a celebration of mixed heritages....

and a journey celebrating 67 political years of nelson mandela and the history of our metro..... against the backdrop of urban renewal in port elizabeth

One of the projects initiated by the Mandela Bay Development Agency (MBDA), in its overall plan of urban regeneration in Port Elizabeth, is the rehabilitation of the Donkin Reserve. The Donkin Reserve, which was a gathering place for the Xhosa leaders and their people and later dedicated to all the citizens of the metro as a public open space, has seen serious urban decay over the past couple of years, which also had a negative impact on the buildings and economy around the Donkin precinct.

In 2008 the MBDA commissioned a plan for the regeneration of the Donkin Reserve which is at the heart of the inner-city. It asked for a conceptual as well as a spatial framework that would achieve a space that is used and "owned" by all of the people of the Metro; a cultural, heritage, social and economic benefit to the Metro, its people and its visitors; that it would serve as a catalyst transforming the face of the city through creating a new heritage for all citizens; and that this project contributes powerfully to the branding of Nelson Mandela Bay in national and international consciousness.

Arts and culture, particularly the visual arts, urban design and the crafts were seen as the key agents of delivery, definition and story telling within this place-making project.

The concept of the Freedom Walk, known for the moment as ROUTE 67 was developed, to knit the inner city together, linking heritage sites, open spaces, civic squares, the entertainment and catering areas and major cultural venues.

Through the journey, a story is told that will ultimately tell of the birth of the City and of the man who gave his name to it and their journey across the twentieth century to the international celebration of the place in 2010 with the Soccer World Cup. The culmination of the walk is in the GREAT FLAG on the Donkin Reserve – the symbol of our achievement of democracy. The flag is the highest flagpole in South Africa at 60 meters and the biggest flag in South Africa (12 meters X 8 meters) and has already become a tourism attraction as the flag can be seen from all angles entering the city.

The Journey will be initiated and implemented between the Donkin Reserve and the Campanile. At the moment the MBDA is upgrading the old Jetty Street into a pedestrianised mall that will enable people to walk from the Camponile, through Jetty Street to Vuyisile Mini Square, the Central Library, up St Mary's Terrace to the Donkin Reserve. The Journey will comprise of 67 giant steps, 67 pieces of art and 67 artists, commemorating 67 years of NELSON MANDELA's political life in parallel to the other victories of the city. The journey will celebrate the role of the international community, civil society as well as governments in transforming this Metro. We also celebrate all those who made sacrifices through the cultural and sporting boycotts that proved such a potent weapon.

Phase Two of the Donkin project will include the construction of an amphitheatre that will become the focal point of art, music and dance in the Eastern Cape. The amphitheatre will provide a base to exhibit this Eastern Cape jewel. The Opera House, which is on the edge of the Donkin Reserve, is part of the present and future revitalisation of the area.

The Walk will also have a strong connection with the Red Location Museum, and together will form a strong tourism product.

Over and above the present infrastructure expenditure on the Donkin Reserve, a further R30 million will be spent in the 2010/11 financial year, this allocation is coming from the Nelson Mandela Bay Municipality (NMBM). A further R15 million, received from the National Lottery, will be used for the art works, public artworks programme, skills development workshops, an education programme ensuring that all of the high school children of the Metro have made "The Journey" by the end of 2011 and related work.

The idea of commemorating the struggle for freedom between the rehabilitated Donkin Reserve and the Campanile does not only have a historic, traditional angle, but also an economic impact angle.

It is known that private sector investment follows public sector investment. We have already seen that the upgrade of Govan Mbeki Avenue at a cost of R80 million and the upgrade of Parliament Street at a cost of R50 million has already shown some private sector investment, and through the economic multiplier, those public sector investments have already grown into significant private sector investment.

The old Edward Hotel has new ownership and it is now an example of an excellent rehabilitated building. Furthermore the old Grand Hotel, which was in a horrific state, has also been bought by private investors and renovations are taking place.

The ultimate prize for public investment is that all buildings around a specific public sector investment will be renovated over time. It is believed that the public monies being spent on the Donkin Reserve will ultimately see its impact in surrounding buildings being upgraded and the area becoming a central node for the people of Port Elizabeth.

The commitment of the NMBM and the MBDA show that Port Elizabeth is no longer the "Cinderella city" of South Africa, but a city that can truly take its place as a competitive city in South Africa and also internationally.

Photos by: Boomtown, Lauren Warner and supplied.

The MBDA in its overall approach of "concept to completion", came up with the idea that a Century Walk will be initiated and implemented between the Donkin Reserve and the Campanile Tower.

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