

'Renew'ing Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia

At first glance, the planning vision for the City of Newcastle, New South Wales, set out in its Greater Metro Newcastle Plan 2036, is similar to that of its namesake in the UK. It too has a vision of a compact city centre which is entrepreneurial and dynamic, seen to be economically globally competitive, offering an attractive lifestyle to attract new populations, and with enhanced sustainability credentials through its 'new economy' as a smart city supported by carbon neutral initiatives. It too envisages key roles for the University as a civic partner and growth of student population, a focus on culture as a part of the economic base and a renewed focus on tourism, and with densification through infill site residential development.

Here too, the city council's approach follows the orthodoxy of national metropolitan planning which for the last two decades has focussed on producing monocentric compact cities (Bunker et al. 2017; Limb et al, 2018). In Newcastle, this involves regulating land use types and intensities strategically distributed around hierarchical transit lines and nodes to create clustered centres. A modern light transportation system (replacing heavy rail lines) and dedicated cycling and walking routes are reinforcing the use of public spaces and buildings to integrate the urban core.



Figure 1 – Polycentric linear ‘Precinct’ approach to Newcastle city centre renewal (Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036)

The vision presents the structure as a compact city centre composed of precincts but the reality is the physical development of a polycentric linear city (Figure 1). Without any explicit reference to urbanisation processes, the vision document’s underpinning messaging is about transformation and transition, replacing the city and city region’s economic dependency on coal exportation to a more diverse “service, creative and knowledge city”.

Whilst there are parallels with the other Newcastle, there is however one key difference between the two visions; the document being the forerunner of conversations rather than the outcome of consultations. Changes at the national level to the Environment Planning and Assessment Act has required states, and through them city and local councils, to engage in more transformative thinking, to develop a 20 year vision for land use management and preservation, as well as set out community participation plans. Together these are designed to make it clearer and easier for citizens to understand the planning process and its aims, and to participate in planning decision-making (New South Wales Government, 2018). The 2030 vision document for Newcastle represents a deliberative attempt to simplify and clarify the planning process, enabling improved regulatory efficiency to deliver economic development whilst also delivering greater transparency (Ruming, 2018). It forms part of a process to re-calibrate the political economy associated urban consolidation and compactness in the past two decades which saw multi-players, especially in the private sector, dominate the discourse and development agenda squeezing out opportunities for communities to be active in the planning process (Ruming and Goodman, 2016; Bunker et al, 2017).

In responding to this enforced regulatory change, Newcastle City Council has thus sought through its vision statement to present the logic (and arguably the underlying theory of change) associated with urban planning. For the city centre, which has already seen significant revitalisation spearheaded by the Hunter Development Corporation, the representation is a series of inter-locking precincts, each focused on a spatial area but designated by function and contribution to the overall economic growth of the area (Figure 1).

In bringing together a heterogeneous agglomeration of different components – urban materialities, territory, symbolisms, economic functions, and authority/power – Newcastle aims to accrete and align particular forms of urbanisation and urbanism into distinct areas of the urban core, precincts. Resembling an assemblage, and open to future assemblage theory analysis to explore how and why such elements might align, it is a framing device for thinking through the processual reformation of the city centre and represents an active attempt to create a ‘new downtown’ (Helbrecht, 2012; Dirksmeier, 2012).

Table 2: Precinct model of city centre development, Newcastle NSW

Precinct	Contribution to city centre	Proposed interventions
Newcastle East	Tourism sector	Enable new and revitalised accommodation and tourism functions; stage major events

East End	Heritage and retail	Transform public spaces to connect shops and waterfront; retain and repurpose heritage buildings; revitalise shopping mall
Civic	Education and research hub + cultural axis to waterfront	Leverage from University of Newcastle NeW Space campus; encourage addition civic and cultural activities
West End	Commercial sector	Relocate key Civic functions to area; increase commercial floor space; promote area of professional, finance and office employment; new ferry wharf and extension of ferry network
Wickham	New economy space and extension of city centre	Leverage transit oriented development around interchange; provide floor space for emerging new economy business and industry

Source: Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036 (State of New South Wales Government, 2018)

Workshops held in the city with key stakeholders offered some further insights on the importance of partnerships with identified key actors such as the University (civic precinct), and tourism developers (east end precinct) but like the vision statement did not reveal mechanisms about how the future vision of the urban core is to realised.

References