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## **Redesigning town centre planning: from master planning revival to enabling self-reorientation**

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### **Abstract**

Retail decentralisation from town centres has led to international concern. In response, some town centres have planned for retail property development to attract brand name retailers. However, in the context of further decentralisation (including the internet), town centres are experiencing brand name loss and an oversupply of retail space. In order to better assess the nature of the problem and how best to respond, this paper explores and develops conceptual understanding of town centre change and appropriate strategic policy responses. There is a need to rethink place-based change. Town centres should be seen as complex adaptive places, their multi-functionality must be treasured and recognition given to the unpredictability/serendipity of opportunities emerging within them. A delicate balance is required between 'umbrella' policies that maintain their core central visitor/community attraction function, deliberate strategies that help develop 'processes' of revival and an emergent policy orientation that allows reflective strategic learning as synergies of activity emerge.

**Key words: town centres; retail; master planning; complex adaptive systems; place-based change**

## Introduction

Whilst recognising their multi-functionality, the traditional focus of town centres has been as retail centres. However, since the pressures for retail decentralisation emerged in 1970s USA, the future of town centre retail has become increasingly uncertain (URBED, 1994; Jones, 2010; Burayidi, 2013). These structural weaknesses have raised international concerns regarding the contemporary relevance of town centres as commercial centres (Powe et al., 2009; Burayidi, 2013; Guimarães, 2016; Hospers, 2017). As within other countries of retail restraint, UK statutory planning has provided a degree of protection against retail decentralisation (Guimarães, 2016). However, statutory planning does not legislate against internet retailing and, following the 2008 recession, the long-term decline in town centre trade as a proportion of total retail spend became more apparent (Portas, 2011; Grimsey, 2013; 2018; DTCPT, 2013).

As town centres struggle with retail decentralisation, how can they respond to this challenge?

Planning for change often involves finding a balance between deliberate and emergent strategies (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1987). This paper compares strategies at different ends of this continuum: property-led master planned development (deliberate); and enabling self-reorientation (emergent). Retail property development is a form of master planned property-led development, which attempts to emulate the top-down control and largescale property investment common within shopping centres. Similar to other projects involving land assembly and significant private sector investment, master planning through public leadership sees town centres as environments to be planned and controlled (Madanipour et al., 2018). Building on the work of Mintzberg and others, Neugebauer et al.

(2016) stresses the importance of the nature of the problem in determining the strategic orientation. If town centres are complex, adaptive systems with self-emergent properties, perhaps there is a need to respect their complexity/multi-functionality and focus instead on helping enable their self-reorientation (McGreevey and Wilson, 2017). Drawing these issues together, as retail property development strategies become less viable and town centres are

forced to decouple from brand name retail, this paper asks if:

- towns should look for alternative property-led master planning solutions for their centres or develop new strategic orientations which focus more on enabling their self-reorientation?

In comparing these very different strategies, the research explores the drivers for change, risks, potential outcomes and key policy choices arising. If as suggested by Mintzberg and Waters (1985, p271), “strategy formation walks on two feet, one deliberate, the other emergent”, this research is about finding the right form and balance within the redesign of policy.

## **Property-led Master Planning Town Centre Futures**

As some town centres struggle to reorient themselves following the loss of brand name retailers, a top-down property-led master planning solution might be appropriate. Whilst large project developers often produce masterplans to justify their project (Wright, 2003), the focus here on public sector leadership is property-led master planning, which is a “tool for coordinating property development and managing uncertainty in a market dominated context” (Madanipour et al., 2018, p.478). Driven by a place vision, masterplans can help coordinate the removal of physical challenges to investment (land assembly, infrastructure provision, and removal of outdated structures). Guided by an ‘expert-driven corporate’ perspective, such masterplans can increase clarity and reduce uncertainty for developers on specific projects (Madanipour et al., 2018, p.477).

In the context of retail decentralisation, property-led master planning solutions can aid their competitiveness as retail centres by attracting brand name retailers that “anchor” and “claw back” trade and, hopefully, benefit pre-existing businesses through “linked trips” (Wrigley et al. 2002; Mitchell and Kirkup, 2003; Bromley and Thomas, 2002; Thomas and Bromley, 2003; Lambiri et al., 2017). This approach mirrors established practice within the development of shopping centres that aim to internalise inter-store externalities (Gould et al., 2005; Voyce, 2006; Carter, 2009; Damian et al., 2011). In the context of an international literature suggesting an oversupply of retail space (Hospers, 2017; Allen, 2019; Guimarães, 2019; Helm et al., 2019), with most new retail space being built in decentralised locations (Jones, 2010; DTCPT, 2013; Jones and Livingstone, 2015; 2018), many town centres are challenged instead with brand name closure. The implications of this are clear. Whilst even small brand name convenience stores can act as “trip generators” for town centres (Wrigley et al., 2018), the loss of an anchor store can lead to a fall in trade for other shops and increased vacancy rates (Gatzlaff et al., 1994; Yeates et al., 2001).

Whilst the efficacy of retail property-led master planning solutions is questionable, alternative property-led solutions (for example leisure, housing and office facilities) may still be viable. However, externally-led property development usually has a “relatively narrow focus” towards a predetermined “single intended outcome” (Madanipour et al., 2018, p.478; Falk, 2011, p.37). The linear process that follows is not likely to be innovative or supportive of bottom-up development, and may be more about replacing town centres than reviving them (Al Waer, 2013; McGreevey and Wilson, 2017; Cozzolino, 2020). As suggested by Neugebauer et al. (2016), strategic orientation needs to reflect the nature of the problem considered. As such, understanding the nature of town centre change requires further conceptualisation to explore the possibility of reorientation rather than replacement.

### **Town Centres as Complex Adaptive Places**

There is an emerging literature that understands urban areas, and their economic landscape within, as complex adaptive systems (Bryne, 2003; Martin and Sunley, (2007; 2011); Portugali et al., 2012; McGreevey and Wilson, 2017; Skrimizea et al., 2019). Consisting of many varied actors, infrastructure and buildings, the complexity is clear. As open complex composite systems, urban areas consist of non-linear interactions that amplify the emergent system beyond simple aggregation, and are established through interrelationships between their component parts. Without central direction or external control, under this conception, urban economies are highly connected self-emergent systems evolving to reflect changing external conditions. Complex adaptive systems are scalar and hierarchical, consisting of many subsystems situated within the context of these wider systems, and may share some of their properties. Town centres provide one such subsystem.

Definitions of complex adaptive systems tend to emphasise their desirable self-emergent/reorientation properties, whose realisation could become the aspiration of town centre policy (Martin and Sunley, 2007; Mitchell, 2009). In a similar way to shopping centres, positive feedback emerges through internalising cross-firm externalities. However, complex adaptive systems are not top-down planned. Coming about through incremental change, town centres are more organic and diverse than the narrow functionality of shopping centres, whose design is mechanistic and expert rule driven. Whilst many town centres have been able to “re-evolve after years of decline as gentrified retail, restaurant or cafestrips catering to the new middle class, ethnoscapes or specialist centres”, the top-down planning of shopping centres

and their lack of flexibility to change, restricts their ability to adapt<sup>1</sup> (McGreevey and Wilson, 2017, p.182; Ferreira and Paiva, 2017; Helm et al., 2019).

Although not providing a precise ontological fit, town centres share many of the key defining properties of complex adaptive systems (McGreevey and Wilson, 2017). They are inherently complex in terms of the number and range of businesses/organisations involved, the variety of centres that exist, the functions they provide and the interactions/interdependence between their various actors. Within town centres there is often a churn of occupancy, where “over time, the once marginal and fragile can eke out a more solid position and replace declining or obsolete agents that once held key positions in the system” (McGreevey and Wilson, 2017, p.178). There is “continuity but also constant change”, where many outcomes are possible as the complex system gradually evolves, but the process is far from being simply random (Martin and Sunley, 2012, p.348). Town centres are non-linear in terms of their dependence on the footfall generated from other businesses and shared infrastructure (roads, car parks etc.), but also the added value of their combined attraction/agglomeration (Eppli and Shilling, 1996; Powe, 2012). McGreevey and Wilson (2017, p.178) see town centres as having a “reservoir of alternatives” for revival. Indeed, it has been long recognised that the multi-functional nature of town centres means they have a “range of possible futures” (URBED, 1994, p.ix).

## **Adaptive Cycle Model**

If town centres can be understood as complex adaptive systems, it is important to gain a better appreciation of how such systems evolve. The adaptive system model is “one of the few well-defined, well-supported interpretations of complex system dynamics” (Cumming and Collier, 2005, p.33). It is one of many meta-models that “incorporate and summarize the findings of many specific models” (Cumming and Collier, 2005, p.29). This model has previously been found to be useful in explaining commercial clusters and small town change (Martin and Sunley, 2011; Powe and Hart, 2017), with Dolega and Celinska-Janowicz (2015) suggesting it may be relevant to town centres. The model suggests a tendency (rather than a deterministic relationship) for systems to be subject to cycles of reorientation. An attractive feature of this model is that rather than following a life cycle, it provides hope of revival. There are examples

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<sup>1</sup> As shopping centres are usually in single ownership, there is more control over their future direction and planning. This means their adaptation to change is likely to be greater than town centres. However, the diversity of built forms, multi-functionality and ownership/tenancy is likely to enable town centres to be more adaptable to reorientation.

of many shopping centres following the path of birth, growth, maturity and decline to death (Ferreira and Paiva, 2017; Helm et al., 2019). Consistent with longitudinal studies of place-change, however, town centres often have a longer history experiencing periods of incremental growth, decline and revival (Paradis, 2000; Findlay and Sparks, 2012; Whysall, 2011; Roth and Grant, 2015; Owen, 2016).

The adaptive cycle model highlights three key drivers of change that vary across the cycle: potential; connectedness; and the ability to adapt. Martin and Sunley (2011, p.1310) describe potential as resource accumulation of “productive knowledge and institutional capital”. Connectedness relates to internalising firm externalities occurring due to co-location. Holling and Gunderson (2002, p.32) suggest the third driver is the “ability to adapt to change, to be able to respond in a flexible way to uncertainty and surprises”. The model consists of four indicative phases: exploitation (seizing opportunity for growth), conservation (accumulation and specialism), release (collapse and uncertainty) and reorganisation to exploitation again (innovation and restructuring).

Due to successful innovation, capital is accumulated during the exploitation stage and connectivity is likely to increase as positive feedback mechanisms emerge. However, as connectivity increases, growth may stabilize and the system enters the conservation phase. Path dependencies emerge which may cause a “lock-in” of processes and policy, such as a dependence on brand name retailers and on deliberate retail property development for maintaining the system. Such systems have grown through adaptation (change within a preconceived path) often at the expense of adaptability (ability to develop new paths) and are highly vulnerable to external events (Boschma, 2015).

Pendall et al. (2010) suggest triggers for release can relate to both “slow burns” and unexpected shocks. In the context of retail, these forces could relate to retail decentralization across the sector and the local construction of out-of-town retail respectively (Dolega and Celinska-Janowicz, 2015). Whilst adaptation, through for example retail/leisure property development, may help maintain the visitor/community attraction role of town centres, it increases connectivity further, is narrow in focus and is anti-adaptive as it leaves little room for bottom-up forces to emerge.

Consistent with Berry's (1963) conception of commercial blight<sup>2</sup> or Guy's (1999) downward cycle, a centre entering the release stage would experience store refurbishment cancellations, store closure, and a worsening environment of vacant declining properties. The positive identity of the centre may be lost as "accumulated resources are released from their bound, sequestered, and controlled state" and "connections are broken, and feedback regulatory controls weakened" (Holling and Gunderson, 2002, p.45). Following release, there is much uncertainty in terms of the future prospects for the centre. Adaptability increases as rigid processes with high levels of connectivity are unlocked (such as a dependence on brand name retailers), but over time potential declines as physical blight sets-in due to a lack of adequate maintenance (Berry, 1963; Holling and Gunderson, 2002). Reorientation is most likely to come from the re-use of released assets, where innovative new attractors are path dependent on the assets released from previous growth (such as former retail stores/locations).

## **Reorientation or Replacement**

Critically reflecting on the adaptive cycle model, the outcomes of complex adaptive systems are inherently unpredictable (Portugali et al., 2012). The adaptive cycle model suggests tendencies and, in reality, other outcomes are possible. For example, some places are sufficiently blessed with potential that adaptability remains high with synergic roles perhaps quickly taking advantage of the opportunities arising from retail decline (Powe and Hart, 2017). As such, perhaps through the support of local commercial/civic groups (Business Improvement Districts<sup>3</sup>, town centre management and/or other forms of town teams), some town centres in the conservation stage can reorient without entering the release stage. Town centres most dependent on brand name retail, having lower potential in terms of assets and poor governance structures are more likely to enter the release stage and a spiral of decline. Due to the challenges of empty properties, absent ownership, lack of market activity and decaying heritage and other buildings for example, the efforts of commercial/civic groups may be insufficient (Burayidi, 2013; Ward and Cook, 2017; Powe, 2019).

Reorientation would mean maintaining the core purpose of town centres as central visitor/community attractions providing a multi-functional offer (Cumming and Collier, 2005; URBED, 1994; Martin and Sunley, 2015). Guimarães (2019) suggests that the "demalling" of

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<sup>2</sup> See also Whysall (2011).

<sup>3</sup> A business improvement district is a business group for a specific area set up through a referendum funded through a compulsory levy.

“dead malls”, for example, has led to functional requalification for some inner city malls. This has included new functions such as offices, gymnasiums, housing, schools and providing warehousing/kitchen support for nearby public spaces. Visitor attractions tend to be leisure, service and/or retail related, but can be supplemented with non-attractors such as housing, hotels, offices and schools that add to the derived demand for the attractors. In the absence of visitor attractions, in whatever form, places are no longer town centres. This would represent a replacement rather than a reorientation.

A key driver of the adaptive cycle model is the tension between the ability of places to adapt and the connectivity required to drive growth. In the context of strategy, the tension is between emergent and deliberate orientations. Indeed, Ganis et al. (2014, p.517) suggests the “dilemma is how to address the shifting balance between the potentiality of randomness that enables innovation ... and the coherence of order that offers a sense of certainty and control in both master planning process and product”. Deliberate policies might relate to direct involvement purchasing properties for regeneration and/or demolition. This probably means a managed decline of the town centre resulting in a smaller but hopefully viable central visitor/community attraction. Under “umbrella” guidelines to maintain the core purpose of town centres, perhaps there is also a need for direct involvement to develop the “process” of revival (Mintzberg and Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1987). This could include “enabling temporary uses of vacant spaces, supporting creative start-ups and independents, and development of local energy” (Madanipour et al., 2018, p.475).

Consistent with the adaptive cycle theory, success requires new themes/trajectories of connectivity to emerge. This goes beyond helping businesses emerge and grow. It also involves supporting the emergence of non-linear synergist interactions that amplify beyond simple aggregation. Such innovation could lead to, for example, areas of cultural/craft/arts related activity, independent specialist retail/food/drink and/or merely popular community meeting points around which other activity emerges (Seaton, 1999; Macleod, 2009; Powe and Hart, 2017). Through strategic learning, a strategy would need to be sufficiently flexible to support the emerging synergistic patterns of growth (Mintzberg, 1987). However, if the salience of town centre decline increases (public and powerful stakeholder interest; pressure for an immediate response), Neugebauer et al. (2016) argue that the temptation for a quicker more deliberate strategic orientation may prevent a more reflective and gradual emergent strategic orientation.



## **Case Study Towns and Data Collection**

Situated in a complexity ontology, this paper explores the key choices for planning town centre change. More specifically, in the redesign of policy away from retail property development, should towns look for alternative property-led master planning solutions for their centres, or should the focus change instead to helping to enable their self-reorientation?

This study began with a detailed longitudinal analysis of the historic town of Morpeth in North East England. Building on previous papers that have tracked the revival of Morpeth town centre (Powe and Hart, 2009; Powe, 2012), this paper uses residential surveys from 2005, 2010 and 2017<sup>4</sup> (807 questionnaire responses in total), as well as case study interviews, and demonstrates the successful implementation of a retail property development strategy. However, during the process of undertaking this research it became increasingly evident that Morpeth represents an outlier, with retail property development now limited to very favourable circumstances (Grimsey, 2013; 2018; DTCPT, 2013; Jones and Livingstone, 2015; 2018).

Taking an ‘information-orientated approach’ to case study selection, research was extended to six further towns experiencing the demise of retail property development strategies and a decoupling from brand name retailers (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p.307). Reflecting a similar national context, the experiences from these small to medium sized towns were insightful in terms of understanding the potential for revival, factors contributing to the demise of retail property development strategies, the outcomes of changes occurring, and the policy responses emerging. Due to space restrictions, two towns were selected as case studies for this paper. Firstly, Llanelli (Southern Wales) as it has experienced highly successful retail property development in the early 2000s, followed by less successful property development and eventually abandoning this strategy for something more emergent and focused on reorientation. Also benefiting from retail property development in the early 2000s, Stockton-on-Tees (North East England) was chosen because of its particularly proactive council that is attempting to reorient its town centre. Consistent with the adaptive cycle model, both these towns could be considered to have entered the release stage. At the time of writing in 2020, the position in Morpeth might better represent the conservation stage.

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<sup>4</sup> The 2017 survey was undertaken specifically for this paper and extends beyond the findings in Powe (2012).

Whilst having local community/business groups within Llanelli and Stockton, the research focus is on the redesigning of local authority strategy from retail-led property development to an approach reflecting more a combination of deliberate and emergent strategies for reorientation. As demonstrated by Powe (2019), such activity (property ownership, management, business support etc.) could alternatively be undertaken by civic/charitable organisations. However, researching local authority leadership was more informative in terms of what is achievable.

The research within all seven towns included a combination of desk-based study of planning/strategy documents, town centre reports, media responses and study visits/key actor interviews. Whilst the focus is on the three case study towns, some quotes are also provided from the other 'contextual' towns visited. Given the sensitivities involved in this project, whilst an indication as to the type of interviewee responding is provided, it is not possible to give further details of those interviewed.

## **Retail Property Development in Practice**

In a similar way to the conservation stage in the adaptive cycle model, successful retail property development increases potential within the town centre through the positive synergies emerging from footfall generated by anchor stores. The focus of this policy was to make town centres more conducive to brand name retailers. As explained by a development officer, "national retailers have a preference for modern, regular shaped units, with good frontages and convenient service arrangements" and, through retail property development, local authorities attempt to ensure town centre "floorplates meet national retailer requirements". Mirroring experience reported in the UK policy literature, writing in 2020, in all three case studies such retail property development is no longer central to policy.

### *Morpeth (population 14,000; North East England)*

Morpeth is an historic town located north of the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in North East England. A survey of town centre businesses in 2005 made depressing reading, as both convenience and comparison retail trade were in decline (Powe and Hart, 2009). Morpeth town centre has since revived its fortunes through a series of retail property developments (Powe, 2012; Powe and Hart, 2017). Illustrating the tension between connectivity and the ability of places to adapt - central to the adaptive cycle model - these developments have significantly

improved trading conditions, but also increased the vulnerability to brand name retailer closure. The initial revival came through the regeneration of Sanderson Arcade, a partially covered shopping arcade, which was beginning to look dated and in need of redevelopment. Providing the main thoroughfare between the main car park/bus station and the main shopping streets, this development comprises twenty-eight shops and approximately 8000m<sup>2</sup> of retail space. The largest unit within the redeveloped arcade is approximately 3000m<sup>2</sup> in size (comprising of a convenience and clothing retailer – Marks and Spencer) and is the second-largest unit in the town centre. Threatened with two out-of-centre supermarket applications, an alternative edge-of-centre proposal led by the owners of Sanderson Arcade gained planning consent. This resulted in the relocation of the pre-existing largest supermarket (Morrisons) in the town centre (gross retail space approximately 2500m<sup>2</sup>) to a new larger site in 2013, providing approximately 45% more retail space. The relocation benefited the town centre through a significant increase in car-parking space, which included a split-level car park paid for by the developer. Led by the same developer, redevelopment of the vacated supermarket site occurred in 2016 in the style of a mini-retail-park, further adding to the brand name presence (clothing retailer Next; café – run by Costa; discount store of B&M Bargains; and a big box pet shop - Pets at Home).

There were seven brand name retailers in 2005 in Morpeth, but this had increased to 15 by 2010 and 22 by 2020. Whilst there was a danger that the supermarket relocation would divert trade from secondary retail locations, the vacancy rate within the town centre has remained low and there has been new investment in the independent shops, including an extension of the independent shopping area. The effects of the retail property development can be illustrated through residential surveys undertaken in 2005, 2010 and 2017. Table 1 illustrates how retail development has led to Morpeth strengthening its role as the main convenience location for the vast majority of its town's residents, becoming the main comparison location for about a third of its residents and maintaining its role as a regular place to shop for convenience and comparison goods for the vast majority of its residents. This finding is consistent with other responses within the questionnaires, where, with the exception of a long-standing independent department store, the brand name retailers were by far the most popular stores.

**Table 1: Town trade before and after retail development**

Year	Sample	Main food (%)	Main clothes shop (%)	Main non-food (%)	Regular food shop (%)	Regular non-food (%)
2005	275	64	11	15	89	52
2010	243	63	22	28	93	63
2017	289	82*	32*	34*	95*	74*

\* Significant increase at the 0.01 level between 2005 and 2017 – these findings are not sensitive to cross-survey differences in respondent characteristics.

This adaptation has been a ‘game changer’ for Morpeth town centre and helps explain the lure of this strategic orientation. However, at the time of writing, these favourable circumstances are unlikely to be replicable elsewhere. Morpeth town centre benefited from the availability of town centre sites for development, a planning context that has protected the town centre from out-of-town development, the Sanderson Arcade development beginning prior to the 2008 recession and the developer maintaining a long-term supportive interest in the centre. Morpeth town centre now provides a combination of a modern shopping mall, large edge-of-centre supermarket, a small retail park and strong independent shops/high street multiples. This is in addition to its offer as a leisure destination, with a range of cafés and restaurants and a historic town centre appreciated by 94% of the residents in the 2017 survey. In terms of the adaptive cycle model, an adaptation ‘lock-in’ has been achieved based on larger retail units and a high dependence on a few key anchor firms (supermarket and clothing). As the town centre is perhaps in the conservation phase, the risk is great, as some of the key anchor chains in the town have been closing stores nationally due to financial difficulties. Indeed, reflecting this vulnerability, there has been a change of focus within policy efforts more towards multi-functionality/diversification (Morpeth Town Council, 2016).

### *Llanelli (population 35,000; South West Wales)*

Formerly an area of heavy industry and a cargo port, Llanelli suffered decline in the second half of the twentieth century and still has areas of significant deprivation. However, the retail story begins with the development of an out-of-centre retail park in 1989 and the desire for the town as a whole, rather than just the centre, to compete for retail trade through brand name attraction. A large supermarket (Tesco) opened within the new retail park and the same retailer simultaneously closed its supermarket within the town centre. Following this development, the town centre suffered greatly within the early 1990s. In response, retail property development (including an edge-of-centre supermarket (ASDA) and indoor shopping mall)

was master planned to attract brand name retailers to the town centre. The successful implementation of this plan became an exemplar within academic research (Bromley and Thomas, 2002; Bromley et al., 2003; Thomas and Bromley, 2002; 2003). This process was supported by public realm improvements within the town, but the key factor in its success was the retail property development resulting from the local authority (Carmarthenshire County Council) purchasing, assembling and preparing the site (Bromley et al., 2003). This development led to an increased town centre presence of brand name retailers and enhanced parking facilities, re-established the town as a convenience retail location and prevented its further decline as a comparison shopping location. In Llanelli, however, there was a desire to attract brand names to the town, regardless of the location. In 2007, a second out-of-centre retail park (11,500m<sup>2</sup> of retail space) was developed containing a further large supermarket (Morrisons) and a range of brand name comparison stores. The original retail park (over 50,000m<sup>2</sup>) has also continued to expand (in 2020 comprising over 40 units, with mostly brand names), and has become a significant convenience and comparison retail location within the region. A development officer suggested it is unlikely that the town centre could have attracted so many brand names and provided stores of a similar size.

Whilst Llanelli in 2014 was ranked the second worst town centre in the UK, in terms of its retail health, by Harper Dennis Hobbs (Retail Property Advisors), the key challenges faced related mostly to two main pedestrian streets that continued to suffer from high vacancy rates and blight due to the long-term neglect of empty properties. Consistent with the adaptive cycle model, following release, the potential for these streets to reorient declines with time. In response, following then established procedures, the local authority master-planned a further retail property development on an edge-of-centre site ('Eastgate'). After local authority land assembly in 2008, an interviewee stated that a key brand name anchor within the town centre was planning a move to this new edge-of-centre location. Whilst 'every effort' was made to dissuade them, just like the supermarket in 1989, the pre-existing town centre store was closed and switched to the retail park. Following further out-of-centre expansion, it was reported that three other brand names had also closed their town centre stores and switched to the retail park. Reflecting this lack of success, the local authority, instead, successfully master planned leisure property development on the Eastgate site filled by leisure brand names (including a multi-screen cinema, hotel, gym, large office unit and restaurants), which was completed in 2012. This strategy was less successful for the troubled streets, as evidence from local authority footfall cameras suggested a 'disconnect' between the town centre and the Eastgate

development. Given the continued decline within the two main pedestrian streets, it would appear that revival requires strategic learning. The focus has now changed to enable local actors, rather than master-planning for brand name attraction, with a key actor suggesting “our role is to help enable the local market to operate”.

### *Stockton-on-Tees (population 85,000; North East England)*

Located on the banks of the river Tees, this historic town was the location of the world's first public railway (running between Stockton and nearby Darlington). In addition to the traditional high street and its large market place, the town centre benefited from retail property development in the 1970s through the Castlegate indoor shopping mall. Whilst Stockton town centre is the largest in the borough, it faces severe competition from the larger town of Middlesbrough and, since 1991, a large retail park (Teesside Park). In an attempt to maintain the competitiveness of Stockton, large parts of the centre were pedestrianised in the 1990s and its competitiveness further enhanced in 2001 through a new purpose-built pedestrianised shopping street (Wellington Square), which replicated the Castlegate mall, benefitting from many double frontages to the high street. Although it initially struggled, having had approximately 20% vacant properties since the early part of the 2010's, the centre did provide many brand name retailers that were crucial anchors. In 2011, the local council embarked on a revival strategy. As a key actor explained: “We were reasonably well represented in terms of national retailers at that point, so it was actually more about how do you diversify away from those national retailers because you could see the direction of travel that retail was going in.” Rejecting ideas of retail property development, their new strategy involved a mixture of deliberate (public realm improvement; renovation of historic properties) and emergent strategies (incubation unit for small business and other associated measures). Despite their efforts to improve the town centre, between 2018 and 2020 a series of brand name clothes orientated stores closed (Marks and Spencer; H&M; Top-Shop; New Look), one of which was a department store (Debenhams). Whilst some brand names remain, the degree of change experienced suggests Stockton has entered the release stage, where, at the time of writing, many of the largest stores were vacant. Whilst closing in Stockton, brand name presence remains strong locally in the nearby Teesside Park and, indeed, there are private sector plans for further expansion of this park. Despite these challenges, the council continues to be proactive in the town centre revival, and their strategic orientation (explored below) is of particular interest to

this paper. These efforts have been praised recently within national policy reports (Grimsey, 2018; HCLGC, 2019).

## **Planning for Town Centre Complexity**

In the context of an oversupply of retail space and strong competition from elsewhere, retail property development and brand name attraction are no longer central to revival efforts in the case study towns. The strategies developed now reflect attempts to diversify the town centre offer away from brand name retailing. This represents a desire for reorientation rather than replacement. For example, a development officer suggested the importance of maintaining a “focal point for retail, social, cultural, leisure side of activity” in the local authority area. This represents the core purpose of the town centre, which key actors were keen to maintain. Subsequent activities ultimately need to fall under ‘umbrella’ restrictions to maintain these town centre functions.

Formal planning of Morpeth and Stockton continues to be around a retail core or primary retail area, within which statutory planning helps maintain a high proportion of retail usage. This helps keep the focus of this area and cross-business externalities. Policy in these case study towns encourages diversification beyond retail within the remainder of the town centre. For example, “Morpeth currently has a successful day visitor economy and its vibrant retail centre could provide the basis for developing Morpeth as a tourism hub for the County” (MTC, 2016; p.28). Rather than a conflict between retail connectivity and diversification, there are plans in Morpeth to look for leisure and business use on ‘vacant and underused buildings’ in edge-of-centre locations (MTC, 2016; p.28)<sup>5</sup>. Stockton also has a primary retail area, but, through managed decline and demolition of retail properties, they are planning for a smaller retail core based on a “more sustainable level of retail”. In Llanelli, rather than attempting to keep the troubled pedestrian streets within their retail core, statutory planning is allowing permitted development (through a Local Development Order) to encourage mixed uses in this former primary shopping area. Complementary business and leisure uses are encouraged on the ground floor, with residential uses on the upper floors (Carmathenshire County Council, 2019). Whilst imposing locally sensitive restrictions to prevent undesirable uses, this was seen by a development officer as “cutting red tape” and “encouraging alternative uses to come forward”.

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<sup>5</sup> This illustrates how a tension between a adaptability to maintain its retail centre status and a adaptation enabling the emergence of new uses is not inevitable (Boschma, 2015).

The shopping mall, which was developed through retail property development in the early 2000s, now provides the retail core for the town centre. Whilst debate in England has focused on nationally imposed permitted development<sup>6</sup> (Watson, 2013; Kochan, 2019), this locally sensitive approach would seem more consistent with the place specific ‘umbrella’ policy argued for here.

Consistent with the adaptive cycle model, the ability of town centres to self-reorganise depends on local potential. Strategies to enhance this key driver within the adaptive cycle model, tended to have a deliberate orientation. In Llanelli, to enhance footfall, the council has been successful in renovating its historic library building and relocating an office and a service hub into the troubled streets to take over a unit formerly occupied by a brand name. Yet, this has not proved to be sufficient for revival. In Stockton, efforts have focused on regenerating a central pedestrianised area of the high street, which is for “large scale high quality events in the town” as well as a communal space with fountains in the summer. New artwork is now located in key places of the centre as well as officer support for cultural events of which there are now several. A townscape heritage initiative has enhanced some buildings and cultural venues have been supported, including the renovation of a large theatre on a long-term lease (The Globe Theatre). As suggested by a development officer:

“It is support for diversifying uses into leisure. But they cannot come in isolation. You need a pretty strong level of footfall to support those types of uses. So – the Globe Theatre for example. More means of bringing people into the town in order to support those changes.”

As such, consistent with previous brand name attraction policy, the local authority is attempting to provide cultural instead of retail anchors to help enable independent growth.

Within Llanelli and Stockton there has been an emphasis on local authority ownership. A review of recent UK policy guidance suggests that retail property owners: are asking for unrealistic rents; fragmented ownership restricts the coordination of town centre efforts; ownership is often opaque and absent; and there is “varying interest and involvement” (Grimsey, 2018; HCLGC, 2019; p.12; PfC, 2019). These issues were also experienced across the town centres visited. For example, the Stockton mayor said: “there is too much empty retail

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<sup>6</sup> Permitted development in England allows size restricted internal renovations to change between town centre uses (retail, leisure, services) and from town centre uses to offices without applying for formal planning permission.



space and property owned by absent landlords who appear content to do little but wait for the next big retailer to arrive” (Grimsey, 2018; p.47). Whilst a development officer in a contextual town suggested, “you need to sometimes just step back and let what emerges emerge”, the longer places are in decline the greater loss of potential for revival. This was evident within Llanelli, where many buildings were subject to significant decline, giving a negative impression to the town centre and deterring others from investing. These empty decaying buildings are likely to act as blockages to revival. National Welsh government funding for affordable housing has enabled the council to purchase 15 properties with the hope of bringing them back into use following renovation as affordable flats and subsidised shop frontages in the troubled streets. As noted by a development officer, these properties were “redundant, lacking investment and simply an eyesore for the town centre”. In the absence of these efforts, it was unlikely that other town centre investment would emerge.

In the case of Stockton, they have taken ownership to another level. As local authorities are low risk bodies, the council has taken on significant loans to purchase both shopping centres in the town. At the time of writing, the council are seriously exploring the possibility of demolishing the 1970s shopping mall (Castlegate). This will enable managed decline of the retail space in the centre, but also open up the centre to a riverside, which the mall currently obscures. This deliberate approach would lead to alternative uses (green space, office space, residential) for this large area of the town centre. The local authority sees their ownership of properties to be crucial within town centre revival. As a development officer suggested:

“Ownership gives us the ability to do things – provide space for alternative uses –it gives us the ability to control things a bit more – set rents which we have not been able to do in the past ... You can actually guide and control the uses and types of development in your town centres”.

Clearly, this approach is also risky as the loans will have to be repaid. Whilst this strategic orientation is deliberate, there is recognition that an emergent element is still required. As suggested by a development officer:

“I think it is a strategy that is always changing – we are in quite a volatile economic period, not least for retail, and opportunities arise where you can intervene directly ... you can’t always foresee those and develop a strategy accordingly. So the strategy is always changing”.

In Llanelli and Stockton, an emergent strategy orientation complements these deliberate policies. For example, the provision of incubation spaces. These were provided within many of the towns visited in the form of local markets, pop-up spaces within otherwise redundant retail units, and subsidised art studios. These efforts can help to enhance potential through repurposing redundant retail space. In Llanelli, incubation space is provided by its successful indoor market. As part of the indoor shopping mall, it deliberately benefits from the footfall generated by its proximity to brand name retailers. It has a waiting list for space and, through support from the local authority, some businesses have been encouraged to ‘step-up’ to the council renovated properties within the town centre. In Stockton, the renovation of a former retail property in a prime location has been used as incubation space. Grimsey (2018; p.47) reports that “since 2011, Enterprise Arcade [this incubation space] has hosted 59 businesses, of which 32 continue to trade independently, with 10 located elsewhere in the town centre”<sup>7</sup>. ‘Stepping up’ has been encouraged across the towns visited through: business rate relief; business advice; grants to encourage refurbishment and improved frontages; and lower rents for local authority owned properties. Clearly, owning these properties gives more agency to local authorities to encourage businesses to ‘step-up’. However, given the spatial focus of the challenges, it was noted by a development officer that there is no guarantee that emerging businesses will wish to locate within the troubled areas of the town centre or even stay in the centre at all.

In attempting to find an appropriate balance between deliberate and emergent strategic orientations, there is also the question of the degree of local authority control over the process. For example, whilst included within the recently formed Business Improvement District in Stockton, local authority representation within this group is only as a property owner. As a development officer explained;

“We are not there as the council. We are there as a property owner. So it is very much driven by the businesses ... there is a real conscious effort to say that’s yours ... it has to have that ownership from the businesses for it to be successful”.

Stockton council are following deliberate policies that attempt to encourage a “more sustainable level of retail” and “helping finding new reasons to be in the town centre”, but there is also strategic learning, as they look to support what emerges. Whilst the salience of town

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<sup>7</sup> This space was also commended by HCLGC (2019).

centre decline has increased within Stockton, so far a delicate balance between deliberate and emergent strategy orientation has been maintained.

## **Conclusion**

Faced with retail decentralisation, there is international concern over town centre vitality and viability. Given this context, how can town centres respond to the challenges emerging? In trying to answer this question, this paper attempts to develop conceptual understanding of town centre change and the resultant strategic orientations emerging. Case study illustrations of exemplar practice support this conceptual and policy development.

Through significant brand name attraction, business retention and associated independent retail growth, the case of Morpeth illustrates how retail property development can be potentially 'game changing'. This builds on previous experience in the case study town of Llanelli (Bromley and Thomas, 2002; Bromley et al., 2003; Thomas and Bromley, 2002; 2003). Whilst this strategy has been successful, it leads to a risky 'lock-in' to brand name dependence. Consistent with an emerging international literature, many town centres are now experiencing an oversupply of retail space (DTCPT, 2013; Hospers, 2017; Allen, 2019; Guimarães, 2019). The policy context has now changed to one of decoupling from brand name dependence. Whilst alternative master planning property-led solutions may be viable, the demolition and renovation for housing, hotels, offices or merely green space will lead to the loss of many town centres. Whilst some degree of replacement is likely to be required, this paper has explored the potential for a reorientation that maintains the core central visitor/community attraction function of town centres.

Drawing on an emerging literature that understands urban areas and their economic landscape within, as complex adaptive systems, this paper has used the adaptive cycle model to explore potential town centre futures. This meta-model provides a well-defined interpretation of complex systems dynamics (Cumming and Collier, 2005). Rather than being top-down planned, such as shopping centres, the model suggests a tendency (rather than a deterministic relationship) for systems to be subject to cycles of self-reorientation. An attractive feature of this model is that it provides hope of revival where, consistent with previous longitudinal studies of place change, town centres can have a long history consisting of periods of growth, decline and revival (Paradis, 2000; Findlay and Sparks, 2012; Whysall, 2011; Roth and Grant,

2015; Owen, 2016). Whilst town centre change is the norm, this model suggests the pace of change will vary through time, with four indicative phases: exploitation; conservation; release; and reorganisation to exploitation again.

In terms of the three case studies considered, Morpeth is perhaps experiencing the conservation stage. Indeed, the trading conditions have stabilised on a situation of footfall heavily dependent on brand name stores. Consistent with the adaptive cycle model, such increased connectivity drives growth but also increases vulnerability. Whilst still maintaining its retail core, there is a need to look-up from “mastering the detail (Mintzberg, 1987, p.72) and attempt to move beyond their ‘lock-in’ to brand name dependence. The experiences in Llanelli and Stockton illustrate how vulnerable town centres are to the decisions of such external organisations. Indeed, policy in Morpeth now reflects an attempt to diversify edge of centre locations to develop tourism. The realities of attempting to diversify without entering the release stage is an important area for future research. Whilst some places blessed with potential can benefit from the self-emergence of synergic roles that take advantage of the opportunities arising from retail decline (Powe and Hart, 2017), most places will require significant guidance and support in planning for such decoupling. As illustrated by the case of Stockton, recognising these trends before they happen enables measures to be already in place if brand name retailers leave.

The case studies of Llanelli and Stockton illustrate the challenges emerging following the release stage. This is particularly the case in Llanelli, where its troubled streets have experienced decline for longer. Following release, there is a slow decline in its potential for revival as redundant buildings decay and become a blockage to wider regeneration. There is also the issue of ownership, where there is a lack of control to not only repair or demolish these buildings, but also to set reasonable rents for new uses to emerge and encourage the continuation of visitor/community attraction uses. This challenge highlights a tension between emergent and deliberate strategic orientations within town centre policy. Consistent with the ideas of Neugebauer et al. (2016), as concerns regarding town centre decline become more salient, the temptation to switch to predominantly deliberate policy would threaten town centre futures. Top-down solutions are likely to be property-led and represent replacement rather than a reorientation that maintains the core purpose of town centres.

If self-reorientation is to occur, ‘umbrella’ strategies are required to maintain the core purpose of town centres and direct involvement in developing a ‘process’ of revival (Mintzberg and

Waters, 1985; Mintzberg, 1987). As part of this ‘process’ of revival, “spaces for local experimentation” are required to enhance adaptive capacity (Cozzolino, 2020, p.213). Whether as markets or repurposed large format stores, these spaces are likely to require public support and adequate design/location to give them a chance of success. Small businesses will also need encouragement to step-up to fill vacant or subdivided larger retail units. Achieving this requires deliberate policies to create and support such activity. Furthermore, the adaptive cycle model suggests key drivers for self-reorientation relate to the centre’s potential in terms of its accumulated capital. Such potential varies considerably between town centres, and understanding its key determinants is an important area for future research. Enhancing potential may mean removing blockages to revival through heritage building renovation, for example. However, as illustrated through the case studies, demolition may also be required to remove unsightly buildings and help achieve a more sustainable level of retail. Given the nature of these blockages, as illustrated in the Llanelli and Stockton cases, there may be a need for strong local leadership through perhaps gaining ownership of key town centre buildings. As demonstrated by Powe (2019), civic/charitable organisations can undertake such activity supported by external funding. In the Llanelli and Stockton cases, leadership was from the local authority. Clearly, in areas where market demand is low, purchasing empty and perhaps decaying buildings is a risky policy and there may be a lack of political will for this activity.

Whilst conducive to the emergence of new business, most of the policies outlined above are deliberate. According to the adaptive cycle model, growth requires innovative new trajectories to emerge, which, through their synergies, benefit the town centre beyond the sum of the new businesses emerging. Such innovation could lead to, for example, areas of cultural/craft/arts related activity, independent specialist retail/food/drink and/or merely popular community meeting points around which other activity emerges (Seaton, 1999; Macleod, 2009; Powe and Hart, 2017). However, the outcomes of policy are uncertain and require reflective strategic learning as synergies emerge. Similarly, new grass root town level governance, business/community groups/activity and social enterprises, for example, may emerge. Taking a flexible strategic orientation that supports what emerges requires strong political will and a strong local commitment to such a long-term and uncertain strategy for revival. Such emergent strategic orientations are unlikely to satisfy the need for political expediency and might be seen as lacking a visible plan.

As brand name retailers focus on a narrower set of locations, many town centres may become “other places”, neglected from external retail investment and experience an uncertain future (Findlay and Sparks, 2012). Action is necessary and, as retail property strategies become unviable, this paper argues the need to recognise town centres as self-organising rather than ordered systems. By treasuring town centre complexity, multi-functionality and, ultimately, helping to enable their self-reorientation, perhaps town centres can maintain their core function as central visitor/community attractions. If self-reorientation can be achieved it is also likely to provide adaptive rather than anti-adaptive development and solutions more distinctive from generic master-planned processes, property-led or otherwise (Madanipour, 2018; Cozzolino, 2020). Ultimately, the future of town centres is in the hands of local stakeholders/communities and their local authorities. If there is a wish to maintain town centres, a supportive stance that is conducive to maintaining their core purpose is required.

Please add author biography and any funding information here

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