

THE KEY ROLE OF THE MIDDLE-CLASS IN REJUVENATING UK TOWN CENTRES

The middle-class people of Britain are *the key cement*.

Now representing over 54% of the UK population, they are the *key cement* needed for the disparate array of *building blocks* for rejuvenating town centres hollowed out by Internet shopping. Those in decline are predominantly, but not exclusively

- North of Watford
- Previously or currently still industrialised
- Not market towns
- Faded coastal resorts such as Ilfracombe or Hastings

Yet not all high streets north of Watford are failing. Shrewsbury and Chester, for example, currently have few if any empty shops. Hotel Chocolat, Costa Coffee and other social meeting places have replaced the bankrupt national chain stores. The middle-class either live in these towns or visit as tourists or shoppers in their droves. Over in Yorkshire it's similar, Harrogate is thriving – the queues to get into Bettys Tea Rooms are an ever-constant reminder.

Naturally, all the High Street commentators, academics and Government advisers have been in overdrive of late. And though there is a wide spectrum of opinion, they all offer very valid observations and recommendations.

Politician Dr Vince Cable and Simon Wolfson, CEO of Next both talk about the iniquities of business rates and how the Government must implement urgent reform. Others like John Roberts of AO.com suggest complacency of the high street retailers is to blame.

Bill Grimsey's latest white paper published in July 2018 for the Government, discusses, inter alia, the major structural changes necessary and how the Internet has reduced the need for so many shops.

But whilst all these narratives make sense, none offer truly workable street-level mechanisms to make it all happen.

Take business rates reductions. They will certainly help but are not a solution in themselves as the ease of the Internet has changed people's shopping methods irrevocably. The need to go shopping on a wild winter's day has long gone.

Creating Government task forces will also probably not resolve much as history shows that most fizzle out after a change in Government.

And local councils have no track record of success either as they are full of apparatchiks, not innovators. It's not clear, for example, how the purchase of town centre property by Canterbury, Doncaster or Bolton councils will play out. They want to buy influence over the shops, but what is there to influence if they're not swamped with shop applicants.

In effect, it's clear there are just three key strategies for rejuvenation.

Firstly, that towns don't need lots of similar consumer goods shops anymore – entertainment, leisure and diversity are key. Secondly, that the infrastructure of towns

needs altering – we need more grass and social meeting places like the boules squares of every French town. Third and finally we need more people living in, shopping and visiting our town centres.

And that's where the middle-classes of Britain come in - they are the one key cement that can reverse the decline and bring back prosperity. But how do we get them back in our towns? – the following issues need addressing.

1. RESTRUCTURE THE NIGHT TIME ECONOMY

Far too many towns, especially in the north, have their complete evening economy surrounding students and the younger end working-class drinkers – offering cheap beer, tawdry bars and the prospect of a kebab and throwing up to finish off the night's entertainment.

Middle class people abhor this sort of scenario, don't feel safe and they won't come into town on an evening.

2. CREATE MEANINGFUL GREEN SPACES

The reason so many middle-class people are happy to live in the centre of Kensington, Geneva or Bruges is the ever presence of small parks, trees and green space. Bruges, for example, has 20,000 living in the town centre out of a total population of 120,000

And not only is grass and trees pretty to look at, researchers in Philadelphia have found that access to even small green spaces can reduce symptoms of depression for people who live near them, especially in low-income neighbourhoods. This view is reinforced by Mike Rogerson, a Sussex University professor whose studies show that green spaces are "equigenic," or equalizers of socioeconomic disparities in health.

Back north of Watford, Bolton and Oldham have not one green space within half a kilometre of the town centre. The issue will be how are sufficient funds accrued to buy up property for morphing into greenspace when the land is so expensive

Crowdfunding

Probably the only realistic way to raise enough money to purchase, say, blocks of run-down offices, shops or poor housing is for local communities to crowdfund. Then top up the crowdfunding monies with Government, National Lottery, other grants and sponsorship. And once the price has been paid, the houses can be knocked down and the small park created.

National Trust / NT Urban

Having bought the properties and created the small park or amenity, the question of ownership has to be addressed.

You cannot trust the council to manage it – for example, witness what happened in Newark, Nottinghamshire recently. Council leaders there are bent on selling off Cedar Avenue playing fields even though they declared the area seriously devoid of green space

Similarly, Henley Homes recently built a mixed occupancy residential complex at Baylis Old School in Lambeth, London, only to deliberately segregate off the communal playing

area from children living in the cheaper social housing section. Lambeth Council says that shouldn't have happened.

These council shenanigans suggest that a Community Trust created to buy the properties for greenery may not be sufficiently skilled or motivated to manage their open space in the future either.

A better solution is to gift the land to the Nation through a specially created offshoot of the National Trust, called, say, NT Urban. The NT Urban organisation will be specifically geared to owning and managing urban spaces.

3. QUALITY ARCHITECTURE AND SPACIOUS APARTMENTS

Making a town centre more desirable than leafy suburbia will be difficult. Apartments must be spacious, European in nature i.e. preferably no more than 6 stories for quick escape and potential walking up and down if lifts are broken. And, as was mentioned earlier above, they must look out or be very close to greenery.

Allowed their own devices, developers will never provide enough greenery and amenity space as they only want to maximise the number of apartments to increase their profits. To them, greenery and trees are dead money. A recent proposed development of an old B&Q site near Lancashire Cricket Club in Trafford Park, Manchester was turned down for exactly those reasons – councils must hold out for a future environment worth having.

A change in the definition of middle class could help pinpoint more town centre dwellers too. Professor Mike Savage of LSE recently came up with a new 7point system for the social classes of the UK which may provide clues who might move. His technical middle class and new affluent workers are highly plausible targets

4. INCREASED DIVERSITY OF SHOPS, RESTAURANTS AND VENUES

It's hard to believe but many failing towns like Bolton do not have one convenience store or restaurant appealing to the middle classes in its town centre.

And whilst most Christmas markets and food and drinks festivals are well received, what happens in the other 50 weeks of the year?

Having the middle classes back living in town will increase demand for artisan bread and fresh produce, plus other professional services like vets and grooming parlours for their pets.

Plus, they'll want entertainment and leisure too with theatres, sports clubs, comedy clubs and the like. At present, the night life in most northern towns is fairly non-existent and has to move up several notches to be appealing.

5. REPLACE COUNCIL HOUSING

All the worst sink estates in the UK are or were council houses – now very much unloved. In comparison, Housing Associations are generally seen to be working well.

What's important for the Housing Associations, however, is to create mixed communities and not to provide housing only for the two opposite ends of the income spectrum

6. POLICING, SECURITY AND THE HOMELESS

The current spates of knife crime and homelessness is worrying everyone, none more so than the middle class. You don't want to be scared of an attack every time you see a 'hoodie': nor do you want to step over bodies in zombie mode from taking the drug spice; nor be confronted by beggars on every street corner.

All these distressing issues are putting a huge number of people off going into town. To counteract these, we need more police on the streets, especially at night. And proper facilities for the genuine homeless to live in.

In essence we need the aggregated middle classes of Britain living in, shopping and visiting our town centres. Until they do, rejuvenation will simply not happen.

Just as importantly, councils must not allow developers to create tomorrow's slums. High quality architecture, building methods and materials are not negotiable - thriving towns like Bruges and Shrewsbury have great buildings, many several centuries old. That has to be the long-term vision for all our UK towns.

To aid comparability, a project is to start shortly on a Middle-Class Desirability Quotient or MCDQ for all failing town centres. It will be based on statistics such as

- a) how many middle-class people live in town already?**
- b) Is there currently enough suitable housing stock i.e. spacious apartments?**
- c) How many square metres of grass and park are there?**
- d) How many empty shops are there as a percentage of the whole?**

It's not meant to be a 'stick to beat the council with' more a meaningful and statistically robust methodology of rationalising and comparing the rejuvenation problem on a nationwide basis.