Newcastle upon Tyne Symposium Summary – Prof Bob Giddings

Newcastle upon Tyne is a **compact city centre** that still seems to be actively enjoying a strong **retail core**. Recent **developments** have been an expansion of bars and restaurants, hotels and student housing. The social structure is a resident population with a variety of demographics, but an increasingly high proportion are students. The city remains the regional capital with numbers of people travelling into the centre. The hotel **development** responds to, and generates **visitors and tourists**; and there are **debates about a tipping point where citizens start to feel like strangers in their own city**. The Council promotes – getting the balance right. It states that the objectives are:

* a city centre that is **open for business**
* a destination for tourists
* a place where local people feel at home.

These objectives are set in a climate of **diminishing local public sector influence**, as Central Government retains greater proportions of local finance and exercises its decision-making. The received wisdom is that the future of the city centre should be directed by a partnership of the public sector, private sector, and the **community**. However, there are no indications as to how this might be enacted and currently, there is a **governance leadership vacuum**. The private sector needs a strong public sector. For example, an impoverished local authority may try to generate income by applying disproportionate business rates to locally-based companies.

There is clear intent to create a city centre that is more attractive to **visitors** and investors. Spaces are increasingly viewed as settings for events and activities, with the aim of **providing attractive places** for all age groups. Architecturally, the centre has a distinctive backdrop but public spaces are predominantly streets – whether vehicular or pedestrian. The concept of access being defined by a maximum of 10 minutes walk to a station, is achieved by the Metro system. The population is suspicious of grand plans, mainly as a result of damage to the city fabric from the grand plans of the 1960s. The centre is still a great place for spectacular events, although there is concern about large scale exhibitions that occur at irregular intervals and have dubious legacy. **Inward investment** is perceived as necessary for the local economy. Nevertheless, the outcomes are also invariably large scale, **may not touch local people**, and based on visions and decisions made at considerable distance from the city. There are two established city centre universities, which like others in the UK, are divesting themselves of student accommodation. This is encouraging a huge quantity of private developments in the city centre.

The developments are distorting social activity and the local economy with student purchasing patterns, no council tax payments, and occupancy for 30 weeks in the year. The city has an inherent **culture**, based on its industrial and **maritime heritage**. NE1, the Business Improvement District is being innovative in its ability to persuade city centre **businesses** to invest in **improving its appearance and attractiveness**. The City Council’s core strategy *Planning for the Future 2010 – 2030,* does not contain any clear vision but seems to rely on more of the same ie

* retail, leisure and commercial activity as the primary basis of the economy
* increased pedestrianisation of streets
* increased cycle routes
* identified potential for public open space – no strategy for how it will be achieved; **private sector development has not delivered the promised public realm** eg Stephenson Quarter