

Scotland's Towns Summit

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A Provocation on Town Centres and High Streets by Leigh Sparks

Town centres, as we currently see them, and as most people nostalgically romanticise them, are in the main anachronistic irrelevancies unsuited to the changed consumer, business, social and economic world. We do no one any favours by clinging to an outdated vision of a past that arguably never existed, and certainly does not match our modern twenty-first century society.

The world changed half a century ago, yet we have allowed our town centres to become vestigial appendices to modern day life, by clinging to a belief they had some unchanged purpose. The world discovered, and then exercised choice, that shattered the old dependencies and certainties. Consumers (citizens) used choice to explore places, spaces and countries, shop in new locations, get and spend money in new ways, drink and gamble at home, avoid local government power structures, download not borrow books and films, eat restaurant quality food at home and live, work, be schooled and play away from central places. We've decentralised and fragmented everything. The town centre has been blown to pieces.

Town centres were economic and social spaces, but by our approach we privileged the economic only to find economic forces can always figure out where the grass is greener. And this is not only about retailing – it applies to all sectors, public and private. We wanted economically successful town centres, but failed to deliver either economically or socially functioning spaces.

In retailing, we have more retail choice than ever before, but that choice is spread out and organised differently. And no one can envisage a return to the past in economic or behavioural terms, without a full societal shift. What they can envisage however is town centres as interesting places and spaces with people having multiple reasons to visit them, including retailing. And that's the future that Portas sort of identified. Sweep away the bad management, lack of proactivity, antiquated mindsets, dysfunctional property systems and a fear of taking risks or being different. Get people interested and involved and celebrate difference and localness.

Commercial retail investment will go to where it makes most money, which today – and tomorrow - means fewer shops and more multi-channel, with a cascading withdrawal from smaller town centres. For these centres their future has to be local, generating interest and engagement, if sufficient groupings can be opened up and developed. We have to find mechanisms to enable and encourage this.

Town centres are social spaces and we need to reimagine and rediscover the social part of retailing and shopping and not just focus on the economic high street, which has moved off-centre or into private spaces. So all town centres will have to shrink to gain focus for their retail offer – we have too many “so-called” shops. Some high streets and shops may well have to all but die. We need to get people and local retailers back living closer to the town centre and wanting to be part of it. We have to free up the property and other control mechanisms. We have to stop blaming change and continually revisiting our impressions of Canute.

Town centres, and high streets within, have a future, but it is a different one to that remembered from the past and it requires an energetic re-imagining of how we put places and shops together to stimulate, encourage and delight people, and not just to make them buy stuff.

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