**Misinformed and missing the train**

To a researcher’s eye, the *Revitalising Newcastle* community engagement project conducted by Urban Growth NSW was contradictory from the beginning. The application approved by Council was written 1980s-style by specifying special needs groups, but they weren’t surveyed. Information providers behind tables in the mall knew little about Newcastle and in focus groups, discussion about the train was quickly shut down.

Four surveys, a focus group study and submissions were used and results were published in a single report, March 2016. It was available online and through Council libraries.

Two online surveys sought feedback on options for the rail corridor, improvements to the city outcomes and attitudes to development. One survey was answered by 1,215 individuals and the other by 94 business people. Although these surveys did not claim to be representative, they were used and compared, as if they were.

A third telephone survey claimed it was ‘statistically valid’ and representative of people over 18 in Newcastle and the Lower Hunter because they recruited by random selection. The demand that participants first read a 12 page booklet, however, reduced the sample by half. Younger age groups were recruited face-to-face on Newcastle streets. These 140 are said to be randomly selected but this should be called a ‘convenience sample’ and undermines the claims of representing the population.

Researchers in the telephone survey equated responses to four options with ‘strength of feeling’ about them. In stats-speak, that confuses a category with a scale: a fundamental error. This mistake was applied to graphs in the *Revitalising Newcastle* report where a scientific-looking X Y axis was drawn over the data, with a zero midpoint and minus signs added that twisted the interpretation. In words, this graph would give nonsense results such as, ‘minus 34% of the sample strongly rejected the *Greenway* opportunity’. A group of people don’t add up to a minus number.

Across the 285 submissions, feelings were very strong. Young people, elderly and those with disabilities utterly relied on safe, seamless train travel right into the city from towns west and north. The overlapping options 3 and 4, *Harbour Entertainment City* and *Harbour Play City* will deny that access. Those 285 submissions were ignored.

The fourth survey, designed by Urban Growth NSW, used Council’s *Your Voice* panel. The thirty questions, requiring extensive comments, were completed by 710 people. Their written comments were listed online in 209 pages of appendix but not analysed or quoted.

The style of questioning varied among surveys. The two conducted online used radio buttons to ensure people selected only one answer when asked about the four options. The question style of two other surveys measured support by presenting each ‘opportunity’ separately for the sample group to like or dislike. That style created much larger numbers in support but even so, none of the options were liked by a majority (over 50%).

Infographics largely replace prose in the report. Bar graphs are fabricated by directly comparing answers from surveys with different populations and without the ‘n=’ that tells how many each percentage result was based on. It looks straightforward but it reveals ignorance about how to draw valid inferences from survey data. Results based on separate samples and questions worded differently cannot be directly compared.

The winner is: *Opportunity 4 Harbour Entertainment City.* The report does not say *why*. Details about the thousands of people who participated and the reasons for their preferences seemed to be of no interest to Urban Growth NSW. Usually, identifying different user groups and finding effective ways to support them is a central purpose of community engagement. Instead, *Revitalising Newcastle* gives no accurate, valid, evidence for the stated conclusions.

There is a simple answer to the *why* question that the report did not raise. The slogan, *Harbour Entertainment City* sounds attractive and familiar. We have experienced it. The shared, easy access to harbour and beaches, parties and festivals by travelling in on the train. It describes the amenity we enjoyed and were known for, until sixteen months ago when the CBD lost its railway stations. The community engagement generated far too much ‘feedback’ for decision-makers to hear what people wanted.

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28 June, 2016