Guest editorial

High Street UK 2020

So much commentary surrounding the economic fortunes of town and city centres in the UK in recent years alludes to a "*before*" and "*after*", sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly. The "*before*"? Well, that usually refers to a pre-2008 financial crisis golden age, where town centre retail was in plentiful supply, upward-only rental reviews were commonplace, and the high street was the destination of choice for shoppers. Fast forward to the post-recession era, we entered the age of the "*after*", where squeezed household budgets, reduced credit, fuelled a rise in charity shops, cheaper online alternatives, budget retailers and bargain hunting.

The past decade has been a turbulent one for our towns and cities culminating in a vote to leave the EU on the 23 June 2016. Will this vote to redraw the boundaries of a major trading bloc and political union, significantly altering the geopolitical landscape, have such a profound legacy that high streets will be understood in the dichotomy of "*pre-Brexit*" and "*post-Brexit*"?

So fundamental have the political and economic shifts been, at a global scale, it is hardly surprising there is such collective concern about the future of our high streets. However, this not a new phenomenon. The Association of Town and City Management (ATCM) was founded in 1991 in recognition of the challenges faced by the decentralisation of retail – from in-town to out-of-town. Now, 26 years later, Ojay McDonald, Acting Chief Executive of the ATCM and one of your Guest Editors of this Special Issue, is still heavily involved in developing and influencing policy to support the continued adaptation of town and city centres because the rise of out-of-town and on-line shopping, changing consumer demands, the financial collapse are really all part of the same story, along with the invention of the motor car, the refrigerator and the widespread adoption of the credit card. Every social, technological, cultural and economic shift impacts on how we live and how we shop. The question is how do the people who have a stake in these places respond?

This relationship between the changing nature of retail and the responses of local stakeholders was the focus of the High Street UK 2020 project. The project was funded by the Economic and Social Research Council as part of its flagship £1.5m Retail Sector Initiative, co-ordinated by Professor Kim Cassidy at Nottingham Trent University, your other Guest Editor of this Special Issue.

The aim of the High Street UK 2020 project was to not only research the changes facing the high street but also bring this knowledge, as well as a package of solutions, direct to people that wanted to make a difference to the prognosis for their centre. What follows in this special issue is a fundamental rethink of how we make, manage, maintain and market places. The knowledge developed in the High Street UK 2020 project and exchanged through these articles has been developed by academics, policymakers and practitioners. Whilst it will not answer every problem on every high street, we do think it is a major step forward as it gives clear guidance as to what can be done at a local level that can lead to measurable improvements in success.

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In their paper *Improving the vitality and viability of the UK High Street by 2020: identifying priorities and a framework for action*, Cathy Parker, Nikos Ntounis, Steve Millington, Simon Quin, and Fernando Castillo-Villar discuss the key findings stemming from the High Street UK 2020 project. Based upon a systematic literature review, and using an engaged scholarship approach, the authors identify 201 factors that influence the vitality and viability of town centres. Through the use of the Delphi technique involving a panel of 20 retail experts, this longer list of factors is further distilled into the top 25 priorities for action. The authors further create and present a strategic framework for town centre regeneration, which comprises repositioning, reinventing, rebranding and restructuring strategies, and is termed the "4Rs of regeneration". The aspects of this framework are discussed in further depth in several other papers within this issue. The paper concludes by demonstrating the impact of these priority factors and the framework on partner towns so far, and it thus has vital implications for bridging the gap between academic literature and practice for the revitalisation of UK high streets.

Turning to the next paper, which is focused on methodology, Nikos Ntounis and Cathy Parker discuss *Engaged scholarship on the High Street: the case of HSUK2020*. Here, they argue that engaged scholarship provides an effective means through which to tackle the "wicked problem" of High Street change. They explain that engaged scholarship is a participatory form of research which involves the co-production of knowledge between academics, practitioners, citizens and other place stakeholders. Drawing upon Van de Ven's diamond model of engaged scholarship, the authors explore the case of the High Street UK 2020 project. They illustrate how, through using engaged scholarship, a greater understanding of the factors impacting the vitality and viability of high streets was attained. The authors, in turn, contribute insights into how engaged scholarship can offer an alternative method of conducting research in place management which can generate enhanced stakeholder collaboration.

In *Repositioning the High Street: evidence and reflection from the UK*, Steve Millington and Nikos Ntounis seek to illustrate how local stakeholders involved in place management can respond to High Street decline through a strategy of repositioning. The paper begins by outlining perspectives on repositioning from the extant literature. The authors then draw on evidence from ten UK towns who participated in the High Street UK 2020 project, to reveal how repositioning involves more than just taking a snapshot profile of a place, since a dynamic approach is needed. Furthermore, the complexities involved in analysing and understanding repositioning and developing coherent strategies is demonstrated in the paper. The authors thus argue for the importance of collaboration and knowledge-sharing between stakeholders in devising repositioning strategies and improving places. Consequently, the paper contributes understandings of how town centre stakeholders collect, interpret and analyse data, and the challenges, opportunities and practicalities involved in developing and implementing repositioning strategies.

In their paper *How to reinvent the High-Street: evidence from the HS2020*, Costas Theodoridis, Nikos Ntounis and John Pal draw upon findings from the High Street UK 2020 project to critically discuss the extensive retail-led changes facing British high streets and town centres, and how this has led to examples of reinvention. With reference to various retail change theories discussing both institutional- and consumer-led change, the authors demonstrate how reinvention is a natural learning process, which can result in the emergence of places that are more inclusive and meaningful to stakeholders. The paper argues that, to positively impact the High Street, stakeholders involved in place management should embrace and attempt to learn from town centre change, rather than resisting such changes. The authors contribute to the theories of retail change literature, in

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addition to providing useful suggestions to practitioners interested in learning how to deal with high street change.

Next, Nikos Ntounis and Mihalis Kavaratzis seek to develop a broader understanding of place branding in their paper *Re-branding the High Street: the place branding process and reflections from three UK towns*. The authors present a holistic place branding process including the interrelated stages of research, deliberation, consultation, action and communication. They further relate these place branding stages to the rebranding process of three UK towns participating in the High Street UK 2020 project (Alsager, Altrincham and Holmfirth). The paper demonstrates the significance of the initial research stage of the place branding process, and how the place branding process discussed in the paper can help places to mitigate identity issues. The authors also illustrate the effectiveness of participatory place branding involving a range of engaged stakeholders sharing knowledge and expertise. The paper thus offers a novel practical grounding on participatory place branding concepts and theories.

Finally, in *Restructuring: Planning and governance dimensions of high street and town centre regeneration*, Deborah Peel and Cathy Parker examine the role of restructuring in addressing the contemporary challenges impacting UK high streets. The paper first reviews the literature surrounding restructuring from a planning and governance perspective, and draws upon the theoretical concepts of "resilience" and "wicked issues" to better understand high street change. Drawing upon action research involving interventions in selected locations, and workshops with engaged practitioners and community actors, the authors argue for a restructuring approach to addressing the issues currently facing the high street. The paper further contends that such an approach should involve planning and governance arrangements which are sensitive and multi-faceted to respond to the complex changes happening within town centres and high streets. The authors, therefore, contribute fresh insights into the people and partnership aspects of place management.

We hope you find the contents of this special High Street UK 2020 project useful. There are additional resources for town centre stakeholders available at www.placemanagement.org. Thanks to Professor Cathy Parker, the Principal Investigator for the project and her team at the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University, for undertaking such a worthwhile piece of work.

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