

# How to reinvent the High Street: evidence from the HS2020

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – The purpose of the paper is to present and critically discuss the findings of the ESRC-funded HS2020 project. The aim is to discuss the retail-led change that has happened to the High Streets that participated to the project that, in some cases, is revolutionary and is leading to the reinvention of the place. To do so reference is made to various retail change theories discussing both institutional and consumer-led change.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This is a discussion paper on the findings of the HS2020 project.

**Findings** – The major finding reported in this paper is that the reinvention is a natural learning process that involves the comprehension of change and the development of knowledge that will lead to the reinvention of the High Street.

**Research limitations/implications** – The findings of the research are based on data that were collected from a total of ten towns across the UK.

**Practical implications** – The paper suggests that to reinvent the High Street the stakeholders that are involved in the place decision-making processes they should embrace the change as a natural development and try to understand and learn from it rather than resisting to it. The HS2020 project provides a comprehensive guide of the areas that change can be managed and if it happens it can facilitate the reinvention.

**Originality/value** – The paper is relevant to the academic community, as it offers insight to the theories of retail change, and to the practitioners, as it provides evidence as to how to deal with the change that happens to the High Streets.

**Keywords** High Street, Retail, Reinvention, HS2020

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

In this paper, we argue that the extensive changes facing British High Streets and town centres has led to examples of reinvention, and the emergence of places that are more inclusive and



meaningful to stakeholders. High Streets have long been the focus of scholarly research and policy-making (Dawson, 1988). The recession of 2008 caused numerous issues for High Streets and town centres, particularly the ones in smaller towns. In 2010, the future of the High Street re-emerged as a political priority for the British Government, when Mary Portas (2011, p. 2) “was asked by the Prime Minister and the Deputy Prime Minister to conduct an independent review into the state of our High Streets”. As a consequence of the political prioritisation of the future of the High Street, the Institute of Place Management at Manchester Metropolitan University was awarded a research grant by the Economic and Social Research Council to examine the impact changes to retailing in the UK were having on town and city centres. The High Street UK 2020 project included ten British retail centres, namely, Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol (Church Road, St George), Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley and Wrexham (for further details visit: [www.placemanagement.org/special-interest-groups/managing-places/town-and-city-centresdowntowns/town-centre-policy-and-research/hsuk2020](http://www.placemanagement.org/special-interest-groups/managing-places/town-and-city-centresdowntowns/town-centre-policy-and-research/hsuk2020)).

This paper elaborates on some of the evidences that were collected and reported during the High Street UK 2020 project, and it has a twofold aim:

- (1) to critically examine the retail change literature and propose a framework of reinvention suitable for smaller towns; and
- (2) to explore the reinvention of the High Streets and town centres of small towns amidst the changes that have occurred within their competitive environment since the start of the 2007 recession.

The paper will first provide a review of the literature regarding the concept of retail change. Second, the literature on the evolution of High Streets and town centres, alongside the forces that impact upon them, will be reviewed. These literature reviews will be followed by a brief section outlining the methodology used within this research project. The paper will then report findings from the project, in particular those findings relevant to the theme of High Street reinvention. Finally, the implications of this paper for practitioners and policymakers will be explored.

### Retail change

The theorisation of retail change is a rather generous term for what has been described as little more than inductively derived generalisation (Brown, 1987a, 1987b). However, there have been a number of different attempts to retrospectively explain the changes that happen in the retail landscape. Pioch and Schmidt (2000) suggest that the debate on the retail change has concentrated variably on retail institutional development; the patterns of expansion of particular retail formats and companies; or on historical studies of selected regions, often including culture and changing forms of demand as variables influencing retail structures. They further argue that most share a positivist preoccupation with reductionist representations of complex change processes which aim to predict future developments and provide explanations of outcomes in all situations, regardless of broader or different context. Retail change theories have thus been subjected to criticism. Early studies have been characterised as “descriptive reasonings” that fail to meet the criteria for formal theory, suffer from poorly defined concepts and causal linkages, lack validity, are tautological in their reasoning and, consequently, cannot hope to serve as the foundations for retail theory (Brown, 1987a, 1987b, p. 27). In a similar fashion, Hollander (1980) argued that these models are mostly descriptive rather than exploratory, lack predictive power, suffer from the subjectivity of the selected examples and are full of “ill-defined” concepts, such as “newness” or “merchandise mix” or “vulnerability”. In

contrast, studies that were published from the 1950s, the so-called “cyclical theories”, were characterised by realism, quantification and managerial relevance (Brown, 1987a, 1987b). However, the validity of these same theories was later questioned, and a post-modern approach was proposed. Brown (1995) concluded that cyclical theories should not be rejected and they are not a panacea either. Moreover, he adds that researching retail change from a post-modern epistemological stance can bring into focus the fragmented and inconsistent sequence of phenomena that motivate or characterise change.

Recently, more sophisticated methods of scrutiny have been called for that reflect the economic and social context of retail change. This complements a call for multidisciplinary in place management research (Coca-Stefaniak *et al.*, 2010; Wrigley and Dolega, 2011). Indeed, retail change cannot be understood in isolation from economic and social contexts. Likewise, town and city centre change cannot be understood without an appreciation of the power and influence of retailing (Milner and Wheatcroft, 1980). In other words, the current challenges facing UK High Streets are closely associated with the performance of the retail, and other, institutions that inhabit them, and vice versa. To this end, the use of *adaptive resilience* has emerged as an explanatory framework to study the evolution of places. The adaptive resilience “focuses on anticipatory or reactive reorganisation of the form and function of a system so as to minimize the impact of a destabilising shock” (Wrigley and Dolega, 2011, p. 2346). The destabilisation and reorganisation of systems are common to some retail change theories as well and, namely, conflict theory (Ferne *et al.*, 2015). The difference is, of course, that retail conflict theory examines change from the organisational point of view; however, some geographers have attempted to link retail spatial evolution to the various types of the environmental crises (Dawson, 2014). The application of complexity theory principles, and particularly the concept of adaptive resilience, was introduced by Martin and Sunley (2007) as an effort to explain how places self-organise themselves in response to changes in their surrounding conditions. Robinson (2010, p. 14) defines adaptive resilience as:

[...] the capacity to remain productive and true to core purpose and identity whilst absorbing disturbance and adapting with integrity in response to changing circumstances.

Adaptive resilience can explain how different High Streets and town centres respond to the challenges that face them. Martin (2012) presented historical findings from the performance of UK High Streets after various periods of recession and demonstrated that different regions recovered at a different pace than others. Similar studies have been conducted in Portugal (Cachinho, 2014), the USA (Cowell, 2014), Austria, Slovakia and Slovenia (Teller *et al.*, 2016), amongst other places in various stages of their economic cycles. All these studies conclude that different places adapt to their environment at a pace that depends on their social, economic and physical characteristics (Dolega and Celińska-Janowicz, 2015).

### **Retail change driven by the consumers**

Ferne (1997) argued that retail change is a consumer-driven process. His approach focused upon demographic changes in the British society since the mid-1970's, which brought respective changes in consumer behaviour that in turn led to change in the retail sector. The impact of consumers' behaviour to the changes of the High Streets is prevalent in the research of Hart and her colleagues (Hart *et al.*, 2013; Stocchi *et al.*, 2016). They suggest that consumers, or the catchment of the High Streets and town centres, search for a holistic experience that includes a mix of the tangible and intangible, for example, the store and the product mix, and the social events that

create excitement and novelty, in addition to functional features, such as ease of movement and parking (Stocchi *et al.*, 2016). These findings are consistent with the results of the High Street UK 2020 project, in particular the 25 priorities for vitality and viability summarised in Parker *et al.* (this issue). The impact of consumers on High Street change is also reported by Wrigley *et al.* (2015), who identified consumer groups among the stakeholders that influence the evolving High Street configuration. The importance of understanding the changing perceptions of the catchment on the image of the High Street is also stressed by Hart *et al.* (2013) who maintain that understanding the perceptions and expectations of the catchment will ultimately drive the delivery of an attractive place. Hart *et al.* (2013) also suggest that the understanding of what is delivered on the High Street is the result of a mental process that reduces the complex offering to anchors that can be recalled and easily classified in a person's memory.

Of course, catchments are also impacted by change that happens outside the High Street or town centre. Hampson and McGoldrick (2013, p. 835) identified four emerging retail consumer clusters during the recession, which includes the *maximum adaptors*, *minimum changers*, *caring thrifties* and, finally, the *eco-crunchers*. The minimum changers, or those consumers that do not present signs of significantly changing consumer behaviour, were the smallest of the four clusters, representing about 13 per cent of the consumer base. This leaves 87 per cent of consumers within clusters that displayed significantly transformed consumer behaviours. A point that is raised in the literature is the long-lasting impact of recessionary consumer behaviour even after the recession period has ended. Slaughter and Grigore (2015) maintain that the post-recession lives and lifestyles are different to pre-recession ones. For example, an emerging trend during the recession period was the increase of the de-ownership and collaborative consumption (Lindblom and Lindblom, 2017). This could explain the documented net increase of retail businesses on the High Street that provide space for experiences and co-consumption, for example, coffee and tea shops and restaurants and bars (LDC, 2017).

The changing nature of the expected functions of High Streets and town centres from the catchment has resulted in a need for their reorientation. Martin (2012) suggests that the reorientation, or realignment, is a proportionate response relevant to the amount of crisis pressure imposed upon High Streets and town centres. Hughes and Jackson (2015) went as far as to say some High Streets became obsolete because of a combination of economic, environmental and functional factors. They suggested that economic obsolescence was a result of the declining demand for retail products and services that subsequently led to the rationalisation of retail businesses and a decline on the demand for retail property. They also raised the problem of "unfit" physical environments, suggesting that the change or deterioration of the physical environment, in addition to changes to the infrastructure, make retail agglomerations less attractive for their catchments. Martin (2012) pointed out the British regions that lagged in their recovery from recessions showed signs of slow adaptation to emerging catchment trends. As a result of these issues, places lose their functionality, and therefore, they become less attractive for consumers. In the past, challenges like this were met by the relocation of retail activity, which was metaphorically described as the "waves of retail" (Ferne, 1995, 1998; Schiller, 1986, 1994); however, nowadays the challenge is more complex and influenced by the opportunities and threats that are created by the rapid development of technology and omni-channel retailing (Grimsey *et al.*, 2013).

Therefore, there is a call to reflect on how High Streets and town centres can adapt and can be changed and revitalised to reinvent themselves and provide whatever their catchment needs in a way that will make them vital and viable. Indeed, later in this paper (after the methodology), qualitative data will be discussed that sheds light on the reinvention process of the High Street.

### Methodology

The purpose of the paper is to report a part of the results of the High Street UK 2020 project. The methodology adopted by the research team is discussed in more detail within another paper in this Special Issue, entitled “Engaged scholarship on the High Street” (Ntounis and Parker, this issue). Nevertheless, to put the findings of this paper into context, a brief summary of the methodology will now be outlined.

The purpose of the project was to address real problems experienced by ten partner towns, namely, Alsager, Altrincham, Ballymena, Barnsley, Bristol (Church Road, St George), Congleton, Holmfirth, Market Rasen, Morley and Wrexham. Thus, the first methodological challenge was to engage the towns in the definition and development of the research aim. To achieve this, the researchers used a framework of *engaged scholarship*, which can be defined as:

[...] a collaborative form of inquiry in which academics and practitioners leverage their different perspectives and competencies to coproduce knowledge about a complex problem or phenomenon that exists under conditions of uncertainty found in the world (Van de Ven and Johnson, 2006, p. 803).

A set of aims and objectives were collaboratively devised that were related to the short- and mid-term change of the respective High Streets and town centres. The first step to achieve these aims and objectives involved the project team conducting a systematic literature review to examine what factors have previously been identified that influence the vitality and viability of High Streets and town centres. This process resulted in 201 factors (Parker *et al.*, this issue). To reduce this selection of factors to a more manageable and comprehensive proportion, a Delphi Technique, which included 22 retail experts, was used. The Delphi Technique refers to “a group process involving an interaction between the researcher and a group of identified experts on a specified topic, usually through a series of questionnaires” (Yousuf, 2007, p. 1). After two iterations of engagement of the experts, the 201 factors were reduced to 25[1] in order of how much impact the factors have on the performance of the High Streets and town centres and how much influence local stakeholders had over the factors.

The final stage of the project focused on the development of a framework for managing change on the High Street and identifying interventions that can facilitate change. Four major intervention themes were identified, namely, “repositioning”, “reinventing”, “rebranding” and “restructuring”. This paper focuses on the reinvention of High Streets or the process of re-orientation/realignment (Martin, 2012).

### How can the High Street be reinvented?

#### *Understanding the need for reinvention*

It was apparent from all the focus groups that took place that there was a strong appreciation for the diverse range of challenges that call for the reinvention of High Streets and town centres. In some cases, the requirement emerged because of the changing nature of the needs of the catchment. In Wrexham, for example, it was reported that teenagers were underserved by the town centres, as there were no free

activities to attend during the summer. Similarly, in the case of Barnsley, the challenge was to make the town centre more attractive for younger college students as it was currently mainly attracting older people. In other towns, the challenges were seen as being the deficit of certain services in the centre. In the case of Market Rasen, for example, the challenge was the lack of a functioning market in a market town called “Market Rasen”. For Congleton, there was a need to improve the “well-being” offer through the refurbishment of the leisure centre.

The real challenge throughout the project was to develop a shared understanding that reinvention is not a bespoke project or a one-off solution. Instead, it is a culture that needs to be embedded into the minds of the place managers and retailers and considered as an on-going process, like gardening. As one Bristol workshop participant noted: “I like the fact that there is a noticeable improvement and new shops are coming in, like delicatessens for example”. This quotation implies that stakeholders notice change, without the need, necessarily, for hard data to support it. What may be more problematic for High Street stakeholders is understanding the drivers of change. When it comes to retailing, it is more commonly understood that change is an outcome of diversification, which is a strategic choice that comes as a result of the constant monitoring of the internal and the external environment. In the case of High Streets and town centres, even though performance indicators are used to measure their success or decline, the project identified that the knowledge of the decision-makers is usually limited or incomplete (see Millington and Ntounis, this issue). This resulted in reinvention, tending to come as a reactive response, often too late (in other words the internal and external environment had already shifted). This highlights the need for a better system of incoming information that will inform the decision-makers about emerging challenges. For example, in the High Street UK 2020 project, the project partners and the local stakeholders found the workshops the research team delivered in the town exploring the factors that caused change extremely useful (a mean score of 4.6 out of 5). Having a more sophisticated understanding of retail and High Street change enabled the participants to develop a shared understanding of the need for reinvention – i.e. what was likely to be driving this need in their particular town.

#### *Learning the art and the science of reinvention*

The reinvention of High Streets and town centres is, put simply, the process of ensuring the offer matches the needs of the catchment. Some High Streets and town centres that took part in the HSUK2020 project had a much clearer idea of what their offer endeavoured to be, whereas others were in the process of figuring that out. Altringham, for example, had a clear view that they aspired to be a modern market town, attractive not only for the catchment but also for new entrepreneurial activity mainly focussing on local products. Barnsley, on the other hand, had to deal with the collapse of a major regeneration partnership; therefore, the local council stepped in to push for the reinvention. In Altrincham, reinvention was more organic. Anchored by the redevelopment of the indoor market-hall, new businesses have been attracted. These entrepreneurs have been encouraged by the town centre partnership, Altrincham Forward, but not “selected” in the same way a shopping centre may approach tenants. In Barnsley, the reinvention involved extensive changes to the public realm, which is far more controllable from the perspective of the local authority, but carries more risk as large-scale interventions are not so easily adaptable. These cases signal a process of learning to reinvent High Streets and town centres, either building on the capabilities of the local community

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(microenvironment), drawing in expertise from the wider commercial or socioeconomic environment (macroenvironment) or a combination of the two.

Learning the art and science of reinvention involves the engagement and cooperation of stakeholders. This may emerge in the form of a flawless interaction or in the form of conflict that leads to a resolution that will inevitably involve some change. High Streets and town centres can learn from retailers in terms of how to reinvent themselves. Retailers are changing the way they do business, becoming increasingly more reliant to their online sales, whereas other retailers engage in partnerships that enables them to extend their offering and attract a wider and more diverse catchment (for example Argos tie-up with eBay). Creating a town-centre click and collect facility was proposed by a number of pilot towns, for example, Holmfirth. Mixed uses of space were also proposed for the introduction of events, the utilisation of public spaces, such as parks, for monthly markets or even the short-term lease of unused retail space for local artists to display their art. These are all examples of how town centres were reinventing. The process of learning how to reinvent in this more flexible or incremental way depended on sharing information and experiences with other towns that had attempted something similar. In contrast, the larger regeneration projects relied on advice and recommendations from professionals – such as developers, planners or urban designers. Any source of learning external to the location needs to be evaluated in relation to the peculiarities of the particular location. It is one thing to see successful reinvention somewhere else – the question to subsequently ask is “will it work here?”. No matter if the learning originates in the microenvironment or macroenvironment, or even both, it has to generate local knowledge and subsequent value for a particular High Street or town centre.

#### *Intervening in High Streets and town centres*

The High Street or town centre intervention is, obviously, the most substantial part of reinvention. The intervention can be subtle (e.g. the creation of outside space to encourage a stronger hospitality offer in Ballymena), or it can involve the complete revamp of the town centre, as happened in Barnsley. The intervention involves the investment of either public money or funds invested by retailers or others with the expectation that the investment will improve vitality and viability. Given the promises and expectations associated with reinvention, decision-makers can be expected to be held accountable.

In Market Rasen, for example, the attempt to create an attractive offering for the catchment did not leave all the stakeholders happy. There was a fundamental disagreement on what reinvention was necessary, and this was strongly communicated in the workshops that took place there. Whilst there was no doubt the town team had made significant improvements to the town – supported by visitor surveys and other statistics – this reinvention without a subsequent restructuring of the governance arrangements of the town (relationships with the town council) meant the change was short-lived.

In Ballymena, on the other hand, project participants advocated a strong partnership between the public and the private stakeholders. One of the achievements of this partnership was developing a free WiFi offer in the town, which not only was of benefit to traders but also improved the multichannel experience for the catchment. Offering connectivity is a tool that can also compete against out-of-town shopping centres that usually offer this facility to their visitors. Another advantage is that having such a platform available means the catchment will have the opportunity to access other innovations. For example, accessing a

mobile app that will use and feed real-time data on available car park spaces would address one of the challenges facing many town centres.

*What is the reinvention of the High Streets after all?*

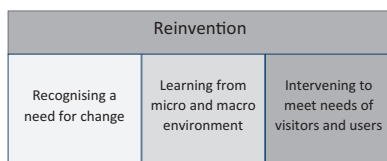
For the purposes of the High Street UK 2020 project, we are defining reinvention as a process of recognising a need for change, learning from the micro and macroenvironment and intervening to deliver a High Street or town centre that that attracts and meets the needs and expectations of visitors and users (Figure 1).

Most models of retail change refer to a cycle of transformation that, in a Darwinian manner, selects the fittest to survive within an evolving environment. The reinvention of the High Street is not dissimilar to this premise. [Portas \(2011\)](#), in the foreword of her review, maintained that we cannot and we shall not attempt to save every High Street. Meanwhile, [Justin King \(2012, p.8\)](#), the ex-CEO of Sainsbury’s, in a public speech suggested that: “[. . .] We all need to adapt or die, be foxes not hedgehogs. Something that successful grocers have been adept at”. [Hughes and Jackson \(2015\)](#) theorised that the death of the High Street or town centre is the outcome of the combination of numerous intrinsic or extrinsic factors. The findings of the High Street UK 2020 project indicate that the High Streets and town centres that survive pay attention and address a variety of factors that are within their ability to influence (Parker et al, this issue). The catchment will choose to custom the High Streets and town centres that provide the offers that are closer to their needs.

**Practitioner implications**

The reinvention of the High Street is an art and a science. It requires a vision and a visionary team to lead the change process ([Peel et al, this issue](#)), but it also requires information on the trend changes ([Millington et al., this issue](#)), routines that will produce sufficient knowledge and people to apply the knowledge and capitalise on that. Retail change theories refer to the *bras de fer* between the old and the new, the established and innovative and the importance of “letting the fight happen” because through these processes change occurs. The reinvention of High Streets and town centres can be conceptualised in a similar way. It is a fight between the traditional brick and mortar retail and the modern omnichanneling. It is a fight to interest the catchment and keep them patronising the High Street, rather than letting it escape to out-of-town or online choices. Reinvention is about developing a retail and service mix anchored around a focal place of interest, with easy access and a plethora of activities to keep the catchment purposefully engaged. Of course, in addition to that, it is an exercise of strong leadership that will involve the stakeholders ([Peel et al., this issue](#)) and make them agents of change.

It shall be acknowledged that the reinvention of the High Street and town centres can only happen within the remit of the authority of the local decision-makers. It is a positive sign that various government initiatives have been introduced to support the aim of “the vitality of town centres”, which is enshrined within the National Planning Policy Framework 2012. This project also aimed to improve the vitality of town centres by providing a forum for stakeholder engagement and knowledge exchange, through the methodology used (Ntounis and Parker,



**Figure 1.**  
The Reinvention  
process



this issue). With respect to the three stages of reinvention (Figure 1), the findings of this research reveal a number of practical implications worthy of future study. With regards to the understanding of the need for a change, the evidence from the research indicates that the decision-makers need to develop their management and decision-making skills (Millington *et al.*, this issue). Previous research has also pointed out that the decision-makers come from diverse backgrounds, and they do not necessarily have the information, knowledge, skills or experience to scan and respond to the changes that happen in High Streets and town centres (Hogg *et al.*, 2003, 2004; Morgan, 2008; Yanchula, 2008). It would be beneficial for all the stakeholders to actively engage with their peers and share knowledge and information for the common good. It would also be useful if decision-makers were provided with the necessary development support (Theodoridis and Kayas, 2017) so that they possess the skills to collect and analyse data, produce information and knowledge that will be underpin decisions and create value from the various sources of data that are in their possession.

Addressing the emerging challenges also entails a process of learning and collaboration. The evidence from the project suggests that High Streets and town centres that engage retailers in the process of understanding evolution achieve better results because the decision-makers benefit from the knowledge and understanding of the retailers, even when the knowledge is moderated and partial. This finding relates to the work of Medway *et al.* (1999, 2000) who maintained that the retailers' involvement with High Streets and town centres is not only vital but also necessary prerequisite for their financial support, which is needed to improve the vitality and viability of the place. The findings of this project are also in agreement with the findings of Thomas and Bromley (2003), who highlighted the impact of retail linkages for the revitalisation of retail agglomerations. Therefore, addressing the emerging challenges requires the engagement of the retailers because they can provide tacit and tangible resources for the sustainable development of the place.

Finally, the intervention process *per se* requires an excellent understanding of the emerging challenges and the boundaries of intervention set by the policies. Furthermore, it also requires understanding of the marketing issues that particularly relate to the consumer behaviour and lifestyles that at some point became non-compatible with High Streets or town centres, and rendered them unattractive or obsolete. This was highlighted in the work of Page and Hardyman (1996) and Stubbs *et al.* (2002) but was particularly focussed on the beneficial synergies between town centre schemes and retailers in the work of Warnaby *et al.* (2005). Marketing the High Street and town centre is a function that moves beyond operational activities, such as litter management or the procurement and display of Christmas lights. In fact, it is a complex strategic function that involves the understanding of the catchment and the delivery of a place that within its capabilities will provide value to all the engaged stakeholders and users.

#### Note

1. See Ntounis and Parker (this issue) "Engaged Scholarship and the High Street: The case of HSUK2020" for details on the elicitation process.

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#### **Further reading**

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