

## ATCM position paper

### Defining town centres

There is an existing body of research that looks at town centre development, and the potential for the evolution of retailing locations into town centres (cf Staeheli L., Mitchell D. – *USA's destiny? Regulating space and creating community in American shopping malls* – *Urban Studies* 43, 5-6, 2006; Thomas C., Bromley R., Tallon A. – *New 'High Streets' in the suburbs? The growing competitive impact of evolving retail parks* – *International Review of Retail, Distribution and Consumer Research* 16, 1, 2006; Lowe M. S., - *Britain's Regional Shopping Centres: New Urban Forms?* – *Urban Studies* 37, 2, 2000) and this is useful to inform the debate but we have based our view on earlier work.

The current version of PPS6 and the newly issued SPP8 in Scotland both make reference to *Vital and Viable Town Centres: Meeting the Challenge* (URBED - for the Department of the Environment, HMSO 1994). This report notes that "*Most people's idea of a town centre is a place that enables a wide range of needs to be met through one trip.*" (Chapter 2, Page 11). The report went on to look at the elements of a healthy town centre and it is this research that we believe forms the basis of a workable definition of a town centre.

We think that a location becomes a *de facto* town centre if it has the following characteristics:

- It is a retailing centre that serves the needs of the local community (offering both independent and multiple retailing)
- It provides leisure, entertainment and cultural facilities (eg pubs, restaurants, cinemas, theatres, venues, museums, tourist attractions)
- It is a public (eg libraries, courts, job centres, local authority services) and private sector (eg estate agents, solicitors, accountants, banking and finance) service centre
- It is an employment and business centre (beyond employment in just retail and leisure)
- It is truly accessible by a choice of means of transport (including walking)
- It is perceived by the local community as their town centre, a place with which they associate (and hopefully take pride) and which they can freely access at all times

The centre may have other functions as well, such as acting as a regional or national retail, entertainment or business centre, but fundamentally it must enable a wide range of needs to be met on one trip. Increasingly town and city centres in the UK are again becoming places in which people live as well.

*Vital and Viable Town Centres* looked in more detail at the characteristics of a healthy town centre and whilst not essential in defining what a *de facto* town centre is, they are nevertheless important in creating a centre that is both vital and viable. This includes good signing and orientation; high quality car parks and public transport facilities; a sense of safety and security; a good quality and well designed public realm with spaces and places that encourage people to linger; a clean, managed environment; regular events and activities; a sense of place.

### **New town centres?**

There is support for the concept that the above are the right elements through the wave of lifestyle developments in the US. Creating quality urban centres with a mix of uses these new developments are taking the very best of traditional downtown activities and features and are indeed aiming to create what Jane Jacobs called the “intricate sidewalk ballet” (*The Death and Life of Great American Cities*). Whilst they may become *de facto* town centres, does it necessarily follow that should be so *de jure*?

History is rich with examples of towns and town centres, and indeed some substantial cities, that existed in fact but were not so recognised in law for many years. They did not secure municipal functions or parliamentary representation. Today we are perhaps more concerned with whether the planning system recognises a location as a town centre than the law itself.

The English planning system is, in our view, rightly designed to protect the interests of existing town and city centres and to ensure that their vitality and viability is not adversely affected by out of centre development. As an organisation, ATCM is totally committed to the “town centres first” approach set out in PPS6 and we believe it is an essential continued commitment if we are to avoid the challenges that many North American cities have faced and which is now clearly evident in Japan and becoming daily more evident in Central and Eastern Europe. Here relatively unregulated out of town development has led to very visible disinvestment in town and city centres that is clearly undermining their vitality and viability.

ATCM believes it is essential that national planning policy on town centres is reflected in structure plans and local development frameworks. We are not of the view, however, that this means no new town centres can be created, and indeed would be strongly supportive of this happening to service the Growth Areas in East and South East England. We believe that key to this is that such centres accord with the definition set out above, rather than just being retail and leisure parks, for example. We also believe it imperative that the development and recognition of a new town centre is supported through a proper planning process that takes full account of any potential impact on the

vitality and viability of existing centres and looks to mitigate that impact where necessary.

We would also stress that in determining whether something is a town centre or not, there is an issue that should be key to the process. This issue is covered in the final point of the definition above. Is the new centre a place that can be freely accessed at all times? This does not, of course, mean that the interiors of private premises should be accessible 24 hours a day, but that the streets, squares, and other areas of ostensibly public realm should be. We see here a potential key difference between the lifestyle centre and the historic understanding of a town centre. Anyone can access the latter, subject to restraints by legal process, whereas the private lifestyle centre can exclude people for any number of reasons at any time. A centre that is only accessible to the customer or those sections of the community the owner wants in is not, at heart, a true town centre and may therefore not ultimately pass the definition test.

## **Conclusion**

New town centres have been created throughout history and we see no reason that process should now be stopped. We are, however, acutely aware that distances in the UK are not as great as in North America or other parts of the world, and would argue that this proximity requires clear evidence of the likely impact on the vitality and viability of existing centres and how adverse effects can be mitigated. We would argue that the creation of new town centres should be done through a proper strategic planning process. We also believe that any centre so designated should have the multiple functions of a town centre as set out in the definition above and would draw attention to the need for public access to be freely available. Given the urban density of the UK and the existing network of town and city centres we are of the view that except in the designated Growth Areas, the creation or designation of new town centres should be limited to exceptional cases.

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