

BOOK REVIEW

How to Save Our Town Centres: A radical agenda for the future of high streets

Julian Dobson
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There has been a plethora of recent policy reports analysing the context for the demise of the high street (e.g. Portas, 2011; Grimsey Review, 2012). The reports concur that there is currently too much retail space in the UK and the demand for physical retail units will decrease further in the future. Dobson's approach to revitalise towns goes beyond the orthodox emphasis on independent retailers, reviewing business rates and repopulating town centres, as a panacea to return vibrancy to traditional retail hubs. The focus of his analysis are places like Rochdale, Stockton-on-Tees, Dudley and Bootle, 'bust towns', where the high street is dominated by vacant units, charity shops, fast-food takeaways, bookmakers and payday loan operators. Dobson is optimistic about these places, stating 'paradoxically, their position on the lower rungs of the retail and property development ladders gives them an opportunity to take a lead in finding new paths to lasting prosperity'.

The book offers a withering critique of the orthodox approach of retail-led regeneration, describing it as a 'flatulent promise' which often privatises public spaces and creates clone town developments. The central premise of Dobson's thesis is summed up in one succinct paragraph in the last chapter of the book:

...the divide between boom and bust towns is becoming starker...many of us will need to re-learn: how to value and apply the resources we have ourselves rather than wait for the wash of others' economic ripples to reach us. At the heart of this is a rediscovery of solidarity. 'Me town' of takers must become 'we towns' of makers, with a shared ambition to create a common future.

The theoretical tradition within which the book is situated is the humanistic approach of Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl. Echoing the work of Jacobs, Dobson emphasises the social meaning of high streets (shared history, kinship and imagined realities). For Dobson high streets are more than simply a place for trade, they are a place for social interaction and collective enterprise, 'places for people' in the words of Gehl. This viewpoint mirrors Wheeler and Beatley's (2014: 427) observation that urban

public spaces are, '...outdoor stages, 'living rooms' in which citizens socialize, interact and come together'. Dobson urges the reader to think outside the box, arguing that the revitalization of high streets requires bottom up community engagement, to shape a reconceptualised and equitable high street that works for the individual local community, traders and property owners and is more than a place for consumption. Fundamentally, a '*one size fits all*' solution is not going to work, individual bottom up solutions need to be devised and in the cold harsh reality not all high street will be capable of being saved.

Dobson describes himself as a writer, researcher and speaker on towns, cities and social policy. The book is an impassioned plea for a new approach to high streets, based on a lifetime of research, consultancy and observations of what makes high streets tick. In terms of readership the book will be of interest to those involved in the fields of human geography, sociology, planning, real estate and community development.

The narrative of the book is eloquent and entertaining, but the structure of individual chapters is quite fragmented, and at points the reader is left wondering whether the author has been too ambitious in the breadth of issues he seeks to address. The text provides many historical anecdotes and case studies, and engages with academic theory in a fleeting manner. It also contains an idiosyncratic range of primary and secondary sources, from TripAdvisor reviews, newspaper reports, academic journal articles and new empirical material that Dobson has generated by interviewing a range of stakeholders (including market stallholders, retail academics and senior managers in major retailers). Perhaps a more systematic academic analysis would have focused on a smaller range of case studies and analysed them in greater depth. The central premise of the book seems to be to provoke a debate about the future of the high street, rather than providing a generic best practice manual.

The book is divided into two halves. Part One examines the current state of the high street, exploring the economic and social drivers which have contributed to its demise. Dobson laments how contemporary planning policies (since the 1960s) have prioritised cars, supermarkets, indoor shopping centres and out of town retail malls. He states that '(t)he motor car that made towns accessible also made them aggressive and congested; the supermarkets that made shopping convenient also killed diversity and humanity'. The opening chapters go on to bemoan the demise of traditional markets and the growth of rational, impersonal modern e-commerce. For Dobson, 'trade is theatre', best conducted at the human scale and involving personal service. The book also chronicles the suffocating rise of major retailers like Tesco, Amazon and Costa, outlining the predatory nature of the giants of global capitalism, dominating the marketplace by eroding choice on the high street and absorbing smaller competitors. Dobson appears to have much sympathy with the Transition Towns approach, and gleefully describes the struggle and ultimate victory of the community in Totnes in their battle to keep major chains like Costa out of their High Street.

Part Two sets out an alternative vision describing how more equitable town centres and high streets could evolve. It presents a veritable collage of innovative initiatives from around the globe and advocates a '...new look at property ownership, access to finance and a philosophy of common interest'. Dobson supports reconfiguring public sector assets, with facilities like libraries to be multi-functional (one stop shops) for information and public services. He also promotes utilising 'in-between' spaces (derelict land or vacant premises) via meanwhile uses, creating cultural/artistic attractions, urban gardens, allotments and community parks. In supporting these approaches Dobson states that '(t)he paradox is that the fluid and ephemeral can often make a more important long-term contribution to the values of towns and cities than the fixed and supposedly permanent.'

The real strength of Dobson's analysis is in Chapter 10, where he launches into a brutal critique of the monopolistic ownership of land in the UK, suggesting that '(t)he interest of property owners can either support or undermine the long term interest of the communities who live in and use a place'. Dobson observes that '...it is a question of stewardship... people who are trying to make a quick buck tend to be poor stewards'. His critique is even-handed and the public sector does not escape unscathed, described as '...poor asset managers...remote from street level effects of their management decisions.'

The book strongly advocates re-invigorating high streets via collaborative action, social usage of disused space, flexible co-working and celebrations of the local and artisan. For some, the book will appear overly optimistic with a tendency to portray an extremely normative view of the world where people have infinite time to make informed choices about what they buy and where they shop. This vision of a less pressurised society will jar with the brutal reality of the pace and complexity of modern life for most. If the most depressed UK high streets are to be revitalized, Dobson is correct that *off the shelf* retail-led regeneration solutions will not provide the answer in the vast majority of cases. Local people (in partnership with the public and private sector) will undoubtedly need to shape and drive the process, led by a new generation of innovative, optimistic risk takers, whose activities can add vibrancy, energy and vitality to struggling high streets. Dobson's text is certainly an interesting starting point, but the initiatives he outlines seem somewhat disparate and lacking in critical mass. As a society we seem to lack the collective time, energy and drive to become centrally involved and to truly revive high streets in the equitable manner Dobson suggests. A pessimistic view would suggest that society would need a massive economic shock followed by an epoch-changing societal shift along the lines outlined in Jackson (2009) *Prosperity without Growth*, if the collective/solidarity approach described in the book is to gain significant traction. Fundamentally, it would require a radical shift in consumption and how we relate to each other as a society. Dobson states the mutual aid that we have witnessed recently in flooded communities, '...shows that far from being a utopian fantasy, co-operative attitudes simply need to be stirred from their slumber'. Whether co-operative attitudes and social solidarity can be maintained over the long term is a more complex question which remains to be answered. Perhaps Dobson has achieved his objective by igniting this debate?

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