



## MEETING REPORT

### Skills and capacity for Spatial Transformation



VENUE: EARTHRISE MOUNTAIN LODGE, FICKSBURG

DATE: 7-9 JULY 2019

FOCUS AREA: SKILLS AND CAPACITY FOR BUILT ENVIRONMENT INTEGRATION

## Meeting Key Points

1. **The state of the intervener determines the quality of the intervention.**
2. **Skills are about more than qualifications and titles, they are about the lived experiences and the individual strengths of people and teams.**
3. **Built environment practitioners have an incredible range of lived experience and ability that is not being drawn into the work of city institutions.**
4. **The transformation required in our cities begins with 'self'- individuals being mindful of their strengths and open to work on areas of improvement.**
5. **Strategic thinking areas are clear strengths of built environment city practitioners, but more needs to be done to ensure that relationship building, executing and influencing skills are built- these abilities are central to working meaningfully with others and getting things done.**

## Introduction

*"Changing the system is only one part of the equation the bigger question is how do we change human beings?" - Jay Naidoo*

City practitioners can be consumed by the business of their city environments and hardly find time to reflect on the purpose of the work that they do and find time to rejuvenate and recalibrate self and team towards achieving impact. An ongoing feature of the BEITT has been a deliberate selection of meeting venues that embody the spirit of transformation. For the last meeting in the 2018/19 annual programme it was decided to gather for a learning retreat to reflect on the past year of BEITT work and plan for the year ahead. The secluded Earthrise Mountain Lodge in Ficksburg, in the Free State was chosen as the destination, established by Jay Naidoo to provide a learning and reflection centre for South Africa. The lodge was established in partnership with the neighbouring Naledi Village- who are co-owners- and has been an important economic support to the broader area. The deliberate partnership approach taken by the lodge presented an opportunity for the BEITT to learn from the experience of doing things with community in mind, what it takes and what the challenges have been.

The theme for this meeting was skills and capacity required for spatial transformation. So often skills and capacity is thought about in terms of qualifications and titles, but the programme for the meeting was designed to understand the softer people skills and strengths that often go unidentified or ignored in city institutions. It provided an opportunity for the team to consider their own strengths and how their broader understanding of skills and capacities could be combined with the strengths of their team members to drive change for transformation of the built environment in cities. The BEITT were fortunate enough to be greeted on arrival by Jay Naidoo<sup>1</sup>, his son Kimi and two Naledi Village community leaders Charles and Japie. Jay aptly framed the rest of the retreat by stating that at the centre of our successful transition towards a more sustainable and humane future was for all of us to work through answering the question "Who am I?" not in terms of title or societal definition but "who am I" in the context of the universe and what is my purpose on this planet?

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<sup>1</sup> Jay Naidoo is a former Minister, responsible for coordinating the Reconstruction and Development Program (RDP), trade union leader and activist involved in many initiatives that drove South Africa's development pre and post 1994.

This report captures some of the prominent themes and discussions that took place as the BEITT reflected on who they are, the work that they do every day and how they feel about the kind impact they are making in society.

## There are gaps...

In the previous BEITT meetings the practitioners have engaged deeply about how their institutions operate and how these operations can be improved to ensure that both the institution and the community get maximum value out of city interventions. The notion of building bridges has become a prominent feature of the work of the task team. At the retreat, the practitioners engaged in an activity called 'Mind the Gap', which required them to recognize the various gaps that are in their institutions that hinder the transformation of our cities, below are some of the major gaps identified by the BEITT:

- **The gap between regulation and reality:** The current regulations provided by municipalities do not reflect the reality of what is happening in cities. An example of this is found in one of the cities where there was a proposal for a crèche in the township to be upgraded from a shack to a container structure, but the land use regulations did not allow this. "So they eventually lost the funding and the crèche continued to operate from a shack, in conditions that the municipality considers as illegal."
- **The gap between management and staff:** "Our institutions are hierarchical environments where we don't see ourselves as teams that are working towards one goal," but rather as individuals that 'submit' to pressures from those in higher positions than us.
- **The gap between the needs of the community and funding:** "Money is being used internally to keep the municipality alive and not outside to make an impact on people." The current funding does not reflect the priority needs of the communities where a large sum of municipal expenditure goes to projects that do not directly contribute to the sustainable growth of communities.
- **The gap between 'old' voices and the voice of the youth:** There is often a lack of coordination in institutions of what the old experienced mind has to offer, and what the young, creative and fearless minds have to offer.
- **The gap between intentions and actions:** Initiatives by municipalities may have good intentions at first, but in the midst of different influences, what ends up being implemented may not present the intended outcome.
- **The gap between community and government:** "We spend most of our time looking upwards at our bosses, and hardly any time looking outwards at communities". The result is that government is not speaking to or working with communities on their real issues. Government often claims to be working for communities but there is a growing divide between what government does and what communities need and expect.

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*"The quality of the intervention is dependent on the state of mind of the intervener"*

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### Textbox 1: Playing Citopoly

The Built Environment Integration Task Team (BEITT) has carried a practice diagnostic research project on identified built environment projects that have been implemented in cities. The study interviewed city built environment practitioners who have been involved in the respective projects. The aim of the study was to get insights into the sets of practices and behaviours experienced by practitioners when working on implementing these projects. The interviews unearthed many rich practitioner quotations, that have been packaged into a game of reading and listening. In Citopoly, as is evident in the case studies, there is a constant tension between the practice that builds organisational value vs the practice that builds broader societal value and performance. The first official sitting to play Citopoly took place at the retreat. Much fun was had but the hard hitting reality of the messages was evident with practitioners reflecting:

*“I see many things in these cards in my environment, it is sad”*

*“These are not new sets of issues to us, if I took this back to my colleagues at work they would say yes, this is how it works, what we want to know is what does the work say about what we must do about it”*

*“People got so caught up playing the game, I feel we didn’t reflect enough on what the purpose was”*



The BEITT agreed that the game provided a useful way to engage the research and suggested it shared more widely in getting the messages of the work across.

NOTE: An important part of the BEITT journey has been to begin to tell individual stories. The BEITT is investing in a series of practitioner profiles to document the lived experience of built environment practitioners. A multimedia specialist joined the retreat to carry out a series of practitioner interviews to build practitioner profiles and better understand ‘who we are’. The work is underway and will culminate in a series of multimedia products promoting the individual stories of BEITT practitioners.



The gaps identified by the practitioners strongly demonstrated how out of touch institutional practice is with community needs. This gap was made even more evident in the game of *Citopoly* (see *textbox 1*), which was created with direct quotes from city practitioners on the dynamic environments they operate under that often leave them caught in between creating institutional value or societal value. *Citopoly* was also a fun and interactive way to disseminate findings that came out of the Case Studies.

### ...and how to bridge them.

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*"I have removed myself from political processes and politicians operating within the city space. Seeing that the city is a political space, it is almost impossible to get everything done if you do not engage with political principals."*

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Often it is easy to get stuck in diagnosing the challenges without ever shifting energy into dealing with these challenges.

Having better understood individual strengths and areas for improvement a discussion on how to begin bridging the gaps was better informed.

**Build the ability to influence others positively-** "The group needs to work on its ability to influence because without influence we will just talk to each other and not move the work anywhere," – a reflection from some of the practitioners showed that although so many skills are required, there tends to be a focus on a few skills that seem more important than others. However, a balance of many strengths is required to ensure that we create as much value as possible from city interventions.

**Find time to be in (and with) community-** A shared sentiment in the group was that practitioners are no longer spending time with the communities they are serving. Importantly the group recognised the value of putting thought into using the complementary strengths of team members to build rich understandings of communities. "we spend a few minutes walking through the village and just in that time there are so many different observations, experiences and ideas that the group has picked up, why are we not doing these simple visits in our city's communities more often?"

**Get to know your teams-** Every day is spent with people who we simply box into fellow planners, engineers, architects etc. without thinking about what drives them, their individual strengths and areas in need of improvement or their personal lived experience. "The strengths assessment has been very useful, it's something I want to do with my own team."

**Change the language-** The team agreed that we have overcomplicated processes and jargon that the people we plan for do not understand – "we are too caught up intellectualizing problems instead of looking at the practical things that we can do to address them". This has resulted in the creation of environments that don't improve the needs of communities, "how are people going to maintain the livelihoods that we create for them?"

One practitioner also believed that it is important to move away from a pessimistic and negative language towards a positive solution-oriented language as it is a choice whether to reinforce the negative or positive outlooks on issues even if the environment is full of challenges.

**Build organisation culture and practice based on strong public servant values-** This activity showed that there is an urgent need to rebuild stakeholder relationships, partnerships and trust – some of the important elements that become neglected whilst we focus on institutional processes. “Our teams should have individuals that are fit for purpose, that have pride and self-respect; this requires us to look beyond skills and capacity.”

**Change the discussion and interaction intergovernmental-** There is also a clear gap in intergovernmental relations, “we know that if we move people to Southern Farms (a new housing development) it’s going to take years before a school is built there, so now they have to struggle to get their children in schools outside the area”. This essentially attributes to the fact that strategic planning is important, but good relationships between people of various departments is equally crucial. Regular communication remains pivotal to how stakeholders interact, open communication provides a platform for citizens to understand the vision of the municipality and provide contributions that are fundamental to the vision, are influential and meaningful.

Driving each of these responses require city practitioners and teams to understand their own strengths and areas for improvement. The importance of getting closer to stakeholders is clear, requiring clear relationship building and influencing skills. Two areas of improvement for built environment professionals. The workshop started the journey of understanding strengths among built environment practitioners.

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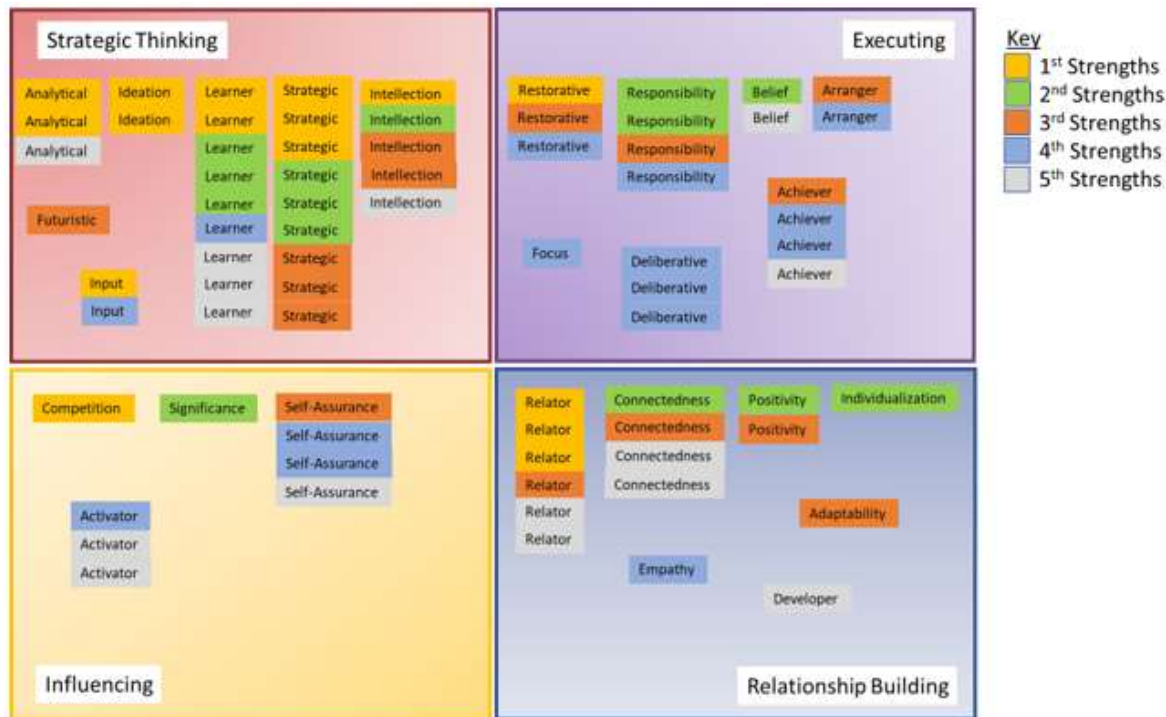
*“How do we document this knowledge, insights and evidence that comes out of the BEITT task team meetings so that it becomes – knowledge?”*

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## Qualifications do not determine strengths

One of the objectives for this learning retreat was to afford each practitioner with an insight into their personal strengths and skills and to begin to identify the skills deficits that exist within cities built environment teams. To assist in identifying the skillsets and strengths of the task team members, each practitioner had to complete [CliftonGallup StrengthsFinder](#) an online skills and strengths assessment. The assessment revealed that indeed the room was filled with great strategic thinkers, which is a fundamental skill to possess as people responsible for making decisions on how to manage the complex issues presented by city environments. However, the skills assessment revealed important gaps that existed amongst the group. The evident lack of strength in the areas of influence, and a lesser extent building relationships and executing were insightful. These are areas that are fundamental to implementing projects and ensuring societal and cultural change. The figure below provides a summary analysis of the practitioner’s strengths:



This exercise indicated that as much as a project/intervention can be carefully thought out with the right intentions for transforming the built environment, the ability to ‘sell’ the project and get buy-in from team members to support and provide resources for the success of the project could be that gap between the success and the failure of an intervention. The value of understanding strengths and seeing where the gaps exist was evident among the groups reflections on the exercise:

*“I want to take this exercise back to my team”*

*“I don’t actually know my own team in this way, maybe there are people who could be better used in a different way”*

*“Linking what needs to be done to what people are strong at rather than have having generic activities for everyone is a good way to think”*

*“The limited influencing strengths helps us see why we struggle to get our plans implemented”*

This is an important set of steps towards better understanding the broader skills that exist in cities. The retreat also offered insights into some of the larger systemic issues that are at play in ensuring the identified gaps in South African cities are widening. These are presented below.



## We must heal our wounds

*“As South Africans we have never taken time to heal our wounds” - Jay Naidoo*

Africa's and South Africa's traumatic and oppressive history has meant that we emerged from apartheid as hopeful and excited but as a deeply wounded society. The discussions across the retreat indicated the ongoing pain and suffering that associates with a wounded nation that is not taking the time to heal. The wounds are evident across all strata of society, in boardrooms and factory floors, city halls, communities rich and poor, universities and schools. All across cities and society we see the wounds festering.

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*“We are more than just slaves to a system that is in terminal decay”*

*-Jay Naidoo*

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People experience our cities in different ways. Some of these experiences are not always positive. A sense of healing needs to take place where “changing the system that is broken is only one part of the solution, we must work towards changing human beings that are wounded, and whose wounds have made manifest in the decisions that have been made for the country over time. The wounds that have killed hope for the young people that the country is being built for.” Yet, as city practitioners, tasked with driving development “we spend most of our time looking upwards at our bosses, and hardly any time looking outwards at communities”. The institutions are designing out the ability to make human connection with colleagues we work with and communities that cities serve.

Therefore, transformation must be intrapersonal before it can change the next person and influence the transformation of cultures, and then eventually, change the system. Before we can make changes in our cities to influence the world, we need to look within ourselves for our purpose of being.

These individual wounds are influencing transformation decisions BEITT practitioners admit that they worked really hard to get away from the pain associated with township living and now they must work to bring that pain to the suburbs where they live. Most team members resonated with this, spending time at the retreat made them realize that indeed they have not completely healed from their past lives that have motivated their career choices and the decisions they make every day. Going forward the task team members hope to look for ways in which psychology can be used in planning and how the sense of healing can be unpacked further.

*“We have not ever thought about bringing psychology into planning, or issues like that, but maybe as this group we need to because it's true, there is a deep psychological scar that exists and impacts the work we do everyday”*

## Retreats as a necessity not luxury

*“We were so busy perfecting a system that was created to serve the interests of the elite”*

Traditionally, the fireside has created an intimate space for people to have important conversations. However, this has almost become a luxury amidst days spent in traffic, surrounded by buildings and tense spaces. There is a value and power in retreating into quiet spaces, where one has a moment to listen to their inner thoughts in a still presence. After a long bus journey the team was greeted by a late night fireside chat with Jay Naidoo and transported into reflective mode. On arrival the first ‘check in’ exercises revealed a general feeling of deflation, despair, concern and worry from the practitioners about the development trajectory that the country is currently taking. There was a strong sense that practitioners where had low energy levels, indicative of the challenging nature of working in municipal institutions. Some reflective insights upon arrival were:

*“Is the city I am helping to create a good place to grow up for my daughter?”*



*“Why is the poverty and inequality getting worse?”*

*“If the average person in my city that earns R3 500 cannot afford to live there, then who am I planning for?”*

*“How do we operate in these tough times and still make a positive difference in society?”*

Government has been so busy working on providing things, that it has lost sight of what is really important. We have reached the point where our ecological and financial debt is insurmountable, yet we continue to take the same approaches to working without pausing to question who we are serving and what impact it will have for our generations to come. Asking why it is that indigenous and community knowledge is dismissed and no longer valued at a time when it feels that the values and knowledge of South Africa’s ancestors could provide so much value for addressing the monumental issues we face as a society.

Jay emphasized the importance of rooting the built environment work in building and nurturing communities over the current trend of greed and disregard of ecological growth. This kind of growth is evident at the lodge that is managed by community members of Naledi Village, which is working to build sustainable solutions and the sharing of knowledge and skills from the older generation to the younger generation (or youth).

While the importance of asking these important questions is unquestioned, opportunities for reflection in city institutions are few and far between. The chance for practitioners to clear their heads, rejuvenate their souls and grapple with tough questions that get lost in the day to day realities of ‘making cities work’ are more critical now than ever. The impact of these sessions is evident from one of the practitioner’s journal entries:

*“Surrounded by the beauty and the purity and culture around us, I am reminded of the authenticity of people, something I haven’t been able to identify and recognize clearly in my surrounds at work. Brought together with the group this group of people who are fighting similar if not more challenging battles, but all with a distinct sense of purpose, to improve lives for the now and the upcoming generations, to serve. I am unexpectedly seeing a different perspective.”*

Upon departure there was a visible and expressed view that the retreat had reenergised the practitioners and provided important perspective on the work that is required.



## Conclusion: moving strength to purpose

The different activities during the retreat had practitioners reflecting on their purpose, why they chose to join the built environment. “The meetings provide practitioners with an opportunity to refill our cup (so that we don’t pour from an empty cup) so that we go back to our areas of responsibility refreshed and ready to take on the challenges,” this is a reflection from a practitioner after the team took a meditative walk into Naledi Village. This signifies the value of BEI gatherings for practitioners. One of the highlights of the retreat was that practitioners better understand their strengths, with some of them showing a desire to introduce the *StrengthsFinder* to their team members so that they can deduce how they can work effectively to drive more purposeful planning in their cities. City practitioners carry their own wounds, yet they are responsible for driving the many interventions required to transform places and people’s lives. Without actively investing in individual healing and rejuvenation our cities are unlikely to be able to draw on the incredible skills, capabilities and life experiences that exist, to make shift. The practitioners attending this retreat noted sets of individual actions they wanted to make in their work environments. This is a start towards investment in finding out “who we are” and changing human beings starts by making individual changes. Some of the individual actions identified were:

- To carry out the strength finders for my team
- To get to know my team members at a personal level, who they are and what makes them tick
- To get out into community more often and ensure my team is getting out into community on the ground
- To spend time more time journaling
- To impart lessons from BEITT to my team

## Next Steps

Moving forward the BEITT agreed to hold quarterly meetings for the next financial year 3 meetings and a learning retreat, with the following adjustments:

- To co-create a meeting agenda with the host city that provides for a more immersive and practical learning experience on a real built environment priority issue for the city.
- To hold a one-and-a-half-day meeting to allow for enough time to engage in a more immersive engagement.
- To engage with a broader group of built environment city practitioners from the host city to share more broadly and provide an opportunity to strengthen the relationship building and influencing capabilities of the group.

## Acknowledgements

The Built Environment Integration Task Team would like to thank Jay Naidoo and the team at Earthrise Mountain Lodge for hosting us so graciously and giving us insights into the excellent work they are doing.

This report was prepared by Chuma Mbambo with support from Rehana Moosajee and Geoff Bickford (SACN BEITT facilitation team).

Images by Chuma Mbambo, Sebatatso Mosamo and Geoff Bickford.

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## Event Quality Feedback

### 1. Was the information you received today relevant and useful to your work?

Category – (1 being least relevant and 5 most relevant)

1	2	3	4	5
			4	6

### 2. Do you feel that you have learned anything that would assist you in thinking about your work?

Category – (1 being least relevant and 5 most relevant)

1	2	3	4	5
			6	4

### 3. Are you likely to use any these lessons in your own work?

Category – (1 being least relevant and 5 most relevant)

1	2	3	4	5
			2	8

**4. What was the high point of the Retreat?**

- Walking up to the cave.
- Village visits.
- Putting the personal back into politics cityopoly.
- The nature of the discussions - rock.
- Visiting the farm school reminded me of who I really am.
- I think the design and structuring of this retreat was what made it most successful.
- It was authentic, creative and original in its design.
- The focus on an inward reflection, a human approach was empowering to me and ignited the exact motivation and search for truth needed to bring transformational change.
- Other highlights - Jay, hike, game and journal.
- Having the light within me awakened by the talks and experience.
- Talk by Jay Naidoo.

**5. Do you have any general comments for the organisers on how to improve future events?**

None

## Attendance

No	Surname	Name	City Or Department	Designation
1	Bakumeni	Siyabonga	Buffalo City	Head
2	Bickford	Geoffrey	South African Cities Network	Programme Manager
3	Chohan	Shaakira	Johannesburg Development Agency	Manager
4	Coovadia	Yasmin	National Treasury	City Support Programme
5	Goode	Richard	DBSA	Infrastructure Planning Management
7	Lebelo	George	Msunduzi Municipality	Chief Town Planner
8	Luthuli	Gcinekile	Ethekwini Municipality	Project Executive
9	Madumo	Dennis	City of Tshwane	Director
10	Mbambo	Chuma	South African Cities Network	Intern
11	McCarthy	Dawn	Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality	Director
12	Mlaza- Lloyd	Thandeka	City of Joburg	Assistant Director
13	Moosajee	Rehana	The Barefoot Facilitator	Consultant
14	Peters	Adrian	Ethekwini Municipality	CSO