

How To Save Our Town Centres : A radical agenda for the future of high streets - Book review

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

Author: Julian Dobson, Policy Press, 2015, ISBN 978-1-44732-393-8. 296 pages

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From Brixton to Brazil, Julian Dobson provides a positive plethora of examples from the retail world to help illustrate what works (and what doesn't) when it comes to saving town centres.

From the outset, the book's premise is made clear: *the failing 'me' towns of the early 21st century [need to] become 'we towns' where all share in a flourishing society*. Few would disagree with such a laudable aim, but perhaps what's more interesting is Dobson's underpinning rationale and his proposed plan of action for achieving such goals.

Whilst recent government, media and public attention has firmly focused upon the ailing high street, Dobson's contribution, as the title suggests, is different. He notes, and dismisses, others' *shrivelled visions of the future*, claiming that what is really needed is longer-term, *purposeful pragmatism* to help *turn town centres from places to buy to places to be*.

There is no doubt that town centres are struggling and have been doing so for some time but Dobson suggests that the finger-pointing of the current blame culture is hardly going to fix the problem. Instead, councils, retailers, landlords and shoppers need to work together, using whatever resources available (or not) at their disposal to help change *me towns of takers* into *we towns of makers*. Whilst Dobson admits that such fundamental change cannot happen overnight, and that the key ingredients needed will also need to be place-specific, he does identify the *mindsets* of all involved as a common denominator for all successfully revitalised town centres.

In establishing a *need for an interconnected critique of policy and practice, reaching beyond traditional disciplines and professions*, the book advocates key stakeholders adopting a joined-up approach in piecing together the jigsaw that is successful town centre regeneration.

The text comprises a tale of two halves; the first section examines current town centre stability and sustainability, analysing and evaluating the various underlying factors which have historically contributed to the conundrum, and the second instalment takes a more forward-thinking, proactive and practical approach to advise for the future.

Throughout the journey, the reader is treated to countless examples, both national and international, which clearly illustrate some of the issues faced by town centres, the varying approaches taken to tackle them, and the ultimate success (or not) of two

such strategies. These instances are really brought to life by supporting anecdotes from those most affected by town centre degeneration; from the market stall holder in Bury, to the owner of a department store in Ripon.

The text makes it very easy for the reader to empathise with businesses struggling to find their place in the prevailing market; over recent years, there has definitely been a sea-change leaving room for only the "fittest" to possibly survive. Yet, there are many success stories too; some admittedly more fledgling than others. One particular victory of note though is the Ripon department store mentioned above which, after facing failure, was metamorphosed by its owner into smaller, separate trading units which were then separately let to independent, local producers. Underpinned by simpler leasing structures, these new arrangements meant that such tenants: only paid for the space that they actually used, were not committed to trading "all day, every day" for lengthy, fixed term periods, were not burdened by crippling rent deposits, and did not face taking on the responsibilities of the usual 40-page lease, within the depths of which can often lurk expensive service charge and penalty clause obligations. As Dobson notes *suddenly 20 businesses had a route to market that did not exist before*. Not only that, this new format was then similarly successfully adopted in the revitalisation of other towns/cities. It is that type of proven creativity, foresight and courage which Dobson suggests that other place-makers could learn from.

And that seems to be the key; appreciating the value of town centres as places to be or linger rather than spaces with no meaning attached to them. Amongst others, one particularly poignant example provided to help illustrate this point is the billion-pound, Liverpool One development which comprises *42 acres of prime real estate... with 165 shops, 500 apartments, two hotels, 25 restaurants, 30,000 square feet of offices and a 14-screen cinema*. Dobson notes an antithesis to the development's seeming success by suggesting that it exists at the expense of its declining, neighbouring towns; that, rather than bringing anything to the table, it simply serves only as a *wealth-distribution scheme*.

Acknowledging such inter-relationship complexities between different locations and their stakeholders, Dobson advocates a new set of 3R's to help turn the tide from degeneration to regeneration; these being *risk, resilience and restoration*. By advocating a multi-faceted, location-tailored approach, which includes not only this tri-partite tenet, but also the ancient Greek concept of the *agora* or central area, it seems that there is potential for transforming town centres from empty spaces to meaning-filled places which aren't focused purely upon trader/consumer transactions. In fact, the text lists the fundamental characteristics which depict a *welcoming, functioning town centre* which appeals to people *from all walks of life and income groups*. This list includes, for example, the need for housing; if town centres are lived in, it follows that their residents should have more of a vested interest in their management. Interestingly though, none of these distinguishing features identified for successful town centres focuses solely on retail.

Perhaps given such intricacies of the complex web underpinning town centre survival, it comes as no surprise that law is not immune to playing its part either. A previously, more-relaxed planning system helped pave the way for the arrival of out-of-town shopping centres, which have since been much-criticised for drawing the life-blood out of nearby towns and cities. Noting such ripple effect, the planning system has since beat a hasty retreat, instead not just promoting, but even requiring, town centre-led regeneration. Part of this planning policy U-turn has also culminated in various changes being made to the General Permitted Development Order; for example to encourage the transition of disused, second-storey shop units to help meet the increasing housing demand.

Whilst much has been made of the impact of planning law and policy on town centre revitalisation, Dobson makes clear that the law's influence potentially

reaches out more broadly than that. He points to a whole body of law already available to communities to help them take more responsibility for shaping their surroundings. Citing the Sustainable Communities Act 2007, the Public Services (Social Value) Act 2012 and the Localism Act 2011 as examples, he notes the role that the law, and local citizens, could play in helping to resuscitate town centres.

However, the text makes it clear that the law is just one of many factors at stake here; there are wider political, economic and social issues to be considered too. Dobson sums the text up well when he suggests that what is needed is an *interconnected critique of policy and practice, reaching beyond traditional disciplines and professions*.

Interesting for both lawyers and non-lawyers alike, this text lives up to its premise; bringing together and analysing the complex mesh of issues behind, and advocating new approaches for, ensuring the survival, sustainability and ultimate success of the ailing town centre. However, far from claiming to be an all-encompassing manual for solving such problems, Dobson does acknowledge that his text is a starting-point, designed to encourage wider debate on putting together a more positive, detailed and practical plan of action for future town centre regeneration than may have previously been available.
