



Future-proofing our Region for generations to come

## HUNTER RESEARCH FOUNDATION 2015 LECTURE SERIES

Newcastle City Hall, 16 November 2015

### Marcus Westbury

Author, broadcaster, founder of Renew Newcastle

#### *Enacting positive change in the Hunter and beyond*

---

I'm glad that Paul [Broad] threw away his speech because I didn't actually prepare one!  
I'm planning to talk to pictures tonight.

I have a very mixed attitude to change. Often change is presented as something that is beyond our control, as something that you either take or leave. You either change and get with the program, or you get left behind. I have seen and met too many people who got left behind. I've been one of those people who got left behind.

For me, the only thing we can't do is stop change. Change is inevitable, it's going to happen all the time. The question is: who gets to shape it, who gets to steer it, and what does change become? Is change something that's imposed on us from above or is it something we collectively engage in and create by our actions.

This is the second time I've spoken at a Hunter Research Foundation lecture. The last time was back in 2009, when a lot of these pictures of the CBD were all too familiar. I'd taken these 12 months before as I'd walked up and down Hunter Street and King Street – Newcastle East to Newcastle West – and looked in the windows of what I had, at the time, counted as 130 empty buildings and later realised I'd missed at least 20 or 30 of them. You can see that they were boarded up, smashed up, they were empty for various reasons.

One of the things that most scared me back in 2008 was that the reason I was looking in all these windows was that I wanted to start a project, I wanted to start a business, a small bar. There's a 2008 post you can read on my blog that is simply titled, *Does anyone have any empty real estate in Newcastle?* I contacted 13 real estate agents while taking these photos, walking down the street, and no one returned my phone call.

I went away and drew the empty buildings on a map and later made this fancy animated thing. All of those red dots were empty buildings back in 2008. There was a lot of things going on in 2008 including long-term economic decline, the effects of the earthquake, the movement of retail from the CBD out to the suburbs, the growth of the shopping centres in Kotara and Charlestown, the disappearance 50 years ago of the tram network that used to feed everyone into the city, there was a thousand factors at play.

The idea that scared me more than anything was the idea that one of the problems with the city was that the people, like me, that wanted to do things there, couldn't. It seemed like the whole debate in the city was about waiting for a big change – something large and external to come in and make a change. For a long time there all we had was artists' impressions of what the city was going to be. There's been no lack of plans, no lack of visions, no lack of big things that are going to come in and change everything. All of these plans, I think, have strengths and weaknesses – good things and bad things. It's not necessarily the idea that you shouldn't plan for the future, but it is the idea that change is this thing that happens at this grandiose scale, that you wait five years for and that has to come down from on high.

The problem for me wasn't the content of these plans, it was the context. It's the idea that everything that happens in the city is top down, that all the change is, at best, two to five years away. I like to joke that the big start for Newcastle is two to five years away – and always has been! It's always something that's going to happen later. What I found, as I walked down the street waiting for real estate agents to return my phone calls, was that they were all waiting for someone else to do something first before they acted.

The idea behind Renew Newcastle was very simple. It is the idea that rather than think about the big, grand thing that is two to five years away, let's try and think about what we can do today, tomorrow, the next day and the day after that. Rather than think on the scale of \$500 million projects that are going to take five to 10 years, let's think about the \$50 and \$500 projects we can do every day. Waiting for big things to come in from outside hasn't always been a great strategy in this town. It rarely comes and we spend so much time waiting for it that we end up ripping ourselves apart about what that change should be, so it ends up being quite counter-productive.

What we set out to do was to set up a structure that would enable us to do things today, tomorrow, the next day and the day after that. What Renew Newcastle does, and I don't know how many people understand it even to this day, is work with the owners of those empty buildings to borrow them. We lend them to creative and community projects, they

borrow them on a rolling 30-day basis. They have no security but they don't pay any rent. When a better offer comes along, they move out or we find that these ventures often become that better offer, that they sign leases that endure. We manage all the really boring stuff, insurance, compliance, all the DAs, we help shepherd people through the complexities of the process of starting your own experiments and doing your own stuff. We try to identify those things that we can make easy in the city.

Rather than ask, what is the ideal thing that someone can do here 10 years from now, we ask, what is the simple thing that someone can do here tomorrow? Let's go out and do that again, and again, and again – let's just keep building up from that. We've identified everything we don't need permission for and discovered every loophole you can possibly get away with to do things without having to get permits or to engage with Council or with long-term frameworks.

We began working in the Hunter Street Mall. When I saw the Hunter Street Mall in 2008 I remembered back to when I was a kid in the early 80s and my grandmother would dress up to go shopping in the Mall. I remember bitterly resenting my grandmother dressing me up to go shopping in the Mall in the early 80s. By 2008 it looked like this – dozens of empty shops. And there was this guy.

At the beginning of 2009 we signed up our first property partner, which was the GPT Group, and we convinced them to lend us some of the properties that they owned around the Mall. Those properties were the first of what is currently 75 properties and GPT was the first of what I think is now around 15 or 20 separate property owners. They range from multi-national listed companies to 'Mum and Dad' investors and people who bought one shop in Newcastle West as the world's worst investment.

We managed to get the keys to those properties and to go in one by one, fix things up, organise working bees and then put people into them who had their chance to start up their own businesses or community ventures, or whatever that might be. We went shop by shop, block by block, and brought people in to start new projects and new businesses.

Some of these have gone on to be successful, some haven't, but the net effect has been to inject a huge amount of momentum and energy into the city. I won't go through all of these photos but this fit-out was done on \$60 of hard rubbish – everything in that picture they either found by the side of the road or they made it themselves. They couldn't afford paint, so they got the ends of all the white paint tins their friends had and mixed it up in a bucket, it's a new shade of white. You won't see that anywhere and you won't see it in

any manual on how you do urban renewal. This is the result of providing opportunities to all these people who had ideas for businesses and were sitting at home by themselves.

Remember that guy sitting in the empty Mall all by himself in 2008? This is the Mall 12 months later. Things are starting to happen, there was the beginnings of change starting to sweep through the city. In 2010 more and more projects, more and more businesses, more and more community initiatives. I won't go through all these but everything from fashion labels, to photographers, to record labels to graphic designers, are moving into the city, setting up spaces.

The rule for Renew is you need to make what you do, it needs to be original, it needs to be local and it can't be competing with existing businesses. As long as you meet those criteria, we'll lend you a space. You won't have any security until you are in a position to pay rent (or not).

These guys make t-shirts and skateboards, they've now got a full commercial lease in the Mall, so go and buy a Christmas present from them, they're still there. These guys run a co-working space. They've since converted that to a commercial lease and they're incubating 20-30 businesses at a time out of their co-working space, The Roost. I won't go through all these, there's too many of them. That fit-out was done on drawers salvaged from the tip.

This is the David Jones building in the Mall. One of the things we became incredibly conscious of, as that building became vacant, was that it shouldn't be allowed to become another Post Office or another Victoria Theatre. One of these buildings that sat empty for years and years, so that everyone is talking about how they are falling apart. So we came up with the world's cheapest, simplest intervention into that space and built some cheap partitions, which technically aren't fixtures, so that we could subdivide the building and make it available to local artisans, makers and crafts-people. The Emporium has been running in David Jones. I don't know if any of you have visited it, but it has meant that we've gone from having a dead street frontage to having an active street and we've helped to incubate a whole range of local artisans and businesses in that space.

This is the same Mall, the same shops and empty buildings I was showing you earlier. The place has transformed dramatically. What's changed? All of those red dots were empty buildings when Renew Newcastle began. The green dots (this is about 18 months old) are buildings that we've cleaned up, fixed up and re-opened in the last two years.

The city has gone from that to this in just six years. And it has done it by harnessing the sweat, the momentum and the passion and enthusiasm of hundreds and hundreds of Novocastrians to go street by street, building by building, block by block to clean them up, fix them up and re-open them. This graph from the Bureau of Crime Statistics data for commercial property vandalism in Newcastle shows it has been dropping by 25 per cent per year since Renew Newcastle started.

All up we've launched more than 200 projects. There are more than 75 properties in the city that have been cleaned up and re-opened by Renew Newcastle. There's been a 60 to 90 per cent drop in vacancy rates and 500,000 extra tourists come to Newcastle this year compared to 2008. We have been mentioned in so many places, we've been in every in-flight magazine ever. Lonely Planet named Newcastle one of the Top 10 Cities to Visit in the world and cited Renew Newcastle as a key reason why.

Newcastle City Council did their tourist survey last year, or the year before, polling in-bound visitors on what their favourite place to visit in the city was and the Mall came in second behind Nobby's Beach. That's the same Mall that had 20 empty shops and you could shoot a canon down and not hit anyone in 2008. To date, our project hasn't just supported buildings, but there are also more than 60 projects that are ongoing viable businesses in the city and 27 that have signed their own commercial leases.

From there, the model has gone on to be used outside of Newcastle. We've taken it to other places around the country and around the world. The idea that started here has been successfully used in other communities. These photos are from around Australia – this is from Townsville and this from Cooma. That's Ethan, he's the youngest participant we've ever had in the program, he's 13 and designs t-shirts in Cooma. This is from the other end of the demographic spectrum, also in Cooma. These are spaces at Docklands in Melbourne, that's a co-working space in a failed food court, that's an artist-run travel bureau in a failed Starbucks. These are properties from Sydney, these are from Adelaide. This is from a news story from July in Adelaide, talking about the success of Renew Adelaide and how a whole shopping mall has been re-opened.

What's the point of what we are trying to do with Renew? I think some people mistake what the intent of the exercise is. Renew is not about 'pop-ups', I actually hate that term, it gets used a lot but it implies precisely the wrong intention. It is not our intention to do things that come and go. In an ideal world, we're doing things that come and discover a way to stay. We're not about having a grand opening and then disappearing. We run lots of little experiments to see what might work and hope that they linger.

It's not just about improving the appearance of the city, although it has done that. It's not about creating a buzz or a vibe, or bringing hipsters to the city. It's about something far, far more basic. Renew is about lowering the barriers to entry. It's about changing the dynamics so that more people, and a more diverse range of people, can try more things. It's about lowering the cost and complexity of participation so people can try things that might not work.

A healthy city is an environment where everyone can try ideas – where a diverse cross-section of people can try ideas – where the consequences for trying something that doesn't work aren't going to send you bankrupt. If lots of people can try lots of things then out of that process, you discover things that work. It's about encouraging creative risk and allowing people to try stuff.

The basic premise is simple. Back in 2008, you had 150 empty buildings in the city but the people in the city who had the lawyers, the deep pockets, the capital, the resources, the ability to navigate the complexities of Council's processes, or whatever other barriers were in their way, was a really narrow cross-section. Renew tried to widen that curve, so that a much wider range of people can shape the city by trying to do things. I hope that we have been able to do that.

My experience is that great places come from organic experiments. No matter how good the plan is, no matter how grand the vision, no plan ever works fully formed and out of the box. Nothing ever arrives mature and ready to succeed. They come from trial and error. The successful places are the ones that have tried a lot of experiments over a long period of time and discovered dynamics that work and are sustainable.

Newcastle is something that we make by our actions. It is not something that comes down from Council. It is not something that is created by the whims of a few, it's not something that comes out of State Government master plans drawn up on a grid in Sydney. It is created by the people here, doing, creating and shaping things. We discover it by doing it. The more we do, the more we can discover about what can and will endure in this town.

Renew is about creating a framework to roll up our sleeves, get in there and do it. That's what we've been doing and hopefully that's a change that will continue to seed successful projects and inspire and create more action and momentum in the city. Thank you.