



URBAN POLLINATORS

LOOKING UP - JULY/AUGUST 2011

COMMENT AND ANALYSIS FROM JULIAN DOBSON

THIS MONTH: THE 21ST CENTURY AGORA

WHY OUR TOWN CENTRES NEED TO WAKE UP TO A DIFFERENT WORLD

FROM CLONE TOWNS TO COLLECTIVE ANIMATION

INFORMATION, MAPPING AND RESPONSIVENESS

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.

This month we've summarised the key points of the collaborative submission Urban Pollinators and eight other organisations have made in response to Mary Portas's review of the UK's high streets. You can also download the full submission at our website.

TOWARDS THE 21ST CENTURY AGORA

Away from the headline-grabbing scandals, something is happening that could have at least as great an impact on our everyday lives. It is happening slowly and relentlessly, and it is changing the look and feel of the places we live in.

It may be the 'to let' signs above your local pub that strike you first. More than 4,000 pubs have closed in the last three years, with the blame variously placed on greedy landlords, taxation, the smoking ban and cheap supermarket alcohol.

While each of these has played a part, the trend is really just another illustration of a combination of economic malaise and social change that is fundamentally altering the faces of the UK's towns, cities and villages. At the end of June another wave of retailers went into administration. Womenswear chain Jane Norman closed 33 stores, with others at risk; Habitat, once the favoured furnishers of middle-class homes, called in the administrators on 24 June; at the other end of the market, discount department store T J Hughes is on the rocks¹.

The impact of these and previous closures has not gone unnoticed. The government has commissioned Mary Portas², TV's 'Mary Queen of Shops', to examine what is going wrong on our high streets and how they can be rescued. Her review is expected to report in the autumn.

The good news is that the review won't just look at how to make over failing shops, but is considering the future of our town centres at a deeper level. To inform and encourage that process Urban Pollinators convened a group of leading thinkers and doers to craft a joint submission to the review.

This article presents the highlights of our joint submission. The organisations working with us were Action for Market Towns, the Empty Shops Network, Incredible Edible Todmorden, Meanwhile Space CIC, MyCard, Research 00:/, Res Publica and Wigan Plus (see endnote for websites).

The aim was to show how our town, city and neighbourhood centres can once again become enjoyable, exciting places to use. They need to be multifunctional social centres, not simply competitors for stretched consumers. They must offer 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.

1 For a fuller list see <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-13977255>

2 See <http://www.bis.gov.uk/news/topstories/2011/May/high-street-review>

A different world

The problems of high streets and town centres are well known.³ But there have been relatively few attempts to think of town centres⁴ in the round, bringing together all the different interests involved.

Over the last 15-20 years we have enjoyed a boom in property values and retail, fuelled by easy credit and rising standards of living. Many towns and cities have enjoyed a revival, drawing on the vision of urbanism set out in the Urban Task Force report of 1999⁵ and underpinned by generous public funding.

That boom has now ended and the last three years have seen stagnation and decline, exposing underlying economic weaknesses as well as problems of disconnection between property owners, public agencies, retailers and – most importantly – the public.

Landlords are struggling to reap the returns they have come to expect; retailers face rising rents and squeezed customer spending; local authorities' ability to invest in the public realm has been curtailed; and there is a glut of retail space. Shoppers, with falling disposable incomes, find the convenience and value of big supermarkets, out of town centres and internet shopping hard to resist.

Future challenges pose an even greater threat, but could also be the opportunity we need. There are three strands to these wider challenges.

Climate change and the challenge of sustainability

Climate change is not obviously a challenge for our high streets. But it will increase the costs associated with town centres and will affect the way people use urban space.

The impact will be felt in transport: as fuel prices rise, there will be pressure to reduce car use and improve public transport, while the public want convenience and ease of access. Centres that are walkable, have good public transport links and facilities for low energy options such as bicycles and electric cars will have an advantage.

The impact will also be felt in prices as rising commodity and energy costs are passed on to consumers. Centres that can source, reuse and recycle local products may be more able to meet customers' needs and build loyal local relationships.

Town centres will need to become less energy intensive and more able to cope with extreme weather. This is likely to require investment in the built environment and in green infrastructure; it may also mean higher insurance premiums and more business lost to events such as storms and flooding.

3 See, for example, this recent article by the BBC's Robert Peston: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-13941964>

4 We use 'town centres' as a generic phrase to cover major town and city shopping areas, traditional market towns, neighbourhood and local centres and high streets. What they have in common is a history of being shopping areas and an experience - or risk - of decline.

5 Urban Task Force (1999). Towards an Urban Renaissance. Download final report from www.urbantaskforce.org/UTF_final_report.pdf

Peak affluence, but rising expectations

After years of rising living standards, many workers' wages are failing to match inflation.⁶ The phenomenon of the 'squeezed middle' may be with us for many years to come.⁷ Government predictions of economic growth have already been found to be optimistic,⁸ and the economy remains highly vulnerable to events elsewhere in the world.

Yet public expectations of an affluent lifestyle remain high. We live in an austerity economy but we do not want austerity experiences. Town centres that thrive in future will be those that give the people who use them great experiences and a sense of belonging but are also seen to be good value. Those that offer a poor customer experience will continue to fail.

The digital age

Smart use of data and information has transformed customers' expectations. Value is more transparent and suppliers like Tesco and Amazon know (and can meet) our preferences. Shoppers will increasingly expect retailers to know and respond to these preferences as a matter of course.

Digital technology and social media can allow anything, from a conference to a music festival to walking the high street, to become a more interactive, social experience. Social media tells us what is going on and who we can experience it with; smart systems tell retailers and service providers what we like and what they can do to engage with our needs and interests. The challenge for previously disconnected stakeholders in town centres is to use social tools to respond together to local needs and aspirations.

Unique places, not clone towns

The problem of 'clone towns' and the need to value, nurture and promote distinctiveness has been long recognised.⁹ But the vision of 'home towns' promoted by the new economics foundation and others remains a long way from the reality we now experience.

At the heart of any response to the challenges facing our town centres must be a recognition of the uniqueness of place and that these unique places are created and shaped by the people who use them. The 'build it and they will come' model of retail development is no longer appropriate or sustainable.

So the message of 'town centres first' that has been part of the planning system in recent years needs to become a message of 'people and place first', bringing together all the players in a particular place. The public

6 Elliott L (2011). 'Economic recovery at risk as households forced to dip into savings'. [online]. The Guardian, 20 June. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/jun/20/economic-growth-consumer-spending?INTCMP=SRCH>

7 Plunkett J (2011). Growth without gain? The faltering living standards of people on low-to-middle incomes. Download from <http://www.resolutionfoundation.org/us/current-work/commission/>

8 Inman P (2011) 'IMF cuts UK economic growth forecast for 2011 to 1.75%'. [online]. The Guardian, 11 April <http://www.guardian.co.uk/business/2011/apr/11/imf-uk-economic-growth-forecast-2011>

9 new economics foundation (2005). Clone Town Britain.

<http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/clone-town-britain>; new economics foundation (2005). Reimagining the High Street: escape from clone town Britain. <http://www.neweconomics.org/publications/reimagining-the-high-street>

should no longer be seen simply as customers but as co-creators of place; public bodies should be curators and carers, not just regulators and enforcers; and landlords should be long-term investors in communities, not just extractors of value.

The 'demolish and start again' approach to failing centres is hugely wasteful and misses opportunities for the creative reuse of existing buildings. Space Makers Agency, for example, has shown how Brixton Village market can be brought back to life without redevelopment.¹⁰ 'Meanwhile' projects and the Empty Shops Network have shown how individual vacant buildings and sites can be reimagined.^{11,12}

Each place has its own issues and complex networks of stakeholders. What works in one place – the Business Improvement District model, for example – will not work in another. But the principles of engagement with people and animation of place through a broad range of uses and events apply generally, and can be adapted to suit local circumstances.

In particular, all partners need to understand how to get the basics right in each locality: ease and cost of access, the state of the public realm, value and convenience, diversity and activity, engagement with civic life. The feel of the whole is the responsibility of all.

Collective animation

Jan Gehl, the Danish architect credited with transforming Copenhagen, recognised that shopping should never be the main reason for going into town. In future, he argues, people will go into town 'because they want to go into town'.

Wanting to go into town is about an experience. It is about sociability and relaxation, creativity and being part of something you cannot get at home or at work. This does not have to be expensive – much of this activity can be cheap and self-organised.¹³

To achieve this each place must be animated. There must be things to do and see, taste and enjoy, learn and discover. This does not happen by itself. Space must be made available for the temporary and impromptu. Traffic and cleaning, community safety and information must be managed so a mix of activities, accessible to all, add to the richness of place.

A town centre manager or local authority may take a lead role but there is no overriding reason why they should have to. It is more important to enable those who emerge as leaders to act as leaders, whether they are residents, chambers of commerce, traders' associations, independent artists, social entrepreneurs or festival organisers. The 'town teams' created in Yorkshire through the former Renaissance Towns initiative are an example of the kind of approach that could be adopted.¹⁴

10 See <http://spacemakers.org.uk/projects/brixton/>

11 http://www.creativeprocess.org.uk/news/empty_shops/

12 <http://www.meanwhitespace.com/>

13 See the presentation JFDI:
http://www.slideshare.net/juliandobson/six-signposts-to-jfdi-urbanism-8244010?from=ss_embed

14 See <http://www.integreatyorkshire.com/partnership-skills-programme.htm>

Local authorities in particular need to see their role as shapers and guardians of place, not just as regulators and enforcers. The planning system needs to support this animation by reinforcing ‘town centres first’ policies, encouraging flexibility around changes of use (especially temporary changes), and supporting what Res Publica calls the ‘right to try’¹⁵ – the right of community organisations to use vacant spaces to test whether they could become community-owned or community-managed assets.

The measure of successful animation is increased footfall and a wider range of activities, not just the proportion of properties occupied. Small-scale, co-created public realm interventions and meanwhile uses for buildings and land show communities that change is possible and that their contributions are integral to it. Rather than resulting from statutory and strategic plans, such ‘early win’ projects should be seen as their precursors.¹⁶

Multifunctional centres – the 21st century agora

The heart of this business of animation is a vision of a town centre as a 21st century agora – not just a marketplace for goods but also for ideas and engagement. Just as the ancient Greek agora was the place where democracy was exercised, so the 21st century agora should be a place that meets the civic needs of today’s and tomorrow’s public: engagement in society, in culture and the arts, in learning, in relaxation and enjoyment of green space, in sport and play, in socialising and debating local futures – and in shopping and trading.

To achieve this, town centres need an ecology of participants who create multiple benefits for local people and visitors. There is far more to this than making the shops more attractive, although this will clearly help. We need to capitalise on the government’s desire to make the planning system more flexible by encouraging the widest possible range of activities, especially those that involve people with limited disposable income. A lot of people spending a little will do more for town centres than becoming the preserve of a few with money to spare.

The Empty Shops Network and Meanwhile Space can cite many examples of what has been achieved through ‘just do it’ approaches and open source methods. Incredible Edible Todmorden has shown how the most unlikely approaches – growing vegetables in public spaces – can change the look, feel and reputation of a town. These approaches create a sense of belonging and attract people into centres, which is good for trade, whether you’re an independent retailer or a chain store manager.

The physical environment should foster opportunities for civic entrepreneurs and start-up ventures. These include a mix of buildings with different-size floor plans; the presence of low-rent premises and spaces for informal meetings; a mix of use classes and of old and new buildings; and adaptability of open spaces. Without such conditions developments become impermeable to change or favour large-scale users to the exclusion of others.

Information, mapping and responsiveness

The idea of a 21st century agora will be wishful thinking without intelligent, responsive use of information. Large corporations are able to collect information not only about purchases but about preferences, and respond

15 Schoenborn, A. (2011). The Right to Retail, Res Publica, download via <http://www.respublica.org.uk/articles/right-retail>

16 See Compendium for the Civic Economy - 00:/ [zero zero]: <http://civiceconomy.net/>

accordingly with offers and suggestions. Sharing such information between a multitude of stakeholders in ways that do not compromise users' privacy is a bigger challenge, but it is one town centres need to meet.

Supermarkets are dynamically responsive operations that use data from customers to drive their business. This removes much of the guesswork from their operations. Town centres need to use such data to align their responsibilities and interests, so transport planning (for example) is linked to health promotion through the provision of green space and walkable routes, and connects with ease of access and service.

This intelligence needs to cover not only the local public – who they are, what they enjoy and how they behave – but also property owners, retailers, public services and others who can or could play a part in creating vibrant centres. Often such intelligence exists only in the head of a town centre manager or secretary of a traders' association: it needs to be mapped and shared as widely as possible in order to create effective networks of mutual support.

Smart use of data can allow schemes to develop that offer deals and rewards not only for shopping but for community involvement and volunteering, using greener forms of transport or supporting independent retailers. Rewards can be tailored to local people's concerns and interests.

By collecting and sharing information, town centre animators can also compare their performance, building on the approach developed through Action for Market Towns' benchmark scheme to create a dynamic learning process where ideas are shared not just within localities but between them. Local loyalty schemes, such as My-Card and WiganPlus, can be an important part of this process.

Our civic roles and responsibilities

The animation of town centres and the information and activity that supports it need to be buttressed by an awareness of the civic responsibilities of all parties. A town centre is a civic space, not a private one, and all have roles to play – including landlords.

There should be an expectation of collaborative working. Action for Market Towns' latest report, *Town Centre Comeback*,¹⁷ gives examples of how this is already happening or could happen. Development and activity should be promoted and measured on its contribution to the wellbeing of local people across a broad range of indicators.

Neighbourhood planning can be used to embed this agenda within town centres (this is already being tried in Chatsworth Road, Hackney¹⁸), ensuring new activities are approved that contribute to local wellbeing. The post office network should be an important part of this mix, maximising its social functions and integrating them into the fabric of town centres.

This is not just about government action, but about enabling and facilitating localism. Central government approaches are often cumbersome, time consuming and unresponsive. The role of government, centrally and locally, is to help citizens discuss and decide what to do in their local patch.

It is also, at root, about collaboration as a more creative and sustainable route to a future for our town centres than beggar-my-neighbour competition. Yes, towns and the businesses within them need to compete on quality, accessibility and affordability. But they can do that better by working together.

¹⁷ Download from <http://towns.org.uk/2011/06/16/town-centre-comeback-report-download/>

¹⁸ See <http://www.chatsworthroade5.co.uk/>

That's one reason why those of us involved in this response to the Mary Portas review are seeking to develop collaborative ways of working, and would welcome input from others who share this vision. Please get in touch if you'd like to work with us.

The response to the Mary Portas review was co-produced by:

Urban Pollinators Ltd (coordinator)

Action for Market Towns

Empty Shops Network

Incredible Edible Todmorden

Meanwhile Space CIC

MyCard

Research 00:/ [zero zero]

Res Publica

Wigan Plus

IN OTHER NEWS...

- Huddersfield has been the scene of one of the more dramatic regeneration projects of recent years, involving the demolition of 600 homes and the remodelling of the Brackenhall estate. How well has it worked, and has a 'community dividend' for new projects compensated for the disruption? We're evaluating the Deighton and Brackenhall Initiative this summer, and we've [set up a blog](#) to record some of the key issues.
- Recent outings include a session with think tank Res Publica at the Chartered Institute of Housing conference in Harrogate, where Julian outlined an approach to people-centred regeneration. Here's [a link to the presentation](#). At the Centre for Local Economic Strategies' summit in July he led a workshop on 'Big Society or big b-loney?', and he also debated big society and community activism at the Centre for Local Policy Studies' summer school.

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

We always welcome your comments and feedback. You can [contact us via our website](#) to have your say, update your details or suggest ideas for future newsletters and articles. You can also view details of recent projects [here](#), or read what people are saying about us [here](#).

And if you'd like us to work with you, help you with writing, research, facilitation or training, or speak at an event you're organising, please [contact us](#) or speak to Julian Dobson on 07545 874556.