

Submission to the 2015 Revitalising Newcastle Community Consultation

As a team of researchers from Macquarie University and the University of Newcastle we welcome the opportunity to make a submission to the Revitalising Newcastle consultation process (August—September 2015).

Our team consists of Dr Kristian Ruming (Department of Geography and Planning, Macquarie University), Dr Kathy Mee, Professor Pauline M^cGuirk (Discipline of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Newcastle), and Dr Jill Sweeney (Department of Geography and Planning, Macquarie University, and Discipline of Geography and Environmental Studies, University of Newcastle). Since 2013 we have been engaged in an Australian Research Council--funded study of urban regeneration and renewal in the Newcastle region. We have investigated the ways in which the Newcastle region is being regenerated through the formal and informal practices of households, organisations, businesses and governments. We have also sought to learn more about how residents view urban regeneration as it is currently being undertaken in Newcastle.

As part of this we conducted a survey of households through which we gathered a sample of 200 residents in inner Newcastle and, drawing from this group, conducted a further 34 in-depth resident interviews. We also conducted interviews with key informants from government, business and community groups, and have attended a suite of consultation and discussion sessions about regeneration. The following submission highlights the issues and concerns that have been identified as being most important to our residents.

Key Points:

- Newcastle residents are proud of their city and desire revitalisation which is place-appropriate, and which serves to increase the liveability, accessibility, inclusiveness and amenity of their home.
- Residents want revitalisation to clearly respect and reflect the work, heritage and identity of Novocastrians, which they see as integral to making Newcastle an increasingly vibrant and valued place.
- Residents particularly want to be able to see the big picture of revitalisation plans, and to be involved in consultation processes beyond generalised visioning stages so that detailed plans may be adjusted to suit the people who will use the services and live with the changes.
- Some residents are fearful of losing Newcastle's character and identity in large-scale changes that do not adequately account for heritage, diversity and sustainability.

Type and scale of revitalisation

Revitalisation is not the sole province of governments and developers, nor is it confined to large-scale redevelopment. The residents we spoke with highlighted that regeneration is a process already underway in Newcastle, largely due to the efforts of local people. This is a process they value highly. Residents described the vitality and energy they have seen developing in the city in the last few years, and appreciated the fact that Novocastrians were driving those changes with the introduction of unique shops, cafés, small bars and creative endeavours. **Small-scale efforts and experimentation in particular have proven to be popular** among our surveyed residents, who praised organisations such as *Renew Newcastle* and events such as the annual *Hit the Bricks* festival. As such, there is **strong concern that large-scale development processes may disrupt the vitality and organic growth which residents feel so positively about.**

This does not mean they are opposed to large-scale change or to development in general. Rather, it is the type and nature of the change that determines their level of support. Importantly, the residents we spoke with expressed **a strong desire to see well-planned development that was sympathetic to, and that worked *with*, existing forms of revitalisation.**

Transport

Transport planning in the city is seen as particularly problematic, especially with regards to revitalisation planning. There is general agreement that **regeneration plans have overlooked the crucial and integrated role of transport in the city**, and the way individual forms of transport and regeneration will work together as plans are realised.

There are concerns, for example, that existing plans have not taken into account the likelihood of greatly increased traffic density and parking difficulties caused by new residential and commercial buildings and new attractions. Many of our surveyed residents pointed out existing congestion concerns regarding Stewart Avenue (near to the proposed Wickham Interchange), and Hunter Street, which they expect to worsen with the addition of light rail.

The light rail plans were seen to offer some positives, yet many said in its current form it would not be enough to be a genuinely useful curb to traffic congestion. According to residents, **for the light rail to be a worthwhile undertaking it needed to offer transportation beyond Hunter Street to surrounding areas and suburbs.** They suggested that having to take the light rail along Hunter Street and then find alternative transport to go to other parts of inner Newcastle will mean many residents will simply elect to drive their cars into the city instead. It is worth noting that buses are not favoured or well-patronised as a means of transport in these areas.

In addition to these concerns, we found some **significant anxiety over the potential disruption to regional connections**, including the greater Newcastle area to southern and western Lake Macquarie, Maitland and Cessnock. Although regeneration plans are focused on inner Newcastle, these connections are vitally important, as a majority of Novocastrians live outside of inner Newcastle and travel in for work, study and most of all, recreation.

Residents would like to see **greater provision for active transport**, such as cycling and walking, allowing people multiple ways of moving around the city. Connected cycleways and accessible walking pathways throughout the city have been repeatedly identified by residents as being important to enhancing Newcastle's liveability. Importantly, they wish to see these elements

included as part of a broader and integrated transport plan for the city that informs and indeed is directly incorporated into any revitalisation plans.

Consultation and Public Information

Much has been said about the perceived inadequacy of community consultation measures in Newcastle to date such that it may come as no surprise that many of our interviewees expressed **misgivings about consultation processes**. Yet we found two particular aspects of consultation about which residents are concerned.

Firstly, that residents feel they tend to be consulted only on individual matters, such as the light rail route or plans for the rail corridor, without their ideas and experiences being sought on how the multiple elements of regeneration might fit together. **Residents want to be consulted about the broader vision for their city, and not just the individual pieces.**

Secondly, they also want to be **involved beyond the visioning stage**. The people we spoke with were often concerned that they had not been consulted about the details of planned projects and thus were only able to offer generalised responses to images and suggestions. As we have found over almost three years of research, the details of plans and projects are extremely important to Newcastle residents, as it is these which will impact them directly in their everyday lives. Knowing, for example, if the light rail carriages will fit strollers and surfboards, and what bus connections will be available at changeover points determines whether or not the service will be useable by the people who live here. Thus residents felt strongly that only being **consulted on general visions meant consultation processes represented an unsatisfying and superficial engagement**.

Very much in concert with these concerns, we found people were feeling frustrated with the manner in which decisions and proposals were announced. It was felt that information was shared with the public in the manner of 'drip feeding' which made it difficult for residents to gain an overall picture. Arguably this approach to informing and engaging the public directly contributes to **prevailing feelings of distrust and disappointment with the process of regeneration in Newcastle**.

Planning Processes

The lack of trust that many residents feel has been exacerbated by the 2014 ICAC investigation and subsequent Upper House parliamentary inquiry. This lack of trust flourished particularly in response to the changes made to the 2012 Newcastle Urban Renewal Strategy (NURS), itself the product of lengthy consultation and community engagement. Of greatest concern are the spot rezonings allowing larger height limits in the East and West Ends on particular sites. We found that for residents, this is both a case of inequity and a cause for doubt, raising **questions about the fairness and transparency of planning processes**, and whether or not regeneration plans are actually in Newcastle's best interests.

Heritage

Our research has revealed the crucial importance of heritage to Novocastrians. This was perhaps most obvious with the community's generally negative response to the proposal to construct towers

in the East End, an area residents know as the historic quarter of the city. However it was also a frequently discussed topic in our interviews. Reflecting on regeneration plans for Newcastle, residents were **frustrated by what they saw as a lack of understanding of the importance of historic landscapes and the heritage of the city.**

Heritage, as our residents understand it, is not confined to individual old buildings or facades. **For them, heritage encompasses the broader historic fabric of the city,** and the knowledge and sense of history which people attach to that landscape. It is also significantly implicated in producing the sense of identity and community that is so valued by Novocastrians.

Regeneration plans which have sought to substantially redevelop an area with new buildings, landscaping and uses, were seen to disregard and even threaten the heritage of the area. This was particularly the case when residents were confronted with glossy images remaking sites that are to them well-known and cherished.

The people of Newcastle love their city. It is a city with a long and richly-textured history and, being a small town that has grown slowly and steadily in relative obscurity, the people here have been able to forge a strong sense of identity and place attachment. Residents thus have very clear views on what the city is and what it should be – indeed, their attachment to Newcastle colours how they see the past and present, and affects how they envision Newcastle’s future. **Heritage is thus a vitally important component of any revitalisation efforts, one which our residents wish to see reflected in plans and consultations.**

Green Space and Sustainability

We have discovered that residents have a range of ideas for open and recreational spaces within the city, but there was great support for green spaces. They **value and enjoy the existing green spaces and were very clear about wanting these to be retained during any regeneration process.** They would also like to see green space expanded within inner Newcastle. Specifically, they are hoping for additional well-designed green spaces that are more than simply a swathe of grass. The residents we interviewed were excited about opportunities for creating **high-quality, appealing and useable open green space within different parts of the city.**

It was also felt by residents that more green space, street trees and community gardens would increase the sustainability of inner Newcastle. In fact, sustainability was identified as an important element of Newcastle’s future, particularly given that the city lies on a low-lying peninsula likely to be affected by sea-level rise. This includes a desire to see the inner city shift away from cars to more sustainable methods of transport. However many residents believed that **sustainability has not been appropriately incorporated into regeneration plans, undermining those plans’ perceived ability to sustain Newcastle into the long-term.**

Indigenous City

It remains to highlight one further aspect of Newcastle which appears to have been overlooked in plans for the city’s future. There has been little to no overt recognition that Newcastle remains Indigenous Country, home to the Awabakal and Worimi peoples who have a living culture and a long-standing connection to these lands. **Regeneration plans which fail to consider and consult on**

this aspect of the city not only ignore an important part of the local community but also implicitly participate in the continued dispossession and marginalisation of Indigenous Australians.

Conclusion

The residents we have spoken with hold diverse views regarding transportation and development, but share **a common concern about the planning and consultation processes of recent years. They have expressed a desire for greater transparency and equity in the planning process.** They also feel they have been consulted on a range of vague and isolated plans without being asked to engage with the broader vision for the city, or provide feedback on the specific details which will determine the usefulness of regeneration plans to the population.

Several aspects of Newcastle which residents feel are of special significance in the life of the city, such as its **heritage, sustainability, and recognition of the local, organic revitalisation currently underway, are seen to be missing from regeneration plans and consultations.** Residents also feel frustrated by and uncertain about the lack of big-picture planning that builds on a cohesive, integrated and innovative vision for the future of the city.

In sum, the time we have spent engaging with residents throughout our project has shown that people in Newcastle sincerely wish for planners and governments to recognise the unique nature of the city, and to demonstrate greater recognition that **residents have experience and knowledge which should inform all revitalisation plans and guide future decisions.**

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