

# **ADDRESS TO THE GRAHAMSTOWN REGION MEETING OF THE EAST CAPE MASTER BUILDERS ASSOCIATION**

THE MONUMENT, GRAHAMSTOWN

7 JUNE 2007

## **Introduction**

The Honourable Mayor, the Chairperson of the Grahamstown Region of the East Cape Master Builders Association, distinguished guests, ladies and gentlemen

Good evening and thank you for the invitation to address this AGM of the Master Builders Association.

I don't intend this evening to deliver an address, as one may do at a conference. Instead, through a number of observations, thoughts and questions on builders and building I would like to begin a conversation that we can hopefully take forward through the various forums that exist in our town.

## **Builders and building**

But first, permit me a few extracts from that great poet and playwright Bertolt Brecht to help in part to frame our conversation. In 'Questions From a Worker Who Reads', Brecht writes:

Who built Thebes of the seven gates?  
In the books you will find the names of kings.  
Did the kings haul up the lumps of rock?  
And Babylon, many times demolished  
Who raised it up so many times? ...

Where, the evening that the Wall of China was finished  
Did the masons go? Great Rome  
Is full of triumphal arches. Who erected them?

The young Alexander conquered India.  
Was he alone?  
Caesar beat the Gauls.  
Did he not have even a cook with him?

Every page a victory.  
Who cooked the feast for the victors?  
Every ten years a great man?  
Who paid the bill?

So many reports.  
So many questions.

We can add 'Who built iRhini/Grahamstown, of the churches, university, schools, houses, and RDP homes'? "So many questions"!

But I am less concerned with the historical question as I am about the Grahamstown of tomorrow.

Permit me a few observations to begin with. First, looking over iRhini/Grahamstown from where we are gathered this evening, we have a wonderful representation of development and under-development, those two phenomena that define all South African towns and cities, all of South Africa's provinces and South Africa as a whole.

Development and under-development are not accidents of the historical evolution of our society; they are the outcomes of a single historical process, of the social relationships that characterized our history, and of

choices and decisions made or not made. They are two sides of the same coin, a testament to a certain past.

It should be noted that historical processes of development and under-development are also accompanied by unequal, uneven, and restricted development, of the kind that we witness in iRhini/Grahamstown.

My second observation is that you are the 'master builders' of iRhini/Grahamstown, a professional status that you should carry, and I trust you do carry, with pride. But, having interacted with some of you, I am aware that you are more than just contractors of brick and mortar services. You are also large and small employers, creating livelihoods and fostering the dignity that goes with an honest days work and job. You also provide employees the possibility of advancing their skills and obtaining more skilled jobs. You are members of charitable organisations. You serve on various community bodies and you are philanthropists. You are, quintessentially, also community builders. And builders of this kind – of community and the diverse people that are its constituents – it seems to me are much needed in iRhini/Grahamstown.

My third observation is that there are wonderful builders of various kinds in our little town. There are those with wonderful dreams and ideas of how life could be so much better if this or that opportunity or infrastructure or service could materialize, who themselves do not have the influence, know-how or resources to make these happen; those with ideas and the know-how, and the determination and energy to realize certain community needs whether it is a palliative care unit or a children's shelter; those who energetically get behind any cause that will improve people's lives and contribute in whatever way they can. There are known benefactors and builders – the kind that Brecht observes get mentioned in poems. But there are also hundreds of unsung heroes and heroines –

those Brecht says never get mentioned - that everyday contribute to building community and people in our town.

So this evening, among you, is a good time to think aloud about our town and about the possibilities and opportunities of building together our town and our people. Building in a way that does not evade what history has dealt us in terms of our inherited social structure, our historical human geography, our lay-out, architecture and spaces, and the like, but sees in these not just problems, obstacles and difficulties but challenges and opportunities which with imagination, thinking, planning, working and building together we can surmount and in the process reshape and remake our town for the benefit of all townspeople.

As a caveat, Rhodes University today contributes 65% of the GDP of iRhini/Grahamstown, a figure that has been growing over the years. This is not a figure in which I take any pride, since the fortunes of the town are far too strongly tied with a single institution. However, this is the current reality, and I am all too aware of the responsibilities that this places on Rhodes.

In early 2008 we will finalise our Institutional Development Plan for the following 5 years. In our discussions on the future size and shape of Rhodes, some reference has been made to the constraint of the ability of the town to accommodate future growth in student numbers and academic staff. I am also advised that should we mobilise the R 108 million required to refurbish and extend our present library this will be the largest project in the history of the town. This is apart from the 2 new residences for 150 students and wardens that we are building this year at a cost of R 32 million, the additional residences and dining halls that we may need to build in coming years, as well as additional lecture facilities.

The Academic Accommodation Task Team recently delivered to me its report. This reveals that some 30% of our academics, and especially younger academics, do not have access to appropriate and affordable housing. This is a cause of great concern when you consider that 45% of our senior academics will retire in the next ten years and the future quality of Rhodes is dependent on attracting and retaining high quality younger academics. We may therefore not be able to avoid initiatives that facilitate our academics purchasing homes.

Yet I like to think there are also various benefits for the town. With proper discussions with the municipality, the business sector and other important constituencies, I am hoping that not only will it be possible to accommodate the expansion that will occur at Rhodes in the coming years but that there will also be considerable benefits for local townspeople. I am clear that Rhodes must not only be in iRhini, but must also be of iRhini and for iRhini!

To return to imagination, planning, and building together so that we can reshape and remake our town: can a partnership of the builders of various kinds – the dreamers, the municipality, business sector, the master builders, the university, schools, NGOs, development and planning professionals of all kinds, and citizens of good will – be forged around a vision and a plan that enjoys widespread support and which is effectively steered and coordinated by some agency?

- A *vision*, which having the economic and social development of iRhini as its animating force and putting people's needs at the centre, boldly re-imagines the iRhini landscape, seeks to connect east and west, and regenerates the town as a whole in the service of the diversity of our citizens economic, social and cultural needs and the needs of potential new businesses and visitors and tourists

- A plan that translates vision into tangible economic, social and infrastructural goals, objectives, programmes and projects, and concrete strategies and means for their realization. (It may seem insensitive to raise the notion of iRhini as a wireless town in the face of the legacy of the bucket system; yet the two do not need to be in competition. An ICT backbone is the equivalent of the roads and railways that made various things possible 100-150 years ago); and
- An effective institutional agency supported by a range of stakeholders with the mandate to pursue defined goals through an appropriate mix of public and private initiatives as well as public-private partnerships.

Is this a futile dream or hope?

Elsewhere Bertolt Brecht writes of the 'struggle of the mountains' and the 'battle of the plains'. If the vote and citizenship for all are the mountains, they have been largely won.

It is now the infinitely more arduous and protracted 'battle of the plains', of creating an equitable, just, and humane society in which equal rights are progressively translated into equal economic and social opportunities that must be joined and won.

Development is never a gift that comes on a silver platter. Development is always something that thinking together, working together, and building together we must achieve by ourselves and for ourselves.

Can this town, and its major institutions, various organisations and its citizens, I wonder, reach deep into itself and take on and win the 'battle of the plains'?

Let us see in the years to come!