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URBAN DESIGN AND THE FUTURE OF THE CITY CENTRE INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores how a more liberated, critical and sustainable form of urban design is needed to help ensure that city centres around the world continue to retain their unique position in urban systems. Four city centres, from four continents, make the argument that contemporary urban design of central spaces should be more adaptive to local contexts, engaging with local communities and citizens to meet their needs, and be more sensitive in the ways in which global planning and development are applied in each place. Joao Pessoa Brazil, Newcastle upon Tyne UK, Tshwane-Pretoria South Africa, and Newcastle New South Wales Australia were the focus of a project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK that brought together international academic partners, including Geovany da Silva, to investigate the on-going ways in which they could be designed and managed in the future. The specific local contexts are expressed to reinforce the variegated challenges faced by each city, and the contrasting and empathetic ways in which local stakeholders could conceive them. These contexts are set in a matrix with the universal perspectives of environment, society, economics, politics, and culture. The perspectives are tailored to the needs of city centres and include – physical planning and sustainable design, community action and social justice, inward investment and the local economy, governance, and identity. The objective is to generate a framework for the development of the future city centre. It is anticipated that such an approach will be applicable to other cities throughout the world.

INTRODUCTION

Across the world, the role and function of the city centre are being subjected to rapid change. This change has impacts that are being felt not only in the city centre themselves, but also pulsating across urban society. Understanding the nature of this transformation and managing its impact on people's lives is therefore important, and the role of urban design has never been greater. The accelerating growth of cities as the spaces within which most people live, work and spend much of their lives, is a reflection of how successful urbanisation has been in shaping society. The predominance of urban living has meant that notions of the city, the urban, and the city centre are deployed as if they are discrete objects, the essence of which can be summarised and captured by these terms. Despite such currency, capturing the variegation in expression of the city centre is not possible by considering it as a single entity. Although globalisation and the continued inter-connectivity between cities have produced a greater degree of homogeneity than ever before, centres remain far from neutral, spatial containers. Rather, it is their diversity and contingency on local circumstances that make them fascinating places, and why indeed many people travel to visit them as destinations for leisure and holidays. Yet, traditional notions that the city centre provides a concentration of economic, social and cultural activities, forming what often is described as the beating heart of the urban area and beyond, are starting to be challenged and replaced. Much more complex and diverse sets of relationships between the city centre and

its environs are being created and in turn this is redefining city identity. The notion of a historic urban centre represented in the cityscape through urban form and preserved buildings, has often been ambiguous and contested, but its presence has been a key element in the positioning of the city as a whole, providing both local identity and differentiation. These transformations are raising afresh, questions about the future rationale of the city, how it should be managed and about the ways in which urban design can assist in continuing to present city centres relevant and resilient.

URBAN DESIGN AND THE CITY CENTRE

Urban design is part of a continuous process in the shaping of places, fashioned by shifting global, national and local contexts. One of the key challenges for urban design, in forming the future of the city centre, is that opportunities for redesign can be limited. It has to work with the notion that the character of the centre reflects the fingerprints and narratives of the ways in which the urban area has developed environmentally, economically, socially, politically and culturally over time. The built heritage, the cultural norms and the economic functions of the contemporary city have their manifestations in the past, fashioned by the city's contribution to the wider community, and by the decisions of previous stakeholders. Buildings and the physical fabric of the city are retained because of this legacy and in turn become the key characterisation and perpetuators of that identity. Names of streets and spaces are adopted to reflect the distinctive, and often local, character of the city and citizens. However, at times such adoption may be challenged as with the current debate about the naming of streets and buildings and the positioning of statues associated with a colonial past and slavery. Economic activity associated with past eras is often robustly defended as a necessary part of the contemporary city centre economy, as current assets are derived from past income. Yet, the capitalist market has no sentiment and does not provide similar assessment of its value as witnessed in the fights to preserve high street shops or local businesses. The urban core presents specific challenges in how to manage change. Where it is spatially compact, there is limited opportunity for larger scale redesign, with development often constrained to small sites or individual plots, restricting improvements to the urban structure. Conversely, comprehensive redevelopment has been badly received by citizens, as it has damaged urban structures and negated identity. The need for retention of heritage and historic value, not just architecturally but also in terms of urban identity, means that city centre urban design needs to be more participatory and guided to ensure retention and renovation of those properties with heritage value whilst meeting the contemporary and future requirements to ensure economic and social vibrancy. Nevertheless, achieving a participatory process is itself difficult, given the large number of stakeholders who may be involved. It not just finding ways to evaluate the competing needs of residents, workers and other frequent users, visitors and tourists, but also appeasing the various priorities of government at city, local, regional, state, and federal levels; as well as business and investors whose interests may extend well beyond the locality. Perhaps more than any other part of the urban agglomeration, the city centre should be designed to allow resilience and sustainability, responding to local needs and recognising global shifts.

LOCAL CASE STUDIES

City centres are trying to respond to the imperatives of density and proximity, as well as the associated needs of the hinterland, and often a general shift towards urban edge or suburban living. The vision of a thriving, vibrant city centre requires definition to guide policy makers, businesses and the public. In this section, the means are explored in which four city centres are wrestling with the evolution of their centres. It draws on research collaboration between UFPB and the universities of Northumbria and Strathclyde in the UK, UNISA in South Africa, and Newcastle in Australia, through funding by the UK Arts and Humanities Research Council. Working with local partners and engaging with those involved in determining the future of

the local city centre in a series of symposia, this research has helped to reveal a diversity of visions and approaches that are emerging in city centres around the world. In the following profiles, local challenges faced by each city centre are analysed, reflecting the specific geographical, social and economic contexts, and contrasts the ways in which buildings and spaces are envisioned. The focus is on urban design, and these four case studies help to illuminate discussion points later in the chapter.

Joao Pessoa, Brazil

The city is the capital of the state of Paraíba in the Northeast of Brazil, and known for being the most eastern point of the American continent. It is a coastal city that lies between the River and the Ocean. The historic core (see Figure 1) and traditional commercial hub in Joao Pessoa have abundant heritage and symbolism, but also a large number of empty and decaying properties, and significantly a perception of representing the past and colonialism. Many local people no longer identify with the historic core, especially those in the middle classes and the wealthy. The hollowing-out of the old centre, as affluent residents have migrated towards the coast, is forming what is perceived locally as the new city centre (see Figure 2). In seeking to regenerate the traditional centre, and address the exodus and neglect that have characterised the recent past, the local municipality has introduced an Integrated and Sustainable Urban Development Program (João Pessoa Prefeitura 2014). As part of this master plan for the whole the urban region, a number of projects have been identified to help bolster the traditional centre's connections within the city's tourism industry, its commercial development and its cultural context. According to Paraíba Government (2019) among the most visited places are the historic core and the artesanato (craftsmanship) centres. This cultural and tourist significance is recognised by the city authorities, and currently R\$10m (approximately \$2m) is being spent refurbishing the main squares and the origin of the city at Porto do Capim. Dozens of buildings have been earmarked for preservation, and plans envisage reclaiming the riverfront to allow greater access to the area.

Figure 1 – the historic core



Source: Authors

Figure 2 - development at the coast



Source: Authors

Local opposition groups, especially amongst the communities that inhabit the area adjacent to the river, fear that revitalising the area will lead to gentrification. This will progressively price existing residents out of their homes, break-up strong community networks, and risk creating a heritage theme park for visitors. For those looking to transform this area, the aim is to utilise the heritage, environmental landscape, and symbolic values to strengthen its identity, and the preservation of the city's memory.

Achieving this aim will need to overcome some deep-seated issues. First, unlike most cities, the centre is not home to key civic and government offices. The Mayor's Office and Municipal Administrative Center, for example, are located on the huge Rua Diogenes Chianca, and this fragmentation of local government is symbolically indicative of the lack of clarity in the role of the traditional centre. Second, there are vigorous competing interests in favour of future investment being made elsewhere. Although the João Pessoa Sustainable Action Plan forms a basis for investment and rejuvenation of the historic core and traditional commercial hub, development is actually being funded elsewhere. Third, similarly due to the economic importance of tourism and the attraction of visitors from across Brazil, there is pressure from the Tourist Plan to support continued building at the coast where the majority of hotels are located, close to the popular beaches at Tambau and Cabo Branco. A key issue in implementing the plans to rejuvenate the traditional centre is giving a voice to its residents, and social and community networks are threatened by the ongoing relocation. Utilising new technologies and greater interaction within the local communities has seen emerging social movements seeking to influence the design of the future city centre, arguing that the legitimisation of a centre's identity depends on interaction with those in the area. Debates over the right to land, citizenship, and recognition of diversity are being wrapped up in urban design processes and calls to introduce city governance (Sousa 2020).

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

This northeastern English city forms a striking cityscape that provides a backdrop for new development, a dynamic economy and the region's leading leisure, retail and cultural environment. The city centre, located to the north of the River Tyne, retains some of its historic structure with the original medieval layouts at the Quayside. In the 18th and 19th Centuries, it spread up the steep bank to the plateau (see Figure 3). The centre's assets include two University campuses with substantial provision of architecture and urban design, enhanced heritage value, clear transport connections to the rest of the region by road, metro and rail; and a vibrant social atmosphere supported by retail and entertainment businesses. Despite various attempts to link the centre with Gateshead across the river, the urban core remains a distinct geographical unit, and the epitome of a bounded mono-centric compact city. It is an active centre (see Figure 4) and takes less than 30 minutes to walk its length. Responsibility for urban design lies with the local City Council. However, like many other cities globally, development is determined by the private sector and a number of key factors have accelerated this trend. There have been campaigns to attract inward investment. Historically, the public has owned the land, which was administered by the local authority. Progressively, this land has been purchased by national and international developers, who are able to transform large areas of the centre in their own image. The counterbalance is the promise of new jobs. Since the comprehensive development programmes of the late 20th Century, the process of urban design has been by incremental change and repurposing the urban fabric rather than masterplanned and larger-scale redevelopment. The creation of a local Business Improvement District, known as NE1, is taking a lead in renovating the public realm, a key aspect of urban design. Nevertheless, current city planning represents a shift from the small scale site design and development of the past 40 years to focus on clusters of vacant sites, underused and undervalued buildings. This shift presents a dilemma. Incremental change does not offer an opportunity to improve the urban structure, in a way that site agglomeration may be able to do. Yet, there is little confidence that international capital will respond to urban design objectives.

Figure 3 – 19th Century buildings



Source: Newcastle City Council

Figure 4 – an active centre



Source: NE1

There is a fundamental question about for whom the city centre is being re-developed. Many of the key concerns extend beyond economics, congregating around environmental, social, political and cultural dimensions. The city plan envisages transformation to a more attractive city centre. It argues that a focus on active travel, safe areas for pedestrians, and more accessibility will unlock the potential for events and activities throughout the year and help to add a downtown atmosphere that increases footfall and spend. Newcastle is not particularly blessed with an integrated public realm, and lacks fascinating pedestrian networks. The plan claims that there is a commitment to creating new spaces, although there are no indications as to how this will be achieved. The provision of such spaces has always been perceived as a cost rather than an investment, and it is unlikely that the current development regime will appreciate its benefits. Although there has been some new housing proposals, the residential population remains small. The focus on a tourist destination and party city has encouraged growth in temporary visitors, and the substantial increase of student accommodation has reinforced the transient population. Achieving investment in new housing that sustains long-term residency remains a challenge. In turn, this raises questions about who needs to be engaged in determining the future design of the city centre. There are tensions between the desire to attract external capital investment, accompanied by organisations disconnected with the city, and the aim to be more inclusive in the design of the city centre to ensure it works for residents, citizens and the urban region.

Tshwane-Pretoria, South Africa

In looking to the future, there is a clear ambition for Tshwane-Pretoria to position itself as an exemplar of a major African city. Therefore, the attention is on strong links with government, national and international commerce, and generating a distinctive identity. Plans articulate this vision by suggesting that “in 2055 the City of Tshwane is liveable, resilient and inclusive whose citizens enjoy a high quality of life, have access to social, economic, and enhanced political freedoms and where citizens are partners in the development of the Capital City of excellence” (City of Tshwane, 2013). Concepts of liveability, resilience and inclusivity are anchor principles in policy making and investment decisions; and balancing mechanisms for the competing needs of social, spatial, and environmental issues brought about by the ever-changing population dynamics. Furthermore,

these principles aim to bring about the realisation of new urbanism and smart city aspirations, involving a human-scale urban design with walkable blocks and streets, housing and shopping in close proximity, and accessible public spaces. Achieving this transformation will be difficult, as they are working with current realities and inherited legacies of the past. The centre hosts national government offices and forms the administrative core of government. At its heart is Church Square. It is architecturally impressive but carries the scars of Paul Kruger whose statue is in the middle of it, the Afrikaan Parliament (see Figure 5), and the courtroom where Nelson Mandela and his associates were found guilty following the Rivonia Treason Trial. Beyond the apartheid framework, there is spatial fragmentation, skewed service delivery towards specific localities, poor education and health standards for the broader population, and socio-economic inequalities dominate, hindered further by many buildings being in a poor state and old infrastructure constraining development. Private sector stakeholders have their own business development agenda to which the Council does not always concur, and the presence of many informal traders (see Figure 6) make engagement and enforcement more difficult. The centre also has a high number of residential buildings which primarily house people who work in the district. However, their condition is deteriorating. As a result, the provision of affordable accommodation for low income people is a major task, with those who do move into the central city usually being single or young couples without children looking for work, and not seeking permanent housing.

Figure 5 – the Afrikaan Parliament



Source: Authors

**Figure 6 – Informal Street Market
with Kruger statue in the distance**



Source: Authors

In designing a more compact city centre, arguments are made that densification provides social benefits, encouraging connections, networks and fostering social capital; as well as providing a means to help address socio-economic inequalities. However, this will have negative effects in terms of environmental sustainability and ecosystem loss, a reduction in green spaces and increase in infrastructure. Yet, there is a need to reverse the dominant urban sprawl and new urban edge settlements that have become a hallmark of the spatial structure of Tshwane-Pretoria. A key point of enabling urban design is the question of governance and alignment of stakeholder goals. The centre exemplifies the problems faced by city governments in searching for effective ways to govern and manage change in the urban core where there are differing needs and a lack of consensus. In terms of the public sector, the Municipality also has to find compromises within the policy context of national and provincial governments. Each level has its own initiatives and they do not always align. With the municipality wishing to be a meaningful partner in the development of new urban settlements as part of the Guateng City Region, compromises in city centre priorities are inevitable. Consequently, although Tshwane-Pretoria has a clear, ambitious plan, it may be quite a way

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New partnerships have been formed to support this re-designing of the city centre. The university is moving some of its functions to fill the void at Civic, to revitalise the area and support the cultural and youth-based aspects in the precinct. Opening-up the public realm in the East End Precinct is aimed at encouraging more families to return to the centre and to support local services (see Figure 8). Destination NSW is marketing the tourist hub at the Newcastle East Precinct. The catalyst for this re-arrangement of the centre of Newcastle was the long-held desire to remove the railway line that ran along the peninsula separating the core from the waterfront. It has been replaced with a street based light-rail system (see Figure 9) connecting to the wider rail network at a new transport interchange in Wickham beyond the West End Precinct. It is ambitious plan that will add additional precincts to the east and west as part of a polycentric structure.

Figure 8 – East End Precinct looking towards Newcastle East



Source: EJE Architects

Figure 9 – light-rail system



Source: Authors

Critically, the City Council does not appear to include urban design in its services but relies on private sector consultancies to prepare plans. Thus, there is not an urban design framework for the city centre, although it would be beneficial as a means of delivering coherence in the forms and spaces. Therefore, proposals can appear piecemeal and un-coordinated. There is a need to change the image of the centre, which could be viewed as dilapidated with empty shops and an unwelcoming public realm, and create an identity. Initiatives such as the much lauded Renew Newcastle became a catalyst for revitalisation of the retail centre, giving property owners the confidence to lend their vacant properties while they remained untenanted, and in turn it was instrumental in reducing street crime, graffiti and vandalism. It returned economic and social value back to the community, and prompted business and residential interest in the city centre. Although closing in 2019, it has changed the pulse of the centre (Saunders 2019). The recent formation of city centre business improvement associations to promote the area, has been supported by the local authority enacting a special business rates programme, in which community organisations and small businesses apply for finance from an annual \$800,000 budget for events to activate the city and create a vibrant centre. Socially, Newcastle's inner city population is dominated by young people (33%) and older people (35%) with 90% living in apartments, dramatically different to the 20% average nationally. The speculative and counter-intuitive development of a new aged-care vertical residential village (Furniss 2019) and the development by the University of two city centre campuses, are unlikely to generate an integrated social profile. Also, in the plan, there is little mention of the social implications of dramatically increasing the city centre student population, especially in the context of the local authority promoting the night-time economy (City of Newcastle 2018).

Key issues and challenges

These four cities underline how responses to the pressures faced by centres in the environment, society, economics, politics, and culture are universal, and how the principles and practices of urban design could be adopted in different ways to promote a vibrant future for their urban cores. However, they also identify that global approaches are only part of urban design. These universal principles have to be tailored to the needs of each centre to meet the local challenges of physical planning and sustainable design, community action and social justice, inward investment and local economy, governance, and place identity and heritage (see Table 1).

Table 1 – Responses to key urban design issues in the city centres

	Joao Pessoa	Newcastle upon Tyne	Tshwane-Pretoria	Newcastle NSW
Environment physical planning and sustainable design	establish shared vision for the concept of city centre(s)	design spatial networks to enhance the public realm	support urban design plan as a clear image of intent for the future	devise coherent strategies for Civic and East End with other precincts
Society community action and social justice	create social cohesion between the three centres	develop heterogeneous residential population	initiate capacity building and affordable housing	involve existing residential communities and avoid social divisions
Economics inward investment and local economy	introduce a more equalized investment strategy rather than just leaving it to market forces	enhance local economy as a means of engaging citizens with future development	engender private-public sector partnerships to tackle poverty and enable more equity in the population	offer alternatives to coal export income and generate a variety of smaller scale business opportunities
Politics governance	evolve governance to provide linkages between centres	local authority, business and the community to establish governance	re-focus government to establish governance	re-establish a strong local city authority to introduce governance
Culture place identity and heritage	ensure appreciation of symbolism that is abundant in the historic core	avoid attenuation of identity by anonymous developments	establish post-colonial/apartheid culture	reinforce culture especially at Civic

The table outlines some of the main issues facing urban design processes in each of the city centres and how they might be ameliorated to achieve a vibrant future. In **Joao Pessoa**, there is a stratification in society that is more fundamental than just different economic groups. This segregation is expressed geographically in the three locations of the historical core and traditional commercial hub, Tambau and the coast, and Castelo Branco. These residents are also socially and culturally divided, and there is little shared experience between citizens in the three locations. **The strongest sense of community and symbolism is found in the historic core, but it is seen as being 'left behind' (negligenciado) by private sector development,**

primarily at the coast and there is a lack of a shared vision for its future rejuvenation. Government and hopefully future governance has a role in providing linkages between the centres. The first target is social cohesion, but it needs to be supported by a more equalized investment strategy, physical linkages with a public sector infrastructure, and expressed recognition of place identity and heritage. In **Newcastle upon Tyne**, the shared desire by the local council and the private sector to attract inward investment into the city centre is affecting its character. The strategy of incremental change is giving way to re-development of large areas. The catalyst is the sale of land to international investors, which dramatically reduces local control. The citizens have a strong sense of place identity and heritage, but there is concern that it may be attenuated by anonymous new buildings and there appears little opportunity to reclaim land ownership for the community. There needs to be development that emphasises new interesting spatial networks, directed by considerably stronger governance that includes local government, city business and citizens. Following significant development of student residences, conditions for the generation of a more heterogeneous residential population are required. Inward investment should be balanced by enhancing the local economy. Of the four city centres, **Tshwane-Pretoria** has the most resolved urban design plan and vision for the future. However, the potential for city centre governance is being diminished by the dispersal of local government services and functions into the suburbs. There needs to be a re-focus and consistency between government departments. The greatest issue is the high number of low income people and resulting informal economy. There are many demands on public sector funding in South Africa and it is unlikely that finance can be made available on the scale required in this centre. Nevertheless, the country has significant natural resources and private sector finance should be channelled into public-private sector partnerships. One imperative is supporting community capacity building to improve employability and entrepreneurship. Another difficulty is housing, with the affluent living in gated communities outside the centre. The quality of housing in the centre is deteriorating, and exacerbated by predominantly young people who are looking for work, and not looking for permanent housing. Others feel excluded and unable to find affordable houses. In addition, there is the continuing challenge of navigating the city's cultural and heritage identity beyond the legacies of apartheid and colonialism. **Newcastle NSW** has a strongly planned structure based on four precincts. Much attention is proffered to tourism at Newcastle East and the emerging central business district at the West End. The other two precincts have less clear futures. Existing communities at the edge of the East End are overlooked and largely absent in the urban design process. The local authority's relocation from Civic to the West End has diminished its former location, which is also the cultural hub. This does not seem to have the same impetus in current plans, as connections with the harbour have become a priority, as well as new university developments that may introduce social divisions between students and older residents. The plans imply a loss of coherence between the precincts. **The economic base is unclear but there is a suggestion that there may a limited future for income from the region's coal exports that has been finding its way to the city centre through the New South Wales Government and the Development Corporation.**

DISCUSSION

The four case studies indicate the potential role of urban design in helping to meet many of the challenges faced in the continual evolution of city centres, reflecting the desire to establish the integrated fabric of urban areas that makes them real places for people (Carmona, 2009). In this section, some of the fundamental lessons are drawn out and made visible in the existing processes taking place across the four local contexts, and how this affects urban design.

Taken for granted and problematisation

Urban design is a product of economic, political, social and cultural processes that over time have become established spatially. It is also a context for ascribing significance. Similar to the city as a whole, the centre is often seen as a genuinely distinct form

of sociation and as an experiential space for the production of shared meaning (L ow, 2012). The presence of this core can be taken for granted, as a location for constructing random buildings with leftover spaces. What the four cases highlight is that their status is a necessary part of the urban design process. Even where perceived of as a spatial entity, it can be challenged, as demonstrated in the policy making in Newcastle upon Tyne and Newcastle NSW, or because of the socio-economic realities in Joao Pessoa and Tshwane-Pretoria. It is acknowledged that fluidity is an essential part of urban design processes, and it requires constant attention to the value of social, cultural and physical elements as part of the identity of the city centre. Not entirely unrelated to questions over continuing identity, is the issue of how in each of the cities, the city authority and key policy makers have sporadically sought to shape the discourse on the future of the city centre. Thus, some are attempting not only to influence the vision of the future of the urban core but also the processes of how to achieve it. Others are leaving large areas to the market, enabling capital to determine future form. In principle, this discourse is seeking to celebrate and positively reinforce elements of the urban space as worthy of retention, development and celebration, whilst also problematising others requiring interventions. However, this objective can become lost amidst the various power struggles. Thus a selective discourse and its framing of the processes by which future actions can be discussed and implemented creates tensions and conflicts. Moreover, it excludes some parties from the debates and ability to influence future directions (Bacchi, 2012). Principal among those excluded are citizens. Potential residents may choose other locations if they perceive that their voices are not being heard. Alternatively, there are great opportunities for inclusive urban design processes to assist in ways of addressing the future challenges faced by city centres.

Supporting partnership working

Urban design is a means of guiding positive changes in the built environment. It is a practice requiring three main capacities:

- to comprehend contingent territorial circumstances
- to hold certain normative positions as regards the way in which space should be organised and transformed
- to organize not only the final outcome but also the process through which it will be possible to reach the intended outcome (Cozzolino et al, 2020).

Where correctly applied, it involves mediation between multiple stakeholders (Biddulph, 2012). This means, for instance, being able to operate within particular socio-political conditions, such as negotiating with different stakeholders who may have opposing interests, and offer the technical expertise required to convert abstract ideas into workable and feasible plans. Achieving this objective is not straightforward and generating and supporting partnerships to deliver transformation can be difficult. It is even more complex in the city centre where the local interests of residents and businesses are set alongside investors and governments from further afield. In some cases, there are attempts to follow well known approaches. In Newcastle upon Tyne, the local Business Improvement District (BID) partnership with the local authority is enjoying limited success. Newcastle NSW, working within complex government structures at federal, state, regional and city levels, is trying to establish a shared vision. It is using the Development Corporation to finance the infrastructure and the private sector to create the buildings and spaces. Tshwane-Pretoria probably has the clearest urban design plan (Madumo, 2019), but in the context of a huge legacy of poverty, its realisation does not seem to have an obvious path without partnering to generate resources. The converse exists in Joao Pessoa. There are poor people but it does not deter substantial unguided development. There needs to be a public conversation about the future of the city centre with a coherent and sustained partnership format to enable mediation. The University may have a role as honest broker.

Local sensitivity and adaptation

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 emphasise distinctiveness and singularity (Kaufman and Arnold, 2017, Abusaada and Elshater, 2021), but it can also risk increasing homogeneity through policy mobility (McCann, 2004). 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 (Cuthbert, 2007; Gunder, 2011; Inam, 2013) and deprived of the levels of local sensitivity and 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 above examples underline the value of urban design 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.

Addressing inequalities

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 emphasises the value of designers to ensure that governing authorities and those offering leadership also recognise 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.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

In responding to the pressures of urbanisation and the threats to the economic vitality in the city centre, the contemporary focus on seeking solutions through urban densification has become almost hegemonic, and appears as a principle that is universally applied to all cities in order to make them more sustainable. As Geovany da Silva (Padovano and Silva, 2020) noted in his thoughtpiece written during the early stages of the Covid-19 global pandemic and prior to his own death and that of Richard Rogers in 2021, “Contemporary concepts such as smart cities and compact cities, such as those advocated by contemporary urbanists such as Richard Rogers should be reassessed in the light of constantly updated empirical data and, at the same time, retroactive, to avoid the creation of models incompatible with the territorial complexity that is observed in the different regions of the planet.” The four cities in this chapter illustrate how more nuanced and subtle ways could be adopted by city centre designers to accommodate people and activities in the urban core whilst working with notions of compactness and densification. The nature of local partnerships and the role of urban design in mediation will mean that variegated visions for the future of the city centre can emerge. These visions may be far from perfect, and the urban design processes involved have discontinuities which will have to be addressed. Not least amongst them is finding effective participatory ways for local communities, citizens, present and future residents to have a voice. In addition, design approaches will require the flexibility

and resilience necessary to accommodate the inevitable change that is constantly faced by all city centres. It is in this respect that Dowey (2017) promotes the capacity to think about the city in many ways at once, and to understand that the centre is a multiplicity that makes the role of the urban designer so valuable.

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