

# Rhythms of our lives reflected in environments we create

HERE'S nothing like an aerial view to throw a city's contradictions into sharp relief.

On the approach to Cape Town International Airport, returning residents get out, scanning for familiar landmarks. There's the mountain and the lone power station cooling towers; and if I follow the main transport artery I can find my suburb and local school roads.

First-time visitors might look for indicators of the city's unique character: they've seen it on maps, perhaps read travel guides, and now this scene gives the impression of a more intimate view of Cape Town.

On international flights, pilots sometimes do a fly-by of the peninsula, showing off the pristine beauty of Table Mountain National Park, a view soon followed by the abject scene of vast tracts of shacks sprawled out like thousands of tiny metal boxes randomly scattered by the north-wester and pum-

## Men About Town Mokena Makeka and Rory Williams



melled by winter rains. I might feel revulsion, shame, embarrassment or indignation at the injustice, and might even be inspired to respond in some way.

But few will immediately feel compassion for those living in squalid conditions, simply because looking down from above keeps one removed from humanity. I can't see people or hear sounds of life. I see only patterns and structure – an objectified representation of reality, like a sketch on paper.

In the last seconds of flight, as the plane skims the housetops, I feel like a voyeur observing the lives of unsuspecting residents. But I'm not, really, because I see only indirect signs of life: lines of washing, columns of smoke and lights in windows.

You don't need to buy a plane ticket to experience something similar. You can perform your own aerial tour of the city, hovering silently where you will. And this virtual tour just got a whole lot more realistic.

Google recently finished photographing the streets of Cape Town, as it has done in a growing number of cities around the world. The exercise has raised concerns about privacy, because whoever happened to be in the frame when the 'Googlemobile' drove by is now on the internet for the world to see. Whether you live in Constantia or Crossroads, your house is now on show, in surprising detail. It's not live, but it is certainly more intimate than the view from an aircraft.

But what Google calls "street view" is more than just a way to see 360-degree views from eye level. The good people at Google hope that we will use their software to turn our houses, offices and other buildings into 3D representations

with realistic-looking facades, and they have started by converting most of the CBD buildings.

With Google Earth, you can pop up all the 3D buildings that have been created, tick the "terrain" box to see the mountain in all its glory, and tour the city. With the Pro version you can even enter flight simulator mode.

Taking a flight down Adderley Street, at an altitude of ten metres, is an exhilarating way to tour the city. You can almost smell the flowers on Trafalgar Square. Soar a little higher, and new things are revealed. Like the green roof on a provincial government building, private courtyards and rooftop swimming pools.

At a wider scale, visible forms across the city bear mute testimony of past planning policies – their successes and failures in bringing about intended urban structure.

Less obvious is the manifestation of unofficial power structures. Have a look

at some informal settlement areas, and you'll notice some interesting patterns. You'll see pedestrian routes following natural routes to stations and bus stops. Under pressure to occupy every square metre of land, who made sure that these routes were preserved?

Even more intriguing is the sight of informal housing at a much lower density than usual, suggesting that even informal settlements have their exclusive areas.

Cities are messy, but patterns are everywhere.

And not only when viewed from above; the rhythms of our lives are reflected in the environment we create, whether by deliberate design or through the daily decisions each of us make. Planners can't control everything, but if the best ideas come from asking questions, maybe the best planning comes from watching what happens naturally, and asking why.

[www.men-about-town.co.za](http://www.men-about-town.co.za)

02.08.10