

Dreams of freedom

A single road can carry a bus route, a housing plan and a jobs strategy, or it can carry just traffic. It depends on how a city plans it.

Mean streets: Louis Botha Avenue connects the CBD to the northern suburbs, making it an attractive option for job-seekers looking to live near work opportunities.

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BY TIANA CLINE

Louis Botha Avenue runs from the inner city suburb Yeoville, snakes through Orange Grove and ends in Alexandra township, a stone's throw away from Sandton. Many photographers have captured the township and the Sandton CBD in the same frame, foreshortening the shacks with the gleaming buildings of what's often called Africa's richest square mile. Thousands of township residents make the short commute to Sandton, and back, every day. Under the tenure of then-Johannesburg mayor Parks Tau, Louis Botha was reimagined as how a single road could tie transport, housing, employment and infrastructure together, but that vision appears now largely dead on the vine.

Johannesburg launched the Rea Vaya bus rapid transit system in 2009 to great fanfare. In the years since, progress has slowed to a crawl. The BRT routes were also meant to unlock affordable housing and retail outlets along its routes.

Kayla Brown, the programme manager for Inclusive Cities at the South African Cities Network (SACN), says integration in urban planning is vital, and cuts across sectors. "Instead of seeing transport issues as only a transport problem, or housing issues as only a housing problem, you see the full picture."

Brown says every metro is required by law to produce a Spatial Development Framework, with the aim of aligning transport, housing, economic development and infrastructure on one map, but it's difficult to align all the parties in a spatial development framework, because there are often competing demands. "What we don't want to see is the outsourcing of these things to consultants, who are not necessarily best placed to deal with these kinds of very complex issues."

Brown says many of the current problems with integrated planning can be traced back to apartheid spatial policy, a pattern South Africa's democracy inherited. "Our housing for the most vulnerable continues to be far away from urban centres, and this is because that's where land is the cheapest," she says. "We are perpetuating these same spatial

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Kayla Brown, SACN

patterns, not because we want to, but because it's the easiest and cheapest way for our government to provide housing to people." Households carry that distance as a direct cost, sometimes losing up to 40% of their income to transport alone. This is one of the many reasons why informal settlements and inner-city informal housing keep growing. Buildings that sit unutilised or have been abandoned by landlords are drawing people in search of housing that's closer to transport and jobs. As this happens, more formal landowners and businesses move out, making way for further informality. "And as that perpetuates, it becomes a self-enforcing cycle," she says.

Then-Johannesburg mayor Tau, who served from 2011 to 2016, was a champion of integrated urban planning, adds Brown, and "was someone who really understood the spatial factors of a city". It was in his tenure that the Corridors of Freedom initiative was established, turning a bus route between Alexandra Township and Sandton into a citywide spatial strategy. Along Louis Botha Avenue, the city relaxed building rules to allow flats and denser

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Shaping a future-ready organisation

In a landscape marked by geopolitical instability, economic volatility, and unprecedented cyber threats, Videsha Proothveerajh, Director of Vodacom Business, has stood out for her ability to navigate complexity while building cultures where people thrive, fundamentally reimagining what it means to lead in times of crisis.

When leading through unprecedented complexity, Proothveerajh explains that the traditional command-and-control model simply doesn't work. Instead, she advocates for collaborative problem-solving grounded in three interconnected elements.

First comes clarity of purpose. "At Vodacom Business, we're guided by a singular purpose: enabling organisations to succeed by removing infrastructure barriers," she says. This clarity becomes the foundation for every decision. Second is building integrated partnerships. "Fragmentation is a vulnerability multiplier," Proothveerajh warns. "We deliberately build seamlessly integrated ecosystems so that when crises emerge, response is swift and coordinated."

But perhaps most critically, she emphasises trust. "Rapid adaptation requires teams to make decisions with incomplete information. That's only possible in environments where trust precedes authority. I invest consistently in trusted relationships and communicate transparently about constraints to create psychological safety where teams can raise concerns and propose unconventional solutions."

The key to embedding this philosophy lies in how she models it daily. Rather than selling a vision from the top, Proothveerajh lives it visibly and vulnerably. "My title gives me authority, but my conviction about why the work matters gives me influence. When team members see their perspectives genuinely influencing strategy, buy-in deepens from compliance to commitment. I demonstrate through visible action that inclusion isn't corporate rhetoric. When our leadership reflects diversity, when decisions account for perspectives beyond the room, teams see the vision embodied and commit accordingly."

This integrated approach extends to crisis management. What distinguishes her leadership is how she extracts learning from disruption. "Every crisis reveals what was already true but hidden. Leaders who transform crisis into advantage are those who act decisively on what they've learned. Rigorous post-incident analysis often uncovers systemic improvements that become durable competitive advantages."



Videsha Proothveerajh
Vodacom Business Director

Women's Irreplaceable Role in Leadership

Asked about enabling women to have a voice in the boardroom, Proothveerajh emphasises that women bring irreplaceable value to decision-making. "This is key to organisational resilience. The most complex challenges benefit from cognitive diversity. Women's experiences and problem-solving approaches, shaped by navigating different constraints than men, create decision-making teams that see opportunities and risks others miss."

She identifies critical strengths: systems thinking that leads integrated solutions; authentic partnerships built on genuine relationships; and purpose-orientation that creates organisations outlasting any individual leader.

For women advancing their careers, her guidance is direct: "Ask for what you're worth and stand up for yourself. This isn't aggressive, but necessary. We must name our accomplishments, articulate our value, and actively pursue opportunities."

Her core leadership lessons are to listen before directing, proactively invest in building trust, and lead from purpose rather than position.

"Remain curious and intellectually humble. Stay teachable, genuinely listen to diverse perspectives, and deliberately invest in visibility and networks."

Vodacom's data shows women represent 41.7% of management and senior leadership.

"At Vodacom Business, I'm committed to ensuring women are genuine holders of power and decision-making authority. This commitment requires vigilance, structural change, and leadership willing to evolve. It's also where our competitive advantage lies."

housing typologies. Aligning BRT routes to where they could densify housing drew private developers into areas the city had chosen, rather than simply building infrastructure and hoping people would follow. Many residents were already trying to live near Louis Botha because of how well it connected to the CBD and the northern suburbs, and the city built policies around a pattern that was already forming. "That's really the role of planning, to bring all of these things together," says Brown.

Although construction on the Louis Botha BRT route was announced in 2014 and was meant to be completed by 2017, Johannesburg went through several changes in leadership, including Herman Mashaba's DA-led coalition, under which the broader Corridors of Freedom concept was dropped from the city's agenda. Local government terms in South Africa run five years, and a new administration, particularly one from a different party, has little incentive to keep building on a predecessor's flagship project. "There are still BRT routes along those corridors, but that entire concept was dead in the water," Brown says. "That's the sadness of it; there was real momentum there. People who work in planning are also just residents of the city and want the same things we all want – reliable service delivery, urban safety, economic opportunity, not travelling far distances." Three mayors have now come and gone since Tau's original vision, along with the operator that was meant to run it. In Brown's experience, fixing a fragmented, unequal city is realistically a 20- to 30-year planning project. "These are things a city will put together in its long-term planning, but as soon as someone new comes in, especially if they're from a different party, it wreaks havoc for your planning ambitions."

"How connected are people in terms of where they are located in the city, and how accessible are things like economic opportunity and social facilities?" she asks. "People are choosing where they want to live in a way that gives them better access to opportunities."

For countries like South Africa, where governing happens in shorter bursts, urban planning only works if it can survive more than one administration. That's why SACN has spent close to 20 years championing a City Development Strategy and Growth Development Strategy. What South Africa now has is Cape Town 2050 and Joburg 2040 strategies, but Brown says that these long-term visions rarely get the attention they deserve. "These are not



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prioritised in cities at all," she says. "The political landscape is rigged towards politicians focusing on the short term, so that they can show what they have done in their tenure." Private developers, national government and a dense NGO sector all shape what actually gets built, which is why so much of SACN's own work looks less like producing plans and more like getting the right people into the same room. Brown says the organisation spends much of its time convening planners, national departments and civil society so they can learn from each other's experiments and avoid repeating mistakes. "The municipality is just one actor in a city," she says. "They have the public money to invest, but they don't have the resources to do everything. The way we structure our municipalities needs to be more geared towards longer-term thinking. It's only through that that we can solve these very complex, entrenched issues."