

Gert-Jan HOSPERS*

PEOPLE, PLACE AND PARTNERSHIP: EXPLORING STRATEGIES TO REVITALISE TOWN CENTRES

Abstract. More and more town centres in Western Europe are in decline, as indicated by growing shop vacancy rates in shopping streets. To turn the tide, decision makers look for revitalisation strategies. Are there any solutions? Making use of theoretical insights, empirical findings and anecdotal evidence from the Netherlands, we suggest that town centre revitalisation is a matter of connecting people, place and partnership. First, strategies should be based on an understanding of how customers (people) behave. Secondly, redesign of the physical environment (place) might be needed, since visitors prefer compact centres that are built on a human scale and known for a unique profile. Finally, close collaboration between a wide range of local stakeholders (partnership) is essential. We conclude that town centre revitalisation is possible, but takes a lot of energy and patience from the actors involved.

Key words: town centres, revitalisation, urban design, collaboration, the Netherlands.

1. INTRODUCTION

All over Western Europe, town centres are confronted with structural change. In the United Kingdom experts have identified ‘a crisis of the high street’ (Portas, 2011), German commentators observe ‘a desolation of downtown’ (Die Welt, 2015) and in the Netherlands some authors even fear ‘the end of shops’ (Molenaar, 2011). To be sure, town centres are multifunctional: they offer more for the local community than only shopping opportunities – think of culture, entertainment and public services (Millington *et al.*, 2015). But it is in retail that today’s town centre transformation is most clearly visible: more and more shops make losses, get into trouble and close, leaving vacant retail units behind. For example, the average shop vacancy rate in the Netherlands rose from approximately 5.5% in 2010 to 7.4% in 2015 (Locatus, 2016). These nation-wide figures also include retail growth in

* Gert-Jan HOSPERS, Institute for Management Research, Radboud University, Nijmegen and Faculty of Business, Management and Social Sciences, University of Twente, PO Box 217, 7500 AE Enschede, The Netherlands, e-mail: g.j.hospers@utwente.nl

well-known cities like Amsterdam and Utrecht and thus hide the less favourable situation in Dutch medium-sized towns. In these places the average retail vacancy rate amounts to 11.9% (Locatus, 2016). In some towns, e.g. Delfzijl, Almelo and Heerlen, 20% of the shops have stayed empty for a long time with a spiral of decline in the streetscape as a result.

Against this background, town centre revitalisation ranks high on the agenda of local policy makers, retail associations and community organisations. There is a call to action, since town centres are widely seen as places that boost the local economy and activate the community (NRW, 2010; Portas, 2011; Department for Communities and Local Government, 2012; Van der Wal *et al.*, 2016). To be sure, the renewal of different parts of town (e.g. neighbourhoods, business areas and the town centre) is a well-documented topic. In the literature, the revitalisation of towns has been extensively reviewed (Couch *et al.*, 2011; Zipp, 2013; Friedman, 2014) and explored by means of case studies, also in earlier issues of this journal (Karppi and Takala, 2008; Wojnarowska, 2011; Faragó, 2012). It is beyond the scope of this paper to review all relevant theories and empirical insights and apply them to town centre revitalisation. Instead, we follow a more eclectic approach that builds on the ideas of ‘classic’ authors such as Nelson (1958), Jacobs (1961; 1992), Lynch (1960) and Gehl (2010). Their views have been a ‘filter’ in dealing with the vast literature on town centre revitalisation. Thus, making use of some classic ideas from marketing, planning and geography we analyse the state of today’s town centres and remedies that may help to revitalise them.

To illustrate the theory, several case examples are presented, primarily from medium-sized towns in the Netherlands. In the Dutch context, medium-sized towns are defined as urban settlements between 50,000 and 100,000 inhabitants. The majority of towns to be discussed in the paper fall within this category: Doetinchem (57,000 inhabitants), Roermond (57,000 inhabitants), Veenendaal (64,000 inhabitants), Bergen op Zoom (66,000 inhabitants), Gouda (71,500 inhabitants), Spijkensisse (72,500 inhabitants), Roosendaal (77,000 inhabitants) and Deventer (99,000 inhabitants). Only Leerdam (21,000 inhabitants), Dordrecht (118,500 inhabitants) and Leiden (123,000 inhabitants) fall outside the category of medium-sized towns. Obviously, there are differences between the centres of these towns with regard to their character (historic or modern style), patronage (residents and/or visitors from elsewhere) and function (leisure or convenience) (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013). For example, Roermond and Gouda are historic towns attracting customers from all over the country. In turn, Doetinchem en Spijkensisse are a-historic convenience centres, serving only their own region. In fact, every town centre is unique and requires a tailor-made and place-based strategy. Although there are ‘no one size fits all’ solutions to regenerate town centres (Portas, 2011), the aim of the article is to give some general insights about what seems to work and why this is the case.

2. WHY DO TOWN CENTRES DECLINE?

The crisis of town centres in Western Europe can be understood as a result of the interplay of structural developments on the demand side and the supply side of post-industrial society (NRW, 2010; Dobson, 2015; Millington *et al.*, 2015). On the demand side, we can observe a change in people's shopping habits due to socio-economic, demographic and technological trends. In these days, consumers are rather demanding and look for choice, convenience and service. Medrano *et al.* (2016, p. 2) call them 'Consumers 3.0, who 'want to be seen and valued more than their money'. At the same time, shopping in a town centre is only one of the growing leisure opportunities consumers can choose from – it is an activity that is not at everyone's priority list. In addition, more and more towns, especially outside the nation's economic core area, face lower birth rates and ageing. This results in population decline and a reduction of consumer demand. And in all Western-European countries we can see a rise of internet sales: a growing part of shopping takes place online. This can be observed for retail expenditure on both food and non-food (e.g. clothing, electronics and books).

When it comes to online shopping, one can discuss whether this trend has to do with demand or supply. After all, consumers take advantage of technologies offered by companies making money with it. Or, as Apple-founder Steve Jobs once famously said, 'A lot of times, people don't know what they want until you show it to them' (Ciotti, 2014, p. 1). However it is an obvious supply side factor behind the current town centre crisis is retail planning in most Western-European countries. Since the 1960s, local authorities have allowed or even stimulated new types of retail outside the centre. Examples are the emergence of superstores, indoor shopping centres, factory outlet centres and retail parks out of town. This decentralisation process prioritised consumers driving cars, but had a negative trading impact on traditional town centres (Thomas and Bromley, 2003). Recently, the oversupply of retail space even expanded due to a wave of public-private projects in which property developers and local authorities closely worked together to 'brand' their town. Take the Netherlands, where total retail space increased by about 15% between 2003 and 2010 (NRW, 2010).

Nonetheless, from all these transformative factors, online shopping is usually regarded as the biggest threat to town centre vitality (Molenaar, 2011; Die Welt, 2015). Instead of trying to beat this trend, some experts recommend retailers in shopping streets to make use of it in a proactive way (Sorescu *et al.*, 2011; Moers, 2015). In their view, the co-existence of online and offline will give town centres a boost. For instance, Moers (2015) has high hopes for 'open marketing': swipe screens on shop windows, interactive apps on smartphones and other devices that enable shopkeepers to communicate with consumers passing by. However, it seems that this is still a bridge too far for today's town centre visitors. In the Dutch town

of Veenendaal, for instance, an experiment combining online and offline shopping enabled by a local Wi-Fi-network failed due to a lack of interest among retailers and consumers (Hulshof, 2015). And a study by Ruigrok NetPanel (2016) revealed that 80% of the Dutch cannot imagine a life without physical shops. Particularly in the case of food, furniture and clothing they consider shopping in the ‘real’ world crucial.

3. TOWN CENTRE ATTRACTIVENESS

Although digital technologies will certainly change the physical appearance of shopping streets, combining offline and online retailing is not the solution to the town centre crisis. A deeper analysis is needed. In fact, we have to go back to a more fundamental question: what are key drivers for people to visit town centres? Basically, there must be something that consumers cannot find at home, sitting behind their iPad or swiping on their smartphone. Medrano *et al.* (2016) suggest that the human factor is essential. In their empirical research they find that the personal attention from salespersons is a main reason to visit small local retailers in shopping streets. Indeed, in town centre shops consumers can get the professional advice and face-to-face service which is not offered online. A plethora of empirical studies shows that the town centre’s quality in terms of retail mix and atmosphere are of crucial importance (Hackett and Foxall, 1994; Leo and Philippe, 2002; Teller, 2008; Teller and Elms, 2012; Millington *et al.*, 2015). In other words, the look and feel of the retail location matters. But which place attributes have an impact on town centre attractiveness in the eyes of consumers? Based on some classic ideas in marketing, planning and geography, we can identify three factors in particular: (1) a compact area; (2) the human scale and (3) a unique profile. Below, we deal with these factors in more detail and illustrate them with examples.

3.1. Factor 1: A Compact Area

In his seminal text on retail geography Nelson (1958) presented a ‘theory of cumulative attraction’ that is still useful to understand the attractiveness of town centres. He wrote that ‘a given number of stores dealing in the same merchandise will do more business if they are located adjacent or in proximity to each other than if they are widely scattered’ (Nelson, 1958, p. 58). This principle of cumulative attraction is also true for shops that are in another type of business – after all, consumers have a ‘taste for variety’: they value a diverse retail mix.

Obviously, the concentration of shops in a high density part of town is beneficial for both salespersons and consumers. Neighbouring shopkeepers can use the centre infrastructure they would not have without clustering, while search cost for customers are lower (Passaro *et al.*, 2016). However, in declining town centres these positive effects are threatened. In contrast to growth, shrinkage cannot be planned in one area of town: shop closures follow from individual decisions, leading to empty units at several places in the centre. The result is a fragmented spatial structure with operating and closed shops next to each other. In other words, with its many vacant units a town centre in crisis can be compared with a ‘Swiss cheese’: a structure that is not dense and compact, but scattered with holes.

Unsurprisingly, most people who visit town centres do not like shopping streets with many vacant units (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011; Raatgever, 2014; Multiscope, 2014). Empty properties suggest that the street is not doing well, while it may also attract vandalism and other activities that deteriorate the streetscape. Thus, a spiral of decline can be induced. Research by Multiscope (2014) among 1,000 Dutch consumers showed that for 25% of them the presence of vacant premises is a reason to visit the respective town centre less frequently. Moreover, streets with a lot of empty shop buildings run the risk that more vacant units emerge, because retailers preferably settle down at those places in town where the action is. Against this background, more and more local authorities try to improve the physical appearance of fragmented shopping streets by stimulating the temporary use of empty properties for commercial, cultural or public purposes (Dobson, 2015). Examples of this ‘meanwhile use’ or ‘in-between spaces’ are pop-up retail (shops that sell their products for a short period of time), art galleries and other creative displays. However, these are palliative rather than structural measures to revitalise shopping streets.

In the Netherlands several towns apply a more fundamental approach to tackle fragmentation in the town centre. In order to encourage shops in declining streets to move to the heart of town, there is a planning instrument known as ‘urban land readjustment’ (Broeren, 2012). The idea is that property owners from promising and deprived streets exchange parts of their property driven by the joint interest of a vital town centre. To make the deal attractive for everyone, participants have to compensate each other for differences in property value. The local government acts as a broker and manages the compensation fund. Experiences with urban land readjustment in the towns of Deventer and Dordrecht make clear that such negotiations are difficult (Boer, 2015). In Deventer the exchange process succeeded thanks to an active group of local retailers, but in Dordrecht property owners did not come to an agreement. If only one party in the town centre does not want to cooperate, the whole

readjustment procedure is blocked. Therefore, the Dutch government has been working on legislation that can force property owners to come to a deal. This makes sense, because it enables a process in which retail gets more and more clustered in promising streets. Ideally, the result of this readjustment is a compact town centre which looks better.

3.2. Factor 2: The Human Scale

Town centres and the streets that are part of them are not only ‘places to buy’, but also ‘places to be’ (Dobson, 2015). Indeed, people go to the centre for more reasons than only shopping. For instance, they also come to visit restaurants, bars, the cinema, a museum and personal service providers (e.g. the hairdresser or dentist), meet friends or participate in cultural, entertainment and community activities. Thus, town centres are multifunctional and social places (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013; Millington *et al.*, 2015). The mix of offerings and the opportunity to come together in public space make the town centre into a kind of ‘living room’ for the local community. The late American author Jane Jacobs was among the first urban thinkers who recognised this role of town centres. In her classic article ‘Downtown is for people’ (1958) – it inspired her bestseller *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) – she made it very clear: ‘It is the premise of this critique that the best way to plan for downtown is to see how people use it today; to look for its strengths and to exploit and reinforce them. There is no logic that can be superimposed on the city; people make it, and it is to them, not buildings, that we must fit our plans’ (Jacobs, 1958, p. 160).

One of the planners who has been inspired by this call is Jan Gehl. In his book *Cities for People* (2010) he concretises Jacob’s view to fit plans to people instead of buildings. According to him, public space must be built ‘at eyelevel and with 5 km/hour’, i.e. the experience people have when they are walking through it. Gehl’s studies show that places built at this human scale attract more people than large, impersonal and monotonous locations. Apparent details, such as a varied and colourful physical environment, planting, pocket parks and fountains, may contribute a lot to a street’s atmosphere, while good walking paths and comfortable street furniture make people feel at ease. An attractive town centre is like a party where people stay because they are enjoying themselves (Gehl, 2010). And this is also profitable for retailers: consumers who like the environment stay longer, spend more and tend to come back. Therefore, it is useful for stakeholders to check how inviting and hospitable their town centre is. For this purpose, they can employ the ‘customer journey’, a tool that follows a potential customer through a series of ‘touch points’, from arrival in town and way-finding to the experience on the spot and the journey home (Hart *et al.*, 2013).

Empirical research in the Netherlands confirms the ideas of Jacobs and Gehl. For instance, 52% of Dutch consumers indicate that they visit town centres regularly because doing so is considered to be ‘convivial’ (Multiscope, 2014). To be sure, the term ‘conviviality’ is difficult to grasp and operationalise, but it suggests the importance of atmospherics in public space. Indeed, Dutch towns that paid more attention to this report positive results regarding the vitality of their centre (Platform Binnenstadsmanagement, 2015; Brugman, 2016). For example, over the last few years the town of Roermond has invested in a more compact town centre and more hospitality, e.g. through a better signage system. Parts of the centre have been made traffic-free and repaved, thus giving more opportunities for pedestrians to walk around and café owners to expand their terraces. Alternatively, with local subsidies the historic town of Leiden has renovated more than eighty shop fronts, which gave the high streets a more authentic look and more pleasant appearance. Such small design changes – because of their pinpoint-like character sometimes called ‘acupuncture intervention’ (Glaser *et al.*, 2012) – can make a big difference in enhancing the quality of public space.

3.3. Factor 3: A Unique Profile

Since the 1990s town centres in Western Europe have started to resemble each other, because more and more chain stores have entered the shopping street. Theoretically, this ‘clone town’-syndrome (New Economics Foundation, 2004) is not necessarily a problem: many towns have a regional function and thus do not compete on a national level. At the same time, medium-sized towns with a bigger town or city in their vicinity may lose visitors. Often these larger places have amenities (e.g. a shopping mall, entertainment district or cultural quarter) that pull people from a wide catchment area. For example, the city of Amsterdam with its high-end retail is a rival for surrounding towns in the region. To catch the eye, retain visitors and possibly attract new target groups, town centres have to look for a unique selling point and brand it. Examples of such attractors are a flagship building, museum or another landmark (Lynch, 1960; Ashworth, 2009). Free parking, barrier-free facilities or something else serving a certain group of customers can be a trigger as well. Paradoxically, also a large chain store like Primark or Media Markt – partly responsible for the homogenisation trend in shopping – can give a town centre a profile. It is recommendable, however, not to brand too many image carriers at the same time, so that a town can stick better in people’s mind (Hospers, 2011).

Ideally, the attractor of a town centre is not something trivial, but connected to its identity. To find an aspect of the town’s DNA that can act as a trigger for consumers, local heritage usually guides the way. Ashworth (2009) discusses a range of local profile markers, such as striking historical buildings (e.g. a church,

tower or signature architecture), hallmark events (e.g., a festival, market or fair), named personalities (e.g. a painter, composer or writer who was born in the town) and local products (e.g. food, drink or crafts). Traditionally, French and German towns brand their local attractions well, by announcing their profile on websites, place-name signs or even in a special spot in the town centre, by means of a monument, sculpture or another piece of art. Think of Saint-Nectaire (France), famous for its cheese and church, as well as Eisenach (Germany), promoting itself as the birthplace of composer Bach. To be sure, town centres cannot make money from their identity marker alone – it is only a trigger with possible spinoff-effects to local retailers. After all, people visiting an attractor often combine it with shopping, eating out or having something to drink.

There are many examples of Dutch town centres that benefit from highlighting their local identity. Gouda is a case in point (Platform Binnenstadsmanagement, 2015). The town presents itself as ‘cheese capital’, making use of its famous Gouda Cheese. The town centre management has succeeded to connect this ‘Holland classic’ with today’s local food trend and organises recurring events based around cheese, varying from markets and festivals to walking tours. This profile creates a vital context from which small local retailers in the centre take advantage. Leerdam is also illustrative: like Gouda the town could have promoted its cheese (Leerdammer), but instead opted for its local tradition of glass blowing. There are many combination visits in Leerdam: people visiting the National Glass Museum and Glass Factory often go shopping or eating afterwards in the town centre, where glass sculptures in public space remind them that they are in ‘the town of glass’. Due to their lack of history ‘New Towns’ often face problems in building an image around a unique local theme. Here, a particular retail mix or a large chain store can act as an attractor (Terhorst and Bal, 2016). In Spijkenisse, for example, the closure of a massive Saturn store – a German electronics chain – in 2015 clearly had a negative effect on the vitality of the rest of the town centre.

4. THE NEED FOR PARTNERSHIP

The revitalisation of a declining town centre requires collaborative action from a lot of stakeholders. For instance, when local government is planning to regenerate the main shopping street, the approval and cooperation from local retailers is needed to implement it. Moreover, it is important that all the separate actions are coordinated, because in the end it is the collective offer that makes a town centre attractive and competitive. Paraphrasing an English proverb, one could say that ‘a town centre is only as strong as its weakest element’. Therefore, many towns in

Western-Europe have invested in a ‘Town Centre Management’-scheme (TCM). TCM is a strategic tool to develop the town centre from a customer-oriented perspective by involving stakeholders from the public, private and voluntary sectors (Warnaby *et al.*, 1998; Whyatt, 2004; McAteer and Stephens, 2011). Ideally, these parties offer expertise and other resources to come up with a joint vision on the future of the town centre. After that, the vision is used to formulate coordinated actions for the short and the long run. Below we will see, however, that this is often easier said than done.

4.1. Public, Private and Voluntary Actors

In theory, all stakeholders engaged in town centre revitalisation have a common goal: a vital town centre that is competitive and capable to attract visitors. At the same time, every party has its own ideas on how this overall aim should be achieved. Typically, the interests between the three types of stakeholders differ: public parties strive for the ‘public good’, private actors look for more business and trade, while the voluntary sector wants to make a difference to particular groups in local community (De Nisco *et al.*, 2008; Håkansson and Lagin, 2015). In the public sector local government is a primary and multiform stakeholder – its task is to balance all interests in local society, but also to coordinate the departments within the municipal organisation that are responsible for aspects of the town centre (e.g. transport, public green and retail). Besides local government public tourist, leisure and cultural bodies may play a role in the revitalisation process. The private sector includes a wide range of stakeholders, such as retailers (from small local shops to large chain stores), restaurants, bars and hotels, property owners (real estate companies, housing companies and investors) and real estate agents and brokers. Finally, the voluntary sector represents local heritage associations, minority groups (e.g. elderly people) and other community organisations.

In reality, collaboration between stakeholders to improve the town centre is not always a smooth process. Several problems may occur (De Nisco *et al.*, 2008; McAteer and Stephens, 2011; Raatgever, 2014). A regular issue is that stakeholders do not contribute equally to the partnership. In this case, free-rider problems may arise, especially when it comes to funding, e.g. for a joint place marketing campaign. Also participation by lobby groups from the voluntary sector can be problematic: there is always the risk that the interests of the passive majority in town are defeated by the aspirations of a passionate minority. Furthermore, within a town alliance local government and the business community may get in a quarrel. Frequently, this has to do with different norm and value systems (Jacobs, 1992; Hospers, 2006). For example, a present, dinner or some sponsoring which business men may consider a favour for a friend can be understood as corruption among government officials. At the same time,

for most business men the principle ‘a deal is a deal’ is extremely important, although policy makers cannot always stick to their word due to new political circumstances. But also interests within one group of stakeholders can differ. For example, local retailers often call for short term actions, while property owners tend to have a wait-and-see attitude.

There are a number of Dutch examples illustrating the aforementioned problems. Take the town of Bergen op Zoom, where in 2014 the local retailers association had an argument with local government on who should decide about spending funds to market the town centre (BN De Stem, 2014). Mediation was proposed, but did not take place, because the local retailers were reluctant to cooperate. Meanwhile, the town centre further declined. Therefore, the municipality decided to start a new trajectory in which also civil society should play a role. In 2016 a ‘Binnenstadslab’ (Town Centre Laboratory) was opened in a vacant unit. Here, anyone with ideas for the future of the centre can walk in and leave a message. In the Dutch town of Doetinchem such a ‘downtown future lab’ has generated a number of useful revitalisation plans. A selection of these plans has been implemented, to the satisfaction of the participating stakeholders (Stad Doetinchem, 2016). However, within Doetinchem’s partnership local engagement of property owners was low, which confirms the findings of Håkansson and Lagin (2015). In their research on town centre development they observe that property owners are often inert and apparently lack cooperation incentives.

4.2. The Quality of Local Collaboration

To regenerate a town centre and let it grow again, a good vision is not enough. In the end, it is about implementing the vision in practice. This asks for sufficient organising capacity: stakeholders have to join forces and work on the contents and the process simultaneously. Thus, town centre revitalisation is a matter of both (1) the quality of the town centre and (2) the quality of local collaboration (Portas, 2011; Millington *et al.*, 2015; Van Scheerdijk *et al.*, 2016). The quality of the town centre refers to the issues we discussed in section 3, in other words striving for a compact centre at a human scale with a unique profile. To get there, investments have to be made in the area’s ‘hardware’, such as relocating shops, redesigning public space or promoting a landmark. This is a complex task, because there are different types of stakeholders in charge. They have to divide tasks, inform each other, develop joint projects and coordinate actions. Therefore, the degree to which parties collaborate – the software – is a critical success factor. In short: also in town centre revitalisation hardware needs software (Van Scheerdijk *et al.*, 2016). This is not only true for the revitalising phase, but also for the period thereafter, when the town centre needs management and maintenance.

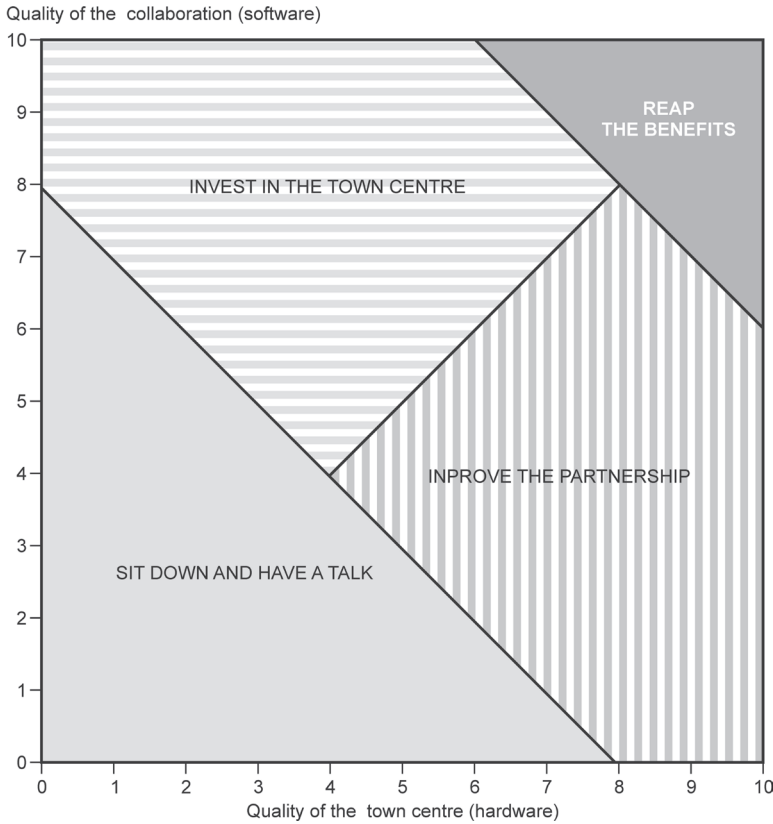


Fig. 1. Score card for a town centre, with quality assessment on a scale from 0 (disastrous) to 10 (excellent)
 Source: based on Van Scheerdijk *et al.* (2016)

Figure 1 combines the hardware and software dimensions and indicates the resulting issues for town centres and their stakeholders. A place is in trouble when both the physical quality of the area and the collaboration between stakeholders are scoring low (light grey area). Stakeholders can best sit down, have a talk and decide what has the highest priority now. There is more hope for locations falling into one of the two striped categories: they should invest in either the hardware or the software. Town centres in the dark grey area – at least for the Netherlands this is a small group when looking at the growing shop vacancy rates – can reap the benefits from their efforts. Obviously, town centres can move from one position to another. The Dutch town of Roosendaal is a case in point (Ons Retailland, 2016). Since 2013, local authorities have been trying to tackle town centre decline. The aim is to make it more compact, green and connected (both physically and virtually), promoting Roosendaal as a ‘Smart Retail City’. At the start, there was

a lot of disagreement among stakeholders. Therefore, the municipality invested heavily in improving the partnership. Finally, this paid off: after three years, it seems that there is now wide support for the regeneration plans.

5. CONCLUSIONS

In this article we raised an issue that is worrying many decision makers in Western Europe: how to boost town centres where a growing shop vacancy rate suggests that things are not going well? We approached this question in a multidisciplinary way. By combining insights from marketing, geography and planning it was possible to shed some light on the challenges declining town centres face. In our view, it all starts with an understanding of how customers behave (people). In section 2 we argued that shopping habits of customers have changed, with online shopping being the most transformative trend. At the same time, the virtual world does not really replace the real world. People are still visiting town centres, but why is this the case? It seems that place attributes do play a major role: attractive and competitive town centres are compact, built at a human scale and known for a unique local profile. Town centres in crisis are therefore advised to redesign their physical environment (place) with the help of these planning principles, even if this is a major task. But regeneration is not only about a vision on where to go to. The ultimate success factor is fruitful collaboration of a wide range of public, private and societal stakeholders (partnership) to implement the vision.

All in all, we suggest that town centre revitalisation is a matter of connecting people and places and developing lasting partnerships. The score card on the hardware and software aspects presented in section 4 is an attempt to translate the analysis into a practical tool. Unfortunately, in this article we could only touch upon some of the many issues regarding town centre revitalisation. In our view, the topic is far too complex and dynamic to give definitive answers. Town centres are living ecosystems in which interventions may have unforeseen effects (Coca-Stefaniak, 2013). Therefore, it is difficult to assess whether revitalisation efforts have succeeded or failed and how the causality should be understood. However, if there is a lesson to be drawn from the Dutch case examples, then it is that town centre revitalisation depends on a coalition of the willing: local actors, be it retailers or authorities, developing a vision and taking joint action to let their town centre grow again. The Dutch policy experiences also suggest that revitalisation is possible indeed. But it is a long-term process, asking a lot of energy and patience from the parties involved. At the same time, working on a vital town centre is never a waste of time, because it always has been at the very heart of a happy, dynamic and functional local community.

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