Building Better Cities, Towns and Communities: What Kind of Research Agenda?

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Overview

• How can we secure a research-informed knowledge base for effective urban management in NZ?

• My purpose is to show why this question is important and what might be included in a NZ urban research agenda.

Photo: James Hutchinson, Source: Transforming Cities
Provocations

• MBIE Draft NSSI 2014-2024
• Key general question: Are NSSI investment priorities and approaches going to be appropriate for NZ in the changing socio-economic/socio-technical/geo-political and planetary conditions likely over the next decade?
• Vitally important to incorporate urban research as a ‘sector of future need’ in the NSSI.
Provocations

• Why? Over 50% of world’s population urbanised and 87% in NZ
• Urban areas are:
  • Sites in which complex social, economic, environmental and technical processes operate
  • Settings through which people, objects, capital, technologies and ideas flow and interact globally
  • Places of urgent national and global policy concern
Provocations

• Some recognition of this in NZ research policy: e.g., resilient cities funding, NSC11: building better homes, towns and cities.

• But is a NSSI dominated by STEM and economic development thinking broad enough to support research aimed at meeting NZ’s desire to build better cities, towns and communities?

• Approaches developed overseas, for example, would seem to suggest not.
What’s happening overseas? Example one

- Research Programme: Liveable Cities (UK) funded by the Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council
- Aim: to develop engineering solutions for achieving UK’s carbon reduction targets tested in three UK cities: Birmingham, Lancaster and Southampton
- Researchers: a national 4-university team of engineers, designers and social scientists
What’s happening overseas? Example one

• Themes
  • City analysis methodology
  • Resources
  • Wellbeing
  • Ecosystem services
  • Energy
  • Economic viability
  • Policy and governance
  • Future visions
• Combination of STEM, social science and humanities methodologies

Photo: Harvey Perkins, Source: Transforming Cities
What’s happening overseas? Example two

• Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) funded by federal, state and territory governments
• 21 year history: 1993: 10 researchers, 2014: 400 researchers
• 10 university/institute partners
• Policy-relevant housing research
• Research conducted across a spectrum of disciplines including the social sciences and STEM
A New Zealand Model: Transforming Cities

• Facilitates connections among researchers within and beyond the University of Auckland with: Research institutions; Private and public sector agencies; Non-governmental organisations; Community-led initiatives

• Promotes collaborative multi- and cross-disciplinary urban research that addresses critical societal needs

Source: University of Auckland photo library
A New Zealand Model: Transforming Cities

- Central meta-level themes in Transforming Cities’ work are urban:
  - Liveability
  - Sustainability
  - Resilience
  - Governance
  - Productivity
  - Integration and efficiency
- Involves researchers from all of the University’s faculties and institutes across the country

Photo: James Hutchinson, Source: Transforming Cities
A New Zealand Model: Transforming Cities

Our close connections with urban policy and practice agencies have given us a good understanding of the elements of research enquiry central to knowledge creation for urban transformation. These are:

- housing
- population
- transport
- climate change
- economic development
- physical and social infrastructure
- natural and built environments
- parks and recreation
- tourism
- arts and culture
- health and well-being
- heritage
- urban/rural boundaries
- the rural hinterland
New Zealand Urban Research

• Seen in this way cities can be thought of as **systems** in which all of these elements interact and are globally connected
• Important therefore to engage in urban research that:
  • incorporates all of these elements and their interactions
  • Recognises that these elements manifest and interact variably **within** cities and **between** cities

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New Zealand Urban Research

• To illustrate this latter point it’s useful to think of the differences and demands for knowledge required in the management of:
  • **Growing cities**: Auckland and Tauranga
  • **Cities in stasis**: Wellington and Dunedin
  • **Regional towns**: Timaru and New Plymouth
  • **Rural service towns** in places of **high amenity**: Queenstown and Taupo

You don’t know what you’ve got ’til it’s gone

• The importance of all these elements of urban research enquiry in interpreting the city have been also been reinforced by the Christchurch reconstruction

• While the national debate focuses mainly on housing, physical infrastructure, economic development and climate change, ‘on the ground’ understanding of the city in Christchurch shows how we need to grasp a much broader range of issues and interactions in the urban sphere

Photo: Harvey Perkins, Source: Transforming Cities
Interacting elements of urban research enquiry

Christchurch as an example:

• housing
• population
• transport
• climate change
• economic development
• physical and social infrastructure
• natural and built environments

• parks and recreation
• tourism
• arts and culture
• health and well-being
• heritage
• urban/rural boundaries
• the rural hinterland
Conclusion: building better cities, towns and communities

• If we want to develop an effective urban research agenda in these terms, we need to:
  • Take a broad social, cultural, economic and environmental approach to urban research
  • Conduct research in a variety of urban settings and at various scales
  • Ensure a methodological balance between STEM, social sciences and humanities oriented questions and approaches

Photo: Brett Taylor, Wellington, New Zealand, Source: Flickr, used under CC-BY-SA 2.0 license
Conclusion: building better cities, towns and communities

- Engage in multi- and cross-disciplinary work
- Focus on the development of a national urban research community – capacity building, end-user engagement, co-learning and effective audio-visual linkages (e.g., SeeVogh)
- Engage with urban research opportunities in support of the Vision Mātauranga policy framework

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Conclusion: building better cities, towns and communities

• Pursue a research agenda that facilitates international collaboration
• Secure funding over the long term

• This returns me to my starting question:
• How can we secure a research-informed knowledge base for effective urban management in NZ?

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