

Planning for the Revitalisation of a Historic Town Centre Case Study: Mahebourg

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Extended Abstract

Mahebourg, named after the French governor, Mahé de Labourdonnais, is considered to be the first town centre of the Island of Mauritius. However, it has failed to attract investment and today, it is lagging behind compared to other town centres. The younger generation prefers to go to other developed centres where they can have access to more facilities and recreation like the Caudan Waterfront. The present study investigated the problems that the town is facing. A survey was carried out and it was observed that Mahebourg is considered to be unattractive due to two major issues:

- Activity patterns which includes traffic, pedestrian movements and parking
- General appearance which consists of architectural design and landscaping.

The town centre has been declared as a historic zone in the planning framework, but the centre has become obsolete due to lack of action by the Central Government and Local Council and shopkeepers. The centre has lagged behind and is failing to attract investors.

The aims of the project were to:

- Analyse the design and development of Mahébourg town centre
- Analyse the existing, future land uses of the centre in conjunction with the existing policies and hence formulate the guidelines of the town
- Identify and analyse the problems that the town shopping centre is facing

- Identify and evaluate the existing and future community requirement for the centre. This issue was addressed by a survey carried out among the shoppers and shopkeepers.
- Propose recommendations to improve the present rural design of the town centre to make it more contemporary and attractive

Findings

The major problems identified after the analysis of the survey and the main recommendations were:

- The activity patterns: Findings have indicated that Mahebourg is unable to satisfy the increased volume of traffic on the main commercial road, Rue des Flamands, which is also used as a through road. As such, there was an urgent need to upgrade these streets and the main road laying emphasis on protection of pedestrians and vehicular traffic.
- Car parking: There were inadequate parking spaces specially during market fair days and weekends. Delivery of goods from the streets worsened this situation. As such, the construction of a car park has been recommended at the back of the market as the site lies bare and is accessible. The site is also very close to the shopping centre and the sea front.
- General appearance and landscaping: Visual coherence is lacking in the centre and the interviewees find the area to be dull and unattractive. As such, it would be an advantage to upgrade and renovate the building facades and to include large windows, which will attract window shoppers. Street lighting must be redesigned to make it more appropriate for the historic town centre.

Quality of public realm: Mahebourg lacks a central space where the local population can meet and interact. As such, it would be beneficial to create a central space, which will provide a setting for leisure and tourism. From the survey, it can be observed that the inhabitants regard the front promenade to be the central place. As such this area should be redesigned to make it more appealing to the inhabitants and to make it become a meeting place for the inhabitants.

Keywords: planning, revitalisation, historic centre, community.

**For correspondences and reprints*

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INTRODUCTION

Mahebourg, named after the French governor, Mahé de Labourdonnais, is considered to be the first town centre of the Island of Mauritius. However, it has failed to attract investment and today, it is lagging behind compared to other town centres. This lack of vitality of Mahebourg has been reinforced by the construction of new out-of-town centres around the whole of the island. Many of these are easily accessible from Mahebourg and the Plaine Magnien region and the younger generation prefers to go to other developed centres where they can have access to more facilities and recreation like the Caudan Waterfront.

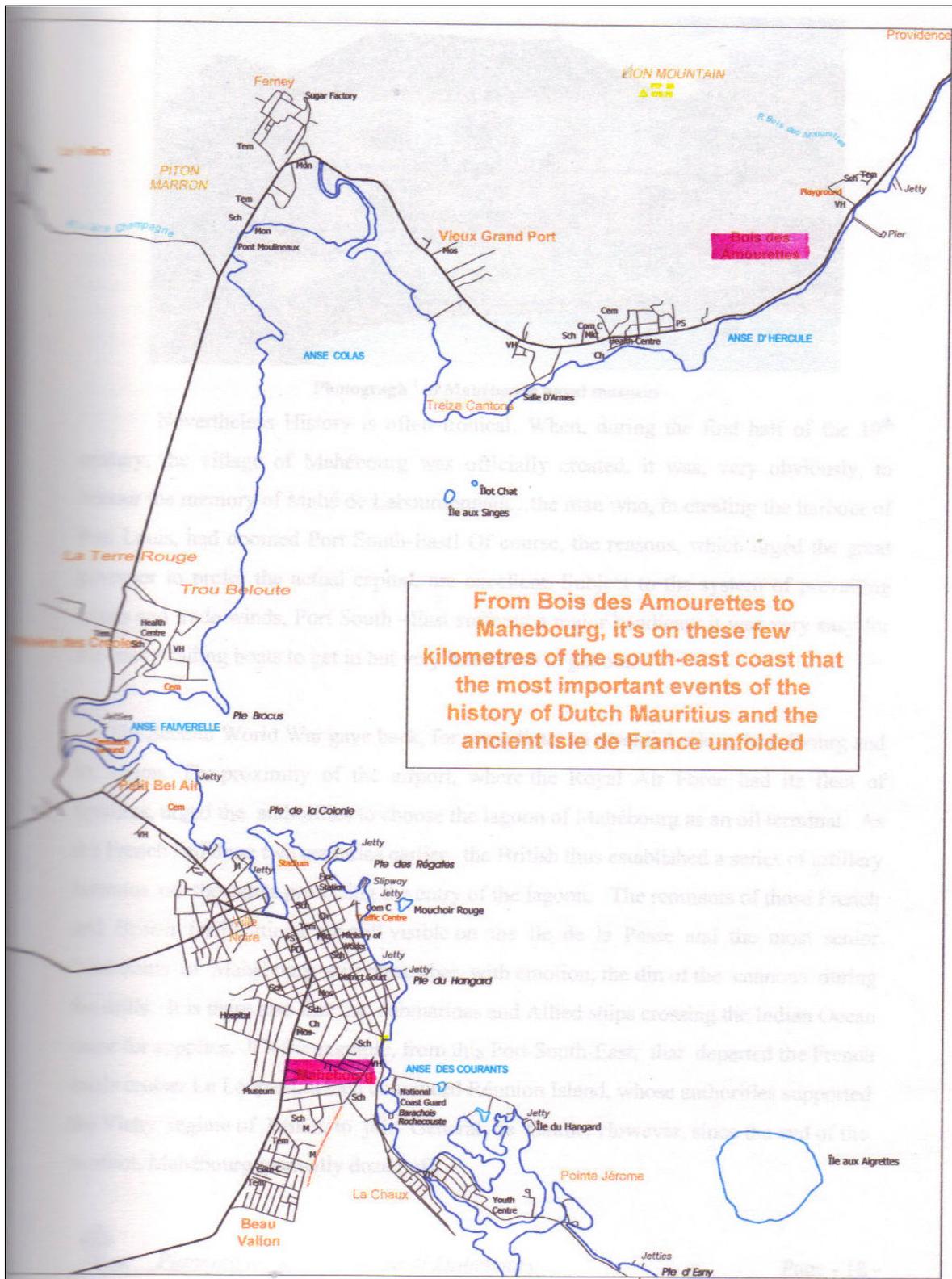


Figure 1 : Historical importance of Mahebourg region

Figure 1 on page 5 shows the historical and cultural importance of the Mahebourg region.

However, It was observed that Mahebourg is considered to be unattractive due to two major issues:

- Activity patterns, which includes traffic, pedestrian movements and parking
- General appearance, which consists of architectural design and landscaping.

The town centre has been declared as a historic zone in the planning framework, but the centre has become obsolete due to lack of action by the Central Government and Local Council and shopkeepers. The centre has lagged behind and is failing to attract investors.

The present study investigated the problems that the town is facing. A survey was carried out and some key issues contributing to the decline of the town centre were observed. The aim of the study was to analyse these issues and to come up with guidelines, which would provide the basis for the revitalisation of the Mahebourg town centre in order to make it more attractive to its inhabitants.

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- Analyse the design and development of Mahébourg town centre
- Analyse the existing, future land uses of the centre in conjunction with the existing policies and hence formulate the guidelines of the town
- Identify and analyse the problems that the town shopping centre is facing
- Identify and evaluate the existing and future community requirement for the centre. This issue was addressed by a survey carried out among the shoppers and shopkeepers.
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DEFINITION OF A TOWN CENTRE

A town centre is an area, central to the town as whole, in which the main land uses are commercial. In western Europe, it forms the most important retail area in the town, and may include both planned and unplanned retailing. It also serves a wider purpose as a business, cultural and entertainment focus for the community. (Guy,1994). A planned detail area is developed in a coordinated manner, either in single buildings where there is one or more retail stores or in an organised group of stores physically separated but with common access and car parking.

ECONOMIC ROLE OF TOWN CENTRES

The retail is a complex and dynamic system of a business that employs a variety of methods in order to sell a product. Retailing is found to be among the most important sectors in all countries, specially in developed countries. In Britain, the retail sector employs more than two million people. It has been estimated that the retail sales constitute around one quarter of the Britain's gross domestic product. (Guy, 1994).

Economically town centres create a large number of direct and indirect jobs. Moreover, during the last decades, town centres have undergone radical changes in their appearance and their functions. The patchwork pattern of small shops, mixed with coffees, residential and other uses, have in many cases been replaced by large buildings containing more than a hundred shops. (Guy, 1994) The same author pointed out that "development of new retail floor space has been one of the most important areas of capital expenditure in the last two decades in Britain". According to McGoldrick and Thomson, 1992, attracting customers depends on an understanding of shopping patterns, the use of anchor stores, the use of food and high frequency purchase stores, use of catering and other facilities.

Another important aspect influencing the development of a town centre is the tourism sector. An early contact of many tourists is the local centre as a place to exchange money into local currency and to look at the nearby shops (Morgan and Walker, 1988). The movement of tourists can cause growth of local activities (Robinson, 1976). Mahebourg, being a town with a great opportunity for cultural and historical tourism, can benefit from the tourism sector. Tourism not only generates economic growth, but allows many facilities and amenities to be made available to the residents. Comprehensive town planning must include sectoral policies to enhance and safeguard the tourism products (Manuel Baud-Bovy, Fred R. Lawson. 1998) - for example:

- Zoning of recreational areas with areas of historical interest
- Conservation of traditional areas and streets which give a sense of character to the area
- Conserve pedestrian areas around town centres where people can meet
- Cleaning of the main areas of interest
- Giving the people a sense of security and 'appartenance' (belonging)

The development of the town centres of Nusa Dua in Bali and Hajdunanas in Hungary are examples of comprehensive town planning used as a means to develop the tourism sector.

TOWN CENTRES IN THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Generally in Mauritius, the town or village centres are considered to be unplanned, as the development has evolved in a piecemeal way due to the many stakeholders involved in the development of the town centres. These include the Local Authority, the planning departments, developers, tenants, shop owners, shop

keepers. All these people have a different idea of what a town should be and what it should provide to the inhabitants of the locality. For example, architects or designers faced with the problems of shopping centre design need to be sympathetic to and understanding of the overall shopping experience. However, for shoppers, shopping may be a householder task, a social pleasure, a relaxation, an exercising activity or simply a means to meet other people. These are the main reasons behind the success of the Caudan Waterfront, where people can relax safely and enjoy the facilities and amenities available in this area. As Goldrick and Thompson (1992: 21) explain : ‘the development of food courts and recreational/leisure facilities provide meeting places as well as helping to attenuate the rigours of major shopping expeditions’. The combination of recreational and shopping uses has given people more reasons to visit centres like Phoenix les Halles, Trianon Shopping Park. Today, in addition to factors such as price comparison and location, the importance of the personal and social motives for shopping play an important role in the choice of a town centre.

WHAT IS THE CONCEPT OF REVITALISATION?

Revitalisation is a state-sanctioned programme designed to help communities improve and redevelop areas that are physically deteriorated, unsafe or poorly planned. Today revitalisation is used a tool to help specific areas of the city realise capital projects – parks, streetscape improvements, community centres... It started as a federal programme to improve inner city housing, revitalisation together with urban renewal has evolved over five decades from a top-down effort characterised by large scale clearance efforts to a more collaborate effort that aims to strengthen existing communities by relying on input from people in those communities. Though it has undergone many changes since its conception, revitalisation has been used as an effective way to reinvigorate portions of our central cities. For instance, in the United States, urban renewal and revitalisation have and continue to enliven and enrich communities. It has helped realise new public assets such as streets, parks and other community facilities. It has also financed incentives for private investments that have helped create jobs, revitalise neighbourhoods and provided a full range of housing options.

In the case of the town centre of Mahebourg, the process of ‘revitalisation’ has been preferred to ‘urban renewal’ as the latter concerns mostly land re-development in areas of moderate to high density urban land use.

FINDINGS

The major problems identified after the analysis of the survey and the main recommendations were:

- **The activity patterns:**
Findings have indicated that Mahebourg is unable to satisfy the increased volume of traffic on the main commercial road, Rue des Flamands, which is

also used as a through road. Both shoppers and shopkeepers complained that the traffic problem worsened on market days, Saturdays and Sundays.

The paving needed to be rehabilitated as in some places they are a danger to pedestrians, specially to school-children who are the major users of the paved streets. The street signs are missing in a majority of cases, as in many instances these have been victims of acts of vandalisms or they have been damaged during cyclones.

Some interviewees also complained that the bus terminal was too far away from the commercial blocks. As Mahebourg is close to the sea, it is very hot during the day and the shoppers find it difficult to walk so much to reach the scattered commercial centres.

- **Car parking:**

As the population and the automobiles increase in the country, the need for adequate parking also increases (NAS, 1971). Well designed parking contributed to the success of a town centre. (McCluskey, 1987)

In the case of Mahebourg, there were inadequate parking spaces especially during market fair days and weekends. Furthermore the parking bays were considered to be insufficient to cater for the increased number of vehicles, which visit the centre during these peak days. Delivery of goods from the streets worsened this situation.

- **General appearance and landscaping:**

The physical environment can affect both the viability of a town centre (Bell&Gaston, 1995). As such, it is very important to consider factors such as architectural design.

The interviewees find visual coherence is lacking in the centre of Mahebourg and the area to be dull and unattractive. There is a lack of street lighting, which can be dangerous at night.

- **Quality of public realm:**

There was a unanimous response that the services and the facilities available in the centre are inadequate. Nearly 50% of the interviewees mentioned that there was a need for a commercial complex with high range of products within a supermarket in the town centre. Such a complex, according to them, could provide a place for family outings and for window-shopping. There were also complaints that there was not a resting place available that could be used everyday and there was a scarcity of recreational facilities in the area.

Mahebourg lacks a central space where the local population can meet and interact. As such, it would be beneficial to create a central space, which will provide a setting for leisure and tourism. From the survey, it can be observed that the inhabitants regard the front promenade to be the central place.

It should also be noted that the town centre's historic buildings are in a deplorable state and that they can hardly resist any fore coming cyclones. No renovation works have been carried out for years and the situation is worsening.

- **Complaints and improvements recommended by shop owners**

All the shop-owners interviewed that they plan to improve their shops. Some have already thought of painting and decorating their shops to have a better window display. Owners of small-outdated units have agreed to pull down their shops if a proper master plan is proposed. They all agreed to participate in any improvements recommended by the authorities concerned.

They also pointed out that the centre is not well maintained. There were also no incentives to encourage them to landscape or upgrade their premises. A lack of ongoing monitoring on part of the local authority was perceived a major problem and the shop owners believed that they needed to regroup themselves in association.

They were also agreeable to pay more additional rates to encourage the upgrading of the town centre.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND IMPLEMENTATION

- **Activity patterns**

There was an urgent need to upgrade these streets and the main road laying emphasis on protection of pedestrians and vehicular traffic. Traffic calming is proposed as a way of integrating pedestrians and traffic. It is also proposed that street traders should be allowed use of the main road only during specific weekdays.

It is proposed to create a conservation zone by the rectangle cornered by the following : Rue des Camizard, Rue de Labourdonnais, Rue de Suffren Rue de la Chau. This pedestrian zone will link the Mahebourg market and the Bus terminal.

This pedestrian way shall be designed taking the following factors into consideration

1. the continuity of the building façade.
2. the colours and materials used in the building adjacent to the pedestrian zone
3. activities such as food kiosks or street traders would not be allowed in these streets
4. the quality of the walkway as the surface materials impact on the users. A type of surfacing that will give the pedestrians a sense of safety and comfort will be used.

- **Car Parking**

One of the most important issues to be taken into consideration while revitalising the town centre would be the way parking is handled in that area. The parking space should be designed in such a way that it would be easily accessible and that it would take a minimum of land area. However, the visual impact of the parking space should be minimised.

As such, the construction of a car park has been recommended at the back of the market as the site lies bare and is accessible and it is government property. The site is also very close to the shopping centre and the sea front. Trees would also be planted around and in the car park to screen its visual impact.

- **General appearance and landscaping**

Buildings are generally attractive elements in a town centre. They provide the visual interest and sense of activity that makes the street interesting and liveable. Unless these buildings relate positively to the street and to one another, the centre will lack visual coherence. Buildings also provide visual and physical access to the activity located within. Large masses of continuous blank wall at eye level should be avoided whilst balconies, porches, traditional architectural features should be encouraged.

As such, it would be an advantage to upgrade and renovate the building facades and to include large windows, which will attract window shoppers, even while encouraging the shop owners to include the traditional architectural features.

Street lighting must be redesigned to make it more appropriate for the historic town centre and to encourage late night shopping. This would also make the inhabitants feel more secure at night. The historical buildings in Mahebourg should be lit at night in order to make them livelier.

- **Quality of public realm**

A good revitalisation process is not superficial. It has a lot more substance and it concerns the entire physical make-up of the public realm and its subsequent care. There is also a symbolic significance in creating a civic space for social and cultural interaction at a central location. Such a central place also has a functional significance as it provides a setting for leisure and tourism activity.

After carrying out the survey, it can be concluded that the sea front promenade stands as the central place in the town. As such this area should be redesigned to make it more appealing to the inhabitants and to make it become a meeting place for the inhabitants. The design of the space will have a very important effect on the inhabitants of the region.

While designing the sea promenade the following factors will be taken into consideration:

- relationship to the street – maximum visibility and accessibility of the public space from the street must be provide, as people visible in the space draw other people and as visibility is an important aspect for security.
- comfortable seating - one of the most important factors influencing public space potential is the number and variety of opportunities for sitting. Plenty of seats should be provided, they can be built in the form of steps, walls or ledges. The use of fixed individual seats should be avoided: movable chairs, in addition to conventional benches, allow users maximum flexibility in choosing how to sit and to relate to other people.
- flexible use- the design of the central place should avoid dictating single, specific uses of space. It should rather be use for multi-purpose activities like open air concerts, social gatherings, cultural activities...
- comfort – trees of substantial size should be provided within the public space to create a sense of scale and provide a canopy for shade.
- quality and simplicity – in designing the central space, it is important to recognise that quality at all scales, from the overall aspect to the smallest detail, increases user development and appreciation. The basic elements such as paving, trees, seating and lighting should receive first priority.

REVITALISATION OF MAHEBOURG – SOCIAL AND PLANNING PERSPECTIVES

A physical planning solution will not solve all the problems identified in relation to the design of Mahebourg town centre. Significant improvements can be made through a change in community attitudes. It is essential to have workshops for different users of the town centre. The existing development process, involving the developers and the Local Council has minimised the role of socialisation of the centre. Consultation must be undertaken with stakeholders, including the community and the retailers with the aim of organising a general community meeting and thus create a committee, which will represent the Mahebourg Town Centre. Surveys can be carried out in order to understand the expectations of the population and focus groups can be organised.

If the Local Authority uses the top-down approach – that is it prepares a concept plan without consulting the stakeholders and their asks the shoppers and the shopkeepers for their views and comments, the plan will not be adopted by the

majority of people as there had been no concertation. It would be more appropriate to involve all the people concerned during the whole plan preparation process. They will have ample opportunity to comment and participate in the process and it would be easier to implement a plan which has been thus prepared. This is the non-physical side of urban planning and affords a sense of ownership over the planning and development process. The village councillors, representing the people of Mahebourg, should have a greater role to play in the town planning process.

It is also very important not to neglect the social aspect while planning the revitalisation of the town centre and to concentrate only on the shopping aspect. The social aspect is very important as it will contribute to the future development of the centre, more so, when there are mixed uses in the centre. Mixed-use development will be encouraged in the planning process as this is a more sustainable approach in planning. All the activities are found in one area (compared to the zoning where all activities segregated – residential, commercial, industrial...) and there is less wastage of natural resources as everything is more or less found in a walking distance.

In addition, community participation is necessary to have a sense of ownership of the centre. Each social and cultural group has to express itself. Activities should be organised along the main road or in the central place frequently. The Local Authority should encourage these types of activities in order to encourage community participation.

A leisure park could also be installed on part of Pointe de la Colonie. This would encourage family outings, and it would be a means to attract people from around the island.

IMPLEMENTATION OF THE REVITALISATION DESIGN

The Local Authority will play its role as the approval agency. However, the role of the Town and Country Planning Board should not be neglected. The Town and Country Planning Board is a para-statal organisation operating under the aegis of the Ministry of Housing and Lands. It was established under the Town and Country Ordinance 1954 which provides for the orderly and progressive development of land in urban and rural areas. The role of the Town and Country Planning Board is to advise the President of the Republic about what areas should be brought under planning control. Furthermore, The Town and Country Planning Board has to prepare and formulate the National Development Strategy Plan, the Outline Schemes for the Local Authorities.

To implement the proposed recommendations, it is necessary to have the collaboration of both parties. This collaboration could be achieved through an Advisory team composed of different professionals involved in planning. The role of such a team, similar to “Conseil d’Architecture d’Urbanisme et de l’Environnement (CAUE)” in the French planning system, would advise the population about public services. However, the advisory team cannot be an independent body as the areas and the capacities of towns and villages in Mauritius

are to a lesser scale compared to those in France or in Australia. This team would work for the Town and Country Planning Board and it would act as a “comité de liaison” between the different parties.

Furthermore the Board and the Local authorities have the responsibility of implementing the policies earmarked in the National Development Strategy Plan which are also included in the Outline Schemes. It would thus be beneficial if the steps taken to revitalise the town of Mahebourg could be included in the Outline Scheme of the region and could also be implemented through Planning Policy Guidelines. An action area plan, which is aimed at establishing a set of proposals and policies for the development of a specific area (such as a town centre or an area of new development) of a local authority, could also be prepared for the town centre of Mahebourg.

The financing support for the implementation should first come from the Central Government. The role of the latter is to ensure the well-being of all citizens. For this reason the Local Council should obtain Central Government grant-in-aid to support the revitalisation of the town centre. Such an aid should not be regarded as a donation but as a duty to the welfare of the local population. The cost maintenance of the town centre should be generated by the users and other direct beneficiaries. After the study carried out, it is obvious that the money received is insufficient for the major revitalisation of the town centre. The financial aid received from the government and the local people will cater only for the immediate needs of the inhabitants. Therefore, it is impossible to make long term plans for the revitalisation of the Mahebourg town centre. As a result, development will be carried out on an ad-hoc basis. It is therefore crucial to make a proper management of the funds available in order to carry out this development project.

A form of finance which will be more viable would be the Joint venture. The Local Council can have recourse to a joint venture with certain local companies in order to fulfil its responsibilities. The principal form of investment would be the Build, Operate and Transfer which could be put into practice for this project. The Local Authority would provide certain facilities or make some capital contribution, whereas the private sector, according to an agreement, may inject the necessary resources in terms of finance and expertise. The State will be responsible for the maintenance of the main road networks and public services. Then Local Authority will manage the secondary roads, public areas, parking areas.

A collaboration between the authorities and the local shopowners/keepers is also very important in order to determine the level of responsibility for maintenance of other public facilities such as street lamps, toilets. Other investments from the shopkeepers could be achieved if facilities such as loans, reduced tax on articles are provided to them.

In addition to financial requirement, councillors will need to have reliable advice and background information to relation to community, the shopkeepers and other related organisational needs within the centre. Such comparative knowledge is helpful in the councillor’s task to improve the town centre’s image. This would be an added value for the whole town.

Furthermore, in respect to the growing concern and importance of sustainable development, it is proposed that a cycle lane links the national airport to the town centre of Mahebourg. This would include rest stops and a landscaping scheme. This design proposal would have the following advantages:

- Relieving Mahebourg from some vehicular traffic
- Promote safer streets
- Encourage pollution free mode of travel
- Promote cycling as a leisure activity
- Encourage more tourists to come to Mahebourg
- Less use of non-renewable resources of energy for transport

PROPOSALS FOR THE SEA FRONT

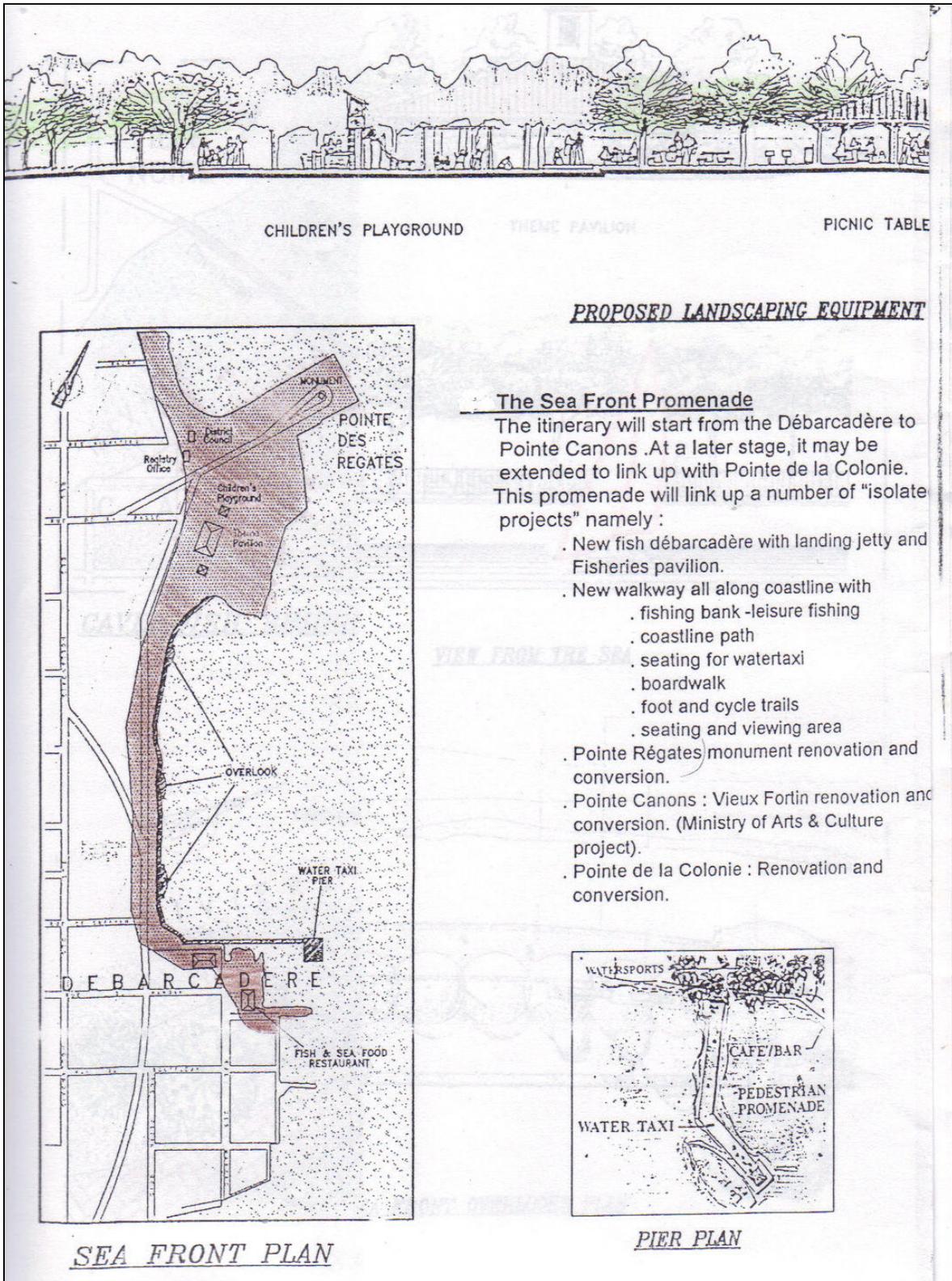


Figure 2 : Proposals for sea front promenade

CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the fact that the Mahebourg town centre has failed to attract investment and this has resulted in restricted development opportunities. From the interviews carried out it appears that the general appearance and the activity patterns of the town centre are responsible for this decline and also that the shoppers use the centre only for basic needs rather than for a full range of shopping and other activities.

The issues in the revitalisation of the town centre are not black and white. They are about extreme choices where a balance was given to it after the survey and the analysis were carried out. The patterns of public space use need to be reviewed and re-evaluated periodically to cater for the most effective design and to provide timely changes that will enhance the potential use. Maintenance programmes should also be reviewed and modified when the need arises. But good quality revitalisation and investment in high quality, durable materials are the best strategies for minimising any problems cropping up thus contributing to enhance the public realm.

The guidelines proposed and their implementation has been based on an environmental, socio-economic and cultural understanding of the town centre. This should improve the current state of Mahebourg leading to a better appreciation of the area by the users. This may allow the town to become a socio-cultural meeting place rather than merely being used for commercial purposes.

Each town has its own characteristics and what will work for Mahebourg may not necessarily work in another town centre and vice versa even though they may be afflicted by the same problems. Therefore, for each case, issues have to be tackled differently in respect to their particular context. However, in developing planning situation in any area, the financial implications have to be considered. In the case of Mahebourg, additional efforts should be made by all stakeholders (Central Government, Local Council, shopkeepers, land owners) in order to revitalise the area.

It is also crucial that the community should not be forgotten in the process. Any plan prepared and implemented should have the support of the community if it is to be successful. Special arrangements should be made with local community groups, voluntary bodies to make them participate in the revitalisation process. Similarly, the collaboration of the private sector will be a plus for the area.

Mahebourg town centre's functions vary between the traditional, historic and the contemporary. The coexistence of these categories is a reflection of the population and its different socio-economic characteristics. Any revitalisation process could create a spectacular attraction that is affordable for many Mauritian communities in addition to the local residents. The centre must, therefore, satisfy the needs of all categories of people visiting the area. Once Mahebourg starts to attract further customers the turn over will increase and a healthy centre could be achieved. If this is accomplished, there will be a sense of ownership, which will create the true identity of Mahebourg.

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