

The Retail Planning Knowledge Base 2013 Publications Update: Commentary

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Commentary

In 2013 there was unsurprisingly an important focus on the Portas Review and where it might lead.

This work was mainly policy focused and is dominated by official publications and consultancy led reports. Academic work included in the 2013 Knowledge Base update has a European bias.

After the Portas Review

Much of the material in the knowledge base update relates to Portas. The paper by the DCLG entitled 'The Future of high Streets' documents what action has taken place in the light of the Portas Review (5/1). There are the other significant reviews such as the review of towns in Scotland - **National Review of Town Centres: Community and enterprise in Scotland's town centres** (5/4) and the Grimsey review - **The Grimsey review: an alternative future for the high street** (5/7). A range of consultancy groups have tried to apply the thinking of Portas and produced papers along the theme of 're-inventing the high street' - British Council of Shopping Centres (**Beyond Retail: Redefining the shape and purpose of town centres** 7/2), KPMG and Retail Think Tank (**Underperforming High Streets Could be Saved by Ownership** 7/11) and the London Assembly (**The future of London's town centres** 5/14). Additionally there are commentaries on Portas including Findlay and Sparks (5/6) and Coca-Stefaniak and Bagaeen (7/6). Other important papers include one on the lack of success in redirecting activities to town centres under the new National Planning Policy framework - Baldock (7/1). Official publications include the evidence given by a range of stakeholders at the BIS Retail Inquiry (5/9-5/13). During 2013 (and continuing into 2014) the debate over whether changes to use classes could help either to change the high street or reduce vacancies has been growing (Smith (5/18) and DCLG (5/2)). Academic research has covered the Kirkgate market in Leeds (Gonzalez (3/4), pointing out that whilst markets may seem to add vibrancy to town centres, traditional markets are being usurped by more gentrified markets. Similar effects have been found in the area around the Westfield shopping centre (Lee 7/13). These are reminders that changes may produce

unintended consequences, to which we need to be more attuned. Particular issues facing retailers such as the rates burden have been tentatively taken up by retailer groups such as the British Retail Consortium (7/3) and also Social Enterprise UK (7/9). Not surprisingly empty shops remained on the agenda. The London Assembly published a paper entitled '**Open for Business: empty shops on London's high streets**' (5/15) with recommendations such as pop-up shops and raising issues such as betting shops and pay day loan shops. Better management and BIDs have also been addressed (Prentice, 7/14), Coca-Stefaniak and Bageen (7/6) and Donaghy, Findlay and Sparks (7/7).

Would more, less or different planning produce more robust high streets? There are those who consider that, perhaps, town centres first has failed and it is time to give up this approach, recognising that it does not fit with consumer preferences. Morton and Derricks paper '**21st century Retail Policy: Quality, Choice, Experience and Convenience**' sets out social and economic reasons why town centres first should be abandoned (5/16). Although there are flaws in their argument, planning does need to demonstrate that it is making a difference. The Centre for Cities report '**Beyond the High Street**' looked at employment in a selection of cities using official data sources (Swinney and Sivaev,5/19). The concept was to track how city centre employment was changing and how this might link to retail change. Their conclusion is that since employment is moving out of town, retail should move out of town. Extending this research could be insightful and should be better linked to reinforce NPPF thinking on town centres first. The Scottish review of towns differed from the Portas Review in a number of ways but one key aspect was that it was concerned with towns rather than high streets. This was based on the concept that the welfare of a whole town and the way a whole town works will impact on the town centre and high street. This is the opposite of the Centre for Cities report in its thinking.

There is a determination in the UK to see town centres and high streets thrive. Some have vested interests and others see them as key to civic society. New ideas and new ways of thinking about the issues matter.

A European Perspective

Finnish and Austrian work focused on older shoppers and the extent to which their shopping patterns differ from the rest of consumers (Kohijoki and Marjanen (5/4), Marjanen, Engblom and Malmari (6/5), Teller, Gittenberger and Schnedlitz (6/8)). Given the ageing population across Europe this is a pertinent topic. Interestingly, differentials were found to be of less significance than might have been anticipated. A UK Retail Think Tank paper also took up the topic (6/7).

Interest in Europe has also focused on green issues and CO2 emissions. Swedish research has shown that city centre shopping almost always is more energy efficient than out of town shopping (Carling, Hakansson and Tao (7/5) and Carling, Hakansson and Rudholm (2/2)). Optimal retail planning could reduce emissions by 20% for shopping.

Amongst the topics featured in the European literature is thinking not about place making but about how places relate to each other. Following from the Portas Review and Localism, thinking has become place specific (marketing, community engagement) and the wider focus on how places relate to each other has been missing. Examples from Sweden and the Netherlands set out thinking on wider spatial contexts and the opportunities for different types of places. Places need to be made to work without necessarily changing to becoming something different. Spierings study of Marienburg in Nijmegen focuses on re-interpreting city spaces in a more entrepreneurial way (7/16). Also in the Netherlands, modelling remains a key part of retail research (Rasouli and Timmermans

2/6). The very process involved raises new possibilities and understandings. For example work using Albatross models highlighted variations in predictability of shopping activities, as well as drawing attention to the importance of temporal dimensions of thinking about retailing. This is a theme taken up in a study of Newcastle's 'Alive after Five' project (Shaw 7/15). The temporal dimension is one which deserves further consideration in a UK context (Warnaby 7/17).

Resilience was an important focus in European research. The REPLACIS project (Retail Planning for Cities Sustainability) has provided the focus for much of this research (Barata-Salgueiro and Erkip 1/1) which begins to identify key aspects of resilience. It distinguishes resilience from sustainability which is seen as a continuation of the present (Stumpp 1/2). Resilience by contrast is about making places work in new ways and remaining vibrant workable places. One particular challenge is to think how retail planning can be used to facilitate this. This offers a perspective to start from, rather than thinking about tinkering with detail. It is a useful perspective as it starts from a theoretical position and seeks to think of ways to translate this into policy. This is very different from the UK mantra of best practice. Resilience is a theme which has not really been present in UK research. The potential to develop this thinking is enhanced by the European research.

A number of themes were developed in this REPLACIS research. The transition from a utilitarian approach to retailing towards one based on identity and meaning has implications for thinking how planning might be used to change places (Cachinho 8/1). Small shops have traditionally been reactive rather than pro-active, but an understanding of resilience shows that pro-activity builds greater resilience than reactive approaches (Erkip, Kizilgun and Mugan Akinci (8/3). In promoting resilience the importance of recognising the differences in the ways that domestic and global capital work in places should be part of strategic thinking (Erkip, Kizilgun and Mugan Akinci 8/4). The REPLACIS project also looked at how different socio-cultural contexts for planning influenced how planning could or could not be used in different countries, with some countries more open to certain

types of planning than others (Fernandes and Chamusca 8/5). It impacts particularly on the ways that planning is legitimised. This channels planning in ways so that some planning options are not considered. The importance of complementarity between places or types of retail places is stressed as being crucial to resilience.

The exciting thing about this European research in the knowledge base update is that it helps us to ask new questions.

Is there a place for not just evidence based policy making but also theoretically driven policy making in the UK, rather than the best practice approach and incremental tinkering, which is seen in many of the papers in the knowledge base?