trading places
Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks suggest that retail planning is becoming increasingly - and inappropriately - marginalised

planning for retailing - on the edge?

As part of our work for the National Retail Planning Forum, each year we collate academic and key trade and other articles on retail planning for a bibliography. In addition to this bibliographic update, we also prepare a commentary on the trends we see in this work. This column reflects on one aspect of this commentary on the 2012 publications and what we think it says about the place of retail planning.

It seems that retail planning, both practice and research, is finding itself in a new, more marginalised place. This is not because it is unimportant, nor is it because there is no useful research, but it does suggest that retail planning has been pushed ‘edge of centre’.

In 2012 the new National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF) came into effect. The struggle to get the ‘town centres first’ policy integrated into the Framework was assisted by the findings of the Portas Review, but the work of many others involved in retail planning was also significant. However, the protectionist town centres first policy sits a little uncomfortably with the pro-development emphasis of the wider NPPF. Articles in Planning magazine already show how discomfort between national policy and local decision-making is emerging as an issue. There is debate over what will happen if a local decision goes against the town centres first policy or if a retailer chooses to question a decision to allow a competitor to gain an out-of-town site when in their view adequate sequential sites were available.

Equally, there have been suggestions that planning is holding back the retail sector and thus lowering productivity. Without getting involved in a critique of this work, we might reaffirm an important principle: it is not the purpose of planning, even in a neoliberal managerial context, to increase productivity, but rather it is the purpose of retail planning to ensure fair and accessible service provision, minimising the costs of so doing while maximising community benefit.

We lose sight of this at our peril. This was, after all, one of the main reasons for the initial emphasis on town centre retailing, and is echoed in the literature on food deserts and the availability of healthy food, particularly in deprived areas. Treading the path between retailing as a (purely) business sector and as a (social) service sector has been and will always be contentious, and indeed may become increasingly so.

The Portas Review did assist in putting town centres back on the agenda in 2012. The Department for Communities and Local Government organised a bidding process for pilot test towns, and nearly 400 towns submitted bids for money. In another competitive bidding process, the Future High Street X-Fund operates as a reward scheme for towns that demonstrate successful improvements. However, is the competitive bidding process in the spirit of planning or really helpful to planning in the future?

Initially 12 towns became Portas pilots, and a second round selected a further 15 towns. The pilot town bidding process involved the submission of a written application and a video. The videos (which can be found on YouTube through the search term ‘video Portas pilot’) are promotional in nature, often beginning with a plea from the mayor or the town crier and with a vox pop style. They constitute a remarkable, fascinating body of visual material on town centres across England.

It is therefore hugely ironic that in 2012 the Department for Communities and Local Government discontinued the collection of town centre statistics. At this critical moment for town centres we are left with a set of promotional videos and a miscellany of local data (some of it good) with little potential for useful comparative benchmarking. While Portas is generating much-needed attention to high streets and has the capacity to mobilise local social capital, most of the projects going forward are neither evidence based nor grounded in the wider research base, and indeed are unlikely to be subject to rigorous research evaluation. We may never know what really works and why.

Planners are concerned with looking at the wider picture, and their assessments are designed to take a broader perspective. This has been usefully emphasised in a number of documents, including the study by Experian and the Association of Town
Centre Management and a Scottish Government paper. The challenges for retail planning from localism are already of concern to retail planners and are also on the agenda of retailers both large and small.

There have been several critiques of the Portas Review in the 2012 literature as being rather superficial. There is a need to get beyond the superficial to get to grips with what is happening in town centres and understand how to make flexible, adaptable, resilient places which work. Portas emphasises the need for locally specific solutions. This should not mean that we have no useful knowledge about how to think about town centres and how to understand retail change.

Powe puts forward the concept of co-location planning to generate multiple reasons for visiting town centres. The work on suburban town centres by Findlay and Sparks focuses on thinking about resilience. Equally, 2012 saw the publication of a special issue of the Journal of Urban & Regional Studies on Business Improvement Districts, highlighting some of the unintended consequences of a Business Improvement District programme where the balance of public/private participation tips in favour of privatisation and lacks democratic accountability. This needs to be part of the thinking about how town teams operate, who they are accountable to, and how they interface with the wider planning environment. Research shows that in times of recession this becomes even more important as there are considerable pressures on public finances and a temptation to offload public services to private providers.

We might also therefore be worried by the Department for Communities and Local Government paper on re-imagining urban spaces, which sees no need to distinguish between public and private spaces in town centres. Privatisation impacts on the ‘public’ nature of town centres but also repositions
‘Retail planners need good data – better than is currently available – and less superficial and populist solutions. But they also need to be more proactive and positive’

While edge-of-centre retailing has been a mixed blessing for centres, being edge of centre or at the edge in the making of the town centres of the future is not a comfortable or appropriate place for retail planning. Retail planners need good data – better than is currently available – and less superficial and populist solutions. But they also need to be more proactive and positive. Planners need to be able to create new visions of town centres, presented in a way that chimes well with contemporary decision-making processes. This means engaging locally, but not just through transient populist competitions.

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Notes
10 A. Branson: ‘£1 m fund launched to reward successful high streets’. Regeneration & Renewal, 30 Aug. 2012. www.planningresource.co.uk/go/home/article/1147742/1m-fund-launched-reward-successful-high-streets
11 See, for example, www.youtube.com/watch?v=z4aPqwPfJf-g; www.youtube.com/watch?v=yKqeYgtkE; and www.youtube.com/watch?v=7iy2DsFoSpE
18 European Urban & Regional Studies, 2012, Vol. 19 (2)
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