

AHRC Future of the City Centre Project: Newcastle, Australia Symposium - March 2019

The Australian symposium was the 2nd of the 4 meetings and was spread over 3 days, from Monday March 4th until Wednesday March 6th.

Day 3 - Wednesday March 6

Presentations and Workshop discussion under the theme of *Current and Future Revitalisation Strategies*.

Held at the University of Newcastle's new inner-city Campus. Attendees numbered between 40-50 and came from varied and diverse backgrounds including multi-disciplinary UON academic staff, UON PhD students; planners from both Newcastle and Lake Macquarie city councils, state government urban planners, construction lawyers, construction project managers, engineers, surveyors, teachers, community volunteers, art curators, building designers, councillors, retail tenants and so forth.

The NeW Space project was at the forefront of the revitalization of Newcastle City Centre. It was an opportunity to create a campus that will be a catalyst for remaking both the physical and cultural heart of the city of Newcastle. As part of design brief for city campus, the university wanted a space that would provide engagement opportunities and enhance connectivity for the community, not just with the building, but with the surrounding buildings and open spaces. The brief required placing students at the centre of the design; creating a space where they want to spend time academically and socially. It needed to create spaces where students and academics can meet and engage in a variety of formal and informal ways as well as areas for quiet reflective learning. NeW Space was primarily built to house the Faculty of Business and Law, who relocated from the main campus at Callaghan, some 10km west of the city centre. Construction costs were supported by Australian Commonwealth Government funding of \$30 million (via the Education Investment Fund Regional Priorities Round), NSW State Government funding of \$25 million (administered by Hunter Development Corporation), and \$40 million invested by the University itself.

The symposium attracted both in-kind and financial support from the University of Newcastle, City of Newcastle, Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation (HCCDC), construction contractors, architectural practices, various built environment consultants and local community groups. The day consisted of 11 formal presentations, each one supported by a Q&A session; an open discussion prior to the lunch interval chaired by Marcus Jefferies and Bob Giddings; networking over lunch; further Q&A after the afternoon sessions; round table discussion; and an overall reflection and feedback session before symposium closure.

The first session was presented by one of the project team members, and UON (Australia) international partner Marcus Jefferies. Marcus began his presentation by outlining the background and main aims of the broader project, and identifying and introducing the international project partners. His presentation then went on to focus on the local context which included a brief history of the city centre of Newcastle, NSW, from the Victorian era to its peak in the post-war years and the start of mass consumerism through to the threat of 1970's/80's suburban shopping centres, post-industrial decline (during the closure of BHP) that soon led to a dilapidated and crime ridden city centre that has triggered the recent revitalization strategies.

Marcus' session then ran into a session by the project leader, Bob Giddings, who provided further detail on the project and reflected on the findings from the UK symposium – held at Newcastle-Upon-Tyne some 6 months prior. Bob's session also led discussion on the historical development of cities, and how this project is taking a world view to the problem of environmental, social, economic, political and technological changes happening in global cities, especially those going through significant post-industrial change. The workshop participants were particularly keen to discuss and debate the similarities, and (definite) differences, between the UK and Australian 'Newcastles'.

The 3rd session of the day, and one could argue the first of the more focused topic-specific sessions, was presented by Chris Saunders – General Manager of Renew Newcastle. Chris gave insight into the history and aim of Renew and outlined the model that really was the catalyst for revitalization of the city centre. Renew started the process of dilapidated properties getting fixed up, commercial leases being signed, the start up of new commercial projects by removing barriers (red tape), helped lower costs and complexity of participation, encouraging creative risk, allowing experimentation, making failing cheap, facilitating government leadership not ownership, investment opportunities, sense of community and a lasting legacy.

Since 2008, the height of dilapidation and vacancy rates in Newcastle's city centre, Renew Newcastle has been connecting people with vacant spaces, supporting a community of creative entrepreneurs who bring life, interest and activity into under-utilised neighbourhoods and partnering with those who share the vision of giving back to their community. After helping to fill the empty spaces with pop-up businesses, exhibitions, art, entertainment etc, it created a series of flow on effects. It reduced street crime, graffiti, vandalism and gave significant economic and social value back to the community that has attracted business and residential interest in the city.

Renew Newcastle ceased to operate in mid 2019, a 'job done' perhaps? It was very much had a 'make do, can do' spirit that has changed the pulse of the city. Since it was established in late 2008 Renew Newcastle has been the inspiration for empty space revitalisation schemes across the country, like

Renew Adelaide, Renew Townsville, Made in Geelong and Pop-up Parramatta.

The next presentation was delivered by Valentina Misevska – Chief Operating Office for Hunter and Central Coast Development Corporation. HCCDC are the NSW Government agency, responsible for the planning and delivery of economic and urban development in the Hunter and Central Coast regions, including the Revitalizing Newcastle and Honeysuckle Urban Renewal projects. The Revitalizing Newcastle project has been met in the main with a positive response, despite some mixed views. The State Government is investing over \$650 million to transform the city centre by strengthening connections between the city and waterfront, creating job opportunities, provide new housing and delivering attractive public spaces connected to better transport. The program's key objectives are to:

- bring people back to the city centre
- connect the city to its waterfront
- help grow new jobs in the city centre
- create great places linked to new transport
- create economically sustainable public domain and community assets
- preserve and enhance heritage and culture

The presentation, and subsequent discussion focused on several of the initiatives such as the new City Centre campus for the university (NewSpace); removal of the old heavy industrial rail corridor that truncated the city from the water front; and the subsequent new transport interchange and light rail project. All of these projects are leading to a more vibrant city centre beyond the traditional CBD hours, flourishing mixed-use commercial opportunities, increased employment, appropriate urban public open space, and restoration of heritage buildings and infrastructure.

The Revitalization is ongoing with various current and proposed strategies:

- Rail Bridge Row - The last remaining stretch of Newcastle's surplus rail corridor is being offered for sale by EOI to help facilitate new jobs, homes and improved urban outcomes. The long and narrow block provides the opportunity to create a high-quality streetscape that, together with residential and commercial outcomes, will help to attract more people into the city centre. This supports the commitment to the ongoing revitalisation of Newcastle, as well as City of Newcastle's *Development Control Plan* and the *Newcastle Local Environmental Plan 2012*.
- The Station - The former Newcastle Railway Station is an important state heritage listed building, and a significant component of the Revitalising Newcastle program. Following community engagement, HCCDC undertook significant repairs, restoration and platform infill works to provide a new lease of life to the precinct. A recent launch marked the commencement of The Station's temporary activation - and the

multipurpose space is now home to a range of hospitality, retail, wellness, art and innovation platforms.

- Museum Park - The former Civic Station precinct is planned to transform into a vibrant public space. The precinct upgrades include renovations to the existing station building, greater pedestrian access between the city and the waterfront, as well as the creation of paved and green spaces in the surrounding parks. Museum Park will be a new pedestrian hub for people to access local businesses, the NewSpace, Honeysuckle and Newcastle Museum - all metres from the Civic light rail stop.
- Market Street Lawn - Market Street Lawn will be a new community space in Newcastle's city centre, connecting the CBD with the harbour. Located at the intersection of Market and Scott Streets, and the destination for the new Queens Wharf Light Rail Stop - this attractive public space provides open green space, shady trees, seating, an illuminated playspace water feature, and amenity to support a variety of events. The lawn has been made possible by removing the overhead pedestrian bridges and heavy rail infrastructure that previously divided the city from the waterfront.
- The Signal Box - Located in Market Street Lawn, the Signal Box is an important piece of Newcastle's heritage fabric. In its previous life dating back to 1936, the building played a key role in directing trains in and out of the former Newcastle Railway Station. After the completion of heritage restoration works in mid 2019, the historic building was honoured by the *Australian Institute of Architects* with the prestigious *Newcastle Award for Heritage*. Now, following a competitive EOI process, The Signal Box will be transformed into a vibrant new dining destination.
- Newcastle Bus Interchange - The former Newcastle Co-Operative Store site will be transformed into a new bus interchange with a view to realising Newcastle's transport and development potential. The \$200 million redevelopment by the Doma Group will take design and opportunity to new levels in the city's emerging West End, providing improved connectivity between heavy rail, light rail and buses - as well as improved high-quality public domain, pedestrian access and roads.
- Affordable Housing - HCCDC is planning to work with Evolve Housing who have been appointed to deliver and manage the development of 30 new affordable rental units in the heart of Newcastle. Affordable Housing is for people on low to moderate incomes such as retail workers, child care and youth workers – the community who provide essential functions and services the city centre will rely on. The scheme will help workers achieve their housing goals of ownership or ongoing private rental.
- The Honeysuckle project is still very much a work in progress, despite seeing early examples of revitalization almost 20 years ago. Current and future initiatives involve sympathetically restoring historic wharfs, creating vibrant public domains, and developing new commercial and tourism opportunities and a campus for the University.

The 5th presentation was led by Anthony Furniss, partner of local Architectural and Urban Design Practice, EJE. Anthony focused on the historical

development of Newcastle, but not just from European history over the last 200+ years but Indigenous history spanning 1000+ years. His presentation was entitled 'The Role of Architectural Practice in City Centre Renewal'. The City centre has now evolved in terms of movement, with three distinct components, or precincts – from the East End on the peninsula which has very much a retail and tourism focus to the civic centre which is a focus for education, maritime and cultural activities to the West End which has gone from significant dilapidation to being the new CBD. Anthony also stressed that revitalization should be sympathetic to Newcastle's Aboriginal and Colonial heritage. New development should not only conform to the changing needs of the city and its population but to its existing built environment, eg the view corridor to Christ Church Cathedral.

Co-leader of the project, Robert Rogerson, facilitated the first of the afternoon sessions. Robert highlighted recurring and common themes from the morning sessions, such as: the city centre as a 'focal point'; the future city is cosmopolitan and inclusive, the location of 'work, rest and play' – commercial, retail, social/recreation, residential; the importance of leadership of vision/the guiding strategy; and how Infrastructure projects help to place the city's 'skeleton' and/or 'footprint'.

Robert also highlighted that one of the most prominent emerging themes today was focused on the heavy rail corridor and revitalisation and how new connections of space and the breaking down of (former) infrastructure boundaries were a vital 'trigger' in this process. Discussion focused on the following key questions:

- The role of the university and other key partners in city centre change/continuity?
- Role of State/Local Governments in leading revitalization?
- What is the role of the citizens/community?

Robert also provided some examples from Glasgow that focused on occupying the city centre, reclaiming the streets, smart city initiatives etc.

Will Rifkind then presented as Director of the Hunter Research Foundation their role in involving stakeholders in the Future of the CBD. He suggested a 'committee' for Greater Newcastle that would bring together business and local government leaders, create a unified voice, and agree on priorities. He reflected on similar strategies in other international and Australian cities, particularly those, like Newcastle, with a regional focus. He also stressed the importance of the role of the University, not just one of multi-discipline expertise but also one of probity and fair and equitable governance.

Warren Hassnoot, an Architect from boutique design practice 'Curious Space', a very different from the corporate and design management led EJE practice then presented and gave examples of current work and potential

for leveraging off the philosophy of the work of his practice at a different scale. His strategies focused very much on smaller scale urban residential projects, a move away from high density apartment living to single dwelling re-use of redundant industrial buildings and inner-city suburb infill housing projects for diverse clients (affordable housing for inner city service workers to professionals wanting to live near work and retirees wanting to live near social and cultural centres).

Steve Fleming - director of Cycle Space, a consultancy bringing built environment expertise to the challenge of building bicycling cities – presented next. Steve reflected on Newcastle's opportunity, as a city centre on a peninsula, ie with no through traffic, to become one of great cycle-way cities (vehicle free) in the world. He reflected on cycle-driven cities in Europe and SE Asia and Newcastle's unique opportunity for change. Much of the focus was on The Relevance of Oslo's Car-Free City Agenda to Newcastle. The basic idea is you take Henri Lefavre's idea that space is a cultural construct, then look at what safe cycling routes are doing to cities. From cyclists' perspectives, their cities are being reconfigured. then you can see regular bike users cognitively and actually building urban space, in the form of new bike infrastructure, housing and attractions, created in the shadows of the mainstream car-centric city.

SueAnne Ware, who's expertise lies in research and practice in urban landscape architecture took the last formal presentation of the day. With a title simply of 'What if?....' SueAnne proposed that Newcastle should be looking to proposition itself by taking extreme measures in order to revitalize the city centre. These included a focus on waste management and Newcastle becoming a city of zero waste. She cited the +CityxChange (positive city exchange) - a smart city project submitted by a consortium of 32 partners including Limerick City and County Council from 11 countries. The full scale project will receive €20 million in funding from Horizon 2020 which has nearly €80 billion of funding available over 7 years. For the next five years, Limerick City along with the city of Trondheim in Norway will work with five other follower cities, Alba Iulia (Romania), Pisek (Czech Republic), Sestao (Spain), Smolyan (Bulgaria) and Voru (Estonia), to develop together through citizen engagement a series of demonstration projects on how to become smart positive energy cities. Together, with all of their citizens, they will develop solutions that will help generate more energy than they consume, and exchange experiences with cities across Europe to learn faster, together. By winning the grant, Limerick will become the first Irish 'Lighthouse Smart City' - Lighthouse cities are ones that develop and tests integrated innovative solutions at district scale and act as exemplars for their region and other cities and regions across Europe.

Newcastle could become a city of Positive Energy (ie generate more onsite power from renewable sources than it consumes). Examples included Smith and Gill's Masdar Future Energy Headquarters building outside of Abu

Dhabi is the first building in history to generate power for its own assembly, using a solar roof pier that will be built first to power the rest of the construction. Other proposals centred around Newcastle's opportunity to become a Biophilic city. These are where there is abundant nature in close proximity to large numbers of urbanites. Biophilic cities value residents innate connection and access to nature through abundant opportunities to be outside and to enjoy the multisensory aspects of nature by protecting and promoting nature within the city. It is not necessarily about quantity but it is about quality and lowering urban temperatures. Other examples focused on 'greening' urban centres and the potential for water wise city centres.