

*Mini Review*

## The future for city centres: Perspectives from the Global South

Robert J Rogerson\*

Institute for Future Cities, University of Strathclyde, Glasgow, United Kingdom.

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**This brief paper extends the discussion of the future of the centre of cities globally, exploring some insights from two cities in the Global South, Tshwane-Pretoria and Joao Pessoa, to complement the arguments made in Rogerson and Giddings's recent paper on the Two Newcastle's. It suggests that there are key insights relevant to all cities to be learnt from the responses of cities outside of the Global North to pressures on the urban core. Alternative responses that imagine beyond the need to retain and regenerate the historic core merit consideration.**

**Key words:** City centre, urbanisation, Global south, crisis.

### INTRODUCTION

The term 'crisis' has been widely applied to city centres or downtowns across the world. By any of the traditional measures deployed to assess the success of the urban core- footfall, rental income, lease uptake, occupancy rates, business turnover- the global pandemic and the 'lockdown' responses from governments have meant that for some (often long) periods of time, the city centre has been changed. Recent images of deserted streets underscore the real sense of crisis faced by city hubs across the world.

Dramatic though such impact has been, the COVID-19 pandemic has largely accentuated what might be described as pre-existing systemic crises for the city centre under neoliberal systems of governance and capitalist economic systems. First, the diverse and disaggregated ownership of property across the city centre, reflecting the role of private sector enterprise and the dilution of public sector roles, has meant that management of the city centre in this recent moment of crisis has struggled to identify resilient solutions and indeed has often lead to more fractured decision making and leadership. Second, the emphasis on renting and leasing of commercial and residential property as a source of investment growth- a trend that has strengthened again after the prime-lending financial crisis of 2008- has once again been seen to be susceptible to moments of extreme pressure. Third, the focus on retail as the panacea or perhaps even the *raison d'être* for the city centre- has become even more fragile as lockdown measures encouraged more people to turn to online retail and purchasing. A perfect storm: A real, existential crisis for the city centre.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

In this context, the recent paper by (Rogerson et al., 2020) in *Urban Studies* defines the future of the city centre: urbanisation, transformation and resilience- a tale of two Newcastle cities - offers a critical account of how a future urban core is being conceptualized and represented by the two city councils and their partners. The case studies are both located within their respective neoliberal planning and development frameworks, and highlight not only attempts to ensure continued revitalization and regeneration of the core areas of Newcastle upon Tyne (UK) and Newcastle, New South Wales (Australia), but also desire to reactivate the city centre as a crucial epicentre of urban agglomeration.

Critically engaging with key planning documents produced by the municipal authorities to articulate a future vision of their respective city centres, the paper has two key purposes. First, it details how within the process of urbanization and urban expansion the city centre's future is uncertain but also seen as essential. Second, it seeks to rebalance some of the current debates in theoretically informed analyses of urbanization and the accompanying questioning about the non-urban or 'hinterland' (Brenner, 2016), with its accompanying risk of deflecting attention away from the city core at a time when it too is being subjected to transformation. The paper concludes with a call for greater attention being in urban studies globally to the city centre: "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".

\*Corresponding author. Robert J Rogerson, E-mail: [r.j.rogerson@strath.ac.uk](mailto:r.j.rogerson@strath.ac.uk)

Reflecting further on the arguments made in this paper I develop several points which provide a wider challenge to those involved in urban studies research and to practitioners whose role is to deliver future urban systems (Rogerson et al., 2020).

First, the two Newcastle studies point to the underlying assumption within much of the current interest in the urban core that such centres are important and need to be maintained. This perspective reflects the historical, economic, social and symbolic value of the city centre as part of the urban system (Brenner, 2013; Schmid, 2018). Questions about whether such continued existence should be maintained are seldom raised, certainly not in the context of the Global North.

Second, the approaches adopted in the two Newcastles typifying the dominant approach in the Global North where neoliberal solutions such as the adoption of Business Improvement Districts and growth coalitions have become almost hegemonic. The accompanying reduction in the role and leadership of local authorities has often resulted in them being mere enforcers of statutory regulations and at best contributors to city centre initiatives, what (Stoker, 2011) termed network coordinators. Such a position has been widely critiqued and as the Rogerson and Giddings' paper points out "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".

## **DISCUSSION**

In both these respects and aligned with contemporary debates over the accepted meaning of urbanism and the roles, functions and shapes of urban areas derived from understandings based on experiences in the Global North (Myers, 2020) there is arguably much to be learnt from responses to city centre pressures in the Global South. The AHRC funded project, which formed the basis of the "Two Newcastles" paper, also explored the future of two Global South city centres; Tshwane-Pretoria, South Africa and João Pessoa, Brazil. These two cases offer significant insights which can counter the trajectories and assumptions of the Newcastle examples.

### **Perspectives from the global south**

In both of these cases, it was evident that there was much more explicit questioning about the need for and the future rationale of a city centre. In the symposia and discussions held in the cities with policy makers, academics, practitioners and community representatives, there was opening debate about whether a 'downtown' of 'CBD' of the form being protected in the two Newcastles was desirable or essential.

In Tshwane-Pretoria, for example, increasing pressure exists to relocate the functions and services traditionally found in the Central Business District (especially government functions but also retail, transport hubs, and even commerce) outwards, into the new population centres and 'new cities' that have accompanied urban expansion (City of Tshwane, 2012; Mabin, 2016). In 2005, half of all business accommodation in the central business district was reported to be occupied by government

departments, but as their current plan (City of Tshwane, 2021) acknowledges the CBD has lost its status as the focal point of commercial and office related activity within the metropolitan area due to the development of a number of high order decentralized nodes and accompanying relocation of government services closer to residential population. With repurposing of vacant offices for medium to high density residential use, the current plan argues that there is significant scope for redevelopment and job creation within the CBD moving away from its traditional commercial and government focus.

In João Pessoa debates over the existence and need for a city centre were even more pronounced. The historic core, the heart of colonial development, has largely been hollowed-out and no longer identified as the city centre, as affluent residents have migrated towards the coast and alternative 'centres' have been identified by local citizens. Despite public investment towards regeneration of the traditional core, there has been very limited private and community investment, not assisted by key civic and government offices located outside the centre, vigorous private sector interests in favour of future investment being made elsewhere, and competing strategic priorities for public finance (e.g. under the Tourist Plan) to support continued building at the coast. As a consequence, the future of the historic centre remains uncertain and for many citizens a distraction.

In navigating their responses to the challenge to the 'historic' role of the city centre, both cities are having to review and redesign the effectiveness of inherited governance structures, themselves legacies of colonial pasts and more recent responses under independence and democracy. Alternative ways are being sought to those in European and American rise of entrepreneurialism and reduced agency of city authorities. In Tshwane-Pretoria, concerns focus on a lack of insufficient capacity at municipality level (Fonkam, 2017) and at regional and national level as moves to multi-level governance emerge. In searching for alternative forms of governance, this has included revisiting forms of urban management and institutions within the city centre that regulate or impose conditions, and institutions to drive transformation. For example, the mandate and function of arms-length organizations (entities models)-housing company and economic development agency-that typify neoliberal governance in the Global north are currently being reviewed to ensure their functionality aligns with the wider Gauteng city region strategy. In Joao Pessoa, with a more fragile democratic base, the re-establishment of a strong local city authority is recognized. the municipality has sought new ways to reorient Joao Pessoa of the future: more sustainable, resilient, fair and participatory, engaging with external funding (e.g. Inter-American Development Bank loan to fund the city's Sustainability programme), modernizing urban planning instruments to enhance regulatory compliance, and strengthening municipal public management (Koch, 2013).

## **CONCLUSION**

The renewed interest and concern about the city centre provides opportunities for those involved in urban studies to engage more critically with the policies and

visions being proposed to shape the future of the urban core. In so doing, there is merit in overturning the past tendency for global responses to be shaped by actions in the Global north. There the continuing presumption that the historic and traditional form of urban core needs to be re-energized and retained could be challenged and alternative responses considered including new ways to govern change and to think outside of the 'core box'. Such opportunities are all the more important as cities react to current calls them to become more sustainable, more local, and more focused in addressing global economic, social and environmental challenges.

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