

## PREAMBLE

A recurring theme in the historical evolution of towns and cities as ‘containers for life’ worldwide is that they are, and should be, dynamic. During the passage of time, some of the individual buildings that constitute a specific part of a city are replaced with architectural fabric more attuned to the needs, desires and technical possibilities of later eras. Cities are thus ‘in a perpetual state of becoming’, often as a consequence of creative professional imaginings that span many dimensions – from meeting societal aspirations and economic opportunities to the specific shapes and forms of the buildings involved. In urban design, this arena of professional consideration is termed *engagement with urban morphology*. Many dimensions are relevant in this regard, and a few are pivotal. The most significant of these is the contextual:<sup>1</sup> the study of the specific location of the site within the city, and the characteristics of the prevailing townscapes, streetscapes and building fabric surrounding it.

Questions relating to context seek to uncover and define the degrees of freedom and constraint that should inform any development, for the specific site in the interests of the common good. At least, and in terms of professional parlance, what is required is the deployment of appropriate concepts and analysis – of comparative urban texture, grain and patterns, building heights, building massing and building typologies – with a view to establishing some reasonable framework for morphological coherence and compatibility, considering potential outcomes into the future, even as urban morphological change may be promoted as a matter of public policy.

Moreover, given the well-recognised massive and alienating negative impacts of some ‘modern town planning’ and of ‘architectural modernism’ on significant historic areas of towns and cities worldwide,<sup>2</sup> decades ago international conventions and norms, national legislation and many government agencies (including the City of Cape Town, CoCT) put in place measures to ensure that appropriate heritage considerations feature in the assessment of development propositions that engage with changes in urban morphology.<sup>3</sup> Constraints on new development propositions should be, or have been, put in place.

The subject of this paper is a significant, heavily contested urban development proposal that would result in considerable change of form and character of (and in) Cape Town’s Bo-Kaap. The paper contributes to professional discussions of the issues at hand, in a situation where procedural aspects appear to have taken precedence over the substantive and the professional in considerations of the development applications involved. It is also offered because the issues go well beyond the specific case. If approved, the development would set an extremely damaging precedent for many other city sites at a time when, because of the economy, city government seems to be projecting facilitation of development ‘at all costs’.<sup>4</sup>

## BACKGROUND

The Bo-Kaap was founded in the late 1700s as an extension of the then compact, gridded colonial Cape Town.<sup>5</sup> Buitengracht Street was the original north-western city boundary, beyond which the Bo-Kaap developed quite rapidly into the 1800s. At two respective scales reflecting the broader context and the immediate one, the site of the proposed building is shown in Figures 1 and 2.<sup>6</sup> Figure 1 shows that the site is in an intervening position between the central city and the historic Bo-Kaap. Figure 2 shows a large expanse of the existing single- and double-storied Bo-Kaap, which is the surviving remnant of the original eighteenth-century town extension of Cape Town. It still comprises historically distinctive townscapes and streetscapes that are representative of adapted colonial urban settlement in South Africa.



## THE BO-KAAP HAS THE LARGEST NUMBER OF HISTORIC TOWNHOUSES OF ANY SETTLEMENT IN THE COUNTRY.

The Bo-Kaap has the largest number of historic townhouses of any settlement in the country. A part of it was a declared National Monument in terms of past legislation, it is currently a Provincial Heritage Site and the City of Cape Town has proposed that it be the subject of a Heritage Protection Overlay Zone (HPOZ) in its entirety, inclusive of the site in question. Riebeeck Square, directly abutting the proposed development site to the east, is also a Provincial Heritage Site. At the behest of the city, Heritage Square (the complete city block at the northern end of Riebeeck Square and proximate to the proposed development site across the Buitengracht) was undertaken as a conservation project some 30 years ago – at considerable cost, with the tallest existing building thereon being four storeys.

As background information, Figure 3 presents an historic (1859) view of Cape Town from the Bo-Kaap, >

1 Central Cape Town Table Valley and the development site, courtesy of CoCT. 2 Development site in context, courtesy of CoCT. 3 Millard Panorama, c 1859, Cape Archives.