

Is Newcastle a ‘Just City’?

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Within urban studies, the vision of the ideal city has many forms – liveable city, green city, sustainable city, or the more contemporary, resilient city. Underlying all concepts is the need for a deeper conversation around the life and livelihoods of urban residents. Contemporary cities represent both the best and the worst of human society – while they are bastions of growth and development, they are also riddled with [social problems](#). The co-existence of the good and bad make cities arenas of inequality; where an uneven distribution of wealth, resources and opportunities exist. Some of the [key issues](#) facing contemporary cities include concerns about ‘equity, inclusion, race, participation, access and ownership, while at the same time addressing the challenges associated with affordability, climate change adaptation and resilience’. Therefore, the principal challenge facing urban planners now is how to develop policies that address these ongoing and impending crises.

One enduring concept to envision the ideal city that endeavours to ameliorate above-mentioned challenges is that of ‘Just City’. A ‘Just City’ has been [defined](#) as a city that prioritises social justice through the production of equitable outcomes for all, shaped by public investment and regulation. The central concepts influencing the design of a just city include

equality, democracy, and diversity. Achieving a just city requires harnessing the transformative power of development to address urban social injustices. The just city has also been [described](#) as one in which ‘*ghettoisation* - the segregation of marginalised people, and *gentrification* - the displacement of poorer people, are mitigated’. A society can be segregated based on ethnicity or economic conditions, and more often than not, these axes intersect, producing multiple deprivations for those marginalised. A segregated society with less mixing of different groups, can lead to polarisation and [social fragmentation](#), which can act as a barrier to fuller socio-economic development.

Newcastle-Upon-Tyne, in the Northeast of England, is an interesting case study for the Just City framework. Often described as a ‘[left behind place](#)’, Newcastle is enlivened by its industrial heritage and haunted by its post-industrial decline. It is a growing city, with 20% of the population aged 15-24, and an increasing proportion of population within the later-life group. It is also a fairly diverse city, with about 13.4% of the population born outside the UK. While the majority of the population identifies as White British, there is a significant presence of non-White ethnicities, particularly Asian. However, it is also a city with high levels of deprivation, with more than 25% of Newcastle’s lower-level output areas in the 10% most deprived category nationally. This leads to [above-average levels](#) of child poverty, low-income families as well incidents of long-term health problem or disability. Austerity measures have drastically reduced public funding, leading to massive cuts in social services. Such budget cuts endanger the ‘[building blocks of democracy](#)’, as citizens are disenchanted with their local governments. Going back to Fainstein’s conceptual framework, it can be said that while Newcastle is diverse, it does not perform well on indices of democracy and equality, and thus cannot be considered to be a Just City.

How do we then make Newcastle just? The first step is to [make injustices visible](#) to politicians, practitioners, and the broader public. The next step is to ‘create housing environments and neighbourhoods that are responsive to the socially and culturally diverse reality of urban economic spaces’. Research has further shown that top-down, technocratic measures often [misunderstand](#) the behaviours and needs of marginalised communities. What is necessary then is to develop strategies that reflect the needs of these communities, attuned to the contextual requirements. As such, participatory and bottom-up methods are preferable to design holistic responses. Along with this, there is a need to strengthen democratic culture, build mutual trust between citizens and the government which ultimately [empower residents](#) of a city. It has been argued that the notion of just city is an ‘[empowering framework](#) for

contemporary urban actors to improve the quality of urban life’, and thus should be placed at forefront of urban reform policy. However, this cannot be achieved without sustained funding from central government, better communication and cooperation among local authorities and empowerment of citizens.

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