

# 05

## PUBLIC SPACES, PUBLIC PLACES

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## THE HIGH STREET: FROM SHOPPING CENTRE TO SOCIAL CENTRE

Why do we need high streets and town centres? As most commentators have recognised, they serve a social function as well as an economic one. They are not just places for the exchange of goods, but for the exchange of news, gossip, ideas and more, says **Julian Dobson**

The story of recession on the British high street has been one of business failures: Woolworths, Zavvi, Adams, Peacocks. Over the next few years that story will be compounded with a story of retail retreat.

Between now and 2015 more than half the leases on Britain's high street shops and shopping centres will come up for renewal, according to property agents Jones Lang LaSalle. It will provide a convenient reason for retrenchment. JLL say there will be a 'swift and dramatic' polarisation between prime and sub-prime, the destinations of choice such as Bond Street, Bluewater or Birmingham's Bull Ring, and the rest.

The race for riches of the last decade has left the UK with a massive over-supply of retail space as towns sought to compete with out-of-town. Analysis by property experts CBRE shows that, if all the plans for new supermarkets currently in the pipeline are approved, the amount of supermarket trading space in the UK would rise by 50 per cent. More than half the UK's retail floorspace is now out of town. Yet towns still seek to regenerate themselves and establish competitive advantage by focusing on their retail offer.

It is ironic that government has withdrawn from serious investment in placemaking at precisely the time when placemaking skills are most needed: when the chickens of retail expansion have come home to roost and places, especially the town centres which were once the heart of their communities, need radical and intelligent rethinking.

It's not as if we couldn't see it coming. In 1988 John Dawson, professor of retail studies at the University of Stirling, wrote in *The Geographical Journal* of the shift towards out-of-town

shopping that was then only just beginning: '[T]here is a concern that the high street shopping environment to which society has grown accustomed, whether as shoppers, investors, employees or entrepreneurs, is changing and we are not sure whether we will like it ...'. In the same year the National Economic Development Council, in one of its last reports before its abolition, produced a tome entitled *The Future of the High Street*, prompted by concerns that some town centres were already dying.

### A PRESUMPTION IN FAVOUR OF DEVELOPMENT?

Ann Burdus, chair of the Distributive Trades Economic Development Council, acknowledged that 'visiting a gradually deteriorating and derelict high street is not an attractive proposition for most customers', but came down on the side of letting market forces provide their own remedy: 'Being positive is a viewpoint which underpins the conclusions and recommendations of this report.' For example, the report supports the presumption in favour of development and change, whilst accepting a need for some control over major regional shopping centres in off central locations.

Time has not been kind to Ms Burdus's positive thinking. At a moment when a 'presumption in favour' once again underpins planning policy, it is hard to see the major retailers denying themselves the economies of scale that come from ever-larger developments and the leverage that comes from increasing market share. Having made their fortune on Britain's high streets, the big grocery chains have found they no longer need them as they once did.



But the people, arguably, still need the high street – but not necessarily for shopping. The British high street was a phenomenon that grew out of the growth of global trade combined with the need for local distribution, and thrived for the best part of a century and a half. But, today, the second half of that equation no longer holds true. Nearly half of all retail sales growth in the UK between 2003 and 2010 was online; shopping via smartphone is expected to rise from £1.3bn in 2011 to £19.3bn in 2021. The place and the purchase are becoming increasingly disconnected.

So why do we need high streets or town centres? They serve a social function as well as an economic one. They are not just places for the exchange of goods, but for the exchange of news, gossip and ideas.

That concept of the high street as a social space was at the heart of a submission I coordinated to the Mary Portas review of the high street in 2011. Drawing together examples of how people across the UK are already thinking differently about town centre spaces, we argued that we should conceptualise the high street as a ‘21st century agora’, echoing the idea of a public space that is far more than a marketplace.

The ancient Greek agora was a civic place, where democracy was exercised and justice done. It was a place of sport and spectacle. Most of all, it was a place where people congregated. The agora of the 21st century needs to reflect society’s need to gather and exchange just as the Greek agora reflected the needs of its culture.

We argued: ‘High streets and town centres that are fit for



the 21st century need to be multifunctional social centres, not simply competitors for stretched consumers. They must offer irresistible opportunities and experiences that do not exist elsewhere, are rooted in the interests and needs of local people, and will meet the demands of a rapidly changing world.’

How can that happen in high streets like Rochdale’s, where even McDonald’s is pulling out? For some it may be too late. But many, by layering numerous functions into the same town centre space, can restore the uniqueness and vibrancy of their towns.

What it takes is imagination, determination and a strategic overview. The place needs to be seen as a whole, starting from a sober assessment of the challenges it faces.

Organisations like the Empty Shops Network and Meanwhile Space now have several years of experience of putting new and creative uses into empty shops, negotiating temporary leases and brokering arrangements between short-term users and landlords.

Events and artworks in empty property are now commonplace and are bringing new people into town: in Wigan, more than £3,000 of art has been sold from one empty shop unit. Festivals like Sheffield’s Tramlines can bring tens of thousands of people into a town centre who might not otherwise visit. Community activities bring in people who might feel uncomfortable in a place designed solely to lighten visitors’ pockets.

The challenge is to turn site-specific approaches into something coherent, thinking of the whole town centre rather



than the use of individual premises. Neighbourhood planning and the ‘town teams’ recommended by Mary Portas could provide a framework for such a whole-place approach.

A growing number of people want to go into town for experiences other than shopping, or in addition to shopping. As the architect Jan Gehl put it, it’s going into town ‘because you want to go into town’. A recent survey by JWT Intelligence found that 74% of ‘millennials’ – people aged 21 to 34 – would be interested in shopping at a store that offered something extra, like a special event or the opportunity to learn something new.

A social town centre is not an alternative to the existing high street aimed at a particular segment of the market. It is a way of underpinning and expanding what the high street has to offer, mixing a multiplicity of uses that draw from and celebrate the uniqueness of each place. The alternative in many places is not the ‘clone town’ of popular outrage, but a ghost town.

Creating social town centres will not be easy. As the Portas Review argues, it will require management and coordination; but it will also require the courage to think differently.

■ Julian Dobson is a writer, facilitator and speaker on placemaking and communities. He is director of Urban Pollinators Ltd ([www.urbanpollinators.co.uk](http://www.urbanpollinators.co.uk)). The submission to the Portas Review, *The 21st Century Agora: a new and better vision for our town centres*, is available at <http://bit.ly/opLqID>