


Constructing the future of the city centre: realizing visions

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ABSTRACT

As cities are being asked to transition to a new future shaped by significant social, economic and environmental challenges, renewed attention is being given to the urban development process, and on how this process has to be more inclusive, and the outcomes more coherent. With past notions of masterplans as a single, fixed visionary document being replaced with guiding strategies, open to interpretation, there is a greater need for different disciplines to engage together throughout the development process. This paper explores opportunities and needs for construction management to be more actively involved in the reshaping of the city centre, from the envisioning of its future to the realization of change. Through the lens of the process of change in four city centres across the world, this paper outlines how discussing construction management could beneficially engage with other urban disciplines to create a shared vision for centres as part of local governance. It argues for construction management adopt a wider spatial and temporal perspective that looks beyond specific buildings, site and projects to situate development in the urban and regional systems and to help be part of the envisioning process. Along with more critical engagement in the policy, design and construction processes for construction management, the paper points to a need for more local sensitivity and adaptation including an appreciation of the contribution of public spaces and a different approach to urban development if the city centre is to be more sustainable in future.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 1 December 2021
Accepted 1 June 2023

KEYWORDS



Construction management;
urban design; urban
planning; city centre;
sustainability

Introduction

The role and function of the city centre, like the wider city as a whole, is being subjected to rapid change. Changing patterns of economic activity, symbolised most clearly in the growth of online retail and the rapid adoption of hybrid and home-based working, are altering the ways in which we all engage with the urban core. Larger societal challenges are also impacting on the city centre. The move towards more locally based service provision, epitomised in policy shifts to support 15-min neighbourhoods, risks hollowing out the centre. New policy initiatives towards carbon net zero futures are impacting not only on modes of transport into and from the city centre, but forcing individual enterprises to review their contributions to meeting climate change targets. In short, cities centres are being asked to transition to a new future.

In this period of transition, renewed attention is being given to the urban development process, and on how this process has to be more inclusive, and the

outcomes more coherent. Past notions of the creation of masterplans as a single, fixed visionary document providing a blueprint for every stage of development through to construction have given way to the generation of strategies that are guiding urban visions, open to interpretation and flexibility, responding to shifting needs and priorities of society and users, and to shifts in the construction and production processes. In this process of urban development, many other roles have shifted as well. The notion of a *master planner* as architect of the overall plan and the design process, and a *master builder* managing the process of construction has been replaced with more collaborative forms of engagement throughout. The role of local public city authorities, once the masterplanners in the development of the city centre as part of *local government*, has been pared back through fiscal tightness, centralized policy agendas, and in particular a reliance on private sector investment, design and

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construction sectors (Kefford 2021) government is being replaced with *local governance*.

Consequently, the aspiration is for more open and collaborative processes, involving a much wider set of stakeholders from inception to delivery. However, without this shift to governance, there risks being the loss of a clear development goal, as it enables all those involved, across different disciplines and at different stages of the development process, to collaborate towards a shared vision. Achieving such coherence will not be without difficulties; not least because of the possible diverging pathways adopted by disciplines as they seek to reinforce their own identities. Urban design research, for example, with its focus on the production and adaptation of the built environment is increasingly emphasizing the relation between built form (and its construction) and public realm (the spaces between) seeking to bridge between urban design theory and practice (Cozzolino *et al.* 2020). Urban studies research has engaged in intense theoretical debates and critical urban analysis (Leitner *et al.* 2019, Scott 2022) as it aims to reference different global sites and situations. With splintered land and property ownership, and the globalisation of real estate, research in this area has raised methodological challenges exploring the varying impacts of local regulatory and geopolitical contexts (Rogers & Koh 2017). Nevertheless there have been a growing number of calls across these disciplines as well as construction management to collaborate in the process of urban development, helping to fill a void in urban planning once invested in local public authorities and to ensure that urban change benefits more equally a broad range of society.

Against the backdrop of these potential transitions in the governance of the city centre and its processes of development, this paper seeks to open discussion about the implications of such changes. It does so through the lens of four city centre case studies, each of which has articulated a vision of the future of their city centre, driven by the local authorities, but in their implementation demonstrates the lack of shared ownership of the vision by those engaged in its implementation and realization. The starting point for this paper is the call by Thomson *et al.* (2021) for the special issue to explore new avenues in which construction management and urban researchers can engage more closely and collaboratively to plan and manage the adaptation of cities to meet societal grand challenges and how they may be addressed in practice. In making a contribution to this special issue, the aim is to engage with recent debates over the role of construction management to engage

more widely beyond specific urban projects and their construction processes. There are both theoretical and practical benefits from closer engagement of the construction industry and those professionals involved with construction management with the areas of urban design, urban studies and place making, and in particular a need for a wider and more critical lens to be adopted by construction management. To illustrate this, the focus of the paper is on some specific challenges identified in four cities where visions and place making designs for their city centres are needed, with the analytic approach reflecting existing ways in cross-disciplinary engagement may be enhanced, whilst acknowledging that the perspective is more embedded in urban design and urban studies than in the construction process and its management.

The paper is structured in four main sections. The first reviews and adds to some of the recent discussions about the future role of construction management, and the calls for a different perspective to be adopted; one that engages more widely with other disciplines as well as being more critical of the contexts in which construction projects are situated. The second section outlines the methodology; an approach that adopts the call for dialogue between a wide range of professionals and practitioners involved in place making to understand more deeply some of the connections and contradictions between construction processes and urban transformations. Using this approach and drawing on conversations generated between stakeholders reflecting economic development, public management, housing, community, real estate and developers, we explore in the third part, four case study cities across four continents to examine some of the challenges faced in the (re-)construction and regeneration of their city centres. These illustrate how in practical ways, delivering envisioned transformation has been challenging, exploring how stronger involvement of construction management could help address key challenges. The final substantial section draws out some key discussion points from the examples central to the desire for stronger collaboration and connection between disciplines involved in the process of urban design and help move towards a desired shared vision in which construction management has a key role.

Engaging construction management and other urban disciplines in conversation

The urban landscape is the product of a continuous process of shaping and redesign as the city is

fashioned by shifting global, national and local contexts and responds to competing dynamics and tensions of market demand; and its mode of production and the urban form in which production and consumption takes place (Næss 2016). Such stresses mean that there is equally a continuous process of negotiation between those who plan, design and construct cities and those involved in shaping and responding to the market demand and managing delivery. Navigating and reconciling such pressure has traditionally been undertaken by a broad array of specialists, regulated and managed by local authorities through planning legislation and regulation, and building standards. It has arguably been a context in which construction management has had limited engagement. As Leiringer and Dainty (2023) note, for most construction management scholars the prevailing *modus operandi* is to be responsive to industry demands, identifying more efficient and effective ways to implement plans and design rather than questioning the underpinning assumptions upon which these demands are based. In this respect, more emphasis has been given to ensuring efficient development of buildings, without questioning for example whether they are appropriate for the location, of the right type and form to meet needs beyond those specified by the developer, or indeed if the building is even required within a dynamic socio-economic context.

This is not to suggest that construction management is neutral in the urban development process. Many industry-driven remedies of the past have rightly been criticized for privileging the concerns and interests of large contractors and clients, highlighting a high degree of hegemony at play (cf. Fernie *et al.* 2006, Jensen *et al.* 2011, Dainty *et al.* 2017). Within this context, construction management research fills an important role in developing new, or improving on established, techniques and methods and in this way supporting industry. However, in the last few years there has been growing concern that this engagement by construction management profession in the transformation of the urban landscape has been too narrow.

There have been calls for construction management to shift its focus from building projects to the wider built environment to help contribute to addressing some of the grand challenges or wicked problems of society (Thompson *et al.* 2021). In this respect, there is an acknowledgement that construction projects are the outcome of decisions and actions taken by others beyond the construction process and in turn buildings have consequences beyond the space they occupy. As Sherratt *et al.* (2020, 1096) express it, “projects and

delivery coalitions are not bounded entities, governed only by interior logic or their own emergent properties. It is clear that the execution of projects takes place in, and contributes to, a socio-economic network of interactions and exchanges which extend far beyond their own boundaries”. Importantly, by shifting the gaze to the built environment, there has to be the inclusion of a wide array of other agents of change—including developers, architects, town planners, urban designers and landscape architects—each shaping the processes of transformation into which specific construction projects are positioned. Equally important, there is an appreciation that the built environment as the product of construction processes has the power to influence decisions of users of the building space and spaces (Nielsen and Farrelly 2019).

Other responses have focused primarily on construction management’s relationship with other disciplines involved in place making. Recognising that the production, consumption, impact and societal experience of urban environments is complex and multi-faceted, with consequences spanning across different spatial and temporal scales, Thompson *et al.* (2021) argue that there is such a need for collaboration and shared exploration. Citing recent research funding programmes and their expectation for multi/trans/inter disciplinary research, these authors posit that construction management and other urban disciplines need to move beyond tribalism towards shared conversations and exploration that help understand more about the dynamics and experience of society with the urban environment, buildings, their lifecycle and longevity. Such a response includes more visibility through contributions to journals beyond the construction management field (Harty and Leiringer 2017), and for utilizing concepts and theories from other disciplines to open up ways to challenge assumptions and accepted approaches in construction management (Volker 2019, Fellows and Liu 2020). It also involves positioning construction management studies and practice within wider economic and social contexts. Rodríguez-Labajos *et al.’s* (2021) recent advocacy of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) as a way to support co-production between construction management academics and practitioners stresses social contexts, interaction, sharing of viewpoints and mutual interpretative understandings to inform construction practice.

This paper seeks to extend the case for greater engagement between construction management and other academic disciplines and practitioners involved in city centre place making. The central thesis is that there are mutual benefits to be gained by those, like

ourselves as authors, in urban design, urban studies and architecture from collaboration with construction management; benefits which help to address challenges and issues faced in the implementation of visions and ideas seeking to transform and regenerate urban spaces. There needs to be more consideration given to the construction element in ensuring that aspirations and intentions in urban planning and design are realized in a way that provides sustainable, resilient but flexible buildings and spaces; key elements in reducing energy usage, creating affordable and safe places to live and work, and reducing poverty and socio-economic inequalities that have been a systemic element of some cities. In making the case for such involvement, and adopting the notion of construction management to encompass the entire process from conception to the delivery of the built environment (Harty and Leiringer 2017) and its conservation and improvement (CIOB 2021), the paper also suggests that new horizons can exist for construction management, including a move away from the traditional focus on development processes largely based around single projects and sites, with the short term goals of successful construction of the built fabric, and on the delivery of outcomes specified by project demands (Dixon and Eames 2013, Koch *et al.* 2019). In so doing, new emphasis and contributions can be made by placing the individual building level in the context of the city, situating buildings within non-built space and the public realm and a shift to issues of longevity and use flexibility that enhance economic circularity (Nielsen and Farrelly 2019, Remøy *et al.* 2019).

To illustrate the potential and need for such collaboration, this paper explores four case study cities where transformation of the city centre is being undertaken but where the construction and development process of the built environment is raising challenges that threaten to undermine their declared vision for the future. In doing this, a key point is that across most urban disciplines, the city centre has attracted comparatively less academic attention than the city as a whole or the processes of urbanization and suburbanization. This absence reflects an assumed and largely unchallenged position that the downtown, as the centre of the urban agglomeration, has been able to regenerate itself continuously within the constant flux of the wider environmental, economic, social and political systems in which it operates. However, across the world, there is a growing awareness that major shifts in patterns of environment imperatives, economic activity, societal behaviour, and political change has raised new concerns about its long term

sustainability and resilience (Rogerson and Giddings 2021). There is increasing alarm that new approaches to reconstruction and regeneration are needed to respond to the perceived risk of the centre being hollowed out.

Methodology

The focus is on four cities in four different continents, encompassing both the Global North and South. There was no a priori rationale for the selection of the specific case studies to be representative of cities globally other than them being non-primate cities in four different political, cultural and social contexts, and being the locale of one of the team members and the context for engagement by their own university.

Mixed methods were used, with document analysis, position papers from key stakeholders involved in place-making, and wider stakeholder focus groups enabling triangulation to evaluate the issues and plans. Documentary analysis was based on published development plans and statements from the local municipality for their city centre's development. These statements also represented the outcome of a process designed to mobilise particular forms of urban coalitions, especially around economic prosperity and urban growth. In positioning centres within the larger hinterland of the local authority areas, they each viewed urban cores as nested within the wider urban region. Site visits for the core team to significant buildings under construction, led by local academics and practitioners, provided additional insights of what were viewed as signifiers of change and direction.

Qualitatively, visions for the future of the city centre were proposed, interrogated and reviewed in symposia held within each of the four cities between 2018 and 2019. Symposium leaders were invited speakers from academia, local government, non-government organisations, businesses and communities, each being asked to prepare position papers to represent their viewpoints on the future of the city centre. These papers were then debated in focus groups by the 40–60 various symposium participant stakeholders over two days drawn from similar multi-disciplinary contexts. This arrangement enabled conversations across, and between, those engaged in place making—from the planners and policy makers responsible for disseminating visions, those active in design processes and in particular those involved in architecture and urban design, to those whose role is the delivery of building projects, and members of the community. In facilitating these conversations, a major objective was to reflect cross-

disciplinary research expertise and interests, covering urban design, construction management, project management and procurement, architecture, and urban studies and community engagement. To enable comparisons across the four cities by the researchers, each symposium debated (a) the location and nature of the city centre, including its spatial definition, identity and social significance, (b) the current use of the city centre as a functioning ecosystem, and (c) the planned future vision and its implications for the urban core within the wider urban system. The presentations and focus groups were video-recorded, and oral summaries were presented to plenary sessions.

Through the symposia dialogue issues, concerns and challenges around image and vision, public realm, social change, economic competitiveness, governance, movement and access, culture and heritage, and innovation and higher education were revealed (Giddings and Rogerson 2023). The conversations identified points of concern and potential conflict between the aspirations articulated in local authority documents and the actualization of development, and they pointed to areas for analysis of where there were potential benefits from a broader, more inclusive engagement in the development process. It is these points of concern and challenges which form the basis of the following analysis section.

Realising change in the city centre: the need for a shared vision

Like other cities globally, in each of the four city cases the urban development process has been initiated and guided by a “vision” set out by the local authority or municipality. Designed to shape the process, they set out an agenda for change which seeks to influence how specific projects and developments need to fit into a longer-term notion of transformation—identifying priorities areas for development, articulating the benefits desired from (re)development, and setting the context in which public decision making seeks to steer change. Each of the city visions are nested within a wider spatial and political context, either as part of a city wide plan or within regional planning, although they differ in character, structure and levels of detail as a result of the specific national legislative and governance contexts of the four nations. Each has been subjected to scrutiny and approval from local, regional or national government, as required by these higher levels of governance, and in all cases have a similar purpose and function of providing a benchmark against which new construction and development has

to be positioned. In all cases, whilst authorship of the plans rests with the municipal authority. However, realizing these “visions” has proven to be difficult, reflecting the diminished role of public sector bodies in the development process, and the accompanying importance played by other actors and disciplines as critical to the delivery of urban transformation. Competing priorities amongst investors and real estate developers, alternative urban strategies, different forms of property construction, and lack of local community consensus underline need for a different approach to ensure a stronger shared vision for the future of city centres.

In this section, the paper identifies some of the challenges being faced in the realisation of the plans for the city centres as projects and initiatives are being constructed. The symposia and workshops held in each city underscored the multiplicity of issues being faced by each as the plans are being actualised—and highlighted the diversity of opportunities where collaboration between those engaged in urban design, real estate and construction could assist under shared themes which cut across the different urban contexts. Table 1 indicates this diversity. In examining each of the cities, ONE of the more deep-seated challenges is selected for more detailed discussion in the following sections, providing opportunities to consider how in practice stronger collaboration between urban design, real estate and construction management could help resolve them.

Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

Since 2015 when formally adopted, the Core Strategy and Urban Core Plan (CSUCP) has been presented by the local authority as the strategic planning framework guiding the redevelopment and regeneration of Newcastle city (Newcastle City Council and Gateshead Council 2015). Prioritizing the “urban core” as the location for major office, retail, higher and further education, leisure, culture and tourism development, the CSUCP envisages the city centre continuing to be the economic hub of the North East, fulfilling its role as the leading retail, entertainment, employment and learning centre for Tyne and Wear. Given the already compact and concentrated nature of activity in its centre, the focus for (re-)development is on a small number of key sites (Figure 1) where existing buildings and land use will be altered to accommodate new housing and commercial business. With the local business improvement association (NE1) being a key player, there is strong emphasis in the vision on

Table 1. Some key urban design challenges in delivering city centre visions.

Newcastle upon Tyne	Newcastle NSW	João Pessoa	Tshwane-Pretoria
<i>Investment in property rather than public realm</i>	<i>High-rise development permitted to support densification</i>	<i>Establish new approach to attractive and sustainable development in historic core</i>	<i>Stem loss of local and external investment to edge cities</i>
Focus on renewal of building/specific sites for investment	Focus on “new” precinct at expense of existing centres	Create social cohesion between the three centres	Provision of affordable housing and reduction informal settlements
Need to attract more heterogeneous residential population	Involve existing residential communities and avoid social divisions	New strategy to attract investment in historic core	Reduce socio-economic inequalities
Stronger local governance to include local authority, business and the community	Re-establish a strong local city authority to introduce governance	Evolve governance to include business and investor interests	Build more inclusive local governance
Loss of identity and sense of place	Loss of place identity in historic “civic” precinct	Harness heritage potential in historic core to give city centre	Decentralization of government services from city centre

Note: highlighted challenge in *italics* explored in the text.

improvements to the public realm and enabling improved public access alongside the construction and refurbishment of properties.

Delivering the redevelopment on specific spatially constrained sites has created new opportunities for construction and reconstruction of the city centre but also identified a number of key challenges. Repurposing of some existing buildings, including those designated as having heritage value, alongside rebuild on existing sites of other fabric provided an opportunity to reimagine and redesign small parts of the urban landscape, creating fit for purpose spaces that meet changing needs of the city centre, and adopting more sustainable forms of construction. Whilst some rebuild has users identified in advance and thus are purpose-designed and built (e.g. the new HMRC offices in East Pilgrim Street site), others are more speculative with a focus on providing investment opportunities and adding value to the real estate and consequently an emphasis on specific buildings and property redevelopment.

One of the key criticisms arising from this process of property investment-led implementation of the city centre development vision is the neglect of the spaces between the buildings and the wider public space. This is difficult to achieve with incremental development, but it is an essential element of the retention of place identity and yet sector landowners and investors and those involved in construction process have often delegated responsibility to the local authority and its agencies. The latest incarnation of redevelopment focusing on the East Pilgrim Street area of the city is one example of how such neglect is potentially a missed opportunity for more imaginative, collaborative and “out of the box” thinking; an opportunity where new forms of governance and a shared vision including actors involved in construction management, real estate and urban design could have provided key leadership. In an area of the city recognized by all key stakeholders as one of the most strategically

important areas in Newcastle City Centre it has seen economic and physical decline as buildings have been systematically vacated by the city council, as a means of introducing large scale redevelopment by international investors, including listed buildings such as the Worswick Chambers. Permission in 2021 for redevelopment of the area, including the provision of a new regional headquarters for the HMRC, the city’s first 5 star hotel in the former fire station, and office and retail space. Owned largely by a single private investor, emphasis has been given on economic return, the attraction of international finance and employment (The Chronicle 2022, 2023).

This focus on specific buildings as apparent economic drivers within an area’s development means that space in-between, the public realm, has received less attention; and where it has been considered in terms of public space, it is a “support role” for the functioning of the buildings. Concerns about the overshadowing of existing buildings, the loss of heritage spaces, and risk of overdevelopment “pushing” people away from the area were considered as outweighed by economic benefits. The risk is that diminished attention to the design and construction of public spaces undermines the planned benefits of the redevelopment. Providing safe, attractive and open access through the city centre is pivotal to its long term vibrancy and sustainability. The East Pilgrim Street development illustrates how a more inclusive and critical vision of these developments is needed. Whilst urban design should have a key role, there needs to more engagement by those in real estate and construction processes to appreciate how the public realm supports and enhances the “value” of buildings.

Newcastle, New South Wales, Australia

Located at the mouth of the Hunter River, Newcastle has a long industrial history built around coal and

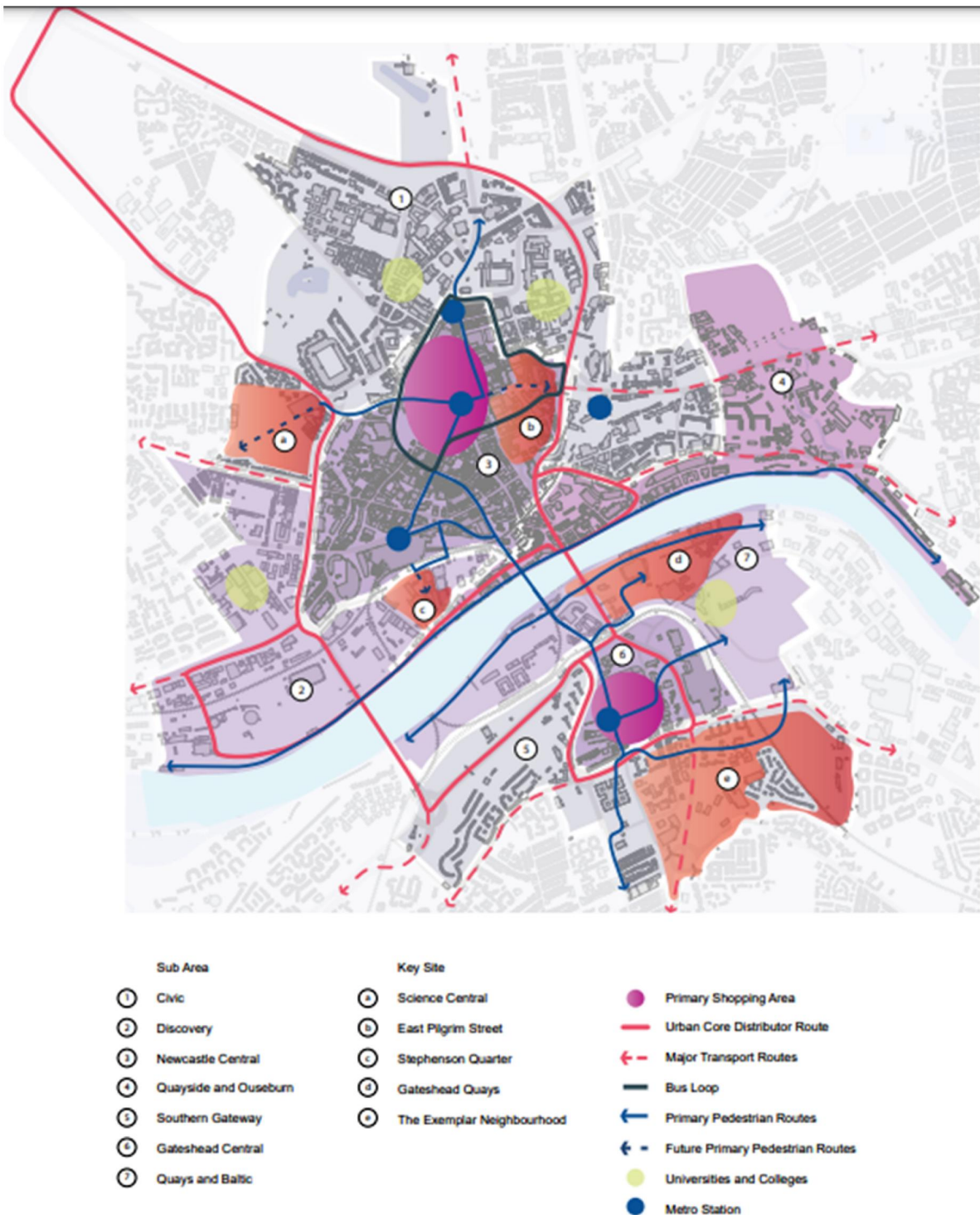


Figure 1. Newcastle upon Tyne urban core spatial strategy (Source: Newcastle City Council and Gateshead Council 2015, p. 46).

heavy industry, and although the port remains Australia's largest coal exporting centre, the city's base and urban form has been transformed as it shifts to a post-industrial, service and creative economy. The closure of steelworks, the removal of its city centre power station, and more recently the replacement of the heavy rail lines has produced spaces and opportunities

for urban redevelopment. The key plan setting out the local authority's vision for such re-development is the Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036 (NSW Government 2018), the first planning document which seeks to coordinate and integrate development across the city of Newcastle and the surrounding settlements. Its aim is to ensure that investment by national and

regional government, and from the private sector, is used collaboratively to maximize benefits across the urban region. Investment in a new light rail system, a transport interchange at the western end of the city centre at Wickham and housing development of parts of the waterfront set the context for the 2036 plan. In 2022, following the election of a new council, the Plan was augmented with new documents, Newcastle 2040, indicating the guiding values and aspirations identified through community consultation—liveable, sustainable, creative and inclusive Newcastle—without the spatial and planning detail found in the 2036 plan.

Encompassing a number of “precincts” which are viewed as the basic planning units for development

(Figure 2), the latest stage of the city centre’s revitalisation leveraging off the multi-modal Newcastle Interchange at Wickham illustrates some of the opportunities and challenges around the transformation in the city centre’s fortune envisaged in the 2036 document. The Wickham and West End precincts occupy primarily former industrial activity spaces with the new precinct forming a core of activity with new corporate spaces, tourism and lifestyle amenities stimulated by the relocation of civic offices and the development of floorspace for new economy enterprises. There is an explicit intention to relocate strategically Newcastle’s city centre to the West End and Wickham areas (City of Newcastle 2022) and the



Figure 2. Precinct approach to Newcastle city centre renewal (Source: Greater Newcastle Metropolitan Plan 2036).

Council's decision in 2019 to move its headquarters to a new rented building on a 15-year lease, located opposite the Newcastle Transport Interchange from its purpose-built offices at Civic, symbolizes such aspirations and underlines the approach being taken in its construction and design.

In taking forward its precinct based plans, the council has relied on large private sector inward investments and the design and construction management processes have had to adjust to reflect the expectations of such financial interests. In particular, the strategy is challenging and altering past planning norms and approaches. Increased densification, construction of higher rise buildings, and a move away from local design principles have been adopted and implemented. In just one proposal, for example, the mayor was relaxed about exceeding the new 90m height limit because the project was a 200 million dollar investment (Nelmes 2019). Such proposals are not just commercial, as there is similar approval for high rise building in the form of residential towers, vertical seniors village, student accommodation tower, and vertical childcare; each of which have been designed and constructed for designated uses with limited consideration of longer-term repurposing and use change.

Whilst such densification may offer benefits, it is the unquestioned adoption of the doctrine of a particular form to all building types that raises issues about the apparent lack of integration to design principles (densification), the form of building design and construction (verticalization) and the social consequences of the resultant usage. Critics of high-density residential accommodation have frequently warned of possible tensions if effective noise mitigation, management of communal areas and protection of privacy are not factored into the design of new developments (Lehmann 2010) and is at odds with beliefs of Indigenous Australians in being in touch with the ground. These tensions can be exacerbated by a range of demographics and cultures, and a vibrant nighttime economy. The resultant repopulating of the centre by older people and students is a new phenomenon in this city that has therefore not been tested over a sustained period.

The tensions which may be created by such development could have been avoided through a more collaborative approach to design and construction, assisting in teasing out the dangers of constructing monolithic developments over a short period of time, and greater consideration would have been given to an evaluation of environmental and social issues, especially in terms of whole life, and whether flexibility for

re-use should be an integral part of the proposals (SUE-MoT n.d.). They also underline the absence of sufficient detail about construction and design principles in the guiding documents of the 2036 and 2040 visions; an absence which could have been avoided through wider consultation and engagement with construction management and other urban disciplines and practitioners.

João Pessoa

This city, the capital of the state of Paraíba in the northeast of Brazil and the most eastern point of the American continent, has a historic urban core that reflects the city's origins as a colonial port developed by the Portuguese to access raw materials inland. The historic core has abundant heritage and symbolism represented by Portuguese baroque and art nouveau architecture and religious establishments. As part of the city-wide Sustainable Pessoa Action Plan (João Pessoa 2014) the significance of the historic centre is recognised by the city authorities. Dozens of buildings have been earmarked for preservation, primarily those with cultural and tourism potential, although this remains piecemeal and uncoordinated. However, rapid urban development from the second half of the 20th century has seen the city expanding towards the Atlantic Coast away from its original heartland. With more affluent residents migrating coastwards, new city centres have been perceived locally to have been formed at Manaira-Tambau and at the service hub of Mangabeira (Figure 3). Consequently, many local people no longer identify with the historic core, especially those in the middle classes and the wealthy, and the area has been subjected to long-term decline and disinvestment, hollowed out by the spatial shift in economic functions and the investment in housing and hotel construction at the east coast.

Past initiatives by the municipal government to regenerate the historic core have been largely unsuccessful. Developers and investors have instead elected to engage in construction elsewhere, encouraged by schemes such as the city's Tourist Plan, to support development close to the popular beaches at Tambau and Cabo Branco. In an attempt to redirect investor and developer interest, the Municipality has sought to upscale development opportunities. It has attempted to create a more concerted and coherent strengthening of the connections between the historic centre and the origins of the city at Porto du Capim on the riverfront. Utilizing design principles around heritage, environmental landscape and symbolic values to



Figure 3. The competing centres of João Pessoa.

strengthen its identity, and form a key element of retention of the historic cores' significance to the city's past and future development. These have proven to be controversial. The plan involves the displacement of some of the existing residents who over 50 years have created the current community as well as upgrading of some homes and the formation of an ecological park as part of the public realm extension. Even with funding assistance from the Inter-American Bank secured, this development has been strongly resisted by local communities and has yet to materialize.

A key challenge in João Pessoa is that amongst key stakeholders and communities there is a lack of confidence in the restoration process of the city centre. The recent experience of construction in the "new centre" at Manaira-Tambau (Figure 3) which has taken the form of concrete towers and gated communities each operating as independent from neighbours, gives limited confidence that the desire amongst local communities for lower level, more flexible housing will be met. The poorly coordinated development elsewhere, based on market forces and aimed at more affluent purchasers, sits uneasily with the needs of existing residents and those who occupy informal settlements

found in the vacant lands around the historic centre. In addressing this discordance, the recent debates over the right to land, citizenship and recognition of diversity have argued for the introduction of stronger and more collaborative city governance (Sousa 2020). Such a move could provide much needed coordination and a shared vision that encourages developers, real estate agencies and investors as well as constructors to help in envisioning a future for the historic core. Although the municipal government has been at the forefront of the current development process, there is an appreciation that a new approach to place making and regeneration of the historic core is needed. It has to be more sensitive, inclusive and sustainable, replacing what is perceived to be the Mayor's current plan to enact a type of social cleansing in order to develop a tourist destination as a kind of heritage theme park. With the process of change already impacting on the original settlement at Porto do Capim (Paraíba 2019), there is an urgent need for construction management and other development stakeholders to help in guiding a more co-ordinated and sustainable development of the historic centre. The remaking needs to be more relevant to the local communities alongside supporting a vibrant tourist

destination, avoiding the past experiences elsewhere in the city where building replacement with inflexible design and construction of concrete towers has occurred rather than repurposing historic buildings. The current absence of successful local governance with active stakeholder engagement, risks the historic city centre spiralling further into decline and neglect.

Tshwane-Pretoria, South Africa

Seeking to reposition the city of Pretoria–Tshwane internationally as a capital city of excellence, the Tshwane Vision 2055: Remaking South Africa’s Capital City (City of Tshwane 2013) document forms the key urban planning document. Agreed in 2013 and being implemented since then, the Vision 2055 plan is situated within a social and political desire for continuing transformation and remaking of the city, embedded increasingly within the wider Gauteng region and its rapid urbanization. It builds on other planning frameworks and strategies from the Municipality, including the city wide spatial development framework of 2012 with the intention to (i) provide “a broad logic to guide growth and development and a programme of action”, (ii) form a reference point for interventions, priorities and strategic actions over the next 40 years, and (iii) be a platform to establish strategic partnerships with communities and stakeholders.

As a central business area, the city centre is acknowledged as important in confronting deep-seated economic challenges, not least the unequal distribution of economic growth in income and employment, lack of past investment in housing stock, and unmodernized urban infrastructure. Large scale migration into urban areas has added pressure on accommodation provision, and although the centre also has a high number of residential buildings which primarily house people who work in the district, there is a lack of affordable accommodation for those on low income and those seeking work.

From an urban design perspective, of the four case study cities, the South African city is the closest to having an urban design strategy for its city centre. The ambition involves human-scale walkable blocks and streets, housing and shopping in close proximity, and accessible public spaces (Madumo 2019). The objective is to create an authentic and relevant compact city centre to counteract urban sprawl. Focused interventions have been identified to reimagine the inner city as a desirable destination for investors, tourists and residents, enhancing its image through beautification of key gateways and landmarks with

identification and development of a tourism route utilizing built heritage and focused on Church Square as the central point of the area, and with a more integrated public transport network to service links to this core (Figure 4). New development is planned for West Capital, the western precinct of the Inner City, with mixed-use residential area and the creation of a government boulevard and precincts that reinforce the core’s administrative functions.

Realizing the Municipality’s ambition for transformation of the centre has been made more challenging by the influence of alternative agendas amongst other stakeholders engaged in the reconstruction process. Competing priorities at different levels of government have undermined investor confidence; an absence only partially addressed in the recently announced “One Plan” (2021–2022) with more integrated planning, budgeting and delivery of development in Tshwane-Pretoria by all three spheres of government; city, regional and national (City of Tshwane 2022). There have also been challenges in enforcing bylaws and regulation, leading to informal settlements, poor infrastructure maintenance, limited development, and difficulties in the implementation of urban design guidelines to assist in the construction processes.

However, arguably, the largest challenge comes from private sector developers and constructors seeking simpler and more lucrative rewards from new build on greenfield sites beyond the current city boundary. The rapid expansion of Centurion epitomizes this position. Lying thirteen kilometres (eight miles) south of the city centre towards Midrand, a new city with its own centre, housing and commercial activity has been and continues to be constructed. With international and national financial resources supporting such development that provides housing and employment for the more affluent sectors of society, there is a real threat to the long term viability of the traditional city centre, and in the medium term to the implementation of the goal of a coherent, single centre capital city. In short, the development and construction of these new communities threaten the functions and services traditionally seen in the city centre and in turn its social functions. The Municipality has previously been criticized for implementing projects that do not address community needs, and for many the new Centurion development may not be beneficial to residents and businesses in the area (Moatshe 2023). Moreover, such constructions undermine the identity and significance of city centre to the city as whole, and its role in generating a positive image is significant for the psyche of citizens. In following investment

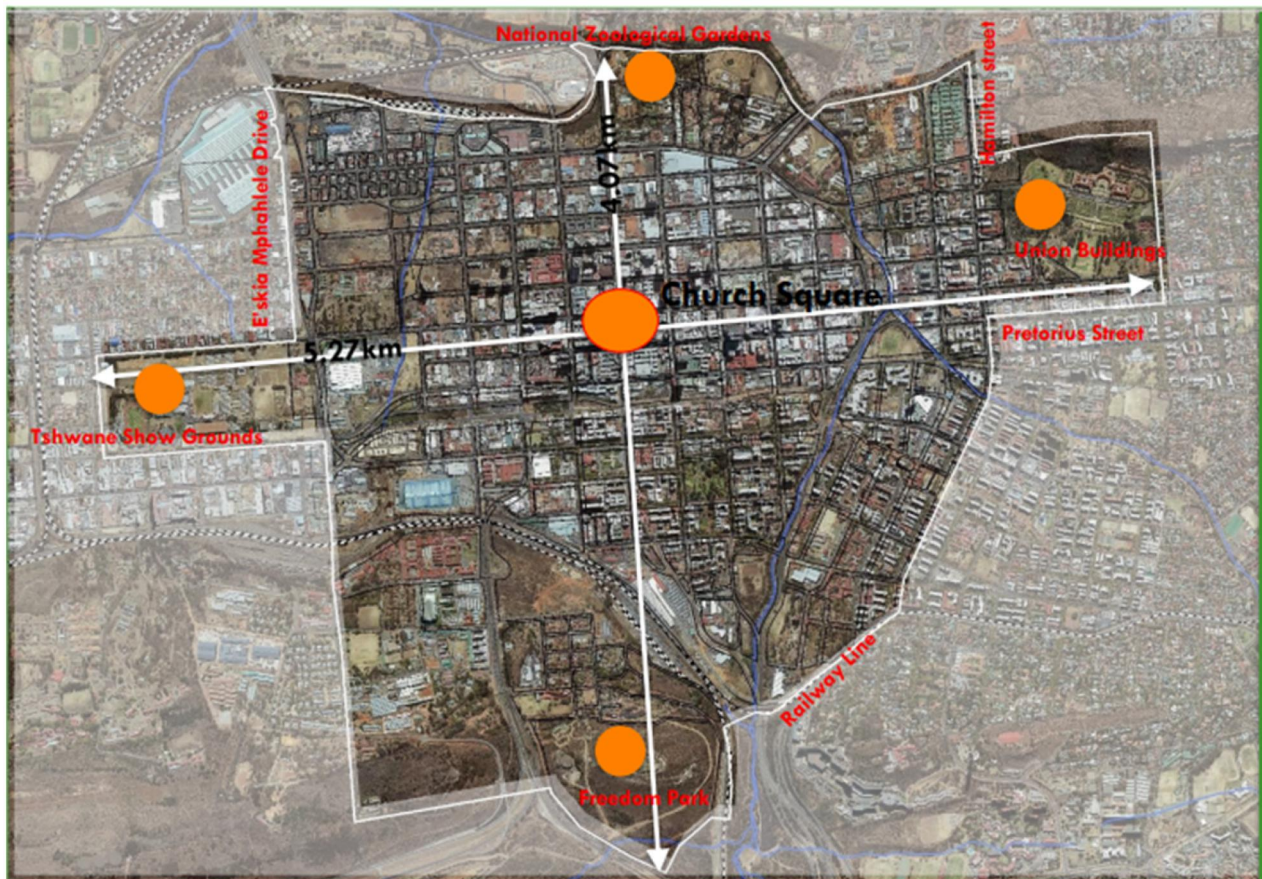


Figure 4. Tshwane-Pretoria city centre (Source: Madumo 2019).

capital, and in meeting the needs for accessible housing and employment for the new middle classes in South Africa, the long term viability and desirable transformation of the city centre is at risk.

An alternative approach, less focused on short term economic returns from construction is needed to rebalance the current development. An important factor in city centre renewal is re-population, as part of counteracting a market forces approach to development. A shared role of construction management and urban studies could be to address the need for affordable housing and a response to informal settlements, which are threatening to undermine the council's aspiration to be a global city. Low returns on investment for affordable housing are restricting supply, leading to a need for more thoughtful and sustainable policies on city housing programmes. Re-population also demands employment leading to support for co-operatives as a way of working towards bridging this gap. Working with other stakeholders, the Tshwane Economic Development Agency (TEDA) is offering capacity building for raising incomes and providing healthier working conditions for small businesses, but it needs more active engagement of everyone involved in reconstruction to participate. The challenge of achieving this shift is rather ironically

illustrated by the contradictory fact that the Agency is located in Centurion rather than Tshwane city centre.

Discussion

Each of the above city centre case studies underlines the complex nature of urban place-making and redevelopment. The process of local authority led envisioning and then private and public sector implementation is in each case raising many challenges. Arguably, they have arisen because the process of envisioning and urban design has lacked the depth and detail that is necessary in the construction process. Construction management has its disciplinary expertise in resolving these issues. As the symposia discussions underlined, vision and strategy documents do not themselves deliver urban (re-)development or determine the process of construction and delivery. Nevertheless, they have a pivotal role in forming the context into which delivery programmes and operational planning could be located. If, as the Newcastle NSW plan describes it, the document "is the primary reference point for all activities undertaken by Council", then why are there implementation challenges when it comes to the construction process? In line with the review above that

construction management would benefit from having wider engagement in the urban design process, what role could construction management have in mitigating such challenges? This discussion section reflects on how construction management could be positioned in relation to this element of the urban development process but also on how the urban design process can benefit from engagement and involvement with construction management. In making this case for such mutual gain, our focus is on four main areas which come from the highlighted challenges in the four cities: the importance of a wider spatial and temporal perspective that looks beyond specific buildings, site and projects to situate development in the urban and regional systems and to help be part of the envisioning process; the need for more local sensitivity and adaptation including an appreciation of the contribution of public spaces; the necessity for a different approach to urban development if the city centre is to be more sustainable in future; and more critical engagement in the policy, design and construction processes.

A longer-term and wider perspective

The suggestion that construction management needs to be more actively involved in the formation of “vision” documents may seem at odds with the more familiar regulations and codes that shape construction management processes. However, if construction management is seeking to participate more widely in the planning and development process, contributing to and engaging with generating vision documents is crucial. They are not as abstract and distant as might first appear. First, across the four symposia it was evident that active contributions to this first stage of urban planning can bring influence and input in subsequent stages. Construction management needs to be involved more upstream, rather than just these development briefs. Second, these plans are a critical component in the assignment of strategic and development resources shaping what of the physical urban fabric is to be constructed and modified, and in part the current challenges faced in each of the four cities in implementing them is the absence of meaningful input from a wider set of disciplines, including construction management, in the early stages. One of the critiques of this form of planning documentation is the length of time required to generate, consult, approve and then implement them, in a context where many global challenges are requiring more rapid action and intervention. They risk being outdated by the time they are published, overtaken by changing needs and methods of

development. Construction management’s expertise on much shorter-term delivery of projects, efficiency, and predetermined objectives in terms of scope, costs, time, quality and the satisfaction of projects stakeholders can provide a valuable contribution to shortening the “development process”. The introduction of development frameworks for its building projects in Newcastle upon Tyne offers an example of how established areas of construction management might be included in the process (Lawless 2016).

There is also a wider opportunity and role for construction management in the wider urban system and the longer-term shifting urban policy and research environments. As the competition between development in Tswane-Pretoria and Centurion illustrates, city centre change can be isolated from wider development opportunities beyond the city. In response, there needs to be a much stronger case made to attract new investment in areas deemed less desirable. Few urban visions and development plans associated with urban design and place-making processes include specific details on particular projects yet that is what the finance and real estate market seeks to allow them to assess investment opportunities. Construction management can help fill this gap in order to make urban development plans more investable, realistic and feasible.

It is equally important that construction management is engaged with the longer-term processes of urban policy making, helping to shape policy initiatives that shape future development and construction agendas. The contemporary interest in planning and urban design on notions of the 15 minute neighbourhood for example is creating a new agenda for resource allocation and development; one which creates new uncertainty for the city centre and risks diminishing opportunities for restructuring and different construction needs. There is a role here to be part of urban governance, working collaboratively with local government, communities, and the local private sector to assist providing important expertise in shaping the built environment, social character and economic futures.

Local sensitivity and adaptation

Urban competitiveness and the reduced financial autonomy of municipal authorities has meant that making city centres magnets to attract and retain external capital and investment has become a central element of capitalist development. Such competition can emphasise distinctiveness and singularity (Abusaada

and Elshater 2021), but it can also risk increasing homogeneity through policy mobility (McCann 2004). The ubiquitous desire to pedestrianize existing 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 and deprived of the levels of local sensitivity and awareness of intangible values attached to individual elements of the urban landscape (Gunder 2011, Inam 2013) have been seen as uncritical urban design (Foroughmand Araabi 2018).

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 opens opportunities for construction management to reinforce the ways in which projects and buildings can add to the distinctiveness and identity that risks being lost. Through imaginative working with architects and advocating the use of appropriate building materials to complement existing urban fabric, construction management can provide an important local filter to the pressures for conformity that arise from imperatives to attract new investment for business, tourism and housing; such as the coastal developments in João Pessoa. But they also need to be sensitive to local contexts and help champion local culture, heritage and identity, recognizing that permitted novel design and construction such as the verticalisation in Newcastle NSW may diminish rather than enhance the urban built environment.

Critical to this perspective is the public realm. As the Newcastle upon Tyne case illustrates, focusing on property (re)development risks losing the place making benefits of public spaces and undervaluing a scarce resource in the city centre. With ownership of land and property increasingly in the non-public sector, it is understandable that public-sector led initiatives such as business improvement districts have focused on the public realm and those spaces of common ownership where they have more direct influence. But the current in the absence of planning in a systematic fashion of such spaces (Carmona 2019) there are exciting opportunities for construction management to help fill this gap. To do so however requires a shift in construction management from buildings to the wider built environment, and it needs engagement with other disciplines. This is a realm where architects and urban designers are seeking to stake a claim, drawing on their expertise involved in interior spaces to fashion the exterior spaces between

buildings integrating these into the surrounding urban area, whilst balancing the visual identity, cultural relevance, and heritage (Duivenvoorden *et al.* 2021). It is also an area where other private sector companies are getting involved—with dedicated teams focused on applying their skills to engineer solutions and construct everyday spaces that are accessible to everyone (Macdonald 2023), albeit contentiously (De Magalhaes and Trigo 2017, Sennett 2020). Through closer engagement with other urban studies disciplines, construction management has opportunities to help ensure that the public realm is viewed as a more important element in urban transformation.

Delivering urban sustainability

In responding to the grand challenge of a more sustainable urban form and urban living, one of the key issues in the urban development process in the context of the city centre is that opportunities for redesign can be limited. Even when new construction is possible, it has to be woven into the character of the centre to reflect the fingerprints and narratives of the ways in which the urban area has developed environmentally, economically, socially, politically and culturally over time. As João Pessoa illustrates, finding new ways to rework built heritage is necessary but challenging and is not one that can be achieved without greater construction management involvement. Retrofitting and repurposing have become key components of the debates over how urban development can have a lower carbon footprint, can produce more sustainable urban buildings, and in turn support the circular economy and net zero target. As all those who have a stake in the city centre grapple with how they can change behaviour and activity to meet sustainability goals, there are new possibilities for the construction industry to be recognized as one of the key enablers to delivering transformational change and its management. Renewed attention is being given to individual sites, individual buildings and how contributions of the small scale can be significant. Initiatives such as those been engendered in Pittsburgh by the Green Building Alliance (GBA 2022) demonstrate how construction management can positively engage with commercial partners, planners and communities to make a real and lasting impact towards a more sustainable future within the existing urban fabric. There is further scope, however, for construction management to take the lead in ensuring that repurposed as well as new

buildings enable regular change of use; an element of development processes that is frequently absent. Single use buildings risk being short-lived and inflexible. Ensuring that building design and construction has the flexibility for easy, low energy conversion and actual conversion offers a significant contribution to city centre's sustainability goals, and can help resolve the challenge of bringing historic buildings back into active use.

Being a critical friend

One of the key insights from all four cities is that throughout the development process there is a need for more critical evaluation, challenging assumptions and plans to ensure that they contribute to the whole process from visioning to delivery. In a period of rapid, unpredictable development in the construction sector many of the dominant traditional approaches to research lack explanatory power and provide little insight into how people and institutions might change. Opportunities to engage with optics from other disciplines can allow more critical assessment of the limitations of existing approaches and in turn the generation of alternative creative, and academically relevant, insights. In making a case for such more collaborative, cross-disciplinary analysis, Green's (2022, 658) recent comments in relation to modern methods of construction need to be heeded: "researchers are too often content to pursue their chosen research specialisms without critically engaging with mainstream policy narratives" and alternative ways of exploring challenges. There is a need for more direct and as appropriate critical assessment of the policy and planning contexts in which construction takes places. In this respect, there are potential lessons to be learnt from the "critical turn" adopted in urban studies, drawing both on critical urban theory and on more direct challenging on policy and practice (Scott 2022). Whilst acknowledging that this risks being what Sherratt (2017) describes as potentially counter-productive given construction management's proximity to business, stronger and critical engagement with urban policy and decision making at a design stage is desirable and arguably necessary to resolve challenges. Visionary plans that are not informed by construction processes risk raising expectations that cannot be delivered but equally construction that is not aligned with such guiding frameworks risk derailing wider objectives in place making and rebuilding the built environment. Such mutual benefits from earlier engagement in policy and planning strengthen rather than undermine construction management's contribution.

Conclusion

The urban development process has changed and is changing as it seeks to meet some of the grand challenges faced by society and humanity. In moving away from past approaches where master planning offered a single, all-encompassing blueprint for every stage of development from initial plans and design through to delivery, the development process is looking to become more inclusive and open. Alongside a declining role for local authorities and public agencies to steer as well as regulate development, they are increasingly looking to other stakeholders to be involved through local governance. As a result, a broader stakeholder base—from urban designers, planners, architects, investors and constructors—to have more influence over the process of urban change. As part of this process, there is a need for those involved in the above disciplines to collaborate in the creation and delivery of a vision for the future.

Through examination of four different city centre case studies, and analysis of some of the issues associated with the implementation of transformational plans, this paper has identified practical ways in which construction management could assist positively to overcome the challenges, and be an enabler in making both the envisioning and development processes more effective. In so doing, the paper has sought to add to the contemporary debates over how construction management is positioned in urban development process.

The case studies have highlighted the need for construction management to adopt a wider spatial and temporal perspective that looks beyond specific buildings, site and projects to situate development in the urban and regional systems, and help to be part of the envisioning process. There is also a need for more local sensitivity and adaptation, including an appreciation of the contribution of the public realm in place development and new approaches to enhance the repurposing of built heritage. New approaches to urban development are needed that generate more adaptable and flexible building construction, enabling the city centre to be more sustainable in future. Crucially, construction management has the potential for more active critical engagement in the policy, design and construction processes, adopting a position of being a critical friend. In turn, the paper suggests that the urban design, planning and delivery components of the urban development process can benefit from engagement with construction management, gaining

from its expertise in project delivery, efficiency, and delivery objectives in terms of scope, costs, time, quality and the satisfaction of projects. Through more collaborative, cross-disciplinary engagement in the envisioning, designing, planning and delivery of city centre futures, construction management can have a more active role in developing a shared vision with other urban disciplines and practitioners.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This research was conducted under a UKRI Arts and Humanities Research Council Research Grant (Research Networking AH/R006881/1). The authors gratefully acknowledge the support of the partners from the Future of the City Centre project, and the input from Northumbria University (UK), University of Strathclyde (UK) University of Newcastle (Australia), UNISA (South Africa) and UFPB (Brazil).

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Data availability statement

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in the Future of City Centre Research website at Home | Future of City Centres (futurecitycentre.com).

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