

The 21st century agora: a new and better vision for town centres

A collaborative response by leading doers and thinkers to the Mary Portas review, designed to highlight and stimulate new and creative ideas.

For more information contact Julian Dobson on 07545 874556 or email julian@urbanpollinators.co.uk

Co-produced by:

Urban Pollinators Ltd

<http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/> (coordinator)

Action for Market Towns

<http://towns.org.uk/>

Empty Shops Network

<http://emptyshopsnetwork.com>

Incredible Edible Todmorden

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

Meanwhile Space CIC

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

MyCard

<http://towns.org.uk/amt-i/loyalty-cards-shop-local/>

Research 00:/ [zero zero]

<http://www.architecture00.net/>

Res Publica

<http://www.respublica.org.uk/>

Wigan Plus

<http://wiganplus.com/>

About us

This response to the independent review led by Mary Portas brings together organisations at the cutting edge of reimagining town centres and high streets, and highlights how they can once again become enjoyable, exciting places to use. Our views are based on what is already being achieved through imaginative thinking.

We have co-produced this submission to the review to demonstrate the way we all need to work in future. We represent different skills and interests, but we are working together to show how much more can be achieved by collaboration and forging alliances than through narrowly focused lobbying on behalf of particular stakeholders.

In a nutshell

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.

Many shopping areas are facing long term decline as consumers' preferences change, spending is squeezed and competition intensifies. These include some city centres, market towns, local high streets and neighbourhood parades: all face difficulties, especially outside the major destinations and tourist areas. They also share some common challenges.

If we are to put the heart back into our local centres, we cannot do it simply by making shops more competitive or adjusting the planning system in favour of town centres and independent retailers, important as these measures are. We can't just pick away at particular problems or complain about the success of supermarkets. We need to start with the people who use (or could use) these places and the unique assets each place has to offer. Then we have to seize the opportunity to innovate that the current crisis presents.

We need to make sure, too, that we encourage innovation that will last. Below we set out some of the key elements of the context to which town centres will need to adapt: if these are not taken into account now, the review will at best offer sticking plasters rather than solutions.

Summary: key themes and principles

1 A different world

For a host of reasons, the high streets and town centres of the 21st century will not (and cannot) be the same as they have been in the past. These reasons go well beyond retail and will affect us all. They include consumers' preferences, the state of the economy, geographic inequalities, rising costs of energy and commodities, and the need to work, live and enjoy life more sustainably. Such issues are often considered as problems – but they are also opportunities to imagine and create a vibrant, 21st century future for high streets and town centres.

2 Unique places, not clone towns

Our response to the issues summarised above must be grounded in the uniqueness of place and the different people and organisations that make each place what it is, not in formulaic approaches. High streets can be reimagined as start-up zones, health hubs or learning centres – particular approaches should always be in response to local priorities and needs. A core message is that we need a 'place first' approach that is deeply connected to the aspirations, strengths, creativity, energy, needs and drive of local people. From this, principles emerge about the roles and responsibilities of different stakeholders that can be adopted generally and adapted locally as a flexible, responsive framework.

3 Collective animation

Each place needs to be collectively animated (not just planned or managed) in a way that is flexible, responsive to change, open to new ideas that enliven space, and able to seize opportunities. Our centres can become lively, creative, exciting and useful places that reflect the diversity of our communities – but not through retail alone. We must seize the opportunity to experiment and try new activities and be ready to take risks to bring the magic back to town centres.

4 Multifunctional centres – the 21st century agora

At the heart of this place creation and place management is a multifunctional approach to urban space and its use. Local centres are about much more than shopping, although shopping is an important

part of the mix. They are about enjoyment, creativity, learning, socialising, culture, health and wellbeing and democratic engagement – a 21st century agora where people engage in the life of their locality. This multifunctionality can create a strong purpose and sustain new and existing markets, supporting retail trades that complement and enhance the experience of using a town centre or high street. In considering the future of retail, the review will need to think as broadly and imaginatively as possible about everything else that makes up a thriving centre. This includes the relationships between the centre and the surrounding area. Factors such as housing stock, socio-demographics, transport and local culture all play a significant role.

5 Information, mapping and responsiveness

To respond in this way we need to be aware of likely future trends and issues. We need to know and map who the different players are who can make each place distinctive, and broker more effective relationships between them. And we need to be tuned in to the public's needs and wants through intelligent use of information and technology. Local centres need to be able to match and surpass the smart information systems of Tesco or Amazon.

6 Our civic roles and responsibilities

A town centre is a civic space, not a private one, and all have roles to play. At whatever scale we work, all stakeholders need an awareness of their responsibilities and opportunities as civic players. This includes the supermarkets and multiples that are often seen as part of the 'clone town' problem, and the landlords and local authorities who decide how property is used. This is particularly important in areas where large property portfolios are held by banks or other institutions with limited local knowledge and understanding.

7 Making it real

Between us, we have many examples and ideas of how this could be and is being done. By bringing these ideas together we can create the ingredients that will allow local people to rethink their shopping areas as multifunctional, people-friendly places. We have included several case studies with this document (see Part 2), as well examples of the extensive resources and further information available.

Digging deeper - why these themes really matter

1 A different world

The problems of high streets and town centres are well known and there is a wealth of material that describes them.¹ But much of that knowledge is stored within professional silos and relates to particular interest groups. There have been relatively few attempts to think of town centres² in the round, bringing together all the different interests involved; there have been even fewer attempts to think creatively about what town centres should be like in the 21st century.

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 – though by no means all – town and city centres have enjoyed a revival, drawing on the vision of urbanism set out in the Urban Task Force report of 1999³ and underpinned by generous public funding.

That boom has now ended and the last three years have seen stagnation and decline in many town centres, exposing underlying macro-economic weaknesses as well as problems of disconnection between property owners, public agencies, retailers and – most importantly – the public. Retailing continues to decline⁴ and many parts of the UK have now hit ‘peak property’.⁵

¹ See, for example, this recent article by the BBC’s Robert Peston: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-13941964>

² In this submission 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.

³ Urban Task Force (1999). *Towards an Urban Renaissance*. Download final report from www.urbantaskforce.org/UTF_final_report.pdf

⁴ See, for example, the following reports from the British Council of Shopping Centres (<http://www.bpsc.org.uk/index.asp>): *Shopping Centre Asset Pricing Guide 2011*; and *Secondary centres: the impact of the recession on secondary shopping centres*; also *21st Century High Streets – a new vision for our town centres*, available from the British Retail Consortium at http://www.brc.org.uk/brc_policy_master.asp?id=611&spolicy=21ST+CENTURY+HIGH+STREETS

⁵ Dobson, J (2011) *Have we Reached Peak Property?* http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/?page_id=865

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. At the same time shoppers, with falling disposable incomes, find the convenience and value of big supermarkets, out of town centres and internet shopping hard to resist.

All this adds up to a rash of increasingly dysfunctional town centres across the UK. Yet this is just where we are now. Future challenges pose an even greater threat to town centres – but could also provide the opportunity they need.

These wider challenges, which must be at the heart of our thinking about the future of town centres, have three core strands that are closely related to each other:

i. 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. The era of cheap global goods may be drawing to a close. Centres that can source, recycle and 'upcycle' local products may be more able to meet customers' needs and build loyal local relationships.

Finally, the impact of climate change will also be felt in the need to make our town centres less energy intensive and more able to cope with extreme weather events. 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. The town centres that do best in future may be those most able to manage these risks through collective investment.

ii. Peak affluence, but rising expectations

As well as experiencing a period of 'peak property', we may also be witnessing peak affluence for the majority of people in the UK. After years of rising living standards, many workers now find their wages are failing to match inflation.⁶ Part-time, casual and freelance work is increasing - 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 over which we have little influence - natural disasters, oil and commodity price rises, and the risk of other nations defaulting on debt or requiring further bailouts. Any of these events could have ripple effects in the high street, most obviously in rising costs and falling spending.

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. Town centres that offer a poor customer experience will continue to fail - expensive transport and parking, dirty buses, and a poor quality public realm will keep turning people off.

iii. 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. They may be caricatured as faceless or rapacious but, unlike many retailers, they know who we are and what we like. Shoppers will increasingly expect retailers to know and respond to these preferences as a matter of course. An increasing proportion of the big high street brands' business is moving online, or to a combination of online and personal shopping.

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

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>

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.

Online networks can reinforce and create new face-to-face networks, as well as sometimes replacing traditional relationships. This positive potential is particularly evident in the emergence of new forms of peer-to-peer learning. Approximately 23 million adults a year now volunteer, many of whom hold specialised knowledge or memberships in communities of interest. Solid uptake in distance-based institutions such as the Open University and the University of the Third Age, and the growth of online platforms like the School of Everything or ReallyFreeSchool further illustrate a hunger for alternative and self-led learning opportunities. Local online networks (OurGoods, Freecycle, Neighbourhood Goods) also illustrate that people have a growing appetite to connect with others in their area to swap goods, skills and resources.

If capitalised on, online networks could harness and unleash people's skills, energy, creativity and capacity to invest in the re-purposing of local places.

2 Unique places, not clone towns

The problem of 'clone towns' and the need to value, nurture and promote distinctiveness has been long recognised, especially through the work of the new economics foundation and others.⁹ But that vision of 'home towns' remains a long way from the reality we now experience and in some cases has taken a step backwards as clone towns become ghost towns.

We believe that 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

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>

‘people and place first’, bringing together all the players in a particular place. The public should no longer be seen simply as customers but as co-creators of place; public bodies should be curators and carers of place, not just regulators and enforcers; and all landlords should be long-term investors in communities, never just extractors of value.

If this sounds hopelessly idealistic, those who see town centres purely in commercial terms need a reality check. Without the belief and engagement of the public, many town centres will die and retailers, landlords and local authorities alike will see their investment wasted. There are pressing commercial reasons why all these stakeholders should play a part in creating centres that people use, enjoy and want to return to. The best returns on investment are likely to come from maximum collaboration and adaptability: based on unique local partnerships, shopping streets could also function as business creation zones, residential communities, learning hubs and more.

The ‘demolish and start again’ approach to failing centres is hugely wasteful and misses the 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 through a different revitalisation process.¹⁰ ‘Meanwhile’ projects and the Empty Shops Network have shown how individual vacant buildings and sites can be reimagined.^{11, 12}

Unlocking dormant assets requires a wide awareness of what is there already. Collaboratively ‘mapping’ the assets of places (both physical spaces and hidden talents and learning aspirations) is a process that could bring policymakers and service providers together with the wider public, creating platforms for genuine discussion about the shared aspirations for places. Such an approach was at the heart of the Brixton Village project; it has also been used in the Leeds Love It Share It project, initiated by a group of local academics, professionals and community organisers. Such engagements should not be seen as a cost but as means to unlocking latent potential. Central to this process is the growing of people's skills and capabilities.¹³

Each place has its own issues and complex networks of stakeholders. What works in one place – the Business Improvement District model,

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

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

¹² <http://www.meanwhilespace.com/>

¹³ See *Compendium for the Civic Economy* - 00:/ [zero zero]: <http://civiceconomy.net/>

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.

For many stakeholders, this will require a radical change of thinking. Chain store multiples, which operate a centralised system so that their stores look and feel alike wherever you go, need to rethink their approach, engaging with local problems to produce local solutions and respecting both the diversity and the local knowledge of their customers. We know that, given sufficient personal discretion, store managers of large multiples will already engage meaningfully with local issues and opportunities, thus playing a vital local role.¹⁴

Landlords who see property as a predictable investment that follows well-known rules will need to think again, as will local authorities that use planning as a straitjacket rather than a creative tool. All need to be engaged with local people and informed of local conditions.

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. Town centres need to be places to live, work and play – centres meeting the full range of social needs. The feel of the whole is the responsibility of all.

3 Collective animation

Jan Gehl, the Danish architect credited with transforming Copenhagen, recognised that shopping should never be the main reason for going into town. ‘If you asked people twenty years ago why they came into the city, they would have said it was to shop. But if you ask them today, they would say it was because they wanted to go into town,’ he has said.

The public often faces a choice between shopping malls that only let activity happen on their own terms, and high streets where activity is nobody’s responsibility. In between are various forms of town centre management or planning control, exercised with varying degrees of success.

Wanting to go into town, as Jan Gehl points out, is different from wanting or needing to shop. It is about an experience. It is about

¹⁴ Mawson Andrew (2008) *The Social Entrepreneur: making communities work*. London: Atlantic Books.

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.¹⁵

To achieve this each place must be animated. Things need to happen – 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 add to the richness of place and are not considered a disruption and inconvenience. This may not be as costly as it sounds – often it is mostly about literally ‘opening up’ to local ideas and energies.

Accessibility is also key. On the internet we can have things when we want them; town centres cannot afford to close down at 5pm. Good street lighting, for example, is crucial so people can move easily from shops to cafes to theatres.

This animation is not the responsibility of one organisation or individual. A town centre manager or local authority may take a lead role in promoting such animated experiences 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.

Too often in the past different bodies have been given duties or responsibilities without the expertise or imagination to fulfil them effectively. We suggest that the stakeholders in each centre should between them choose who should manage and coordinate the experience, and funds should be made available from central or local government (possibly via local enterprise partnerships) to support this work. The ‘town teams’ created in Yorkshire through the former Renaissance Towns initiative are an example of the kind of approach that could be adopted.¹⁶

It is important that these local animators work closely with retailers, property owners and local authorities. 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 some of the ‘town centres first’ policies,

¹⁵ See Julian Dobson’s presentation *JFDI*: http://www.slideshare.net/juliandobson/six-signposts-to-jfdi-urbanism-8244010?from=ss_embed

¹⁶ See <http://www.integreatyorkshire.com/partnership-skills-programme.htm>

encouraging flexibility around changes of use (especially temporary changes), and supporting what Res Publica calls the ‘right to try’¹⁷ – the right of community organisations to use vacant spaces to test whether they could become community-owned or community-managed assets.

The role of local animators is to create places that allow experimentation and new ideas to develop, while providing alternative activities to shopping, drinking and eating. These experiments may be temporary uses of vacant shops or buildings, but they could also be long-term additions to the mix of activities in a centre. The measure of successful animation is increased footfall and a wider range of activities, not just the proportion of properties occupied. Because of their long and formalised timescales, existing planning tools such as area action plans or masterplans may do little to enabling the ‘civic economy’ in the short term (although they can play a role in developing favourable conditions for the long term). 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.¹⁸

Meanwhile uses should not be seen as a recession-only phenomenon but as part of a healthy approach to regeneration and a start-up economy: permanently maintaining a diversity of space typologies (in terms of ownership, unit size, rental levels and lease types) is crucial to make sure that local ventures can have access to affordable and flexible space and thus to the wider market at all stages in the economic cycle. Developers and landowners should be incentivised to maintain or create these conditions within both vacant buildings and new development projects.

The review needs to recognise that this animation doesn’t just happen. It requires brokers, enablers, troubleshooters and network builders. It is a highly personal and social process that cannot be achieved simply by producing guidance or a helpful website: it requires people on the ground with the energy, freedom and resources to make things happen.

¹⁷ Schoenborn, A. (2011). The Right to Retail, Res Publica, download via <http://www.respublica.org.uk/articles/right-retail>

¹⁸ See *Compendium for the Civic Economy* - 00:/ [zero zero]: <http://civiceconomy.net/>

4 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.

Why could new schools or other social infrastructure not be housed in vacant high street premises, and thus drive vibrancy? Over the past years, expensive new health, education and early years centres have been built in neighbourhoods across the country – creating vital infrastructures, but often with little regard for or positive effects on local town centres. In a more resource constrained future could high quality accommodation for learning, childcare and health not increasingly be provided by re-using the existing resources of town centre premises?

This demands the involvement of local people as co-creators of places, not just as consumers. Successful town centres are those that meet residents' needs and improve their quality of life. Public wellbeing is the over-arching success criterion. With a little imagination, our high streets could become places where we go to actively engage with other people in our communities; places where shopping is just one small part of a rich mix of activities including working, sharing, exchanging, playing and learning.

At the heart of this different development logic are three principles:

- Trust residents. We are creative, knowledgeable, have extensive networks, can design, plan and take action and are attached to where we live, work and play.¹⁹
- Thinking and doing. Always link strategy to early and sustained action (we have been told that a resident in Great Malvern discovered 40 town development plans had been written over the last 70 years, with no evidence that any made much difference).
- Capture more local spending. Support local entrepreneurs and encourage enterprising behaviours, create 'social supply chains' based on local trust and relationships, and develop local loyalty programmes.

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 (see Part 2). 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.

Town centres must enable conversations – face time with people you know, like, and trust. Supermarkets and online shops cannot offer this. For retailers, customer experience is the competitive differentiator: people will pay more for something they enjoy.

This raises several important messages for retailers and town centre animators:

- Provide a clear and compelling purpose – the fundamentals of quality, price and customer service are a starting point but there is a pressing need to add meaning to the mix because that is where value is added
- Practice good social citizenship – to differentiate effectively, town centres should align their interests with those of the community, and say so
- Invest in culture – people skills are hugely undervalued. The happier people are, the more productive they are
- Make listening an enterprise-wide skill – taking the pulse has never been more important
- Extend and enhance the digital fabric – people are happy to volunteer personal information when they know it provides them

¹⁹ See Tims C and Mean M (2005) *People Make Places*. London: Demos. Download from <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/peoplemakeplacesbook>

- with a better service or experience, and town centres cannot afford not to know their market
- Turn innovation into a continuous process

A range of mechanisms can be applied to enable this to happen. Community ownership and the 'right to try' involves the public in creating town centre spaces and activities. Allowing communities a right to use and manage local assets for an initial time-limited period could be one way to enable this. The rapid expansion in online sharing platforms can make available assets and resources more transparent – building on platforms such as somewhereto (www.somewhereto.com), Livity's initiative to unlock access to spaces for youth²⁰, or the growing number of local neighbourhood websites.

Physical conditions need to 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.

It is urgent also to enhance the capacity of local people and organisations to invest financially. Given the constraints on both public and private finance, alternatives are needed – and available. Local investment vehicles are already being created through, for example, public service pension funds and community share issues;²¹ community bonds and local stock exchanges have been proposed; and crowdfunding can be used to make specific projects happen. The city of Seattle match-funds local initiatives (for example, local people in poor neighbourhoods painted vacant retail storefronts, helping to bring empty shops back into use).²²

The Demos report, *Seen and Heard*,²³ shows how public areas can be made child-friendly, encouraging families through play. The People's Supermarket (www.thepeoplesupermarket.org) demonstrates how public involvement can stretch all the way from initial consultation to active participation in the final product. This 'we will if you will' approach helps to bond people in a relationship of mutual trust and accountability.

²⁰ See resources section

²¹ See, www.communityshares.org.uk

²² <http://www.seattle.gov/neighborhoods/nmf/>

²³ Download from <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/seenandheardreport>

New civic ventures can benefit from shared 'infrastructures'; for example, efficiencies generated through shared supply chains or back-office functions, shared raising of finance, and the structured sharing of know-how. There will be an important role for intermediaries who facilitate this process: whether through physically shared spaces or web-based channels, the challenge is to seed, maintain and grow real communities of practice.

Transport is an important issue. Unlike supermarkets, most town centres cannot offer free parking, which creates a real imbalance in a society addicted to the automobile. There are solutions, however. Shop and drop schemes, for example, can be combined with town centre walkways that make being it a pleasure to be a pedestrian (see case study: Incredible Edible Todmorden). And off-peak car parking spaces are often wasted when they could be given away to customers who spend a specified amount in local shops or are attending events.

5 Information, mapping and responsiveness

The idea of a 21st century agora will be little but wishful thinking without intelligent, responsive use of information. Large corporations are able to collect information not only about purchases but about preferences, and respond accordingly with offers and suggestions. Sharing such information between a multitude of stakeholders in ways that do not compromise users' privacy is obviously a much bigger challenge, but it is one town centres need to meet.

Supermarkets are dynamically responsive operations that use data from customers to drive other parts of the business, like the supply chain, human resources, revenues, customer service, marketing and so on. 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. Everyone needs access to

information about land ownership, responsibilities for transport and parking, planning issues and public safety.

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' market towns benchmark scheme to create a dynamic learning process where ideas are shared not just within a locality but between them.

Local loyalty schemes, such as MyCard and WiganPlus, can be an important part of this process and need to be developed further. Such schemes can be two-way, not only rewarding customers for supporting local shops but also asking them what they want (and what they don't like) and changing what is on offer to serve local people's needs and interests.

WiganPlus is an example of the kind of approach that is needed – a digital infrastructure that learns about the customer, protects their identity, gives them rewards and makes their lives more convenient. This can be twinned with the open source approaches developed by the Empty Shops Network and others to allow the public to become active shapers of place: Spareplace.com is an illustration of an approach driven by the public, not professionals.

Information about land ownership, proportion of independent shops, cultural activities and customers' preference can be used to show people where their money is going and illustrate what creates or destroys the 'local multiplier effect' (the greater local economic impact of spending with independent or local traders who in turn spend within the local economy). Residents should be able to see how much of their money stays in the locality when they spend it in different ways, and this can help to inform their choices.

At national level, government's increasing interest in measuring wellbeing is welcome, particularly if it creates opportunities to question how the local economy is structured, owned and co-produced. Local people must drive the debate about what local wellbeing means, how it relates to the economies of places, and how this affects the way we measure progress.

In the Scottish town of Neilston, for example, such debates led to the collaborative creation of a town charter and the development of new civic ventures. These kinds of processes could be part of the formal planning system but could also take place more informally, through online community platforms and 'open government' web platforms that enable debate about local opportunities, assets, problems and risks. Local government can respond to this activity and information by providing business rate incentives for companies or ventures that meet a triple bottom line of social, commercial and environmental benefit.

6 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 within town centres. Action for Market Towns' latest report, *Town Centre Comeback*,²⁴ 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, not just on economic value. Supermarkets can be part of this process by recognising their wider contribution to the local economy and creating micro-spaces for independent retailers (just as The People's Supermarket hosts an independent florist) and community activities.

Neighbourhood planning can be used to embed this agenda within town centres (this is already being tried in Chatsworth Road, Hackney²⁵), 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; similarly, community ownership and use should be encouraged as a way of enriching the variety of activities and experiences on offer in the town centre.

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

²⁴ Download from <http://towns.org.uk/2011/06/16/town-centre-comeback-report-download/>

²⁵ See <http://www.chatsworthroade5.co.uk/>

government, centrally and locally, is to facilitate groups of citizens discussing and deciding what to do in their local patch.

Localism should embrace town centres as a key economic, social and environmental challenge and asset. That is why, although the 'community rights' proposed in the Decentralisation and Localism Bill do not expressly address town centre issues, organisations like Action for Market Towns (AMT) are keen to ensure they are part of community led planning and solutions. Through the process that it describes as the Localism Ladder, AMT provides resources to guide stakeholders through a process involving capacity building, coordination, financial planning, community led planning and business planning and delivery of solutions (see 'resources', below). Town centres should be a key part of this and town benchmarking, community enterprise, shared good practice and local loyalty schemes are all important factors.

Part 2

Making it real: case studies

Brixton Village

The Spacemakers Agency developed from a series of meetings among artists, first forming the Spacemakers Network to explore new ways of using space, particularly around the idea of a 'third place' between work and home.

A small group of associates from the network formed the separate trading company The Spacemakers Agency, and this became the managing agent for three months for twenty properties at Brixton Village.

Originally called the Granville Arcade, this 1930s covered market is home to around 100 very small units. Although recently listed as part of Brixton Market, the arcade is in poor condition, with most units looking dated, poor quality shop fittings, and the public spaces in a tired state.

On the suggestion of Lambeth Council following a failed attempt to redevelop the market, owners LAP employed the Spacemakers Agency, initially for a total sum of around £14,000, to manage twenty empty units and bring in a range of arts, creative industries, retail and catering users in a three month project. These were offered rent-free for the first three months, with occupiers taking responsibility for any necessary refurbishment, as well as paying rates and utilities.

The additional footfall into Brixton Village helped establish new businesses alongside the existing traders, who are mostly serving distinct ethnic groups with food, fashion or household retail.

In addition, the project relieved the landlord of the burden of business rates on empty properties and ensured the units were partly refurbished, decorated and maintained in the short term.

More information: Empty Shops Network, www.emptyshopsnetwork.com

Chatsworth Road E5

Chatsworth Road Traders & Residents Association is a not-for-profit organisation run entirely by volunteers and committed to promoting Chatsworth Road in Hackney, east London as a vibrant high street, a safe and enjoyable public space, and as the community hub for a large and highly diverse residential area.

The association is producing a Neighbourhood Plan that will help local people manage the make-up of shops on the high street. Through powers outlined in the Localism Bill it intends to create planning policies that will:

- control the amount of street frontage allowed for any single shop, preserving the fine grain of the street and influencing the mix of unit sizes, and in turn the occupiers likely to take up spaces along it
- create a detailed Use-Class Order that can be used to better control the type and mix of shops along the street that are given planning permission
- influence how the upper storeys of retail units are used, to encourage more active uses that will contribute to increasing footfall along the street.

The association is also creating a database of all landlords, rents, tenants and length of leases for every shop along the high street. This information will allow them to help tenants who are an asset to the community to negotiate changes in rents and prevent them being priced out. It will also enable them to facilitate the introduction of new occupiers to the street, and to facilitate the temporarily occupation of vacant shops.

More information: www.chatsowrthroade5.co.uk or www.facebook.com/crtra

Coventry Artspace

Coventry Artspace, acting as arts development team for Coventry City Council and working closely with the council's property team, have brought together a range of partners to manage a number of spaces in City Arcade. This is a covered space made up mainly of small units and sited at the edge of the city centre.

Visual arts projects were first to colonise the space, and these include the gallery space Unit One, the innovative public studio I Love,

Artspace Bursaries project which has used two units, and the curated Castle & Elephant gallery.

As well as increasing footfall, these projects have generated national media coverage, including a Radio 4 magazine feature, and been recognised by specialist journals and magazines.

Performing arts have found a home in City Arcade alongside the visual arts spaces. Theatre Absolute, founded in 1992 and led by writer Chris O'Connell and producer Julia Negus, have now occupied an empty fish and chip restaurant, to use as a small scale 'shop front theatre' based on a model from the USA. The venue opened in December 09 with a rehearsed reading of Theatre Absolute's 'Car'.

'The Bubblechamber' is a project run by Mercurial Arts, primarily a dance company who make extensive use of new media and technology. They are using a large empty shop with a series of very different spaces for workshops, classes, multi-media installations and performances.

Both Theatre Absolute and Mercurial Arts are using their spaces to generate new productions – products which can be sold to a national market – at a far lower cost than if they were to take a traditional route and use rehearsal rooms, theatre space and a full-scale production.

Overall, the mix of projects, and additional short-term use of other units by groups such as the Scouts, has seen additional footfall driven to City Arcade and may have identified a long-term branding and mix of use for the space, creating an adaptable arts centre based in empty shops.

More information: Empty Shops Network,
www.emptyshopsnetwork.com; www.coventry-artspace.co.uk/

Garstang: The world's largest hotpot

Garstang in Lancashire is the world's first Fairtrade Town, which also symbolises the importance of Fair Trade for local farmers. To promote Garstang as a place where people can buy quality local produce a week-long food festival was planned.

The festival needed an event that would put Garstang on the map and attract media attention – hence the idea of cooking the world's largest hotpot, a traditional Lancashire dish. Local traders provided the

cooking pan and utensils. The army agreed to help cook the hotpot alongside trainee chefs from the local college.

The media latched on to the event – Granada Reports, Lancashire Radio, Blackpool Gazette and many smaller publications. The week-long food festival that was to follow was promoted and a local produce market was held on the same day to promote the local producers who had donated all the ingredients to the hotpot. Children from the local school were involved and celebrity chef Loyd Grossman came to taste the hotpot. Local celebrity Fred Talbot also helped on the day and spoke to the media.

Over 700 people came to the event, which made people more aware of what they can buy on their doorstep instead of heading straight to the larger stores. The food festival that followed was a great success with hundreds of people attending farm tours, workshops and factories, learning about where food comes from and how it is grown. This level of awareness would not have been possible without the launch event.

It was confirmed in January that the hotpot set a new world record.

More information: Angela Kershaw (akershawgdp@hotmail.com) Tel: 01995 600551

Hitchin Market

The Localism Bill should, in theory, make it easier for community groups to bid to take over assets and local services.

This could include the management of the local market. Hitchin's market is one of the oldest in England but after several years of decline, local people decided it was time for it to get more investment.

The local town centre partnership, the Hitchin Initiative, stepped in to take on the management of the market. By taking it on they were able to manage it at a lower cost than the council had before them while making improvements to the market's environment.

Hitchin Markets Ltd was formed when the partnership took on management of the market from North Hertfordshire District Council in 2008. It operates on a not-for-profit basis and has three traders on the board to provide feedback.

The market is outdoors with fixed stalls and the partnership has invested any profits in improving those stalls and in other works including better lighting.

Since the takeover the market's footfall and trader base have increased. A weekly car boot sale and monthly farmers' market and craft market have been added to the timetable.

More information: <http://towns.org.uk/2011/06/23/localism-case-study-asset-management-hitchin-market/>

Incredible Edible Todmorden

Todmorden is an example of how a town can be transformed when the powers that be are prepared to work flexibly with the vision of local residents.

This West Yorkshire market town used to look more or less like any other, but the infectious passion of a few residents has started a food revolution that has given it a unique identity and is attracting attention from all over the world.

It all began when two friends decided that planting vegetables and giving them away free was a way of sparking interest in the big issue of food security at a time of climate change and increasing global upheaval.

As more and more vegetables started sprouting mysteriously on sites around the town, so residents caught the vision and now local institutions from the police to an old people's home are involved in growing vegetables. The high school even serves produce in its canteen that the pupils have grown themselves in a commercial sized polytunnel.

Businesses in Todmorden have benefited from a boom in locally produced food, and local people hope to build on that by attracting more people to the town and encouraging them to buy from all the Todmorden shops.

An ambitious green walking route is planned, linking all the main buildings in the town and taking in most of the town centre shops. There will be exhibition gardens, vertical and rooftop planting, glasshouses and public art.

From the start, the Todmorden pioneers were clear that they didn't want money thrown at them - they just wanted people in authority to let them get on with what they wanted to do.

Some council officers caught the vision and became champions of the movement, getting alongside to offer expertise where needed and adopting policies to enable community land to be used for growing. Anyone can now apply for a licence to plant on council land.

Similarly a social landlord, Pennine Housing, has given out free seeds, run cookery demonstrations and even changed its rules so that tenants can keep chickens.

More information: www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk/

Meanwhile Whitechapel

Meanwhile Whitechapel is typical of the impact 'meanwhile' activities can have in an area. For 89 days a building on Whitechapel Road in London's East End was transformed into a cultural and creative venue, hosting everything from Muslim women artists to a project making furniture from recycled pallets.

In total 37 projects used the space, around 200 people visited each day, one person got a job and two new social enterprises started.

Meanwhile Space CIC met with Workspace Group PLC several times before a suitable space was found to pilot a project. Workspace Group already run a programme for start-up companies but Meanwhile Space wanted to explore opening their spaces to a more cultural sector and diversify their key clients.

Because of the high rates on the property Meanwhile Space CIC then approached New Deal of the Mind to sign a charity lease with Workspace Group. Having New Deal of the Mind as an intermediary landlord meant that the space had to meet the charity's objectives, which related to employment issues in the area.

Workspace Group were extremely happy with the interest the project brought to their property and the boost to their profile. Because of its success they found Meanwhile Space their next space, on Exmouth Market in Clerkenwell.

The Pallet Project started by Christian Dillon in Meanwhile Whitechapel has gone on to take multiple orders from cafes in the area and he is now involving three of his friends as assistants.

Lloyds TSB Bank has now signed a 20 year lease with Workspace Group plc and there is one less empty space on Whitechapel Road.

My Card

My Card is the brainchild of Action for Market Towns and offers a different take on the local loyalty card. Residents in a participating area can load their My Card with cash and then use it at Visa terminals to pay for goods purchased at local shops. It can be tailored to a city, a town or even just a neighbourhood and aims to unite communities, recirculate local wealth and create significant income for local regeneration.

Local merchants can not only expect increased sales but will also receive monthly intelligence generated through the transactions that will enable them to target products and services to their customers. As the card uses existing terminals, there are no hidden costs.

The card operates through a local partnership organisation, such as a local authority, town partnership, business improvement district or civic group. This organisation also benefits by accruing income from transaction fees that can be used to further develop sustainable town centre regeneration.

Action for Market Towns plans to pilot the card shortly in four local areas.

More information: <http://towns.org.uk/amt-i/loyalty-cards-shop-local/my-card-smart-local-loyalty-programme/>

The UpMarket, Worthing

Nearly 50 local community groups, voluntary organisations and small charities; a wifi hub; art galleries, fairs and markets; an internet radio station and a wide range of hands-on activities crowded into one empty carpet showroom for six weeks.

The UpMarket was the first time Worthing Borough Council had used its property for a meanwhile project, and the 2,000 square foot void space of a carpet showroom was initially going to be used for a 'Grand

Charity Market' run by the local Lions Club. The UpMarket concept rebranded this, focusing on vintage, retro and collectables displayed with good visual merchandising.

A range of activities were planned and presented, with the whole project turned around in a matter of days. At the centre was the charity market, giving small organisations an easy-to-understand method of meeting the local community. As well as selling secondhand goods, the groups were encouraged to communicate their messages, recruit volunteers and find potential service users.

The temporary event programme included meetings, an art fair, workshops, live music and a Scout group's Christmas Fair. This mix of semi-permanent and changing activity ensured a wide, varied and changing audience. Footfall counts taken internally indicate that The UpMarket had over 12,000 visitors, increasing both footfall and dwell time in a secondary retail area.

The project was established by Worthing Lions Club and the Empty Shops Network, with the Lions negotiating a rates reduction and a reduction in utility bills. The Empty Shops Network used funding from the local regeneration partnership for capital expenditure, including a mobile wifi hub to connect the project to the internet, as well as practical resources such as cleaning equipment, tables and tablecloths, banners and catering equipment.

The two organisations developed a light, adaptable management structure to respond to problems and opportunities as they came up.

More information: Empty Shops Network,
www.emptyshopsnetwork.com

Joined-up thinking in Wales

The value of a joined-up approach to town centre revitalisation is shown by ongoing work between Action for Market Towns, North Wales market and coastal towns and six local authorities.

Over the last year Anglesey, Conwy, Denbighshire, Flintshire, Gwynedd and Wrexham councils have been working together to share thinking on how to revitalise their town centres. One result of this has been a bumper field of entries to the first-ever Market Town Awards for Wales.

The awards finalists exemplify a host of ways of enhancing the town centre experience and increasing footfall. In Colwyn Bay, the Art on the

Fence project led to an artists' group opening a new gallery in an empty shop in the town centre. Down the coast in Prestatyn, the town council took the bold decision to borrow £1m to complete a ten-year project to revamp and re-open the Scala Cinema and Arts Centre in the town centre as a state of the art digital facility.

The Flintshire Town Action Plan Programme works to develop town centre partnerships for seven small towns. These partnerships represent local businesses, voluntary groups and other organisations, county councillors and town councillors. They have grown at varying rates in the different towns and have developed different priorities and focus, but all have continued to meet with the ongoing help and support of the county council.

The action plan programme ensures that neighbouring towns in Flintshire have distinctive and sustainable futures. Certainly a one-size-fits-all approach would not work for towns as different as struggling Flint on the coast and more obviously prosperous Mold inland.

The next stage in the coordinated work across North Wales is for many of the councils and towns to undertake town centre 'benchmarking' to provide a baseline for making comparisons between towns and over time. This involves collecting data such as the number of vacant units, car park occupancy and footfall. Importantly, business people are among the volunteers involved in data collection, which helps to ensure buy-in to the process and commitment to the solutions. By extending its pioneering small town typology to Wales, AMT will also be able to help share experiences and solutions between English and Welsh towns.

More information: <http://towns.org.uk/2011/05/12/action-for-market-towns-awards-2011-flintshire-town-action-plan/>
<http://towns.org.uk/amt-i/town-benchmarking/>

WiganPlus

WiganPlus is a social enterprise that uses digital information and smart technology to engage, inform and reward its local community. It operates as a personalised marketing and communications platform and joins people, business and local authorities in a 'member community', and rewards them for their contribution.

When shoppers sign up for a card, they inform WiganPlus about the kinds of things they like to buy, or the services they like to use. They can then touch their card to one of several 'pluspoints' scattered

around Wigan town centre and receive a print out of personalised offers.

The business model is based on Tesco's Clubcard and rewards members for shopping locally, or for taking part in community activities. Businesses save money by spending less on blanket marketing and people receive personalised rewards that are timely and relevant to them as individuals. WiganPlus is now testing its revenue model so that further UK expansion can be commercially funded.

More information: www.wiganplus.co.uk

Workshop 24

Peel Precinct is a run-down shopping area on the South Kilburn Estate, northwest London, which is undergoing major development over the next 15 years. The public realm is in poor condition, and planters had been abandoned. No 24 was empty for some time, and in poor physical condition.

The Empty Shops Network took it over and created Workshop 24.

In four months Workshop 24 hosted 20 projects, running 84 sessions for 750 visitors, and served 1,000 cups of tea. One of South Kilburn's empty shops was transformed from a damp, cold, tatty space into a creative community hub, finding ideas and firing imaginations.

Workshop 24 hosted and supported a range of projects, improved the Peel Precinct environment with new planting and enhancements to the physical environment, and engaged with a wide spread of the population in different ways.

It has left a legacy of creative people thinking about developing future careers, which fed into South Kilburn Studios as they opened, and has left ideas for future projects including one which may see abandoned allotments brought back to life. Finally, Workshop 24 has demonstrated a possible future for Peel Precinct which could make it again the heart of South Kilburn's community.

More information: Empty Shops Network,
www.emptyshopsnetwork.com

Further examples, ideas and resources

Below is a small selection of the many innovative examples of reusing and rethinking town centres that are already happening, in the UK and beyond.

Baisikeli (cycle hire in Copenhagen and refurbished bikes for Africa): <http://www.cph-bike-rental.dk/>

BGI evaluation report - action to improve town centres in Camborne and Redruth, Cornwall: <https://docs.google.com/leaf?id=0B99dkeodeCHkMmQyYzE2YzUtMGYwOS00MDc1LTlmZmEtZmJhMDFlYjkzYTk1&hl=en>

The Official Guide to Brentford High Street - <http://www.brentfordhighstreet.com/>

To Buy, to Bid, to Build - Res Publica - <http://www.respublica.org.uk/articles/buy-bid-build-community-rights-asset-owning-democracy>

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

Empty Shops Toolkit: the definitive guide to doing it! - <http://www.artistsandmakers.com/images/Empty%20Shops%20Toolkit%20MLA%20Final%201.pdf>

Example Licence to Occupy: lightweight, flexible - <http://www.artistsandmakers.com/images/EmptyShopsNetworkExampleLicence.pdf>

FabLab - inventors' workshops, up and running in Manchester: <http://www.fablabmanchester.org/>

Farm Direct - direct connections between farms and consumers: <http://www.farm-direct.com/AboutUs.aspx>

High Street Malvern - <http://www.highstreetmalvern.org.uk/>

The Hub - flexible workspaces, including micro-spaces for designers to sell their wares: <http://the-hub.net/index.html>

Living over the Shop - Northern Ireland Housing Executive: http://www.nihe.gov.uk/index/hig_home/grants_available/living_over_the_shop_grant.htm

Livity (youth employment and creative communications): <http://livity.co.uk/>

The Localism Ladder - AMT - <http://towns.org.uk/2011/03/24/the-localism-ladder-delivering-community-led-planning-and-solutions/>

Ministry of Found: project for Yell, interviews with pop-up shop experts - <http://ministryoffound.com/>

The People's Supermarket: <http://www.thepeoplesupermarket.org/>

Prosperous Places - Action for Market Towns position statement: <http://towns.org.uk/files/100826-PP-PPS.pdf>

Right to retail - Res Publica - <http://www.respublica.org.uk/articles/right-retail>

Seven steps from ghost town to host town - Urban Pollinators - <http://urbanpollinators.co.uk/?p=415>

Spare Place: community mapping, crowdsourced guide to spaces - <http://www.spareplace.com/index.html>

The U - A Citizens' University: <http://www.youngfoundation.org/our-work/ventures-and-investment/citizens-university/citizens-university>