

WATERFRONTS: TOURISM TREASURE  
CHESTS

DATE : MARCH 2013

Tourist waterfront developments – *tourist traps* or *true to place*? *Exclusive* or *for everyone*? *Icons* or *eyesores*?

From Auckland to Busan, Cape Town to Düsseldorf, Edinburgh to Frankfurt, and all other waterfront locations from *F* to *Z*, the debate continues. What value do waterfront developments really bring to a destination? There they stand on the edge of the water, attracting tourists as often a first port of call, often dominating a visitor's dance card and perception of place (to the point where they can draw in more tourist foot flow than any other offering in the destination), generating highly desirable amounts of revenue, but greatly undesired envy (dare one say jealousy) from other tourist attractions.

Sadly, in some places, locals feel locked out – the space seems not for them, only for tourists with gold cards and gift lists of souvenirs. No thank you, not interested, especially when it all feels just so stereotypically '*been there, got the t-shirt*'.

And what about impact on marine eco-systems, water quality, and sea views?

It is little wonder that waterfronts targeting tourists often receive such challenge. Whether it is Singapore, Sydney, San Francisco, Seattle, Santos, Seoul or anywhere else under the sun that has a waterfront development catering to tourists, the question is the same: aside from their individual gains, is it really a good thing for the destination as a whole?

This question has for decades been asked by destinations, and developers, alike.

The answer: a strong "*absolutely*", when waterfront developments are looked at as a whole.

### GETTING THE RIGHT BLEND TO GET REAL BUY-IN

One tourism waterfront that spent many of its formative years making its case is Cape Town's iconic V&A Waterfront. Blessed with the backdrop of the majestic Table Mountain, one of the 7 Natural Wonders of the World, the city's waterfront development is recognised globally for its award winning design, finely woven together mixed-use working harbour and tourism destination offering, six star green, gold star heritage rating, and #1 position as South Africa's most popular tourism attraction.

Still, built at a time when the new South Africa was still reshaping as a recently liberated nation, coming together as a people united by a determined spirit of colour blind unity, the waterfront spent many a year being accused of being just for them – the tourists – and not welcoming to locals. As a result, concerted effort was made to ensure that the waterfront was felt to be not just a place for people across the country, but a place of the people across the country, in all ways that matter – socially, economically, emotionally, collectively. The result? Inclusive, emotive success.

As expressed by the current CEO of the V&A Waterfront, David Green,:

*"A waterfront cannot be viewed in isolation. It is an extension and neighbourhood of the city, not just an attraction. It makes a significant impact not only as a driver of tourism, but also from an economic and emotional wellbeing perspective. This is an indoor outdoor destination that offers city dwellers a "backyard", in an historically significant setting. We recognise that a waterfront is about creating and fiercely retaining a space that locals love and celebrate as their own; the spaces between the buildings are actually more important than the buildings themselves."*

Normally a man of modesty, speaking of the V&A Waterfront's journey causes a justified puffing of the chest in Green:

*"Since the V&A Waterfront's start in 1988, it has come a long way. Today, the V&A Waterfront is an award winning, mixed-used destination the size of 180 rugby fields. We have:*

- 450 retailers,
- over 80 eateries,
- 10 hotels offering 1500 rooms,
- a marina with 34 different charter boat activities,
- an active fishing industry,
- 20 leisure tenants,
- a helipad with 3 different operators,
- an aquarium, and
- a fresh food market.

*Most notably, 16,000 people work here on a daily basis, supporting the 23 million people who visit annually. And all this is wrapped within a working harbour. It is a place where people eat, live, work and play. It is a neighbourhood of Cape Town, and it runs 24/7/365."*

Pride in widespread pride of place aside, Green is acutely aware of the responsibility that the waterfront development has to the bottom line of the city, province and nation.

*"Today the Waterfront makes an on-going contribution to the local and national economies through the contribution to GDP, household income, rates and taxes. It employs thousands of people who may otherwise be without jobs. Hundreds of people have benefited directly from the remarkable enterprise development projects and programmes within the Waterfront. Thousands have benefited indirectly through the premium given to the value of their properties – and the City has been able to access some of this through potentially higher ratable income.*

Importantly, recognizing that the V&A Waterfront – all waterfronts – are for visitors from around the corner, around the country, and around the world, Green is emphatic about the fact that,:

*"The Waterfront is a magnet for locals, domestic visitors and international tourists. And it truly is a place that showcases the best of our country, by showing South Africa at work. If visitors take a small piece of this away with them, then we are achieving our goal of helping people understand Africa. It is not only the pride of the people who work here that energises me, but seeing this pride that South Africans hold. History, industry, commerce and tourism are intertwined to make an incredibly special place."*

### **A DESTINATION ARRIVALS LOUNGE**

From a visitor perspective, there are good reasons why waterfronts are so popular. Seaside aside, lest we never forget that as much as being a tourist demands a degree of courage, starting an adventure is made so much more courageous when started within a safe, secure, comfort zone, translation; a waterfront.

Tourist waterfront developments offer the perfect start point for visitors in terms of, *inter alia*,:

- **ORIENTATION:** getting one's bearings, being able to pause and feel the '*here and now*' without getting out on the road, getting into it all...
  - **IMAGINATION:** soaking up all of the sights and sounds of the place as a soundbyte for the destination beyond the waterfront, exciting the '*what next?*', inspiring the '*why not!!*'
  - **NAVIGATION:** getting more information on the destination, deciding the '*what next*', planning the '*where to from here?*'
  - **EXPERIMENTATION:** getting a taste and feel for the local culture across all of the senses, and importantly, the local spirit of hospitality, all it is that makes '*here*' so special,
  - **INVITATION:** a platform for other attractions / offerings to reach out to visitors and attract their interest, and to intermix with locals,
- and importantly,
- **CELEBRATION:** feeling in their hearts the energy and vibe of the place they are now in, the place that they have so hoped to visit for so long, enjoying the excitement of it all now being real!!

### **NOT JUST A DESTINATION, BUT THE DOORWAY TO THE DESTINATION**

Tourism waterfront developments are so much more than simply boutiques, beds, bistros and bling. For all of the reasons outlined above, waterfront developments must tell the story beyond the buildings. If the value of the waterfront to the tourism economy, and greater national economy, is unknown, it is the job of the waterfront to expand the eye, helping people, and see the tangible and intangible impact on the people and place,:

- establishing offerings as an expression of local culture, creativity and capability
- being clear how wide and deep the impact of the waterfront is across key economic and social metrics
- reaching out to other important storytellers who can credibly, convincingly drive the message through, ie. media, investors, and locals

Waterfronts - they are a place where engineering, art, and water's edge, come together, masterfully combining industry, society and opportunity in a way that allows for harmonious coexistence.

Where else can one experience the awe of a working harbour, with dry docks, cargo terminals, tugs and tankers, all getting on with the business of maritime travel, trade, repairs, entertainment, and recreation. And it's right there in front of passers by.

It's right there! Wait – I need a photograph...

- ENDS -