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a room within the city – a place for dialogue and planning imagination

Mark Tewdwr-Jones, Anne Fry, Emma Coffield, Dhruv Sookhoo and David Mitchell explain how a multi-media, city-wide approach was developed to engage people in thinking about the future of Newcastle and Gateshead

As cities become more complex, we often struggle to make sense of change. Recent measures to stimulate economic growth, the growing disparities in housing provision in different areas of the country, attempts to install large infrastructure projects in and between places, the introduction of new smarter technology, and rising awareness of the environmental costs of extreme weather events have all created uncertainty, not only for politicians and professionals but also for urban communities too. These immense structural changes are occurring throughout the urbanised world, in different degrees, sometimes at a bewildering pace.¹

At the same time, the ways in which governments and researchers engage and interact with citizens and create dialogues are being stretched. Voter turn-out in local elections remains low. Members of the public are increasingly turned off by party politics and formal governmental deliberations. Traditional public consultation methods are very much on the terms of those initiating the consulting – short timeframes within which society and individuals can express their views on pre-defined policies and proposals that are often narrowly geographically focused. And even where more innovative participatory approaches are rolled out, there is some scepticism as to whether anything will change as a result of the effort.²

New attempts to engage citizens in discussion about change in the built environment should have unleashed the start of a fundamental shift in the way governance and decision-making operates. The Localism Act 2011 promised a great deal at the outset, but the way it has been rolled out has disappointed some citizens, as the Coalition has inserted parameters over what is possible (saying 'yes', rather than 'no' to development, adding additional housing numbers to pre-identified sites but not reducing them, the inability to diverge from Core Strategy and pro-growth National Planning Policy Framework agendas, and making a distinction between what is and is not a planning issue).³

Localism is hardly a place-based attempt to manage and co-ordinate change, least of all on the terms of the communities themselves. And how should localism work in inner-city locations rather than in small villages or hamlets? There is already some evidence that competing groups of neighbours are vying for control of neighbourhood fora in the same parts of urban areas, leading to local hostilities and resentment.⁴ And with neighbourhoods defined across just a few streets, trying to address broader city-wide urban structural changes is almost impossible.⁵

It was perhaps with this in mind that the Farrell Review of Architecture and the Built Environment discussed the importance of governments,



Above

Panels and model displays at the 'Newcastle City Futures' exhibition

professionals and others engaging positively with citizens on more general changes in the built environment. The Review report, *Our Future in Place*, laments the current inadequate methods to engage communities on their terms.⁶ Farrell calls for the establishment of 'an urban room' in every city as a way of bringing residents into the heart of discussions about change. An urban room, Farrell suggests, would be an exhibition space, a learning space and a community space, and would be used to explore the past and think about how to plan for the future.

Designing innovative urban engagement

While the Farrell Review was under way, and coincidental to that initiative, in autumn 2013 a group of people at Newcastle University's School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape decided to initiate an innovative city-wide participatory approach in Newcastle and Gateshead. Their inspiration was partly urban planning museums and design centres in many cities overseas (not least in China, where most cities house grandiose urban planning museums and galleries) and partly the desire to assess whether urban change could be communicated through more visual means, such as models, photography and film. Utilising these techniques is not new in the UK: at the start of the modern planning movement in the first half of the 20th

century the planning exhibition had been a well regarded method but had fallen out of favour in the post-war era.⁷

It was decided that the Newcastle experiment would not form part of any formal Core Strategy consultation methods, nor would it be owned by the City Council, or any one group of professional planners, architects or developers. Rather, it would be led by the University and forged from a partnership of public, private, community and voluntary groups in the city, and would combine story-telling, imagery, exhibition and interactive events and be housed in a city centre location neutral to any one organisation.

Ambitiously, the University team set a goal to organise and create the exhibition and event series in late spring/early summer, in the Royal Town Planning Institute (RTPI) centenary year, just six months after the initial decision to go ahead. It would be named 'Newcastle City Futures', would occur between 23 May and 10 June 2014, would be free to enter and open seven days a week between 10.30 and 16.30, and would incorporate a different event every evening. It would be financed by Newcastle University through its engagement activities but would rely on material, support and good will provided by partner organisations. The main partners comprised the RTPI; the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA); Farrells;

Tyne and Wear Museums; Newcastle City Council; Newcastle Science City; Newcastle Libraries; Nexus (metro); Newcastle Airport; Ryder Architecture; Byker Lives; Archive for Change; and Amber Film and Photography Collective.

Originally conceived as a small exhibition celebrating architectural and planning achievements in Newcastle upon Tyne since 1945, the event became a much larger exhibition as a backdrop to a rich programme of events over a three-week period, taking place in the Grade I listed Guildhall, located in a prominent location on the Quayside adjacent to the iconic Tyne Bridge. The more historic artefacts on display in the exhibition were intended to act as a prompt to discussions, debates and launches – essentially what the organisers called a ‘big city conversation’, jointly hosted by the University and the University’s partners, which aimed to engage different communities in discussion about change and renewal in the city.

The depictions of the recent past were to serve as a prompt for imagining the future. How has the city changed physically since 1945? How have we viewed the city’s future at different times? What has been built and unbuilt, and why? And what sort of city do we want to see develop over the next 50 years? The exhibition would not shy away from the more comprehensive and often-criticised 1960s planning solutions enacted by the then City Council



Above

Presentation by Nexus on the future of the Tyne and Wear Metro 2030 at the City Forum

leader T. Dan Smith and Chief Planning Officer Sir Wilf Burns, but rather celebrate them. They were in themselves identified as neglected (perhaps even airbrushed) stories in Newcastle’s history.

Critically, the exhibition and events would dispense with planning syntax – the legislative and policy ‘planning-speak’ – in order to open up discussions with all sections of society, regardless of age, and thereby create a common language for all. Posters were designed to advertise the

exhibition, using monochrome photos of instantly recognisable places in the city beneath a colourful ‘Newcastle City Futures’ name and logo, under the leading question: ‘What would you do?’

Newcastle City Futures

The Newcastle City Futures exhibition was multimedia in form and comprised:

- exhibition boards with explanatory text and personal stories;
- historic films;
- oral histories from community members;
- an extensive photographic collection of many previously unseen pictures of the city between 1950 and 2000;
- city models showing change and built and unbuilt developments over time; and
- exhibits and models of significant future proposed developments.

The exhibition was structured broadly around three themes: past, present, and future. The focus was on the city, both Newcastle and Gateshead on either side of the River Tyne, rather than differentiated by administrative boundaries.

Among the prominent developments included were:

- the planning of housing, including the Byker Estate;
- community life in Shields Road;
- the conservation of Grainger Town;
- the building of Eldon Square shopping centre;
- the pedestrianisation of the city centre;
- the redevelopment of St James’ Park;
- the Central Motorway construction;
- the transformation of the international airport;
- the building of the Metro; and
- the creation of the regenerated Quayside.

Several ‘radical’ development proposals of the past that were never built were also included to depict the uncertainty of change, including the subterranean urban motorway, the ‘Tyne Deck’ construction over the river, a new Newcastle FC/Sunderland AFC joint stadium, and the High Level Bridge museum.

The exhibition was further arranged into a number of key areas, which often related to geographical points in the city. Material from the past, present and future was then displayed within each area. In this way, a chronological narrative, with associations of fixed and inevitable progress, was disrupted in favour of multiple changes ‘read’ in context. Rather than view developments in the city’s history as ‘set in stone’, the exhibition took care to present change as the result of deliberate and, at times, controversial decisions, changing circumstances and new ideas, and so aimed to encourage debate and enable fresh ways of thinking.



Above

Feedback on the 'What would you protect?' interactive board

Equally important was the sourcing of material from a variety of partners, including internationally recognised museums, galleries and archives, community groups, and individual members of the public.

For example, the exhibition included the original architects' model of the infamous brutal Trinity Square development of 1967 (also known as the 'Get Carter' car park after the 1971 film that featured it as a location), prompting people to contemplate on the new development now on the site and viewable through the exhibition building windows. An old street sign was displayed from one of the demolished terraced streets in old Byker, contrasting with the now-celebrated Ralph Erskine 1970s public housing scheme on the site. A 25-minute film from 1980 showing the planning, design, construction and opening of the Tyne and Wear Metro was screened on a loop and attracted significant interest. And an original iron manhole cover from the 1960s Killingworth Estate (long since demolished) that uniquely displayed the plan of the housing layout, and was installed at the time of construction to assist residents to navigate their way through their new 'alien' surroundings, caused a flurry of media attention; many older residents of

Killingworth visiting the exhibition could remember the covers in place.

All these may seem like unorthodox planning exhibits, but in presenting these materials as equally valuable contributions to a wider discussion, the exhibition made space for place memory prompts, allowing multiple 'voices' and perspectives that residents and others could relate to. Short archive film clips showing Newcastle's communities in the 1950s and 1960s were played on monitors, and historic sound recordings of residents of Byker talking about their old and new housing were run on iPods.

More interactive elements sought to capture the public's views. A large oblique aerial photograph of the city was mounted on a pin-board under the heading 'What would you protect?' and prompted visitors to identify buildings and places they liked by marking them with coloured pins. Postcards written by visitors could also be pinned alongside the photograph, identifying possible future projects and new developments. Issues raised by this process included calls to fully pedestrianise Grey Street, the introduction of cycle lanes, the extension of the Metro, a new southern entrance to the railway station, and the provision of affordable housing in the city centre.

A family area was designated in one corner of the exhibition and free events for children were run at the weekend, targeted at different age groups, and enabling the creation of children's visions of their city, a musical city soundscape initiative for teenagers, and map-making activities. Plus there was Lego, playmats and drawing opportunities for those wanting to pursue less formalised fun. Children's imaginations were allowed to run riot, and among the ideas generated were plans for a Cat Hospital and an Ice Cream Skyscraper.

The project provided a fantastic context in which to explore planning as a long-term design process and, significantly, to demonstrate the role of exhibition design as a means of presenting resonant physical artefacts and historical imagery to fuel discussion about planning for the future. Addressing this strategic brief meant seriously considering the nature of the exhibition and the position of the city and citizen within the exhibition as a potential 'urban room'.

The exhibition form and layout

Staging an urban exhibition from scratch did not only involve decisions about the theme and content: careful thought had to be given to form and layout. The exhibition was envisaged as a *room within a room*, formed by modular displays in trapezium form that defined a straight, walled *outer space* associated

with debate and circulation, and a quieter *inner space* with gently sloping sides. Beyond practical considerations such as stability and relative ease of fabrication, the simple geometric form devised for the stands offered symbolic social opportunities across different experiential scales. For example, the designers envisaged a scenario in which visitors would come and display material that they themselves had generated, alongside formally presented pieces, and so the stands were detailed with a simple lipped edge offering use as an easel.

At the scale of exhibition assembly, the geometric form of the stands offered opportunities to enhance the prominence of models by presenting them on stands that had seemingly toppled into the centre of the exhibition. This was intended as a playful gesture within the quiet economy of the exhibition and had the effect of framing models within the exhibition wall and visually positioning past and future proposals for the city against the views of the Quayside seen through the exhibition space's large windows. This self-conscious act of permeability, framing the models and aerial photography against views of current urban context, was part of an exploration of the Newcastle City Future concept that signposted past and present developments and experiences to support the re-imagining of future urban development. Arguably, this was most relevant to the presentation of Farrells' 'Geordie



Above

Free events were organised for younger age groups, and children's imaginations were allowed to run riot



Above

Careful consideration was given to the exhibition's design and layout

Ramblas' scheme of 2004, which proposed new pedestrian routes through Newcastle city centre from the Town Moor to Gateshead's Quayside.

Considering the exhibition as a potential extension to the evolving broader conversation had implications for the selection of finishing materials for the stands. More expensive, high-gloss materials such as tubular steel and laminate were rejected to avoid suggesting that the exhibition was staged to present a definitive body of work which was to remain unchallenged. Instead, relatively inexpensive, well detailed plywood was selected for its warm, tactile qualities, which provided a welcoming, accessible backdrop to an exhibition designed to be largely barrier-free. This material selection was considered alongside graphic design considerations aimed at producing an open, image-driven format that avoided using self-consciously dense, scholarly text. Material selection, graphic design and a simple, unifying geometric form provided a visual coherence between exhibits from different eras, put together by different authors and embodying different attitudes to urban planning and city-shaping.

At an early stage, the team decided to make it more than just an exhibition, with the designation of a 'partners' space' within the Guildhall, dubbed the 'City Forum', to allow partner organisations to present their plans and strategies for the future of Newcastle upon Tyne and Gateshead. This involved constructing a stage area, creating seats for 70 people, and setting up audio-visual equipment

where none had previously existed. This gave the initiative much more of a contemporary feel, with the platform allowing for the staging of presentations, films and panel debates on Newcastle past present and future, and allowing audiences to engage directly with experts, officials, community and business leaders.

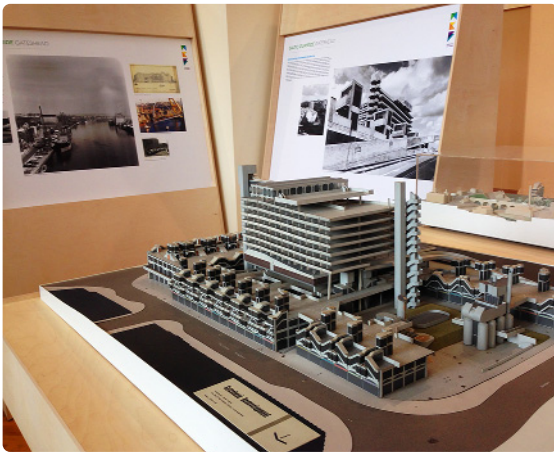
Meaningful dialogue – style, substance and legacy

After six months of preparing the marketing, assembling material, partnering various organisations, hiring a venue, appointing a curator, commissioning designers, and fabricating bespoke display stands, Newcastle City Futures was officially opened by the late Professor Sir Peter Hall on 23 May, and ran until 10 June 2014, when it was closed by Nick Forbes, the Leader of Newcastle City Council. Over 19 days, there were 2,400 visitors and 24 free events at the Guildhall, linking up 22 different partners across the city. It was a resounding success, forging new links between individuals and organisations and paving the way for future discussions about what the city could become.

Newcastle City Futures heard about long-term expansion plans for both the Metro and Newcastle Airport, considered the position of refugees in the city, debated how to develop an age-friendly city, looked at ways to develop further 'smart city' initiatives, gave opportunities for discussion of economic growth and new architecture in the

region, promoted sustainable transport options, and discussed the long-term plan for the Science Central site. It was risky asking partners to reveal their plans in innovative public-facing talks and presentations that most of them had not experienced before, but they rose to the challenge. Two new films about Newcastle were also screened. There were visits by school groups and by business leaders, who used the space to sell investment opportunities in the city. Partners and public agreed that the experience had been worthwhile.

When they set out, the team were a bit apprehensive about whether Newcastle City Futures would capture the public's imagination. Partner organisations, particularly professional planners and developers, expected the public to unleash a torrent of abuse about change; transport operators expected complaints about ticket prices and service reliability. But in the event there was no negativity, at least stated in public, and only two negative comments were posted on the display board during the entire three weeks. This positive attitude – 'we want to think about change and we want a part in your plans' – surprised everyone, since it jarred with perhaps anecdotal views about the public's role in planning.



Above

The original Trinity Square car park model – used within the Newcastle City Futures exhibition

Large numbers of people really wanted to engage with both the private and public sectors to talk about what they would like to see in Newcastle, making positive, constructive and thoughtful comments on the development of the city. And although the physical exhibition closed on 10 June, this was the start of a new conversation that took all these ideas forward in a partnership process. Its legacy is a sense of pride, engagement and optimism.

Final thoughts

At face value, Newcastle City Futures appeared to be an exhibition on planning and architecture – and it could be read as such. But for the team it was always a unique method and process of demonstrating two things: how planners can initiate and engage with diverse urban communities in relevant, multiple and exciting ways using multimedia; and how social scientists can act as brokers between science, engineering, social science and the arts, and between the university and public, private, community and voluntary sectors. The civic university is only effective when it has social entrepreneurs that take risks in initiating pioneering attempts to showcase the talents of the academy in ways that have not been achieved before. This was not only a first for Newcastle; it was a first for a Russell Group university.

One of the most interesting – and challenging – aspects of the Newcastle City Futures exhibition and events series was bringing so many individuals and organisations together in one programme by making connections with partners and inviting them to contribute in some way to the venture, either by loaning exhibits for inclusion or by hosting an event.

The partners were generally enthused by the idea of participating, and willingly loaned material. Others contributed by 'donating' their skills – partners Home Group, for example, loaned their designers to work on fabrication, and members of the Amber Film and Photography Collective gave up their time to take part in a special screening of one of their documentaries, *T Dan Smith: A Funny Thing Happened to Utopia*, and hosted a lively debate afterwards. The critical mass that was achieved by ensuring that the programme was as inclusive and diverse as time and space allowed enabled multiple voices to be heard throughout the exhibition and gave smaller organisations and community groups equal footing with large, private sector partners.

The exhibition was progressed in parallel with, but separate to, Terry Farrell's Review of Architecture and the Built Environment and his recommendation for the creation of 'urban rooms'. The Newcastle City Futures exhibition and event series may be considered a prototype for considering how planners, developers and community groups could use historic and present proposals to redefine future propositions for the immediate shared environment.

Reflecting on the process of exhibition design and curation, alongside the emerging debate around implementation of Farrell's recommendations, the apparent success of the Newcastle project made clear what the planning community perhaps implicitly knows: that the successful planner will be a good presenter, able to draw out the essence of a proposal and its design principles to inform

community participation or support developer design iteration. This project has provided an opportunity to demonstrate the role of the planner as a positive city leader with multiple roles: curator, designer, urban historian, promoter, and city visionary.

Newcastle City Futures already has a legacy: the design dimensions of planning will be explored further through the curriculum of Newcastle University's Urban Room project, within the newly established joint architecture and urban planning undergraduate programme. The Newcastle City Futures event provides an invaluable precedent, both spatially and socially, and the Urban Room project provides a real opportunity to produce new graduates that are conscious of the role of planning, architecture, urban studies and community participation in the long-term planning and creation of tomorrow's places.

'The skills associated with designing and staging a planning exhibition were an integral feature of modern town planning in the first half of the 20th century. It is time that the city-wide exhibition is returned as an extension to community consultation and civic engagement'

Further work is currently being undertaken on 'Newcastle Foresight', a Department for Business, Innovation and Skills funded initiative within the Foresight Future of Cities project which is intended to consider the future of the city over the next 50 years and involves representatives of 50 different organisations in the city. Plans are in progress to continue children's and youth participation in planning, working with schools and Planning Aid. And a series of formal ongoing dialogues are being created to allow service providers to interact with citizens on long-term solutions to problems. Newcastle City Futures will continue.

Planners and developers are constantly involved in the process of presenting images, but they often forget the immense opportunities that multimedia platforms could offer in engaging the public – who in turn often want to respond positively, as was witnessed in Newcastle. The skills associated with designing and staging a planning exhibition were an integral feature of modern town planning in the first half of the 20th century. It is time that the city-wide exhibition is returned as an extension to community

consultation and civic engagement; perhaps then urban localism will become truly meaningful.

● **Professor Mark Tewdwr-Jones** was Director of Newcastle City Futures; **Anne Fry** was Project Manager; **Emma Coffield** was Curator; **Dhruv Sookhoo** was Design Advisor; and **David Mitchell** was Design Assistant. Newcastle City Futures would like to express thanks to Newcastle University and the Newcastle Institute of Social Renewal for supporting the initiative, and to all the partners who donated time, expertise and material so generously. The views expressed are personal.

● **Newcastle City Futures' film of the exhibition can be viewed online at**
www.youtube.com/watch?v=EhsNsS4iHZU

Notes

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