



URBAN POLLINATORS

LOOKING UP - FEBRUARY 2011

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

THIS MONTH: SAVING OUR TOWN CENTRES

ARE OUR TOWN CENTRES ON AN IRREVERSIBLE SLIDE?

IS THERE AN ALTERNATIVE TO SHOPPING TO ANCHOR OUR COMMUNITIES?

SEVEN STEPS TOWARDS SOCIAL TOWN CENTRES

WELCOME

Urban Pollinators is a consultancy and practical think tank founded by Julian Dobson, commentator on regeneration, placemaking and community issues. This newsletter is part of a series of regular commentaries on topical subjects. We hope you find it useful and informative - please pass it on to anyone you think will be interested, and please let us have your views.

This month we look at the future of our town centres, and set seven principles that could underpin successful town centres in future.

FROM GHOST TOWN TO HOST TOWN

Last month another city fell victim to the credit crunch as the £300m Summer Row shopping development in Wolverhampton was axed¹. But was it really such bad news? It might just be that Wolverhampton has been saved from one of the last of the dinosaurs.

According to its promoters, Summer Row was going to bring 'world class shopping, leisure and urban living' to Wolverhampton that would 'capture the imagination while retaining the original flavour and characteristic style of Wolverhampton's cultural heritage'². No longer. We have to find different ways to capture the imagination now.

Closing time for the shopping dream

For years British local authorities and business people have equated town centres with shopping. The result was a standard regeneration formula: invest in top brand retail, hotels and restaurants, and a people-friendly public realm, and Bob's your uncle - you have an economic success story, in which an improved urban environment attracts high quality shops, in turn attracting big name employers whose staff have above-average disposable incomes.

In some places this worked, for a while. There was a welcome shift from ever bigger and blander out of town retail parks to city and town centre developments. Centres that were previously dead burst back into life.

It was a false dawn. Away from the major cities with a critical mass of high-income employees and residents, a continued decline is exposing some harsh realities. Planning policies that favoured town centre developments masked three problems: the UK has more retail space than it needs; the nature of retail is changing fundamentally as an increasing proportion of business is done online; and the debt-fuelled rise in personal disposable income has ground to a halt.

1 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jan/26/wolverhampton-shopping-centre-cancelled>

2 <http://www.summer-row.co.uk/index.aspx>

There have been warning signs. Work by the new economics foundation (nef) on Clone Town Britain - and, most recently, its paper on *Re-imagining the High Street*³ - highlighted many of the deeper issues that need to be addressed as the diversity of our town centres gives way to standardised offerings from chain stores whose ownership is increasingly distant from the communities they serve.

But think tanks like nef have tended to be regarded as interesting fringe players, and their warnings have been ignored in favour of discussions among investors and retailers of how to increase footfall and rates of return. The wider cultural and policy debate has focused on shopping local and supporting independent retailers: *The Guardian's* architecture critic, Jonathan Glancey, recently mounted an impassioned plea for the return of specialist shops and customer service to our high streets⁴.

It's hard to make Hay when the sun's not shining

But nostalgia and middle-class spending power won't save our town centres. Places like Hay-on-Wye and Ludlow have bucked the trend with specialisms and a tourist market; major cities can support concentrations of independent retailers in locations such as Borough Market and Brick Lane in London. These are exceptions. In smaller towns and neighbourhood shopping centres, stores are continuing to close.

There are compelling reasons for this, even if they are reasons we don't like. The big supermarkets are convenient, predictable, and responsive to customer demand. They are strong enough to give us what many of the independent shops offer without the hassle: why walk down a rainy street to a deli if you can get similar products at the deli counter in Tesco, along with the rest of your weekly shop? Diversity may be exciting, but if you're short of time and cash, ease of use and cost are likely to outweigh your interest in supporting local and specialist businesses.

Internet trading takes this a step further. Last year there were more than 150,000 e-retailers in the UK, supporting 600,000 jobs. Jonathan Glancey laments the loss of customer service, but what Amazon and other e-retailers do well is to replace the 'expert' advice of the salesperson with the expertise of your peers: you can discuss the merits of particular products with others who have already tried them, and you can find out what others like you have bought or looked at. And many specialist suppliers have done well through the internet without ever having to open an inconvenient town centre shop.

There is every reason to expect the internet to continue to sap custom from our town centres. John Lewis turned over £500m on internet sales for the first time last year⁵; the clothing store Asos grew its UK sales by 23% to £56.3m. These purchases are not coming from customers spending more money; they are coming from people who would otherwise have spent their money in town centres or shopping malls.

Factor in too that transport costs keep rising: with oil hovering around \$100 per barrel and predicted by some to reach \$150 this year, the withdrawal of subsidies from public transport, and increased town centre parking charges as some local councils seek to plug financial holes, going into town to do your shopping will become less and less attractive.

3 <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/reimagining-the-high-street>

4 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/jan/10/high-streets-specialist-shops>

5 <http://bit.ly/hzg4Um>

Where does all this leave traditional town centres? Figures released by the British Council of Shopping Centres last year suggest more than £10bn of shopping centre assets are at risk from a combination of recession and changes in buying habits.

Towards social town centres

The last couple of years have seen an explosion of imaginative attempts to use the empty spaces now multiplying across Britain's high streets. The Meanwhile Space initiative⁶ has found temporary uses for shops as art galleries, information centres and more. Online initiatives such as The Place Station⁷ and www.spareplace.com encourage the public to submit examples of spaces that could be used or shared by community groups or creative projects.

But there is still a general assumption that a recovering economy will remove the need for such temporary solutions as retail confidence returns and shoppers head back to the streets. Don't count on it: a more likely outcome is that town centre retail will continue to decline.

We need to plan for shrinking town centres and a very different range of uses to those that have become familiar. The challenge will not be how we can generate enough other activities to support town centre shopping. Nor will we save our town centres by filling them with grade A office accommodation in the hope that enough workers will buy lunchtime sandwiches to bring our urban spaces to life.

The real challenge will be to turn towns into social centres that support a very wide range of overlapping activities, only some of which are to do with shopping. That means making town centres places for everyone and finding ways to make the various activities they engage in mutually supportive.

Seven pillars of a social town centre

Seven major elements are needed to create the viable town centre of the 21st century. There isn't space in this newsletter to go into detail, and the balance of these elements will vary according to the unique assets and circumstances of each place. But here is a brief checklist that could help turn places in danger of becoming ghost towns into 'host towns' that buzz with activity.

1 *A living town centre.* Town centres need to be promoted as places to live for a wide mix of people. Proliferations of student housing don't create viable communities: we need to encourage solutions such as living over the shop, short-life housing in properties that have become vacant, live-work premises for artists or small business owners, and community land trusts that create affordable town centre accommodation with a range of uses and activities.

⁶ <http://www.meanwhitespace.com/>

⁷ <http://www.theplacestation.org.uk/>

2 *A learning town centre.* In Victorian times town and city centres had Mechanics' Institutes and hosted evening classes for workers. A 21st century equivalent would be to combine formal learning accredited by universities and colleges with spaces for informal learning and exchanges of skills. In the short term, empty town centre spaces could be used as peer learning hubs, face-to-face versions of initiatives like the School of Everything⁸; in the longer term, dedicated spaces could be created for informal and self-organised learning in partnership with educational institutions.

3 *A greener town centre.* Interest in local growing projects is rising as consumers become more aware of the waste associated with global food distribution systems, and climate change is likely to increase the need for local food resources and for the relearning of gardening skills. Town centres can be places where such skills are shared and showcased, with urban allotments, seed swaps, free markets for the sharing of surplus produce, and the transformation of unused public land into vegetable beds, as demonstrated by Incredible Edible Todmorden⁹.

4 *A creative town centre.* The Meanwhile Space projects and similar schemes have shown just how much creativity there is in our communities, and how central locations can help spread the word about artists, musicians, theatre companies and more. Instead of seeing creative activity as a drain on a community's resources - something to be treated as part of a company's corporate social responsibility work, or a burden on the public purse - we should recognise that creative activities will draw people into urban spaces, generating interaction and business opportunities. Many such activities need temporary, flexible space rather than permanent buildings.

5 *A networked town centre.* The key to a successful centre is not the buildings or the retail offer; it is the people. People attract other people. Our central spaces need to bring people together and link up their activities. Festivals and local trade fairs can showcase community and business activities. The exponential growth of online networks and tools, from Facebook to hyperlocal websites, can be harnessed to support and promote face-to-face networks and the spaces needed to allow them to flourish. Reward systems such as WiganPlus¹⁰ can help to make such networks mutually supportive, linking activities such as the use of public transport with discounts in shops or opportunities to try new activities.

6 *Social supply chains.* Town centres that support networking and creativity make good business sense. There is an opportunity to recreate the kind of networks that enabled market towns to succeed in the past - the personal relationships between suppliers, links between producers and consumers that inform business choices and create bonds of mutual support as well as price-based transactions. Experiments such as the Lewes Pound¹¹ are a step in this direction.

7 *Planned fluidity.* Town centres need to be planned for the future, and planning needs to become more flexible. Walkability is key, but it is just as important that people can easily find the things they want to do. They need to be planned for shifting modes of transport, flexible public space, and changes of use that are likely to become more frequent than the planning system currently allows. The government's move towards 'neighbourhood planning' begins to recognise this at a community level; we need an approach for town centres that balances the certainty investors demand with the ability to respond effectively to rapidly changing circumstances.

8 <http://schoolofeverything.com/>

9 <http://www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/home>

10 <http://www.wiganplus.com/>

11 <http://www.thelewespond.org/>

Many of these elements are already in place in some locations; and they are not vastly different from the way people already use successful city centres. The opportunity to be grasped is to make them work in smaller places with fewer resources, and to shift away from a focus on retail alone as the driving force.

This will require imagination and courage from owners, investors and planners who have tended to work to stock formulas. The successful town centres of the future will be created locally and will build on local assets - and that will demand very different ways of working.

** Our experience with the Bradford Regeneration Academy and links with innovators such as the creators of the WiganPlus scheme, Meanwhile Space and more means that we can facilitate workshops and discussions that draw on and apply new thinking in practical ways. If you would like us to work with you on rethinking your town or neighbourhood centre, please get in touch.*

IN OTHER NEWS...

We're delighted with the reaction we received to our first newsletter. These are difficult and challenging times for all of us, but that makes new thinking and forms of collaboration more necessary.

We're seeking to do that in practical ways through our work as well as by sharing ideas through these newsletters and on our website. Recent projects include working with The Mersey Forest to highlight the importance of community woodlands in response to the government's plans to sell Forestry Commission land (you can read our pamphlet setting out the issues [here](#)) and continuing to work with frontline council officers on the Bradford Regeneration Academy.

If we can help you with any of your work, please email julian@urbanpollinators.co.uk or call us on 0114 229 5726 - we look forward to hearing from you.

WHAT DO YOU THINK OF IT SO FAR?

We'd like your feedback. Was this newsletter interesting or useful? Are there topics you'd like us to look at in the future?

Please send your comments to Julian Dobson - email julian@urbanpollinators.co.uk - or find us on Twitter at [@urbanpollinator](https://twitter.com/urbanpollinator).

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