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Social Pictures



Neighbourhood watch
POINT taken?

Words: Anne Schaffer **Photography:** Sally Chance

When Herman's Hermits crooned the golden oldie 'There's a Kind of Hush,' they really got the Point, one which aptly describes the present communal holding of breath by those who've invested heart, soul and bank accounts into Durban's Point Waterfront.



With R1-billion worth of property nearing completion in phase one – about 900 units – the eleventh-hour Environmental Impact Assessment objections to the proposal for the Small Craft Harbour and 150-berth yachting marina at Vetch's Pier have put the brakes on the all-important phase two. More than simply stalling the momentum in terms of sales, development and, well, a real waterfront, it has the potential, say many, to scupper the

original concept. Neels Brink, MD of Metallon Properties and project director for the Durban Point Development Company, says bluntly: 'Without direct access to the Indian Ocean, the Point project would essentially be no different to a waterfront at Hartbeespoort Dam or the centre of Bloemfontein.' This certainly doesn't mean all would be lost – but the bit that would set us apart certainly would be.

So what now? Nothing. It's a waiting game while the various players debate the finer points.

In the meantime, there's plenty of earth being moved around the Point Waterfront, and it's not all mud slinging. The main players want – and are working towards – a practical solution to the impasse. And not only for personal reasons (whether it's a water-sports club, a development or an investment) – but because

we're within sight of something potentially great for Durban. To put it mildly, the stakes are high.

Eddie Lahee, chairperson for the Point Watersports Club – a body formed specifically to represent the very vocal interests of the Durban Ski Boat Club, Durban Undersea Club and Point Yacht Club – is currently in renegotiation with the Durban Point Development Company to ensure that the clubs which have always enjoyed an existence at the water's edge are not marginalised or priced out the water. He says: 'We're happy to cooperate with the development and want to see it go ahead, but we don't want to lose the facilities we currently enjoy.' These clubs – and a fourth, the Durban Paddle Ski Club – have for many years leased the land along the expansive stretch of beachfront, and have been assured of accommodation elsewhere at the Point development.

Frustratingly too, the delay plays into the hands of the average local, giving him the perfect excuse to sigh resignedly at what he perceives to be the same old two-steps-forward-one-step-back dance of Durban.



Key Projects is probably the first and largest developer at the Point, with both the Quays and Quayside already having been transferred into owners' names. Only two out of 120 units remain unsold.

Greg Cryer, director of Key Developments, is unequivocal in his views about the indispensability of the Small Craft Harbour. 'The SCH is absolutely critical to the success of the Point Waterfront development. Without it, the development of future top structures will progress at a snail's pace, because the dream that has been sold is of a world-class, iconic development with features unlikely to be rivaled anywhere else in the world.'

Referring to the concerns raised by the water-sports clubs, he believes: 'In a small concentrated area, it is possible to accommodate all interested and affected parties who could enjoy all the benefits of a well-managed, secure environment accessible to the public. Where else could a working SCH be found where one could learn to surf, snorkel, scuba-dive, sail, fish, charter sail, motor- or ski-boat?' He adds: 'The sense of arrival from the sea

could put Durban into the same league as other major cities around the world which have recognisable iconic structures such

as the Sydney bridge in Australia.'

Turning back the clock a decade or so, the driving forces behind the Durban Point Waterfront concept were twofold. Firstly, uShaka Marine World needed a solution to its water reticulation system, hence the waterfront canals which form the spine of the development. Water is drawn directly from the sea, undergoes a filtration process to ensure it's correctly treated for marine life, and is returned to the sea via the canals.

Secondly, the darkly degenerate Point Road area has long been earmarked by eThekweni municipality's iTRUMP (Inner Thekwini Regeneration & Urban Management Programme) as ripe for a massive revamp. This

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initiative would not only rid Point Road of its 'hell-run' reputation as an unsafe, unsavoury area but – in terms of the City's 'Better Buildings Programme' – either save or slaughter many of the dysfunctional and/or historically significant buildings in the area.

The result? The evolution of a sensational waterfront as a drawcard for tourists, a vibrant mixed-use environment for those with the wherewithal to work, live and play here, and a space for locals to access a host of sociable amenities a sandcastle away from the beach, ocean, marina and harbour.

In addition, a significant part of the charm of the Point Waterfront development is the juxtaposition of past and present, where listed buildings – such as the gracious 1906 Edwardian Port Supervisors' houses (sympathetically restored by Michael Shannon and Alan Burke of Blue Plum Developments) – rub shoulders with sumptuous, glamorous high-rises.

Another player in this game is the National Ports Authority, currently effecting the long-discussed harbour widening and deepening project. The port of Durban handles the greatest volume of sea-going traffic of any port in southern Africa, and has embarked on a project of enlarging the entrance channel to enable safer access, as well as access to larger ships. The widened channel will be 220m wide, and a minimum of 16m deep, with work scheduled for completion around 2010.



Since the launch in 2003 of the Durban Point Waterfront, all land in precinct one, including the properties along Point Road owned by the Durban Point Development Company, has been sold. Almost 200 000m² of property have been sold to 14 property developers, with around R1.8-billion having been committed towards investment in the development of infrastructure and building complexes... excluding the initial R735-million cost of uShaka Marine World, and the R150-million loan recently granted to them.

City manager Mike Sutcliffe justifies the outlay of this loan in the following terms: 'While uShaka did run at a loss for the first few years, this trend is not uncommon when compared with attendance figures of other international marine parks.'

The report is intent on explaining that uShaka should not simply be dismissed as a loss-making entity, as it had played a pivotal role in the regeneration of the Point area. In addition, at the Marine Park, the South African Association for Marine Biological Research (SAAMBR) is a Section 21 company, doesn't generate profit and relies on uShaka for its funding. Mayor Obed Mlaba points out that while the project had incurred some loss, 'it was not a money-spinning one but a strategic development initiative.'

The City committed R300-million over a five-year period for upgrading and developing infrastructure in the Point area. Still, there remain concerns about the notorious Point Road region. But, speaking to those who work there, the risks are historical perceptions rather than reality. Not that life is perfect there, but significant strides have been made in cleaning up the area in terms of grime, transforming the access roads, and installing a committed police force to eradicate crime. There is a solid, visible police presence and, in addition, the Durban Point Development Company has employed a private security firm within the precinct and installed an extensive CCTV surveillance system. Horst Keil, developer and converter of the 1932 Durban Point Prison building into a stylish apartment block, Point Bastille, says the Waterfront has had no reported crime and was recently voted safest area in Durban.

One of the general concerns about life at the Point is that, while most of the sites have mixed-use zoning – and developers are encouraged to use the ground floor for retail facilities, entertainment and restaurants opening out on to sidewalks and canals – it's slow to happen. Aside from the difficulty of generating an interactive social climate in the midst of a gigantic building site, the apartments have primarily been purchased by investors, many intent on holiday letting. That leaves many blocks largely empty, lacking soul. Hopefully this is a temporary scenario, and history suggests most large-scale developments of this nature tend to go through a similar slow start-up stage.

But perhaps more relevant regarding the lack of ambience is the near absence of retail. When it comes to commercial versus residential, nobody has really satisfactorily answered the time-worn question of which is the smarter starting point: chicken or the egg. Keith Wakefield of Wakefields believes that, unlike Cape Town's V&A Waterfront and other similar developments, Durban's Point probably began with the residential component because it was launched in the midst of a residential property boom. It is also envisaged that it'll take another 18 to 24 months before the active-edge restaurants, pubs and shops will come on stream.

Keith firmly believes: 'If our Waterfront is to be successful, exciting and a catalyst for the regeneration of the city precinct around it, it's urgent that the shopping element and the active edge be developed as soon as possible.'

Greg is convinced that had the go-ahead been given for the SCH, construction of the proposed shopping centre (40 000m², to lie adjacent to the 9 000m² of uShaka Retail Village Walk) would already have started.

'The shopping centre would also make sense if the second phase of the residential land had been released to the market with the SCH having been approved.' To the question of retailers dragging their feet, he feels 'the retailers also need to be confident that the entire Point development will be a live, work and play space in the future.'

A number of big and boutique hotels are destined for designated sites, but are currently waiting for the light to turn green.

But there is a trickle of entrepreneurs currently integrating themselves into the area, like the popular Beside the Point coffee shop in Albert Terrace, Cargostore home requisites in Point Road, and funky Moyo restaurant at uShaka. These forerunners are targeting the sizeable workforce, apartment purchasers and renters, as well as the tourist market.

How have the investors done? Well, once the Waterfront moved beyond the twinkle-in-the-eye stage, investors were buying off plan at between R1 100 and R1 800 a square metre. Rumour has it that when phase two is given the green light, the figures will rocket to about R35 000 for the same privilege.

Cecily Deetlifs of Tyson Properties says the first apartments sold off plan for R1.4-million for two bedrooms, two bathrooms, two parkings... and one of those is now back on the market for R1.995-million – in an incomplete building.

Do they have views? Bly Scott-Williams of Tyson Properties shakes her head: 'What's a view? Most of these apartments have wonderful views, some down the canals, the greenery of the Bluff, and ships coming and going in the harbour. They aren't all panoramic sea views, but they're equally charming – and often even more so.'

Amusingly, Bly says the current 'thumb suck' when it comes to residential pricing is R1-million a bedroom: one bedroom apartment, one million; two bed, two million, and so on.

The drawcards of living at the Point Waterfront are obvious. Bly enthuses about the safety of swimming at Vetch's and Addington: 'Safest bathing areas because of the long continental shelf at Addington.' A smile: 'The lifeguards have a tough time staying awake because there's so little to do. So safe! And,' she adds, 'it's one of the few beaches on which you can walk your dog! Bottom line, everything's so close to you.'

Ultimately, the public promenade will extend southwards from uShaka – so, says Neels, 'you'll be able to walk from one end of the beachfront to the other, all along the Golden Mile – right down to the new North Pier which the National Ports Authority will build as part of the harbour-widening project.'

And for those who prefer not to put their best foot forward, the City will take you for a ride on the new People Mover system. Ten luxury buses run at 15-minute intervals (from 6.30am until 11pm) between Suncoast, the beachfront, uShaka Marine World, West Street and through to the Victoria Market by way of Field Street. A single journey costs R4, and a day pass R15.

Peering into the future, if the various parties allow everybody a slice of that enticing Point pie, Durbanites can look forward to a safe, clean, vibrant environment of homes, businesses, entertainment and retail outlets, complete with the intoxicating sound and smell of the sea. The final investment figure in the area is estimated to round off in the region of R6-billion.

Likewise, if the powers that be manage to achieve their aim of a safe, world-class, well-managed environment, the Point Waterfront has to be one of the prime spots in Durban to build a nest. Or, at least, a nest egg.

The Durban Point Development Company states: 'Ultimately, the Waterfront initiative is not an attempt to extend the city fabric, nor is it intended to transform the area into an extended theme park or tourist resort. Rather, it will develop as an important, well-defined addition to the city, and become a sought-after place to live, work and play.'

It's fair to say that Durbanites are hoping against hope that our Waterfront can rise to the slogan emblazoned on our new People Mover buses: the future begins here...

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