

# The origins of city centrism: 'The Potential of Glasgow City Centre'



**Andy Pike** analyses some of the themes in the 1983 report 'The Potential of Glasgow City Centre', an early example of city centrism with a policy repertoire that has since influenced urban and regional development thinking. He explains why, 35 years on, city centrism presents more of a mixed picture than a panacea for urban policy; in a [separate post](#) he offers thoughts on the way forward.

Published in 1983, *The Potential of Glasgow City Centre* is a landmark report. Produced by McKinsey & Co., the US-based consultancy, and Gordon Cullen, an urban design consultant, it was commissioned by the Scottish Development Agency and informed by Glasgow Action, a group convened by city business leaders to work with the then District Council of Glasgow, Strathclyde Regional Council, and the Scottish Development Agency. It aimed to formulate a strategy and mobilise action "to realize the economic and physical potential of Glasgow city centre". The report embodied the city's search for a way out from the "severe threat" facing Glasgow of a "spiral of decline" caused by de-industrialisation and the intensified job loss in manufacturing in the early 1980s.

## The anatomy of 'city centrism'

The report is an early example of 'city centrism': a narrative and policy repertoire that has since become an enduring influence on urban and regional development thinking and policy in Britain and beyond. Several constituent and related elements are articulated:

- Acceleration of the transition to an urban service economy to "revitalize the city centre", "stimulate the economic regeneration of the city as a whole", and "lay the foundations of its economic future" because service industries were the "only realistic opportunity for employment growth". Central to this theme was an emphasis upon upgrading especially in terms of "attracting HQs" – building upon newly privatised Britoil's move to Glasgow in 1982 – alongside stimulating demand for and growth of "business services", expanding the "software industry", especially applications in "office automation" and "interactive cable services" for this "natural software capital of Silicon Glen", and constructing a venture capital network. The development of "exportable" services was important too including merchant banking, advertising, consultancy in construction and engineering, and computer software. Key measures were focused on improving the attractiveness of the city, business linkages to universities, and appropriate education and training provision.
- A central city focus upon the needs and dynamism of the urban core as the "natural location" for most business and many consumer services. Integral was the creation of a "compact" and "magnetic" economic centre as the centripetal "spark" for an "implosion" of urban economic dynamism rather than a centrifugal explosion of decentralised suburbanism since by "avoiding sprawl and concentrating the nerve centres of the city, the fire may start to burn".
- Identification of "commercial opportunities" for "private sector investment" assisted by the relaxation of conservation policies and provision of public support for existing building refurbishment.
- Improvement of the city's "environment" and "image" to enhance the city's "product" and make it more "attractive" as a business base. The aim was to retain especially the city's better qualified and younger population and to attract people from outside such as corporate executive decision-makers, skilled, motivated and talented people – with the availability, cost and quality of "executive housing" and "high-quality offices" of particular concern – and other business (e.g. for specialised short courses) and tourism visitors.
- Improvement of "international airlinks", road and rail travel connections.
- Joint or 'partnership' working between the public and private sectors including local and national government and specialised agencies.
- A turn to the US for examples and inspiration including the aquarium in Baltimore, Boston's repeated reinvention, and the attractiveness of Atlanta, Minneapolis, and Californian cities as places to live and work. Indeed, the choice of McKinsey & Co. to produce Glasgow's early strategic analysis is closely related to what has become an engrained enthusiasm for American urbanism in British urban policy.

Such thinking was innovative at the time and relatively early compared to other British cities, and it was six years later at the close of the 1980s that urban scholar David Harvey coined the idea of 'urban entrepreneurialism' to capture this package of changes.

## City centrism and the Glasgow experience

Some three decades on, these ideas have cohered into an enduring, dominant and familiar narrative and policy mix of city centrism. For Glasgow since the early 1980s, large scale and [sustained deindustrialisation](#) configured the formulation of multi-faceted development strategies with particular objectives and the design of institutional arrangements with specific and integrated remits, both sectorally and geographically. The relatively small size and weakness of the private sector and scale of economic change in Glasgow situated the public sector as the lead actor working with business leaders and public policies as the key interventions in trying to shape economic adaptation.

As *The Potential of Glasgow City Centre* demonstrates, institutions and policies prioritised supporting transition to a service-led and city-centre focus to attract and develop growth sectors creating a particular service economy that has since shaped the further evolution of the city economy. Public sector institutions were hampered in their roles and responses to economic change through the UK and Scotland's centralised governance system, the historical and ongoing change, churn and disruption in institutions and policies. They were also hampered in their small-scale in relation to the magnitude of change, and the effects of mostly spatially blind national policies such as macro-economic, research and education, and transport.

City policies – such as spatial planning, city centre regeneration, investment attraction, innovation, and skills – have supported structural evolution towards services. However, they have struggled to influence the direction of the transformation, especially its drift toward lower productivity services and some but not large scale growth of higher-end services, or to deliver more inclusive forms of growth by better spreading the benefits of growth across the city and wider city-region. City centrism, then, presents more of a mixed picture than panacea for urban development and policy.

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### About the Author



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