

Urban Transitions in Context: Comparing the Manchester and Cardiff City Regions

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Introduction

Changing political priorities, pressures and economic drivers are experienced, interpreted and acted-upon in different ways across different scales and places. The findings focus upon the manner in which changing UK policies and priorities in a climate of austerity have touched down and being reconstituted in two UK city-regions: Greater Manchester and Cardiff city-region. While at a first reading, the two city-regions seem to follow common rhetoric of sustainability and economic growth, the two different governance settings and different historical developments in the two city regions have generated different responses towards a transition to sustainable retrofit.

Process

The research is based on over seventy in-depth interviews with key stakeholders. The understanding of retrofit responses covers four sets of issues:

1. An analysis of the city-regional governance frameworks within which each of the retrofit responses is constructed.
2. The ways in which these governance frameworks are mediating and interpreting wider sets of global pressures at city-regional scale and which of these – economic, ecological, governing, social justice etc. – pressures are more and less prioritised.
3. The responses – i.e. retrofit visions and strategies - that are being constructed in each of the city-regions, what they look like and set out to achieve.
4. A comparative understanding of retrofit responses.

Novel findings

Greater Manchester: Retrofitting ON and IN

Greater Manchester is a metropolitan county of around 2.6 million people, encompassing 10 local authorities (LAs). Greater Manchester was established in 1974 and operated on the basis of two-tier governing arrangements where the strategic level Greater Manchester County Council shared power with the 10 metropolitan boroughs that constituted it. A process of change meant that with the abolition of the Greater Manchester County Council, many powers were devolved back to the 10 boroughs while others powers – including transport and emergency services – operated at the metropolitan level. In the second half of the 2000s, the designation of Greater Manchester, along with Leeds city-region, as Statutory City-Regional Pilots resulted in the emergence of a new metropolitan governance at a metropolitan scale but one where the embedded capacity to act is limited, where national priorities remain an important shaper of metropolitan priorities.

The financial crisis post-2008 has created the conditions for an era of austerity within which efforts to constitute the capacity to shape retrofitting strategies needs to be understood.

As is the case with many city-regions, Greater Manchester has to achieve significant carbon emissions reductions. It needs to do this in the context of contributing to national emissions reduction targets and also as part of an emerging world of ecological competition between city-regions to have secure access to the ‘cleaner’ energy resources necessary to literally fuel economic activity. In Greater Manchester a framework for doing so has been set out to achieve targets for delivering domestic carbon reductions of 55 per cent on 1990 levels by 2022 as part of a wider targets of 48 per cent carbon emissions reductions by 2020 (Greater Manchester Low Carbon Housing Retrofit Strategy, GM LCRS) The GM LCRS sets out what needs to be done so that the retrofitting of nearly 1.2 million homes contributes to those targets. There are a wide range of retrofit activities in Greater Manchester which we characterise as two emergent pathways for urban retrofit:

- A dominant national/city-regional policy and business led view of the relationship between Greater Manchester and retrofit which is ‘top down’ and can be characterised as retrofitting ON Greater Manchester. The historical politics of Greater Manchester over the last three decades or so can be seen in the ways in which the retrofit agenda is seen as: reducing emissions in relation to Greater Manchester’s carbon reduction emissions targets in a broader national context; as a way of achieving ‘first mover’ economic status and positioning Greater Manchester as leader in an emerging UK retrofit market. In doing so the development of a retrofit agenda is seen as a way to attract private investment to the city-region.
- A range of community and embedded activities within Greater Manchester which is ‘bottom up’ and which can be characterised as retrofitting IN Greater Manchester. By ‘bottom up’ we are talking about initiatives that primarily emerge from and are developed in particular neighbourhoods, organizations or places to meet, or at least try to address, the motivations of groups of local interests and people. They are in some sense motivations that emerge from local contexts and that seek to reconfigure in local contexts. They are embedded in local contexts. Motivations for embedded retrofit and community engagement are manifold. What is clear is that the concept of community cannot be understood in its singularity. Within and across places communities interact and interrelate.

Cardiff: Retrofitting as Alternative to National Strategy

The concept of a Cardiff city-region (also called South East Wales Region or Capital Region) is a nebulous one without the clear geographic boundaries of city-regions like Greater Manchester. The Wales Spatial Plan, as last updated in 2008, defines the South East ‘Capital Region’ as incorporating three distinct areas: the City Coastal Zone, the Connections Corridor and the Heads of the Valleys Plus. For our purposes this conceptual city-region has been extended to include the LAs of Neath Port Talbot and Swansea to the west. This is intended to capture the strong economic connections between the three urban regions along the south coast (Newport, Cardiff and Swansea) which



differ significantly from the neighbouring rural regions of West and Mid Wales. Cardiff city-region is home to 1,831,915 people, 60% of the Wales' population despite spanning only 17% of its area; indeed, the three urban centres of Swansea, Cardiff and Newport account for 24% of the Welsh population. The region continues to suffer pockets of social and economic deprivation, with gross value added (GVA) standing at 80% of the UK average in 2009 and average gross weekly income at 86% of the UK figure in 2011 (Stats Wales, 2011; 2011a).

The historical development of the region coupled with the economic and population growth experienced in the 1800s has had an important role in shaping the built environment (both in terms of infrastructure and the housing stock) in the city region. Mass immigration in South Wales Valleys put several pressures on the housing stock and in order to accommodate its swelling population (Minchinton, 1969) a number of houses were quickly built to low standards. The issue of poor quality housing stock is closely related to the issue of fuel poverty. While retrofit is not framed formally as a policy area within the Welsh Government (WG), retrofit is slowly emerging as a potential delivery mechanism for addressing/ implementing different policy priorities stemming from the sustainable development (SD) agenda. SD in Wales, since the progressive process of devolution in Wales has begun, firmly focuses on improving and sustaining people's quality of life, the wellbeing of people and communities, embedding social justice and equality for all.

Retrofit is an emerging process within the city-region that ranges from planned and responsive maintenance programmes to targeted energy efficiency improvements and major refurbishment programmes (e.g. Arbed). A narrative for retrofit is constituted focussing on area-based solutions that seek to regenerate deprived areas, reduce fuel poverty and establish a demand for greener technologies that will create local jobs. Since the outset of the flagship refurbishment programmes Arbed, it was realised that *'the full potential of energy efficiency schemes can be realised if these schemes are embedded into Wales' broader economic development and regeneration agenda'*. There is a move towards a more *'scaled up approach'* to increase impact and deliver the ambitious targets that the WG and LAs are aiming to achieve. Most of the activities are driven by public funding which targets mainly social housing, excluding the private rented and private housing sector.

Greater Manchester and Cardiff City-Region in Comparison

In setting out retrofit responses in Greater Manchester and Cardiff our aim has been to understand whether these are attempts to transform the city-region and, if so, in what ways? Or whether paradoxically they represent efforts to construct a retrofit governing framework that reproduces the neoliberal myth of governing as a problem that impedes the market? The two cases capture elements of both of these questions. Within Greater Manchester there is an overarching emphasis on the dominant retrofit response to position the city-region as an economic first mover, an attractor of inward investment and a test-bed for national priorities. The response at a Cardiff city-region scale emphasise social justice and fuel poverty elements of retrofit within a longer-term governance framework oriented towards sustainable development. Table 1 provides some elements of comparison between the two case studies.



Conclusion

The research has shown that changing political priorities, pressures and economic drivers are experienced, interpreted and acted-upon in different ways across different city-regions. In some instances cities act as ‘test bed’ and ‘receiver’ of national priorities and programmes that are then implemented in the local context. However, cities can also develop further capacity and capability to envision and enact their own process of change in response of the economic, political, social and ecological transformation processes that shape the particular city- region contexts. Whether these initiatives are taken up at national level and scaled up to challenge the current dominant solutions towards a transition to sustainable retrofit is a matter to be analysed by further research.

Table 1: Comparing Retrofit in Greater Manchester and Cardiff City-Region: Transformation and Market-Making

Understanding retrofit	Greater Manchester	Cardiff city-region
Drivers and pressures	A means to position the city-region externally to attract investments <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘retrofit markets’ 	A means to deliver SD <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • economic, environmental and social benefits
Governance and cultural context	Emergent metropolitan governance: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • top down up and less inclusive • limited capacity to act and shaped by national priority • mainly <i>aspirational</i> Grassroots approach: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a range of communities and embedded activities • tackle issues that are specific to the local context • can be piecemeal and isolated 	Inclusive governance and partnership SD organising principle Governance by government HAs/ RSLs/ LAs /private sector
Social organisation of responses	Ambitious targets and plan to retrofit at scale Driven by businesses and elite politicians: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • hierarchy of responses • dominant technological approach • raise funding from private and public sector ‘Cherry picking’ Little coordination between the two styles of governance	Area-based approach: Focus is on vulnerable communities and households <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • ‘targeting the right area first’ • ‘worst performing stock’ Alignment of interests Establishing links with community groups and existing organisations

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