watercourses that literally and figuratively connect the city's diverse communities.

There are benefits far beyond the original idea, by inspiring others to identify spin-off projects to take forward. A theme of this column is to encourage ordinary citizens to get involved in determining their future by shaping their city. Caron not only has leapt into the fray herself, but with this project she has created an opportunity for others to do so.

The project is a framework for others to build on. Other planning initiatives can absorb the ideas of Reclaim Camissa and demonstrate its feasibility and benefits, inspiring its spread across the city, province and country. It is a concept that is as big as people are willing to make it. It is inherently scalable and replicable. And it is something that each community can make their own, turning local aspirations into concrete projects.

African Brothers Football Academy is an example of this. They are a privately owned business that finds, develops and nurtures football talent, and also run life skills training for youth at risk.

The Academy uses a property where they hope to develop existing change rooms into a clubhouse, classroom, kit shop, and coffee shop for members and the public. Their objective:

“As part of its development plans, the Academy will work with Reclaim Camissa to uncover part of the old stream that runs through the property and hopefully bring that part of the history of the site to life in a way that serves the community interests.”

This is the sort of collaborative leadership that Cape Town needs. Government does not have the resources to singlehandedly upgrade every part of the city that needs rejuvenation, but residents and businesses do – if only they are encouraged to accept civic responsibility and are shown how they can make a difference.

To find out more, go to the Facebook page <http://on.fb.me/camissa>