
Traditional or experiential places? Exploring research needs and practitioner challenges in the management of town centres beyond the economic crisis

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Abstract This paper outlines some of the key issues affecting town and city centres today, and provides glimpses of new challenges and opportunities for researchers and practitioners in this field. These include the strategic positioning of town centres, managing the evening and night-time economies effectively, the growing role of the experience economy to town centre attractiveness beyond mere retail-led approaches, the potential dichotomy between physical town centres and digital high streets, more human smart cities, as well as the growing role of emerging concepts such as the sharing economy and the circular economy. It is argued that place management practitioners will need to address these trends proactively (rather than reactively) and that further research is required in order to understand the complex interactions of the various parameters managed by place managers to keep town centres vibrant, viable, innovative and resilient to further global economic downturns.

Keywords: *towns, town centre management, city management, Business Improvement Districts, digital high streets, smart cities, evening and night-time economy, events, destination management, experience economy*

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INTRODUCTION

Town and city centres in the UK and much of the western world have suffered considerably from the effects of the global economic downturn initiated in

2008 by the collapse of Lehman Brothers in the USA. Although some would argue that the economy is now — seven years later — in a state of recovery and growth forecasts for leading European economies

may yet be revised upwards (again) in 2015, economic data seem to mask more complex structural issues. In the UK, for instance, the growth witnessed in 2013 and 2014 appears to be accentuating the differences between north and south, fuelled in no small part by escalating property prices in London and the south-east, and leading to what some economists have already warned as unsustainable levels of social inequality,¹ with residents in the south-east now twice as wealthy on average as their counterparts in the north, even if inequality within society remains a contested view, particularly on ideological grounds. Similarly, four out of every five new jobs created in the UK since 2008 have been in London and the south-east, a trend that is likely to have influenced business confidence, job creation² and consumer sentiment in town centres across the ubiquitous north–south divide.

All in all, the effect of the global economic downturn of 2008 on town and city centres in the UK — and much of the western world — has been swift, enduring and a major challenge to accepted wisdom in the management of town centres.³ Not surprisingly, issues such as economic resilience^{4,5} and its reincarnations in the form of future proofing⁶ or even town centre performance^{7,8} have grown in popularity as trending topics of debate among academics, practitioners and policy makers. Yet, although on the surface these may be valid issues for contention, they often fail to address the root of the problem — many town centres appear to be anchored in the past in terms of their service offer and strategic positioning.⁹ The practice of marketing town and city centres as shopping destinations is nothing new^{10,11} but, unfortunately, it is also a phenomenon that in many cases has seen little change since the 1980s.

A growing body of research^{12–14} argues that consumers' expectations today go well beyond the functionality that town centres can provide in terms of their retail offer. Instead, it is the quality of the overall town centre experience that is becoming key to visitor engagement, satisfaction and local resident loyalty.^{15–18} The advent of what was contentedly coined in 1999 as the 'experience economy',¹⁹ has manifested itself since in the growth of the evening and night-time economy, with an estimated worth of £66bn²⁰ and remarkable levels of resilience during the economic downturn, in spite of ongoing challenges related to safety perceptions at night.^{21,22} But none of this success materialised by chance. Professionals in the hospitality sector — largely responsible for the service offer of the evening and night-time economy — have long understood the importance of anticipating consumer trends and offering carefully designed services focusing on the customer experience.^{23–25} Today, this approach is actively recognised,²⁶ supported and exported overseas by Europe's first area-based evening and night-time economy management accreditation system — Purple Flag.²⁷

TOWN CENTRE MANAGEMENT AS A RESPONSE: FROM REACTIVE TO PROACTIVE APPROACHES

The daytime economy of town centres in the UK, which has been traditionally managed by town and city centre managers, would do well to learn from the success of the evening and night-time economy. Although not as widely recognised as other related professions such as urban planning or local economic development, town centre management has existed in the UK for over thirty years.²⁸ This tailored approach to the management of town and city centres has

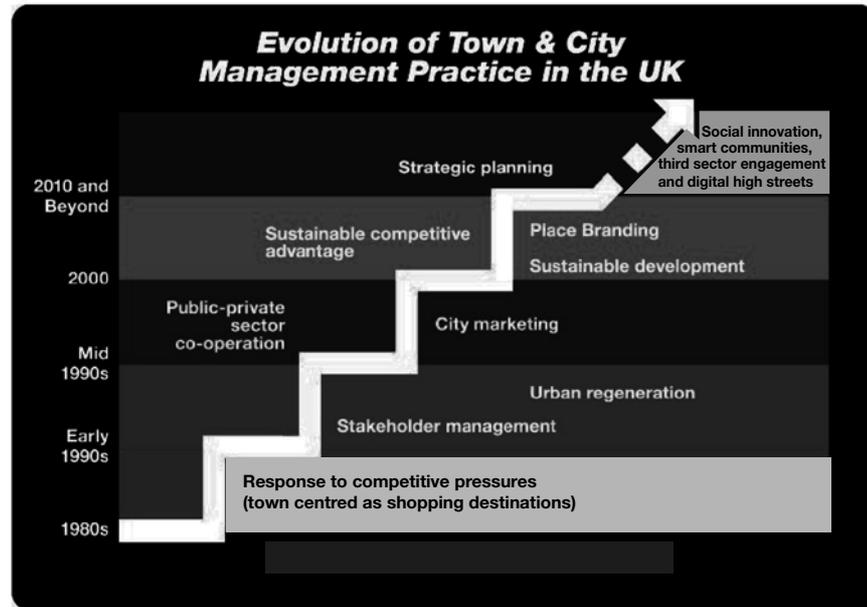


Figure 1: Evolution of town centre management practice in the UK³³

been defined by the Association of Town and City Management as:

‘a co-ordinated pro-active initiative designed to ensure that our town and city centres are desirable and attractive places. In nearly all instances the initiative is a partnership between the public and private sectors and brings together a wide-range of key interests.’²⁹

This definition and partnership-based approach builds on a legacy of practice in the UK influenced by a wide array of disciplines (Figure 1), which include strategic planning, economic development, retail, urban regeneration and sustainability, with clear parallels to other spheres, including urban planning³⁰ and place branding.^{31,32}

It would be impossible to consider town centre management in the UK in isolation from events and developments elsewhere in the world. Recent estimates indicate that there are more than 2,150 formal and informal town centre management schemes across continental Europe, with a further 3,000

private-sector-led Business Improvement Districts (BIDs) operating in North America. In Europe, the foundations of many inceptions of town centre management rest on urban revitalisation (eg Poland), the independent retail sector (eg Spain, Italy, France, Portugal) or place marketing and branding (eg Germany, The Netherlands). Innovative approaches also abound, including the use of established keystones of the visitor economy³⁴ such as tourism to fund town centre management in Austria. In the UK, this type of imaginative visioning is embryonic by comparison and rather limited in scope.

Similarly, in Sweden, the commercial property sector has been a key stakeholder in town centre management for over 20 years.³⁵ Paradoxically, it is only comparatively recently that a debate has gathered momentum in the UK on this front, with specific reference to BIDs as a private-sector-led funding model for place management. This debate, which may have been triggered in part by the fallout of the economic crisis, has been granted

additional impetus by ambitious plans for a major expansion of BIDs across London.³⁶

In spite of the continued institutional support for actively managed town centres in the UK, Germany,³⁷ Italy,³⁸ Spain³⁹ and North America,^{40,41} there remains a major gap in research evidence with regard to the relationship between actively managed town centres and the success of their interventions. Again, innovation on this front comes from overseas, with the southern Spanish region of Andalucía rendering institutional support (and public funding) for town centre management conditional on a comprehensive viability test enshrined in law — a first of its kind in Europe and a useful governance tool for public finances crippled by the economic crisis.

Regardless of how contested the issue of town centre performance continues to be among practitioners and scholars alike,^{42–44} the debate over the ultimate value of town centre management initiatives is set to continue for years to come, given its similarity to long-standing feuds over the true return on investment of marketing initiatives, urban regeneration projects, community events and festivals, or street art, to mention but a few examples from parallel spheres. This gap in understanding of the effectiveness of town centre management as a mechanism to improve the competitiveness and liveability of town centres will remain a key area in urban research and is likely to grow in importance as a priority for policy making and government funding.

TOWN CENTRE COMPETITIVENESS: FROM UNDERSTANDING OF INTERACTIONS TO STRATEGIC POSITIONING

Perhaps one of the reasons for the elusiveness of town centre performance as a clear-cut concept rests in the complexity

of interactions present in these managed urban ecosystems. As understanding of these relationships between parameters improves with time, so will, presumably, the ability to measure the effectiveness of managed interventions, including town centre management, urban regeneration, events or destination marketing. The coarseness of the majority of existing town centre data,⁷ however, is likely to remain a major barrier.

A recent study⁹ commissioned by the Retail Unit of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills suggested a revolutionary fine-grained community-led street by street approach to data collection. The resulting ‘DIY toolkit’ has since been adopted by a number of town centre partnerships across England. Its approach advocates the use of town centre management market intelligence and know-how to reposition town centres strategically based on their local ‘personality’ or DNA using a long-term life cycle approach.

The strategic National Town Centre Performance Framework put forward by this report — a first of its kind in the UK — also represents a firm challenge to the town centre management profession. It advocates a more visionary approach to the management of town centres beyond the janitorial role that many professionals in this field were often associated with by some local authorities before the economic crisis. Similarly, it encourages a 24-hour holistic and service-centred post-crisis view of the city, with retail continuing to play an important though far less dominant role. Similarly, while encouraging town centre partnerships to adopt good practices from successful service-centred third places,^{45,46} the framework’s multifaceted toolkit also serves as an effective safeguard against the turning of town centres into potential theme parks devoted solely to tourists and devoid of all authenticity.⁴⁷

CONCLUDING REMARKS AND FUTURE CHALLENGES FOR THE MANAGEMENT OF TOWN CENTRES

As town centre management practice continues to evolve into the future, it will be imperative for new management and funding models to foster entrepreneurship as well as social innovation. The continued blurring of the boundaries between the physical (town centres) and the virtual (digital high streets⁴⁸) worlds will help on this front, particularly within the framework of the sharing economy.⁴⁹ In spite of this, special care will need to be taken for towns and cities not to develop ‘schizophrenic’ personalities (or confused strategic positioning options) where these two domains overlap.

Similarly, events and festivals in town centres, for which currently 85 per cent of town centre managers are responsible,⁵⁰ will grow in importance as test beds for urban innovation, sustainability,^{51,52} social marketing and entrepreneurship interventions, which can then be rolled out to wider catchment areas. Town centre management in all its forms and inceptions will continue to play a pivotal role here, though it may well be through job descriptions such as ‘community engagement manager’,¹⁵ still unfamiliar to many UK-based town centre partnerships, even when they are commonplace in other European countries.³⁷ Similarly, the development of hybrid forms of town centre management, including integrated (and networked) destination management with a stronger focus on the visitor economy, or online community management with a focus on people’s virtual interactions with their town centres via social media, will continue to develop to address new manifestations of consumer behaviour. The growth of the circular economy⁵³ as a post-crisis reaction — and certainly once energy prices recover to levels closer to their pre-2014 levels — will also challenge more traditional (and

resource-intensive) management approaches. It is not surprising, perhaps, that some thinkers would argue that a key factor of urban resilience rests not only in infrastructure and technology but, crucially, in developing strong relationships with key local stakeholders⁵⁴ — a key feature of town centre management and a critique of current approaches to the development of Smart Cities,⁵⁵ which are likely to become more community focused in the future and less concerned with technology-driven solutions to infrastructure issues.

In 2013, the Grimsey Review⁵⁶ provided one of the most damning assessments to date of the state of the UK’s high streets.⁵⁷ The report called on local authorities to act confidently and proactively to make high streets the centrepiece of their local economic vision. Unfortunately, the report fell short of arguing for town centre management to receive similar levels of attention. Given the number of existing town centre management schemes in the UK and elsewhere in the world, ignoring their (largely under-researched) contribution to the post-crisis survival and future sustainability of town and city centres is a step in the wrong direction. Indeed, the words of J.F. Kennedy appear to be particularly poignant here: ‘We will neglect our cities to our peril, for in neglecting them we neglect the nation.’

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