trading places
Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks on a newly published collection of ‘perspectives from social science’ on the future of the high street

the high street is dead; long live the high street

Above

‘High streets and town centres are living, breathing entities, and they shape and construct many lives’

When Woolworths collapsed in late 2008 it seemed to mark the end of the ‘high street’. The death-knell had been sounded and, despite the mouth-to-mouth resuscitation suggested by Portas and Grimsey, the last rites were pronounced. This common narrative contains at least three problems: the high street was in trouble before Woolworths failed; the high street has, in fact, in some places proved quite resilient; and in many towns the high street itself is not alone in being in trouble.

The seeds of the decline of the high street were sown a long time ago. For decades we have been (sometimes for good reason) decentralising many previously town centre functions, and not only shopping. Cumulatively, over a long period, that has both drawn people away from many town centres and given them fewer reasons to ever ‘go to town’. The rapid technological change of the late 1990s onwards has played its ever strengthening part in changing both commercial (not just retail) economics and consumer behaviour. We arrived, as many commentators have suggested, at a point where unprecedented change met unprecedented recession.

It is in this space that some would argue (especially academics) that we need the calm, reasoned, evidence-based approach of, yes, academics. And this is where Neil Wrigley and his collaborators have stepped up. In late November 2014, Neil Wrigley
and Erin Brookes published (under the auspices of the ESRC) a focused collection of academic, social science insights and thought leadership pieces. Entitled *Evolving High Streets: Resilience and Reinvestment. Perspectives from Social Science,* this 50-page collection features ten chapters covering planning, secondary centres, convenience culture, night-time economy/experiential behaviour, place management, various varieties of digital places, and data needs. As Mary Portas writes (on page 48 of the publication), ‘I urge anyone with a vested interest in their high street and local community to find a few hours spare and settle down to reading these views.’

Two of the chapters have been written by ourselves (on planning policy and secondary centres – both also the focus of previous columns here). It is invidious therefore to go through the collection chapter by chapter. Instead, we focus initially on the introduction by Neil Wrigley, which sets the scene and also summarises common themes, and then secondly provide our own reflections on the collection.

**The resilient, reinvented high street**

High streets are one of those subjects on which everyone has a view; there are even more opinions than there are economists. High streets provoke strong feelings, are deceptively complex, and are geographically contextualised at a variety of scales. They have succumbed to the effects of online retailing, out-of-town competition, and the resultant change towards a more service-oriented culture.

For Neil Wrigley, variously Mary Portas, Bill Grimsey, the Future High Streets Forum and even various English Ministers have proved to be positive catalysts for change by raising the high street agenda and the temperature of the debate. The solutions that are being proposed, the reactions that are being promoted and the changes under way on the ground all point, for Neil Wrigley, not to the death of the high street, but to a high street that is ‘bouncing forward’ and is adaptively resilient to its stresses. It’s not the old high street we seek and are building (this is not a ‘bounce-back’), but a new modern one; and the evidence is beginning to point to its emergence – at least in some places.

It is in understanding this differential adaptability that Neil Wrigley sees the benefits of a social science perspective on the high street. He points in particular to four main advantages:

- Providing analytical insight into the marked variation in performance of town centres/high streets as they adjust to the shock-wave of economic crisis.
- Providing related insight into whether, and how, drivers of differential performance may vary by scale and by position in the retail centre hierarchy.
- Providing a conceptual framework which helps in making sense of both those complex variations in performance and the longer-term evolving configurations of high streets.
- Contributing theoretically informed, evidence-based insight to the development and implementation of policy.

By reading the collection (Box 1 lists the contents by topic and authors) you can judge if these perspectives have merit or not, singly or collectively.
Reflections and discussion

Our reading of the collection mirrors aspects of Neil Wrigley’s assessment, but also prompts us to reflect on some cross-cutting issues:

- A number of the chapters focus, implicitly and explicitly, on the recession of 2008 as the trigger for change. It is this narrative that has, initially at least, been prevalent in common media and thinking and in turn could lead to a way of thinking that sees the high street returning to its past. This is clearly challenged by much of the work here, as encapsulated in the ‘reinvention’ and ‘bouncing forward’ approach. The (old) high street is dead; long live the (new) high street.

- The collection is about high streets, but, for us, this is surely contestable. High streets do not, and cannot, exist in isolation. Indeed, high streets are components of town centres and places and are best conceptualised as such. Retailers never asked to be the bellwether of the town centre, but they became that as many other uses were moved out or chose to leave. With fewer customers visiting many towns, the high street began to die; but it was not alone, as the wider town centre and sense of place was also dying. We cannot save the high street on its own, but we can save town centres, which in turn will reinvent and re-energise the high street. People make places, and we must regain that linkage.

- We might also begin to think more carefully about whether high streets and town centres are places and/or spaces. We often separate the two and manage them against each other. Great high streets and town centres have both public and private spaces and places to dwell, enjoy and use. Place managers need to develop these inter-relationships of place (shops) and space (street) more carefully.

- As we noted earlier, geography matters; but what geography? And is geography more important than history? The nature of the town and its locality are clearly vital, and perceptions are built up in many ways about the quality of the town and the experience it offers. Some towns and high streets have proved markedly resilient, and we need both to understand why and to manage individual towns better to focus on what matters to users. This nature of place also includes a clear sense of role and position, not only in physical terms but also in digital terms. In the collection, Hart and Laing argue persuasively for a better understanding of ‘moments of truth’ or ‘touch points’, both functional and experiential, and note how users react differently to these – and by extension to different places. This leads on to aspects of the concept of ‘e-resilience’ discussed by Singleton and Dolega, and our own observation on ‘the inescapable irony of a land use planning policy being our core policy tool in an increasingly digital and virtual world’.

- Much is made across the collection about the need for better place management (Coca-Stefaniak and Carroll), understanding of different uses (Roberts, and Wrigley and Lambiri), behaviour across channels (Weltevreden), and different policy impacts and place resilience (Findlay and Sparks). All of these require a stronger and more coherent collection and use of data, and the final chapter (by Page) focuses on the ‘inconvenient truths’ now revealed about high streets and town centres, which could have been understood and addressed at an earlier stage if we had had access to detailed, consistent and comparable public data.

Conclusions

Whether you nostalgically pine for the high streets, town centres and retailing and shopping behaviour of the past or are a committed internet, click and collect/deliver/download etc. shopper, high streets and town centres are fascinating, complex, fluctuating artefacts. But they are living, breathing entities, and we should never forget how they shape and construct many lives. Town centres are more than a collection of businesses or activities; they have meaning for people.

As this collection shows, this meaning is changing, adapting and altering, and thus reinventing an increasingly resilient set of high streets and town centres. Not everywhere is yet seeing the benefits of this, so change has to be further pursued. This collection points to some of the issues in understanding and implementing what this means.

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Note

Town & Country Planning
The Journal of the
Town and Country Planning Association
ISSN 0040-9960 Published monthly
January 2015 • Volume 84 • Number 1


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Printed by RAP Spiderweb Ltd, Clowes Street, Oldham OL9 7LY
Printed with vegetable-based inks on chlorine-free paper from sustainably managed sources.