

THOUGHT PIECE 3

Whose city centre? – Re-conceptions of citizenship

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Citizen participation

Revitalising downtown or city centre areas has become a critical part of ensuring the future of the city. Achieving this however has often proven to be difficult, more complex than anything that any one sector – such as local government, property developers or economic development professionals – can accomplish along (Walker, 2017). Similarly, a focus on large-scale single catalyst projects including waterfront development and conventions centre has also failed to offer more than marginal gains.

In seeking more collaborative and partnership working – a theme which has emerged from the case studies of city centre renewal in the AHRC project across the world – there are positive attempts to increase local empowerment, enhance community self-reliance and make the city centre attractive to a wider cohort of citizens. Programmes such as the Main Street Approach (see <https://www.mainstreet.org/mainstreetamerica/theapproach>) in the USA, or the Grainger Town project in Newcastle upon Tyne (<http://neregenarchive.online/graingertown/>) point to how city centre transformation through partnership working with local citizens and communities.

Mobilising communities and other stakeholders to participate in new governance forms is not easy – see De Magalhaes et al's (2016) account of Grainger Town – but most approaches seek to draw upon the knowledge and relational resources of residents and citizens in the process. In addition, they presume that people are taking part in the planning process because they are interested in a particular issue, or concerned about the longer-term future of their community (Leino and Laine, 2012).

Only a small proportion of citizens actually reside in the contemporary city centre. Their number may be increasing, but for most major cities around the world, the proportion of their population having an abode in the city centre remains small.

To adapt Lefebvre's phrase they all believe they have "the right to the city centre". They have no legal right to be there. They do not pay property or land bases taxes which residents do, and thus have a different relationship with the city centre beyond the capitalist notions of 'rights' bestowed through taxation. They are also disenfranchised, not having any rights to elect representatives. BUT and it is a very significant but, these non-residents have major influence over the future of the city centre. They are not the 'residues' which Lefebvre sees as claiming rights to a collective urban life for the first time, but lie at the very existential core of the city centre. Indeed, most of the economic activity, services and functions offered by the city centre are primarily for this non-resident population.

Which citizens?

Like many other commentators considering the 'right to the city', Marcuse (2009) focuses on those often excluded or denied access to the city, those alienated by processes of urbanisation and the asymmetries of power to manage and shape the city, but acknowledges that this alone is not sufficient to merit a 'right'. Just because they are discontented or struggle with deprivation is not sufficient to have rights to the city!

But what happens when those encouraged to have rights to the city centre as part of the planned regeneration of the area are short term citizens, and where they have limited local knowledge? How can they be mobilised to participate in city centre/downtown renewal and future planning?

So whose has the right to city centre? Or in other words, whose city centre?

As part of this AHRC funded research project we have been exploring these questions within four cities across four continents, asking those involved in planning the future of the city centre who are key people to the future of the city centre and for whom the city centre is being planned.

Across the cities, three groups have emerged – each viewed as key to ensuring a future of the city centre but each also raising issues about the notion of ownership or citizenship.

- The tourist
- Low income groups
- The international student

Here the focus is on the third group – details of how the other two groups are viewed as important to the city centre future can be found on the symposium summaries.

The international student

Less than two decades ago, although students were acknowledged as contributors to the future of the city and city centre, little attempt was made to manage their potential contribution. van den Berg and Russo (2004) in the preface to their analysis of the 'Student City' noted "Student communities are without doubt a strategic resource for urban development. Students are citizens and the highly skilled working class of tomorrow. They keep cities alive and diverse. They are consumers of cultural and recreational facilities. They have a distinctive expenditure patterns that in some cases is crucial to support the economy of specific area or neighbourhoods." So started

Over the intervening years much greater attention has been given to students in local urban policy. They have moved from being the 'invisible population' that van den Berg and Russo describe to being more central to urban development and planning. Their particular needs, especially in terms of housing, and their unique contribution economically and socially to the city has become a key element in making studentification of the city a common part of city planning. And cooperation between education institutions and city planners has also expanded as mutual interests around civic growth align.

Although systematic analysis was first initiated in the UK, off-campus student housing has now attracted scholarly attention worldwide, from student ghetto (Rugg et al., 2002) to vertical studentification in Spain (Garmendia et al., 2012), to marginalised foreign student accommodation in Australia (Fincher and Shaw, 2009), to student accommodation in Kuala Lumpur (Sabri and Ludin, 2009).

Often viewed negatively as part of a process, comparable to gentrification, where displacement is central to the discussion on studentification. Whereas the production of student accommodation forms part of a neighbourhood, it has been seen more positively as the cultivation of cultural identity and social relations.

Students' agency as part of the commodification process of student life engaged with gentrification and urban regeneration (Chatterton, 2010, 513) has largely been ignored or assumed. Whilst some studies have underlined the 'suboptimal' nature of spaces for student accommodation (Hubbard, 2008), given their purchasing power in leisure and recreational consumption (Chatterton, 1999), others have emphasised the presumption that students (often drawn from middle and upper class families) are rich in cultural capital and expertise in their own areas (Smith, 2005).

The symposia in Newcastle (UK), Newcastle (Australia) and Tshwane (South Africa) each emphasised the important role of the provision of student accommodation and in particular the rise of purpose-built student accommodation (PBSA) to bringing new residents to the city centre. PBSA is as He (2015) mutation of studentification, differentiated by its location (usually city centre), the absence of residential displacement (usually the displacement is commercial), and its high standard of accommodation (usually beyond the affordability of average students). Viewed as gated 'student-enclaves' (Smith and Hubbard, 2014), their characteristics are more typical of other city centre occupiers seeking alternative cultural and residential preferences. For a description of student accommodation development and location in the context of the strategic plan see Ruiu (2017).

Municipal authorities have also understood the advantages of keeping international students in the local economy, with the creation of start-ups and business incubators centred on knowledge and entrepreneurship (Hawthorne, 2018).

But whilst international students are sought to be active participants in the future of the city centre, there remain key questions to be considered about how (or maybe if) such temporary residents contribute in other ways to the development of the city centre. To what extent, as Robertson (2016) notes, do their temporary mobilities lead to different impacts from those of permanent 'settler' mobilities?

Attention needs to be given to the impact of the concentrated presence in creating new 'temporal zones' in the city centre and its impact on practices within cities. And given their temporality, those advocating greater citizen participation in city centre planning need to reflect on how this increasingly significant cohort can be engaged and included despite their limited rootedness to place.

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