Thought Piece 4

The future shape of the city centre: insights from 'The Future of the City Centre: global perspectives'

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Introduction

In our invitation to the contributors to the book, Bob Giddings and I asked them to focus on the future, speculating as desired on what they saw the thematic area contributing to the city centre in the coming years. Like most other research on cities, it is of course easier to reflect on the contemporary city centre and its issues and challenges, and on the past, than to consider future opportunities and trajectories. Indeed, it has been evident in our engagement with city authorities and communities across the world, that the envisioning a future is much harder to achieve than an assessment of the current lived realities of citizens and businesses.
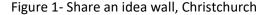
Limited scope for change?

The surficial expression of the future city centre, what is immediately visible to the visitor and citizen, is likely to be both the same and different. In this respect it mirrors the contemporary city centre which arguably more than any part of the urban conurbation has been subjected to repeated physical change and reinvention. 'New' dimensions are played out in the same space as the past, with the result that their contemporary centre is an amalgam of buildings and structures which reflect many time periods of occupation and activity. The selective retention and restoration of some building, deemed to have more cultural significance that others, has created the 'historic' character that for most people is a feature of the city centre. Such selective representations in physical form of the dynamism of the city centre will continue as the norm.

But occasionally there are alternatives to the process of selective retention. In some city centres, such as Christchurch, New Zealand after the widespread damage caused by earthquake in 2011 or the rebirth of downtown New Orleans in the aftermath of hurricane Katrina, there are opportunities to make more substantial change. Schnitzer (2011) points to how more mixed income developments have assisted to reinforce the core of the city as an economic engine that is bringing people back into the core of the city; reversing the previous outward movement of lower income groups from the city centre. But the exceptionality of such opportunities for dramatic and fundamental change to a city centre is evident in the contested and extended processes to reach consensus on how both Christchurch and New Orleans are being rebuilt. Even when major redevelopment of the city centre is less severe, responding to such opportunity has not been straightforward. The long-term decline in port facilities and the accompanying power and transportation systems in Newcastle NSW has created opportunities to redefine and reinvent the city centre at a scale seldom available to most city authorities, but as Jeffries notes in Chapter 4 discussion over how to utilise 'new spaces' can be protracted.

The contested nature of managing and governing the city centre and its future, noted in Chapters 2 and 11, is highlighted sharply by the experience of Christchurch as it has sought to rebuild its urban core. Proposals drafted by the local community and the mayoral team under its 'Share an Idea' plan brought together citizens and the local authority together to create a vision for its future and a framework to

deliver this (Figure 1). This 'bottom up' proposal was however rejected by the state government and alternative visions and plans are being implemented.

Figure 1- Share an idea wall, Christchurch

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City centre governance (or the lack of it)

Traditionally, the city centre has lacked its own distinctive level of government, being part of a larger scale system of governance, either at the metropolitan or regional scale. This absence has inevitably meant that managing change in the 'core' is located within a wider geopolitical urban context of local government. One way in which this gap has been filled has been the development of forms of 'alternative' groupings of key stakeholders such as the Business Improvement Districts – but as noted in Chapter 2, their remit is partial and lack democratic mandates that comes with traditional forms of local government. There is a need and desire as part of good, multilevel governance to bring together effectively stakeholders – but for the city centre this is even more challenging, as if includes a complex array of stakeholders – from residents in the city centre and beyond, local businesses in the city centre, and non-local businesses with headquarters elsewhere, alongside the various local, regional and national agencies of government. It is thus entirely understandable that Wu and Lombardi (Chapter 11) underline the struggle to ensure effective co-ordination of the interests and expectations, resources and knowledge in a way that complement each other and are directed towards a shared vision. There is an expectation globally that the local state – local authorities or municipalities – will have a key role in facilitating such coordination; a role often legally constituted. Achieving this has to date proven problematic, but it is clear that local government is willing to be more experimental in seeking new ways to harness stakeholder engagement in shaping the future of the city centre. Such pathways – move the debate over the management of the city centre from BIDs and similar approaches, to new that achieve accountability while recognising the interdependencies, as a precondition of cultivating trust and a co-operative relationship among levels of government.

<u>Making space public</u>

One aspect where multi-level and differing forms of governance has been strongest has been in terms of public realm and social infrastructure. Social infrastructure is vitally important to the quality of life in urban centres – not just those facilities that provide entertainment and opportunities for social gatherings, but also the public spaces that are intimately linked with more sociable cities, creating opportunities for people to get together and support each other (Chapter 8). The growth of mixed communities living in the centre and the concept of a heterogeneous residential populations appear to be fundamental. A particular aspect will be the balance between permanent and temporary residents. There is a need to look beyond the stereotypes of city centre activity and residency to explore what makes cities thrive socially and how the current social assets of centres can be leveraged for the future to create new models of city centre life that help people and centres to succeed. It requires a change in mindset as to what the future city centre is for, and how it can be better fitted to the needs of the community. In part this shift is needed because of the dominance of the Anglo-American notions of the city centre being commercially-led and focused, opening this to alternative models where apartment living is the norm for people of very different incomes, it is long accepted that people live in the heart of the city. And these residents – the 'insiders' as Bacon and Hajisoltani term them in Chapter 9 – as well as those whose footprint is more temporary including the regulars who commute into or use the services of the city centre and visitors, need to be more involved as stakeholders in the governance of city centres. While centres are owned by anonymous and distant corporations, the community will never feel at home.

Figure 2 – Public square in the centre of Joao Pessoa

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One of the first steps must be to understand and value city centre communities, and to understand their role in activating spaces and places (Chapter 9). Without such active involvement there is a risk of making the city unhospitable to them – such as experienced in those cities where over-tourism has become contentious (Dodds and Butler, 2019). The focus in most policy initiatives has been on cementing currents into the city, through stronger place attachment, concentrating on utilizing green spaces to enhance social activity, and on the provision of services that support the growth of social networks, wellbeing and a sense of belonging. The downside of such an approach has been of building social capital that reinforces social status and order, differentiating groups of people from others. A more inclusive approach, sympathetic to the needs of other groups and where a sense of identity and affinity to place are created by different groups.

Achieving this, further values public spaces and the public realm more generally (Chapter 8) where different social groups intermingle and where metaphorical 'ownership' by communities is not exclusive of any particular social group. In this respect, there is much to value from the ways in which in Global South city centres, such spaces have become the locus for informal markets, informal meeting places and often expressions of alternative cultures. Whilst such informality runs counter to an understandable desire by government to formalise and regulate economic activity, the social dimensions of the street

markets and eating spaces are being sought to be replicated in the Global North as they re-open the streets and public spaces of the city centre. Such an amalgam of local residents, traders and visitors (Figure 3) epitomises the aspiration of the 'welcome city centre'.

Figure 3: Claiming the streets: trading in Kolkata

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The best and most successful centres offer a sustainable, local economy and society with diverse and mixed uses attracting and meeting the needs and desires of their local communities. They enhance a sense of community, place, and identity and are locations that advance equality by enabling all members of society to participate fully. They are increasingly likely to be places which offer conviviality. Dobson (Chapter 8) underscores the role of the public realm and open spaces, especially those that bring nature back into the city centre, in making city centres welcoming, convivial. But this can be extended – to the importance of food consumption as part of the shared experience amongst diverse groups of people. The hospitality industry has long been a key part of the economy of the city centre, a centrepoint of bringing together residents and visitors, providing the social mixing that marks the centre.

Accessing the city centre – rejecting mass and fast mobility

Associated with this needs to be a radical shift in the way we conceive of connections between the city centre and the result of the urban realm. As van Vuren (Chapter 12) notes the historic and contemporary focus on mobility and access – and the resultant investment in transport infrastructure – has been constructed around speed and mass movement. This desire to move as many people as quickly (ie efficiently and cheaply) as possible into and out of the city centre is as odds with the desire to make the city centre more convivial, more hospitable. There is we argue likely to be more attention needed on the ways in which the notion of slow mobility can be achieved, where the quality of the journey and the 'lingering' at the destination are elevated to become part of urban transport planning (Figure 4).

Figure 4: Moving around the city centre: BYD's vision of sustainable battery-powered mobility

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City centres are places to **be in** rather than **to get to**. With fewer journeys for work purposes, and more hybrid and diverse patterns of commuting, the rationale for transportation shifts. It is intriguing for example that in Scotland, where the rail service has been nationalised in April 2022, the intention is to re-organise timetables to support off-peak, day time travel rather than return to the pre-Covid peak commuting capacity (BBC, 2022). This shift is already evident in some cities where investment in cycling

infrastructure into the city centre has helped to increase green travel (Figure 5). Although apparently counterintuitive, reducing the speed of travel within cities saves time for residents and creates more sustainable, liveable, prosperous and healthy environments (Tranter and Tolley, 2020).

Figure 5: Relax and ride: Slow mobility and green travel, Atlanta Georgia

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And this can be extended to incorporate more than just travel. The Cittaslow movement has grown since its inception in 1999. As its manifesto says the desire is to create towns and places – but equally could be applied to city centres –

 "animated by people 'curious about time reclaimed', rich in squares, theatres, workshops, cafes, restaurants, spiritual places, unspoilt landscapes and fascinating craftsmen, where we still appreciate the slow, benevolent succession of the seasons, with their rhythm of authentic products, respecting fine flavours and health, the spontaneity of their rituals, the fascination of living traditions. This is the joy of a slow, quiet, reflective way of life." (Cittaslow, 2020 - Cittaslow Manifesto - EN)

Built around Slow Food movement, the focus is on local resources, economic and cultural strengths, and the unique historical context of a town. These movements represent an alternative urban development agenda that focuses on the intersections between the economy, the environment, and equity (Mayer and Knox, 2006).

Open, inclusive and social

This notion of a welcoming, convivial place in turn focuses on understanding and promoting city centres as places of use – for living, socialising, and working - rather than as places of trade and exchange (Chapter 9). They have become more open and equitably accessible places. The spatial sorting of residents according to socio-economic status is as old as the history of urbanisation (Nightingale 2012) and across the city is often reinforced by other racial, cultural and social characteristics. Unequal access to land, property and employment (and in turn income) is a feature of capitalist urban societies. But for the city centre, as a hub for an urban society, it has to move beyond such social and economic segregation. Responding to the many inequalities present in the contemporary city centre continues to be a globally faced challenge. In the past, urban design has been criticised for what Gunder (2011) terms a creation and product of neoliberalism. He argues that it mirrors values of reification and façade, the superficial, the surface, in the commodification of the built environment. Yet, each of the four case studies in Chapters 3-7 emphasizes, the value of designers to ensure that governing authorities and those offering leadership also recognize the social value of urban design and the role it can play in improving community well-being and social justice. As White (2015) notes, it also needs to ensure that the provision of high quality design is not restricted to those who live in prosperous enclaves or gentrified areas, and benefits citizens in addition to those with time to invest in participatory planning processes. In this respect, it is desirable to move beyond the successful implementation of built environment design, codes setting minimum health and safety requirements, policies setting aspirational targets, and incentives such as green building rating schemes that set design standards and work effectively towards achieving the UN Sustainable Development Goals, especially SDG 11 on sustainable cities and communities.

Figure 6 - High density living: a sustainable future? Guangzhou, China

And for this to happen, there needs to be more emphasis on re-populating the city centre. Across the book's chapters is a recurring theme that for the city centre of the future to be successful it to appeal to more and different people as their place of residence. Whilst some cities – such as Newcastle upon Tyne – have been successful in changing the demographic profile of the downtown with the attraction of student accommodation and others have gentrified some parts, many others have struggled to provide an appeal that counters the attraction of suburban living. As noted in the context of Tshwane (Chapter 6), low returns on investment for affordable housing has severely restricted supply, leading to a need for thoughtful and sustainable city policies on social housing programmes.

The selective nature of those engaged in this reversal of previous depopulation trends has often been viewed as a key aspect. For some the renewal of buildings into residential use has been seed as part of a 'gentrification' process. For others, it is a niche lifestyle form of urban living, appealing to a cohort of the population. This recent historic growth of city centre housing in the Global North has Barke and Clarke (2016) argue to be understood as an innovation; the active role of markets and interventions that bucked the trends that have plagued the city centre over many decades. Such innovation has however has to be extended to enable a widening and deepening of the repopulation of the urban core.

All of the above elements of the city centre to a degree challenge the predominant emphasis of the city centre as an economic space. Most city centres have become predicated on commercial and retail activity, especially in the Global North. As globalisation and economic competitiveness has increased, the response in city centres globally has been to intensify shopping centres at the core of cities and develop further commercial buildings, which often introduced high rise building. These developments, funded by circulating global capital, have produced a homogenisation of city centres with, as Wiedmann, Thomas and Peterek (Chapter 10) note, commercial buildings tended to look alike, and shopping centres contained the same stores and products that could be found anywhere in the country or even the continent.

<u>Standing out from the crowd</u>

Urban competitiveness and the reduced financial autonomy available to municipal authorities has meant that making city centres magnets to attract and retain external capital and investment has become a central element of place making. Such competition can emphasis distinctiveness and singularity (Abusaada and Elshater, 2021), but it can also risk increasing homogeneity through policy mobility (McCann, 2011). Recent attempts at urban design have been viewed as uncritical (Foroughmand Araabi, 2018) with, for example, the adoption of certain urban forms and components. These include the ubiquitous desire to pedestrianise commercial streets to open-up spaces for entertainment, without fully understanding the urban problems involved; or focusing on big-architecture and not understanding the socio-political contexts and without an awareness of intangible values attached to individual elements of the urban landscape.

Whilst the use of tools such as masterplans may be viewed as indiscriminate and insensitive forms of urban design, the designing of the future city centre has to incorporate local sensitivity into the planning process. This is especially pertinent where the economic and political needs for attracting new investment for business, tourism and housing, needs to be balanced with local culture, heritage and identity.

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