

City Economy Rapporteur summary – Pauline McGuirk

The City Economy sessions yielded papers that can usefully be grouped under four main strands. First there were a series of theoretically oriented papers that problematised our understandings of the nature and drivers of urban economic change. Several took generalised theoretical propositions about the conditions and trajectories of urban economies in the context of globalisation and tested them empirically against Australian cities to raise important questions and to demonstrate critical departures. The second strand dealt with aspects of the ‘new economy’ and the multifaceted implications of new patterns in the social organisation of work, new work practices and locational factors that appear to shape and reflect ‘new economy’ processes. The third strand involved a vibrant series of papers that presented fascinating and empirically rich investigations of ‘old chestnut’ issues of the urban economy—labour markets, mobility, housing markets, affordability— but took on the new complexity and spatiality connected to their contemporary manifestations. Finally, the fourth strand focused on the development of tools and techniques to assist urban economy management—spatial modelling and economic risk assessment tools specifically.

I want to highlight two core, overarching issues that arose in various ways through several of the strands and suggest some important research gaps: the question of spatiality and the problem of data. First, to spatiality. As a geographer it seems self-evident to me that questions of spatiality rise to the surface when dealing with contemporary transformations of the urban economy, but this was a concern across the disciplinary and practitioner groups represented in these sessions. The importance of having a spatialised understanding of urban economic processes *at many scales* emerged as a central question time and time again. At the fine scale, attention focused on the cluster, as a means of accommodating innovation, information exchange and face-to-face transactions, and its role in maintaining the entrenched centralisation of urban activity particularly in the advanced financial and business services. Attention was also focussed on significant respatialisations of key economic activities, notably office work. Careful reflection was also given to the spatially uneven impacts and outcomes of macro-economic policies.

Particularly important in our discussions of labour markets was the over-powering evidence that proximity of workers to jobs does not equal accessibility: in labour markets proximity and accessibility are not the same thing. The strong inference here was that we need to wed our analyses of proximity to analysis of access to the infrastructure of social reproduction: to affordable housing, to flexible, reliable public transport and transit arrangements, to childcare and support services.

These discussions suggested, then, two major research gaps. First is the relationship between labour markets and housing markets; their integration and interaction. Second is the complex frameworks of behaviour and decision-making that shape the residential choices of the household and locational choices of firms and corporations. There is a need for much more widespread research to unpack the economic, and the social and cultural factors shaping decision-making and configuring the trade-offs that are made within households with multiple attachments to labour markets and multiple journeys-to-work, as well as multiple other, multi-direction intra-urban movements to be accounted for. These are not easily standardised nor routinised. We need to move towards multi-method quantitative and quality research that can give us deeper insight into these imbrications of labour markets, housing markets and consumption choices. In short this research is needed to give us more robust insights into the increased complexity of what the urban economy is.

Second, then, to data issues. Across the papers we dealt with the issue of a seemingly expanding mismatch between generally available data sets, the geographical scales at which they are available, and emergent data needs. We need data both at finer, unit record scales and at larger scales to capture both the quite localised complexity and the global connections and flows that shape urban economies, a facet plagued by the persistence of ‘state-istics’ unable to account easily for cross-national flows. Specifically, there is an acute absence of available data on information flows and telecommunications flows at a variety of scales.

In particular on the issue of data availability, intense concern was expressed about intended changes to the availability of census data at the CD level. It appears that in future, the ABS intends that CD data will no longer be made available, meaning the loss of spatial continuity across time-series data at that scale. So for those for whom that has been a critical scale, the end of CD level data means a ‘year zero’ of sorts. The implications of this for understanding the fine grain of urban change over time, right at the point when increased urban complexity means that a coarser scale misses the actual patterning of change, are very serious. It is fundamentally important that we communicate more effectively with the ABS on the necessity of maintaining public access to CD level data.

The city economy sessions offered several calls to action regarding data, methodologies, spatiality, theoretical and empirical focus points. It is clear that urban economies are growing increasingly complex in their spatiality, driving forces, and patterning and that we need to develop new empirical and theoretical frameworks to enable our understandings to keep pace with their transformations.