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Inaugural Lecture by Prof Christo Venter Department of Civil Engineering

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Transformative transport in African cities—progress and prospects for success

Abstract

Transport is a key lever in the project to transform cities into more efficient, equitable, and environmentally sustainable places; mobility is at the heart of achieving UN Sustainable Development Goals 3, 9 and 11. The need for transformation is especially urgent in African cities, given their low infrastructure bases and massive projected increases in population. This lecture considers the role of the transportation planning profession in enabling it and identifies key research priorities for academia. Transportation planning is evolving from being highway oriented to embracing the full range of urban mobility problems in their political, social, and economic context. I will review recent efforts to describe and analyse transport upgrading investments in African cities (including in South Africa) from various perspectives and highlight how the transformative impacts of several projects were limited by an over-reliance on narrow technical analysis. My focus will be particularly on Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) projects that have been deployed or are being planned in several African cities. In many cases, project implementers under-estimated the importance of engaging with stakeholders, especially the incumbent informal transport industry, as well as the complexity of implementing such radical interventions in public space. I will highlight how our research at the BRT+ Centre of Excellence has contributed to a better understanding of these problems. I will conclude with thoughts on how research and tertiary education can grow to equip African planning professionals better to meet the challenges of creating transformative transport in cities.