

# The future of the city centre: Urbanisation, transformation and resilience – a tale of two Newcastle cities

**Robert J Rogerson** 

University of Strathclyde, UK

**Bob Giddings**

Northumbria University, UK

Urban Studies

1–16

© Urban Studies Journal Limited 2020



Article reuse guidelines:

[sagepub.com/journals-permissions](https://sagepub.com/journals-permissions)

DOI: 10.1177/0042098020936498

[journals.sagepub.com/home/usj](https://journals.sagepub.com/home/usj)



## Abstract

Recent debates over the content and theoretical orientation of urban studies act as a strong reminder that the nature and existence of the city as a form of spatial urban agglomeration is changing. They have acted positively as a heuristic to inspire critical analysis of urbanisation and helped to illuminate the considerable empirical variation over time and space in urban agglomeration forms. However, in shifting the focus onto the planetary reach of urbanisation, such debates risk deflecting attention away from the city core at a time when it too is being subjected to transformation. The city centre has been taken for granted as critical attention has been given to the impact of development and enterprise in extending the city outwards. The recent proliferation of public and policy interest in the future of the city centre as the archetypal expression of urban agglomeration has not been matched by similar growth in academic and theoretical accounts of its transformation. Drawing on the examples of two city centres, and placing them in the context of the recent debates of urban agglomeration theory, this article seeks to initiate deeper analysis and dialogue about the future of the urban core, including how it is being articulated and by whom. It argues for a greater analytic understanding of the ways in which the city centre as a physical and emotional entity has been so resilient, and advocates for stronger engagement with initiatives seeking to reactivate the city centre as a crucial epicentre of urban agglomeration.

## Keywords

planning, policy, redevelopment, regeneration, theory, urban studies

---

### Corresponding author:

Robert J Rogerson, Institute for Future Cities, University of Strathclyde, 99 George Street, Glasgow G1 1RD, UK.

Email: [r.j.rogerson@strath.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.rogerson@strath.ac.uk)

## 摘要

最近关于城市研究的内容和理论方向的争论强烈地提醒我们，城市作为一种空间城市集聚形式的性质和存在正在发生变化。这些辩论积极地启发了人们对城市化进行批判性分析，并帮助阐明城市集聚形式在时间和空间上的显著经验变化。然而，在将焦点转移到城市化的全球范围时，这种争论有可能在城市中心也正在经历转型的时候转移人们对城市中心的注意力。人们一度想当然地看待城市中心，因为在向外扩展城市的过程中，开发和企业的影响受到了极大的关注。最近，公众和政策对城市中心作为城市集聚的典型表现的未来的兴趣激增，这是，但学术界和理论界对其转型的描述却没有类似的增长。本文以两个城市中心为例，将它们置于最近关于城市集聚理论的讨论中，试图就城市中心的未来展开更深入的分析和对话，包括如何表述以及由谁来表达。本文主张对城市中心作为一个物质和情感实体的复原性进行更深入的分析理解，并主张更有力地参与旨在重振作为重要的城市集聚中心的城市中心的倡议。

## 关键词

规划、政策、再开发、更新、理论、城市研究

Received December 2019; accepted June 2020

## Introduction

Recent debates over the content and theoretical orientation of urban studies act as a powerful reminder that the nature and existence of the city as a form of spatial urban agglomeration are changing. In challenging the extent to which it even remains prudent to adopt ‘the city’ as an appropriate empirical or theoretical lens (Brenner, 2016; Brenner and Schmid, 2014; Merrifield, 2013; Roy, 2016; Storper and Scott, 2016), these debates have sought to provide bold understandings of the changing nature of the urban and cities. Much attention, in this journal and others covering urban studies, has been given to the merits of perspectives such as postcolonial urban analysis, planetary urbanism and assemblage analysis as ways to understand urban trends and the urbanisation process. Each perspective has acted positively as a heuristic to inspire critical analysis of urbanisation and has helped to illuminate the considerable empirical variation over time and space in urban agglomeration forms. Exploration of this diversity

of urban forms has both generated a plethora of terms to capture the forms of urban development (Scott and Storper, 2015) and encouraged a shift in analytic and theoretic gaze beyond the ‘city’ (Brenner and Schmid, 2014). Despite this outward gaze, there remains a consensus that ‘the city’ continues to be a significant, albeit only one, representation of urbanisation (Merrifield, 2013).

Amidst these debates and shifts in theoretical sensibilities about cities, the city centre’s constitutive and existentialist position as ‘inside’ the urban has been taken for granted. Academic attention has been drawn to out-of-town and ex-urban and suburban movement (Keil, 2018), and to the rise of the polycentric city (Kloosterman and Musterd, 2001; Van Meeteren et al., 2016). Where mentioned, the city centre is assumed to have a distinctive empirical character which, as Storper and Scott (2016: 1129; emphasis in original) note, ‘poses uniquely problematical scientific and political questions deriving from its mode(s) of operation’, epitomised by its specialised land uses, dense

networks of interaction, economic and institutional functions and the impact of social dynamics, cultures and mentalities.

Planetary urbanisation and postcolonial urbanism theories, however, remind us that contemporary critical urban analysis needs to revise systematically inherited concepts and representations of the urban. Our starting point in this article is an acknowledgement that the seemingly familiar form of the urban city centre is itself being fundamentally transformed across the planet (Schmid, 2018). Such change, comparable with the dissolving of the city as the single expression of urbanisation, requires a different focus on the city centre. There is a need to conceptualise the city centre less as an integral and authentic part of the city, and more as distinct from the overall notion of cities. This aligns with Keil's (2018: 1594) contention that 'suburbs, peripheries, peri-urban areas are not dangling dependently off the "urban" centre anymore' (Keil, 2018: 1594). Thus, new horizons of liberation for the city centre are opened up.

### **Problematizing the city centre**

Whilst the city centre may have attracted little recent academic attention as the city has been spun out through suburbanisation and agglomeration, across the world there is renewed political attention to, and concern about, its future. It has become a focus for policy action concerned in developed nations with the 'death' of retail functions, as familiar names close and new leasing agreements are sought to stave off further closures (Hubbard, 2017; Millington and Ntounis, 2017; Zhang et al., 2016), and with new levels of commercial office vacancies (Bruce et al., 2015; Harris, 2015). In developing countries, continued and rapid growth of the city has created centrifugal pressures to create more new centres serving the needs of the dispersed housing developments which

accompany urban population in-migration. City authorities, realising that structural change is happening in city centres, are responding by seeking to construct new collaboration between private and public sectors, and with citizens (Brańka et al., 2016; Le Feuvre et al., 2016).

The new gaze on the urban core is again underlining its diversity. Globally, the terminology deployed to capture such diversity – from downtown and central district to main and high streets – reflects the changing functions and priorities of this spatial entity in people's lives and its manifestation within the wider urban systems. The verticalisation associated with downtowns in North American contexts, for example, differentiates them from the sprawling low density of the inner and outer suburbs. In other contexts, the notion of the central district is less evident in the urban skyline but mirrors the location of key functions as differentiating it from other urban spaces. But urbanisation is also reconfiguring notions of centrality (Quinby, 2011; Salet and Savini, 2015), with more dispersed local centres and main streets found in local suburban areas as well as lower-tier urban agglomerations. This diverse taxonomy thus reflects changing ideas about the city centre in response to the rise of decentered, polycentric and larger urban agglomerations. Across such accounts, there has been a tendency to view the city centre as the authentic part of the city – what Keil (2018) has called the 'normal' centre – extended by the development of inner and outer suburbs. As such, the city centre has not been considered distinctively from the city as a whole.

Despite this, there is an acceptance that the city centre functionally – in terms of retail, commerce, services, governance etc. – has a far wider reach than the city itself. The city centre is the pivotal point of an urban agglomeration, drawing in opportunities from across a wide territorial area, and

being embedded in multiple layers of social, economic, cultural and institutional functions. If, as Scott and Storper (2014: 6) contend, ‘agglomeration is the basic glue that holds the city together as a complex congeries of human activities... [with] a highly distinctive form of politics’, then the city centre forms the epicentre of such agglomeration. In this sense, it is more than the physical centrality that is important, for the city centre also has a key role in helping to ‘circumscribe individual agglomerations in geographic space, and certainly, in the limit, to distinguish one agglomeration from another’ (Scott and Storper, 2014: 7). Transformational change which reinforces the unique internal organisational dynamics and ‘generic roots’ of the city centre can thus have far wider (spatial and non-spatial) positive implications. Some recent interdisciplinary research exploring opportunities for the use of smart technologies and systems to improve standards of environmental efficiency, citizen health and well-being and to increase prosperity and social cohesion (Berman, 2016; Mehan, 2016; Ogbourn et al., 2014) has made a positive start in this direction. Here, we seek to extend this discussion, drawing on two cities where there is a vision to create opportunities for the reactivation and repositioning of the city centre as a ‘liberator of agglomeration’.

## Methods

In the following discussion, our focus on the urban core is designed to open up debate about its ‘place’ in the context of processes of urbanisation, drawing upon Lefebvrian notions of urban spaces as places that can dissipate themselves, dissolving and recreating themselves, and where the classic notions of centrality can be recreated anywhere. To do this, we consider the visions for the future of the city centre of two ‘Newcastles’—one in the UK and one in Australia – as they

respond to wider processes of urbanisation and change. We explore how the urban core is being conceptualised and represented by two city councils and their partners, located within their respective neoliberal planning and development frameworks. In so doing, we are seeking to open up such conceptualisations to critique and in particular to suggest future research avenues to understand the processual realisation of the city centre futures.

To enable this, our focus is on two key planning documents produced by the municipal authorities to articulate a future vision of their respective city centres. Each sets out the vision of policy makers about their city centre, positioning them strategically within the wider urban and regional systems. The pivotal role of these documents in forward planning was reinforced by discussions at one two-day workshop (September 2018 in the UK and March 2019 in Australia) held in each city as part of an Arts and Humanities Research Council international research network grant. Bringing together more than 40 key private, public and civic stakeholders as well as citizens to enter into dialogue about the future of the city centre, the workshops underscored the significance of the planning documents in framing debate, whilst also revealing the contested nature of the visions. Representatives from local government underlined the key guiding functions that the vision statements had in shaping future place making, and most other participants making presentations and engaging in discussions used the documents as contexts into which they engaged critically with different elements. The workshop discussions enabled critical assessments to be made of the role of the published planning documents in shaping local envisioning, and revealed alternative interpretations of the current challenges faced in the city centres.

In adopting this approach, we recognise that these city plans are situated and partial,

the outcomes of a process of neoliberal governance designed to mobilise particular forms of growth coalitions, and designed to respond to statutory and regulatory obligations placed on the municipal authorities by national governments. As such, they represent a partisan view and, as was evident from the critical engagement in the workshops, one constructed primarily by one (government) actor, who under neoliberal urbanisation systems is often a minority partner. Municipal authorities can only suggest a future plan and vision where they can utilise their relatively limited but critical regulatory powers to help transform visions into a reality. In large part, these blueprints are discursive documents designed to mobilise and align other actors to engage collaboratively towards a shared reality.

The use of the term 'city centre' here is not as a distinct, bounded territorial unit of analysis but more as a relational space (Amin and Thrift, 2002). In both case studies, the city centre is nested within a wider urban region, incorporating not only the urban agglomeration but also a larger economic and spatial hinterland. The city centre is viewed as the beating heart of the urban system, under threat economically and emotionally, and needing to be reinforced through a coalition of shared interests to secure its future. In adopting the notions of the city centre constructed by the city councils, we acknowledge that these form only one, contested and far from self-evident conception. However, given the relational power of this source to shape debates and direct the future of the 'city centre', their conceptions have significance. We use them here not as accepted facts or indeed as more than guiding visions, in order to explore critically some of the research questions which we feel need to be asked about the city centre and its future.

## The two local contexts

As well as sharing names, the two Newcastles are both post-industrial, second-tier port cities with key roles in the economic growth of their respective regions, where their city centres have traditionally serviced a wider regional area. In recent years, the urban core of each city has experienced contrasting fortunes. The Australian Newcastle has like many cities around the world seen rapid, car-based urban expansion, with resulting low population densities and dispersed economic growth typifying suburbanisation globally (Ekers et al., 2012). The rapid decline of heavy industry and the shift to more service- and knowledge-based sectors have been accompanied by the dispersal of many traditional functions located in the city centre as these were encouraged to support suburban polycentric development. Consequently, urban governance has also shifted with the need for greater cooperation between the city (Newcastle Council) and regional government and development agencies.

The processes of urbanisation in the UK Newcastle have created a less spatially extensive urban agglomeration, and more typical of compact urban agglomerations (Jenks, 2019). Despite this, there has been a similar trend to that of Newcastle New South Wales of developers and investors being supported to extend the city out into the suburbs and surrounding areas, with accompanying development of services and facilities including out-of-town retailing, satellite commuter settlements and extensions of regional transport systems. Hereto governance of economic regeneration and planning oversight has shifted to more formal cooperation between councils, with the city authorities of Newcastle and Gateshead to the north and south of the River Tyne working together to create a coherent plan for the future of the wider urban agglomeration.

The selection of these two cities is, however, primarily about their ambitions and visions. In their national contexts, both Newcastle cities are being viewed as exemplars of a renewed and sharper focus on the city centre as a distinct space, worthy of special attention, within urbanisation processes. In their respective strategic planning documents, there is a shared renewed concern that past planning decisions supporting edge or 'out-of-town' business and retail parks, direct commercial property development in suburban areas and infrastructure to enable such peri-urban development have 'risked' the ontological future of the city centre.

Both municipalities are envisioning a stronger, morphologically and functionally distinctive role for the city centre but, reflecting different socio-cultural and political contexts, are deploying different imaginations of the city. The visions represent two different future forms of the city centre. Borrowing terms of urban morphology commonly used to describe different forms of growth and spread, Newcastle upon Tyne is reinforcing its monocentric compact city centre whilst the Australian Newcastle represents a linear polycentric form.

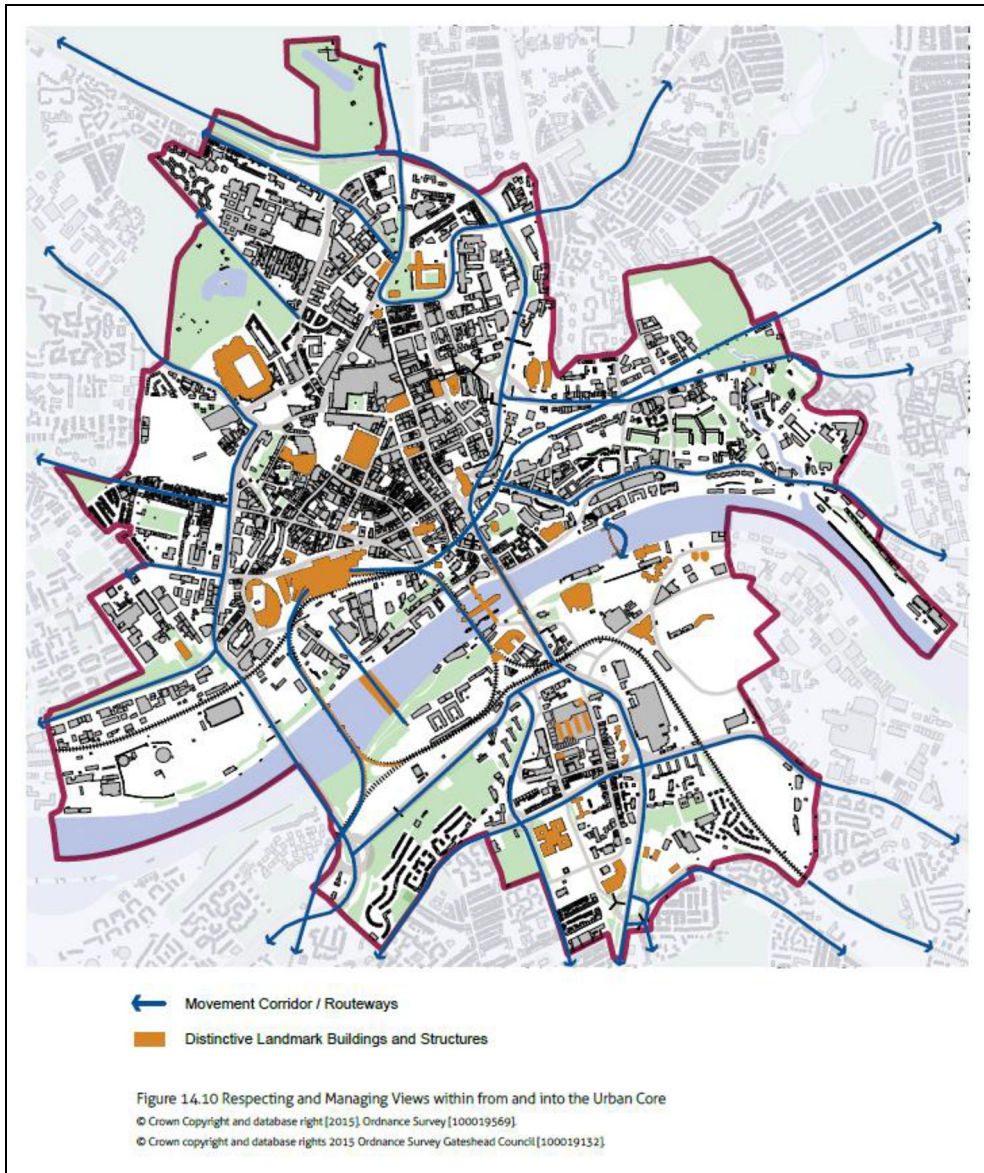
### *Newcastle upon Tyne, UK*

In November 2017, the city council of the north east English City of Newcastle upon Tyne launched what was claimed to be an ambitious proposal to reinforce the city centre as a regional shopping and leisure destination and to extend this internationally. Its foundation is the city's apparent resilience to global pressures on commercial and retail sectors found in other UK cities, with significant growth potential identified in the plan particularly in the science, retail, digital, creative and tourism sectors. Collaborating with other partners, especially the local business improvement district (BID) company NE1 Limited and its neighbouring City

Council of Gateshead, the 2030 plan follows a well-trodden path where the economic and social regeneration of the central part of the city is built around compact growth.

Newcastle and Gateshead Councils' vision document claims to be a product of 'active conversation with our communities' (Newcastle City and Gateshead Councils, 2015: 10) setting out an agenda for future action, recognising that processes of urbanisation are impacting negatively on the functional logic of the city centre. The underlying logic remains, however, of a city centre more compact and lively, generating positive externalities and fostering an environment that reinforces density, proximity and connectivity, whilst also being a driver of economic growth for the city as a whole and the urban region. As such, it seeks to reinforce notions of traditional economic roles of the city centre as a place where economic ideas and innovation emanate (increasingly in conjunction with educational partners) and which provides the majority of leisure and retailing for the regional population serviced by a radial transport network and from further afield through tourism.

In the absence of both fiscal and regulatory capacity to respond more radically to the acknowledged pressures on the city centre, the strengthening of the compact city centre represents an underlying theory of change that is incremental rather than radical (Figure 1). The strategic focus is on multi-functional redevelopment of key, under-utilised interstices (geographically defined) within the existing built environment alongside further densification and the segregation of uses vertically as retailing, leisure and commerce seek space. The limited funding committed by the two municipal authorities is primarily set aside to enhance streetscapes and pedestrianisation and to capitalise on the city's already strong network of public transport, thereby improving sustainability (Table 1).



**Figure 1.** Compact city regeneration infill, Newcastle Upon Tyne, UK.  
 Source: Newcastle City and Gateshead Councils (2015).

However, the vision also marks a key departure from the past focus on economic and cultural activity and the hitherto acceptance of the outward shift of many demographic groups to the suburban and ex-

urban settlements in the wider region. As part of the densification process, there is a desire to use the planning process to offer residential development for a new and growing cohort of city centre populations.

**Table 1.** Newcastle upon Tyne urban core future development.

Future contributors	Vision	Priorities
Office and business development	Provide at least 380,000 m <sup>2</sup> of new office space	Five large-scale office developments in mixed-use sites
Leisure, culture and tourism	Enhance and diversify offering, both daytime and night-time	Extend conference and business facilities, new hotels and family-friendly attractions; enhance riverside access
Homes	Diversify housing offer and develop c. 3750 new homes	1000 new homes; allocate home space in five mixed-use sites (as above for offices); support conversions of upper floors for homes
Sustainable transport	Promote sustainable transport modes and safe, better-linked areas	Priority to sustainable modes on designated primary pedestrian routes; creation of direct routes to five mixed-use sites (as above); enhanced public transport via bus priority lanes and re-invigoration of Metro
Other transport	Minimise impact on environment and quality of place	Focus traffic on defined urban core routes; minimise car parking for developments; promote short- over long-stay parking
Urban design and heritage	Deliver higher quality locally distinctive places	Presumption against development which causes significant harm to views; maximise opportunities to sustain and enhance heritage assets; provide strong urban frontages, especially along pedestrian routes
Urban green infrastructure Public realm and public art	Protect and enhance network Improve the network of public and open spaces, and use public art to enhance their character	Fill gaps and linkages in network Add new public spaces which have flexible use; incorporate durable materials; make provision for temporary use and events by the private sector

Source: Based on Newcastle City and Gateshead Councils (2015).

Drawing on the success of projects like Grainger Town (Cullen and Lovie, 2015) and wider residential regeneration (Barke and Clarke, 2015), the aim is to extend the socio-demographic profile through affordable housing and student rented accommodation. This demographic re-profiling and the generation of an urban buzz include emphasis on the private sector providing

student housing and building rented and owner-occupied housing in vacant spaces.

### *'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





**Figure 2.** Polycentric linear 'precinct' approach to Newcastle city centre renewal (New South Wales Government, 2018).

similar to that of its namesake in the UK. It too has a vision of a city centre which is entrepreneurial and dynamic, is seen to be globally competitive, offers lifestyles able to attract new populations and has 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 in the growth of the student population. It too has a focus on culture as a part of the economic base and a renewed focus on tourism, with densification through infill site residential development. Without any

explicit reference to urbanisation processes, the vision document's underpinning message is about transformation and transition, replacing the city and city region's economic dependency on coal exportation with a more diverse 'service, creative and knowledge city' (New South Wales Government, 2018: 7).

Whilst there are parallels with the other Newcastle, there are also several key differences, both in the heuristic use of strategic plans and the vision set out.

The New South Wales document is the forerunner of conversations rather than the outcome of consultations. Required by

**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 additional 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-orientated development around interchange; provide floor space for emerging new economy business and industry

Source: New South Wales Government (2018).

national government to develop a 20-year vision for land-use management and preservation as part of enhanced community participation (Ruming, 2018), the 2036 vision document represents a deliberate attempt to simplify and clarify the planning process. It forms part of a process to re-calibrate the political economy-associated urban consolidation and compactness of the past two decades, which saw multi-players, especially in the private sector, dominate the discourse and development agenda and squeeze out opportunities for communities to be active in the planning process (Bunker et al., 2017; Ruming and Goodman, 2016).

In responding to this enforced regulatory change, Newcastle City Council, NSW, has thus sought through its 2036 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 spear-headed by the Hunter Development Corporation, the representation is a series of interlocking precincts, each focused on a spatial area but designated by function and

contribution to the overall economic growth of the area (Figure 2). As a framing device for thinking through the reformation of the city centre, the vision represents an active attempt to create a ‘new downtown’ (Dirksmeier, 2012; Helbrecht, 2012). By 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 each distinct areas precinct (Table 2).

The city council’s vision is a departure from the orthodoxy of national metropolitan planning, which for the last two decades has focused on producing monocentric compact cities (Bunker et al., 2017; Limb et al., 2018; Randolph, 2006). The physical development of a polycentric linear city 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.

## Processual realisation of the future of the city centre

The two Newcastle examples remind us that effective interventions to transform the city centre to the benefit of the 'city' as a whole are dependent on the context in which such interventions take place. This is more than just the local economic, social and cultural setting, including also national governance structures and global economic and sustainability agendas. They, like other cities, are thus repositioning themselves within an urban world society seeking to recreate and reinforce the centrality of the urban core as new downtowns (Helbrecht and Dirksmeier, 2012).

Both Newcastles are seeking to reinforce their cores. For those growth coalitions involved in setting out their visions, the city centre is, for example, the 'focal point of the Tyneside conurbation' (Newcastle and Gateshead Councils, 2015: 122), seeking to be the 'place of choice for doing business, learning, entertainment and living' (Newcastle and Gateshead Councils, 2015: 136), and in Australia 'an important catalyst for a vibrant and internationally-facing Greater Newcastle' (New South Wales Government, 2018: 17). Both strategic plans, with their heavy reliance on local planning and regulation, acknowledge the role of the city councils as place-making leaders to manage change and avoid dysfunctions of urban agglomeration being able to undermine the viability of the city centre.

In analysing these two visions articulating the individuality of each Newcastle, we are not advocating notions of 'new particularism', although we certainly do not deny the considerable empirical variation existing between city centres. Quite the opposite, as we see both cities creating discrete and distinctive responses to similar processes of urbanisation that are representative of different imaginations for the reworking of the city centre and its central role for retail,

commerce and leisure change. Both are seeking to foster regeneration of what is publicly and politically viewed as a key urban space, and both are facing similar organisational forces and processes which are perceived to threaten the existence of the city centre. Similarly, both set out plans for the urban core within the context of a wider urban hinterland.

Equally, neither are we arguing for a theoretical articulation of urbanisation and the city centre which is totalising, where specificities of cities simply reflect the local context. There is the possibility, as with other critical urban theory (Leitner and Sheppard, 2016), that no single theory can account for the variegated nature of city centres across the world.

The plans, in contrast to Brenner's (2013: 90) critique of the urban as 'devoid of any clear definitional parameters, morphological coherence, or cartographic fixity', emphasise that the city centre continues to have empirical and conceptual resonance. The strategic documents offer more than just a statement of intent to reinforce the continued meaningful existence of the city centre within the urban system, as they both underline that this existence is at risk of being hollowed out along with the 'urban'. Of course, in using planning processes and the associated use of bounded spaces, the plans offer a narrowly defined city centre, at risk of simplifying the connections with the urban 'outside'. Whilst acknowledging this, the plans are nevertheless creating meaningful political and spatial entities through with future institutional actors and practices will be shaped (Allen and Cochrane, 2014).

However, the political and processual realities of implementing plans like those espoused for both Newcastles have the potential of making such guiding visions little more than 'story-telling', using assumptions about the future whilst cast within narratives of the past (Devisme, 2015). For all its claims to reposition itself from being a

'great port city' to a post-industrial city (Stevenson, 1999), Newcastle NSW for example remains heavily dependent on the exportation of coal through the port, jarring with its aspirations around urban sustainability. And with limited budgets relative to those being expended by the regional Hunter Valley Development Corporation, the Council's influence is limited. In the UK's Newcastle, its limited fiscal and regulatory capacity to react to the pressures on the city centre means that here too the city council has to achieve its visions through collaboration and partnership, relying heavily on private sector investment and support beyond the 'urban' spaces managed publicly. In this respect, a focus on the city centre may be misplaced. Its future is being shaped by urbanisation processes beyond any spatial bounding of the downtown, with those managing this area relatively powerless to make a difference as they increasingly draw support from beyond the city centre.

### **Researching the 'urban inside' future**

The current debates, arguing for more theoretically informed analyses of urbanisation, offer critical insights into how the tentacles of urbanisation processes extend beyond urban agglomerations. However, in challenging the 'city dominance' and rightly asking critically about the non-urban or 'hinterland' (Brenner, 2016), such debates risk deflecting attention away from the city core at a time when it too is being subjected to transformation. Such limited scrutiny may arguably reflect the assumption that in contrast to suburban (Addie, 2016), post-suburban (Helbich, 2012) or other wider urban areas (Scott and Storper, 2014), the centre remains analytically distinctive.

Our intention here has been to start to rebalance the focus on how contemporary urbanisation is remoulding the 'inside' as

well as the urban 'outside'. Our argument is that the analysis of visions of the future of the city centre opens up key questions requiring further interrogation into, first, how urbanisation processes are transforming the city centre, and second, the ways in which future visions are being constructed and delivered. This needs to go beyond the contemporary attention by academia, the media and the public on the future of retail in the city centre (Millington et al., 2015; Risselada et al., 2019). As one key function of the city centre, the future of the retail sector is important, but the downtown core of the city and its urban character is based on more than consumption.

In responding to this call, we acknowledge that our article offers only an initial, limited analysis. It has focused solely on the planning and vision statements published by the municipal leadership of the two cities, both in developed nations, which although viewed as significant by local representatives in research workshops as part of the Arts and Humanities Research Council international project, do not capture the breadth of analysis needed to consider the complexity of city centres' future globally. Even in this restricted context, however, it is still possible to suggest potentially fruitful and desirable future avenues for research into the urban inside.

One strand is a need for greater understanding of the ways in which the city centre as a physical and emotional entity has been so resilient, especially under the planetary growth of urbanism, despite (or arguably because of) continuous 'disturbance' and flux. This lends itself to engagement with concepts of urban resilience and the recent interest in the politics of urban resilience (Meerow and Newell, 2019). But to do this, there is a need to avoid being constrained by viewing city centres as self-organising, predictable ecosystems (Beilin and Wilkinson, 2015), by avoiding inherent conservativeness

and passively accepting change (Evans, 2011) and by overly focusing on adaptation to disruptions without sufficient attention to the underlying causes of such change (Wamsler, 2014). The two visions above point to an amalgam of desired resilience and resistance to change, whilst also seeking to embrace and foster change, but further interrogation into how such planning decisions both enable and constrain the future of the urban core is required. With the reduction of non-statutory responsibilities for municipal government under neoliberal reforms, strategic planning documents have become more critical in representing the views of influential stakeholders, whilst also opening up local governance to wider scrutiny and engagement. The documents are intentionally ambiguous and contradictory, a position seeking both to engage local constituencies (including commercial and citizen) whilst also building extra-local legitimacy and support for development through local projects (Lauermaun, 2014). The contrasting purposes in this respect of the two Newcastle documents underscore the need for further interrogation of their genesis and attention to the processes of 'negotiated resilience' (Ziervogel et al., 2017).

Equally, and related, greater attention needs to be given to planning and strategic documents such as those considered in this article, including whether like master plans previously generated to assist urban regeneration (Madanipour et al., 2018), their fixed spatial and temporal foci unintentionally create greater risks of being rigid. As an ideological practice, the city centre blueprints and plans developed by both city governments can rightly be subjected to the criticism of supporting local urban regimes (Addie, 2013; Olesen, 2014; Wachsmuth, 2014). They reinforce the notion of a particular conception of the 'city centre', giving it political and economic significance, and

positioning it within an urban regional context of urban systems. They thus reify a particular sense of functional purpose and processual realisation, providing justification for municipal attention and investment. The approaches adopted in both cities are reinforcing the continuation of historic and critically unchallenged functional logics and spatial practice that foreground the same actors, and reduce opportunities for others to be involved in dialogues about the city centre future.

New forms of urban governance are needed which move beyond the collaboration seen here between neighbouring city councils in Newcastle upon Tyne or between the Hunter Valley Development Corporation and Newcastle City Council in Australia. Alternatives, such as the creation of 'cabinets' and other city-regional governance forms (O'Brien and Pike, 2018) associated with city deals in the UK, are required to mediate and generate new and more progressive interactions between the centripetal and centrifugal tensions associated with urban agglomerations and planetary hinterlands. Under the existing urban governance arrangements, as both Newcastles illustrate, municipal authorities are struggling to operate as mediators of urban conflicts and frictions in the city centre. There is thus a need for greater consideration of achieving democratisation of city centre regeneration.

It is crucial to ask the key questions arising about who is included and excluded from the planning of a future city centre (Meerow and Newell, 2019), especially as multi-stakeholder engagement and partnerships form the basis of city centre transformation. There is, for example, a need for deeper analysis of how a 'shared' sense of threat to the city centre has been generated and how such perceived vulnerability is (or is not) creating bonds between partners. And questions need to be raised about what role municipal authorities have in leveraging assistance from

others as they tap into the innate characteristics of citizen and society to build social resilience (Rose, 2014). In focusing on more democratisation of regeneration of the future of the city centre, there is scope to consider a tripartite categorisation of those likely to be involved, from those *in* the core (e.g. residents), *of* the centre (stakeholders having a presence) and *for* the centre (with wider urban region). In envisaging a future for city centres, critical questions need to be researched about who is involved in their evolution, and in turn who is excluded from and by the emerging plans.

## Conclusion

As an expression of the urban land nexus agglomeration, the city centre and its future have wider significance in the theorising of urbanisation and urban change. The contemporary and public focus on retail in the Anglophone world risks overlooking the multiple functions of city centres as places where people live, work and play, and is shaping a perception of the urban core having a bleak future. Political and policy responses increasingly reflect this characterisation, focusing on regeneration and renewal, rather than situating responses in more nuanced accounts of processes of urbanisation. As illustrated by the examples of the two Newcastle cities on opposite sides of the world, the accompanying narratives of a future of the urban core both extend outside of the core for future growth, and reify the functions and logics of the core itself as 'urban inside'.

The two case studies here are not only attempts to ensure continued revitalisation and regeneration of the city centre, important though that is as part of their constant evolution under processes of urbanisation. In addition, they are projects seeking to reactivate the city centre as a crucial

epicentre of urban agglomeration. In this respect, city centres and their future merit greater critical attention – as they embody the very tensions between dispersion and concentration that lie at the heart of the contemporary debate about the nature and form of urban theory. Whilst contemporary processes of urbanisation are altering the historic gravitational pull of the city centre, they continue nevertheless to be potent powerhouses of the spatial concentration of the means of production and infrastructure. As part of a reflexive analysis of the city centre within critical urban theory, there is a need for a deeper understanding of their resilience to profound and rapid mutations of urbanisation, and an exploration of how city centres might have new liberating roles as part of urban agglomerations.

## Declaration of conflicting interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Robert J Rogerson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6943-9263>

## References

- Addie J-P (2013) Metropolitics in motion: The dynamics of transportation and state reterritorialization in the Chicago and Toronto city-regions. *Urban Geography* 34(2): 188–217.
- Addie J-P (2016) Theorising suburban infrastructure: A framework for critical and comparative analysis. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 41(3): 273–285.
- Allen J and Cochrane A (2014) The urban unbound: London's politics and the 2012

- Olympic Games. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38(5): 1609–1624.
- Amin A and Thrift N (2002) *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Barke M and Clarke J (2015) Residential growth in Newcastle upon Tyne's city centre: The role of the public and private sectors. *Journal of Housing and the Built Environment* 31(1): 141–166.
- Beilin R and Wilkinson C (2015) Introduction: Governing for urban resilience. *Urban Studies* 52: 1207–1217.
- Berman M (2016) *Modernism in the Streets: A Life and Times in Essays*. Edited by D Marcus and S Sclan. New York: Verso.
- Brańka S, Coca-Stefaniak A and Plichta J (2016) City centres as places for strategic cooperation through active city management: The significance of trade entities. *Scientific Annals of Economics and Business* 63(1): 125–133.
- Brenner N (2013) Theses on urbanization. *Public Culture* 25(1(69)): 85–114.
- Brenner N (2016) The hinterland urbanised? *Architectural Design* 86(4): 118–127.
- Brenner N and Schmid C (2014) The 'urban age' in question. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 38(3): 731–755.
- Bruce T, Zuo J, Rameezdeen R, et al. (2015) Factors influencing the retrofitting of existing office buildings using Adelaide, South Australia as a case study. *Structural Survey* 33(2): 150–166.
- Bunker R, Crommelin L, Troy L, et al. (2017) Managing the transition to a more compact city in Australia. *International Planning Studies* 22: 384–399.
- Cullen F and Lovie D (2015) *Newcastle's Grainger Town: An Urban Renaissance*. London: Historic England.
- Devisme L (2015) Urban figures in the frame of forward-looking activities. Towards a criticism of storytelling in planning. *Journal of Urban Research* Special Issue 7. <https://doi.org/10.4000/articulo.2731>
- Dirksmeier P (2012) The wish to live in areas with 'people like us': Metropolitan habitus, habitual urbanity and the visibility of urban-rural differences in South Bavaria, Germany. *Visual Studies* 27(1): 76–89.
- Ekers M, Hamel P and Keil R (2012) Governing suburbia: Modalities and mechanisms of suburban governance. *Regional Studies* 46(3): 405–422.
- Evans J (2011) Resilience, ecology and adaptation in the experimental city. *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 36: 223–237.
- Harris R (2015) The changing nature of the workplace and the future of office space. *Journal of Property Investment & Finance* 33(5): 424–435.
- Helbich M (2012) Beyond postsuburbia? Multifunctional service agglomeration in Vienna's urban fringe. *Tijdschrift voor economische en sociale geografie* 103(1): 39–52.
- Helbrecht I (2012) *New Urbanism: Life, Work, and Space in the New Downtown*. Abingdon: Ashgate.
- Helbrecht I and Dirksmeier P (2012) A new form of centrality and urbanity in World Society. In: Helbrecht I (ed.) *New Urbanism: Life, Work, and Space in the New Downtown*. Abingdon: Ashgate, pp. 1–22.
- Hubbard P (2017) *The Battle for the High Street*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Jenks M (2019) *Compact City. The Wiley Blackwell Encyclopedia of Urban and Regional Studies* 1–4.
- Keil R (2018) The empty shell of the planetary: Re-rooting the urban in the experience of the urbanites. *Urban Geography* 39(10): 1589–1602.
- Kloosterman RC and Musterd S (2001) The polycentric urban region: Towards a research agenda. *Urban Studies* 38(4): 623–633.
- Lauermann J (2014) Competition through inter-urban policy making: Bidding to host mega events as entrepreneurial networking. *Environment and Planning A* 46(11): 2638–2653.
- Le Feuvre M, Medway D, Warnaby G, et al. (2016) Understanding stakeholder interactions in urban partnerships. *Cities* 52: 55–65.
- Leitner H and Sheppard E (2016) Provincializing critical urban theory: Extending the ecosystem of possibilities. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 40(1): 228–235.
- Limb M, Grodach C and Mayere S (2018) Where is the compact city? A method to monitor the implementation of compact activity centre policy. In: *State of Australian Cities (SOAC) Conference 2017*. Adelaide: Australian Cities Research Network, pp. 1–15. Available at: <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/132074/15/132074.pdf> (accessed 6 July 2020).

- Madanipour A, Miciukiewicz K and Vigar G (2018) Master plans and urban change: The case of Sheffield city centre. *Journal of Urban Design* 23(4): 465–481.
- Meerow S and Newell JP (2019) Urban resilience for whom, what, when, where, and why? *Urban Geography* 40(3): 309–329.
- Mehan A (2016) Investigating the role of historical public squares on promotion of citizens' quality of life. *Procedia Engineering* 161: 1768–1773.
- Merrifield A (2013) The urban question under planetary capitalism. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39: 909–922.
- Millington S and Ntounis N (2017) Repositioning the high street: Evidence and reflection from the UK. *Journal of Place Management and Development* 10(4): 364–379.
- Millington S, Ntounis N, Parker C, et al. (2015) *Multifunctional Centres: A Sustainable Role for Town and City Centres*. Working paper. Institute of Place Management, Manchester.
- New South Wales Government (2018) *Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036*. State of New South Wales Government.
- Newcastle City and Gateshead Councils (2015) *Planning for the Future: Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan 2010–30*. Newcastle City and Gateshead Councils.
- O'Brien P and Pike A (2018) 'Deal or no deal?': Governing urban infrastructure funding and financing in the UK city deals. *Urban Studies* 56(7): 1448–1476.
- Ogbourn M, Blunt A and Pinder D (2014) *Cultural Geography in Practice*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Olesen K (2014) The neoliberalisation of strategic spatial planning. *Planning Theory* 13(3): 288–303.
- Quinby R (2011) *Time and the Suburbs: The Politics of Built Environment and the Future of Dis-sent*. Winnipeg: Arbritter Ring.
- Randolph B (2006) Delivering the compact city in Australia: Current trends and future implications. *Urban Policy and Research* 24(4): 473–490.
- Risselada A, Weltevreden J and Warnaby G (2019) *Future Retail City Center: Success Factors for Collective Interventions in Town and City Centres*. London: Shopping Tomorrow.
- Rose N (2014) From risk to resilience: Responsible citizens for uncertain times. *Public Lecture* 28. University of Melbourne. Available at: <http://www.riskanduncertainty.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/08/NikolasRoseUniMelb2014.pdf> (accessed 12 June 2020).
- Roy A (2016) What is urban about critical urban theory? *Urban Geography* 37(6): 810–823.
- Ruming K (2018) Post-political planning and community opposition: Asserting and challenging consensus in planning urban regeneration in Newcastle, New South Wales. *Geographical Research* 56(2): 181–195.
- Ruming K and Goodman R (2016) Planning system reform and economic development: Unpacking policy rhetoric and trajectories in Victoria and New South Wales. *Built Environment* 42(1): 72–89.
- Salet W and Savini F (2015) The political governance of urban peripheries. *Environment & Planning C: Politics and Space* 33(3): 448–456.
- Schmid C (2018) Journeys through planetary urbanization: Decentering perspectives on the urban. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 36(3): 591–610.
- Scott A and Storper M (2014) The nature of cities: The scope and limits of urban theory. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 39(1): 1–15.
- Stevenson D (1999) Reflections of a 'great port city': The case of Newcastle, Australia. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 17(1): 105–119.
- Storper M and Scott A (2016) Current debates in urban theory: A critical assessment. *Urban Studies* 53(6): 1114–1136.
- Van Meeteren M, Poorthuis A, Derudder B, et al. (2016) Pacifying Babel's tower: A scientometric analysis of polycentricity in urban research. *Urban Studies* 53(6): 1278–1298.
- Wachsmuth D (2014) City as ideology: Reconciling the explosion of the city form with the tenacity of the city concept. *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 32(1): 75–90.
- Wamsler C (2014) *Cities: Disaster Risk and Adaptation*. New York: Routledge.
- Zhang D, Zhu P and Ye Y (2016) The effects of e-commerce on the demand for commercial real estate. *Cities* 51: 106–120.
- Ziervogel G, Pelling M, Cartwright A, et al. (2017) Inserting rights and justice into urban resilience: A focus on everyday risk. *Environment and Urbanization* 29(1): 123–138.