

Cities, Communities and Homes: Is the Urban Future Livable?

1. Paper / Proposal Title:

Clashing Visions – Decentralization meets Centralization

2. Format:

Written paper (3000 words) and verbal presentation

3. Author(s) Name:

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4. University or Company Affiliation:

The University of Sydney

5. Abstract (300 words):

This presentation reports on recent research into the social construction of the urban built environment, which has revealed a fundamental tension between the advice of experts such as transport economists, urban planners and public health advocates, and government action to expand the network of toll-roads leading into Sydney, Australia through a project named 'WestConnex', at a cost of AU\$16.8 billion. Disagreement about urban infrastructure can be viewed as a clash of two visions for the future of the city.

Centralization and decentralization represent two distinct visions of the city. Increased density and centralization of city life is thought to increase the agglomeration of financial and business services which drive wealth creation (Moreno, 2014). Though not an explicit government policy, an increase in radial road networks leading into the city increases urban centralization. Simultaneously, urban design experts argue for decentralization. This research shows that experts agree on design solutions that improve the distribution of livability within a city. Decentralization of the urban fabric through the creation of local employment, education and health service hubs, and provision of a high quality public transport network across the city instead of funneling people into the center, are most urgent to enhance livability and allow localized communities to form, according to experts.

This presentation offers a theoretical lens with which the drivers of centralization and the calls for decentralization can be understood as divergent trajectories in terms of urban form. A clearer understanding of conflict and agreement over urban infrastructure development can be gained by understanding this context as a Bourdieusian 'field' (Bourdieu, 1996), in which expert advice occupies a particular social position in relation to the surrounding economic context. Urban design experts are considered to create and maintain cultural capital, whereas large firms, such as transnational infrastructure conglomerates, create and maintain economic capital. This presentation investigates the social forces which have ensured that construction on 'WestConnex' has begun, despite widespread opposition from experts and residents. It forms a case study of the dominance of economic capital over cultural capital.

References

- BOURDIEU, P. 1996. *The rules of art: genesis and structure of the literary field*, Cambridge, Polity Press.
- MORENO, L. 2014. The urban process under financialised capitalism. *City*, 18, 244-268.

6. Author(s) Biography (200 words each):

Greta Werner is a PhD candidate in the Department of Sociology and Social Policy at The University of Sydney. Her current research examines the social processes that inform urban development including transport and residential infrastructure. Her research has included interviewing senior public servants, politicians, industry experts and planning academics to support her theoretical work. Her theoretical work compares historical materialist theories with Bourdieusian views to critique and extend the theoretical literature in the sociology of urban development.

Werner's interest in these processes is informed by a background in self-organized urban entertainment and sustainable design and architecture. Her experience in music and event production has informed her understanding of the tensions inherent in self-organized community events within capitalist liberal democratic cities and the politics of urban space. This was consolidated through a course in Events and Entertainment design, for which she won a TAFE NSW state medal in 2002. From 2003 to 2008 she established a sustainable kitchen design business. She has advocated for sustainable design practices through work for not for profit organizations supporting students and practitioners interested in sustainability, and has taught sustainable interior design. Her current research builds on this experience by providing sociological explanations for economic and political processes of urbanization.