

BOOK REVIEWS

*Final report – Innovative strategies
for retail revitalisation in medium-sized cities*
Urbact/RetailLink, 2018, 170 pages

As an economist, in all my activities – both academic and practical – I have always paid special attention to the economic aspect of revitalisation which, in my opinion, when properly implemented throughout the process, guarantees much greater effectiveness and durability of the introduced changes. Moreover, I am also interested in the participation of local communities in the development of different projects in cities. Therefore, I found Final Report “Innovative strategies for retail revitalisation in medium-sized cities” extremely interesting. The report presents the results of a project in which 10 different medium-sized European cities participated. The cities and stakeholders were looking for ways to develop and adapt to the current needs of the retail sector which is an important element of the local economy and urban vitality. Each of the beneficiaries conducted an open and oriented dialogue that was aimed at creating an attractive offer in compliance with user expectations.

For centuries, the areas where trade operates have been not only the places where economic activities concentrate, but also the centre of local community life and a point of reference for shaping the identity of a city’s inhabitants (Nary, 2001). Due to the nature of shops and service points operating particularly in city centres, their customers are not only the dwellers of city centres, but of entire cities or even regions. These areas frequently play the role of public space and tourist attraction, and determine the image of a city. However, technological progress and the changes to our buying patterns cause a decrease in the role and significance of high street sales in the functional structure of urban areas. These areas can be helped by adopting a coherent spatial development strategy, in particular as

far as trade functionality is concerned (Celińska-Janowicz, 2014; Guy, 1994). The discussed Report perfectly meets the needs of local governments in this respect.

The Report focuses on medium-sized cities, thus fitting the trends of urban policies of many countries including Poland (National Urban Policy, 2015; Urban Agenda for the EU, 2016). These policies emphasize the problems of starting modern development actions by medium-sized cities. Additionally, such places are more vulnerable to negative effects of economic crises or demographic changes. Changes connected with the outflow of inhabitants or retail sales from city centres are very visible here. Simultaneously, what is also visible is greater flexibility in management and greater motivation to improve the living conditions.

Our buying patterns have changed completely. Today, we are very eager to shop online. New business models have appeared on the market. Social media is used both as a communication tool and a means for supporting customers. How can empty buildings in city centres be re-filled with retail in this rapidly changing world? Project beneficiaries made an attempt to answer this question, each of them individually, considering their endogenous conditions, but also supporting each other and using different research methods to identify universal solutions.

The Report suggests research areas, phenomena, and indexes which enable one to determine the profile of a local consumer and their needs, as well as target consumer groups. One can learn the results of analyses which show typical consumer behaviour. Different research methods and tools have been used, starting from desk research of data obtained from banks, property market or mobile apps, to fieldwork and periodic interviews and surveys in the field or online. The third diagnostic step is to categorise the retail offer and the place according to consumer perception, i.e., one needs to determine whether consumers are treated functionally, sensorily or symbolically, what has been the customer experience so far, and how a city is perceived from the point of view of its commercial offer. The conducted research has enabled researchers to understand the needs and preferences of inhabitants, which is definitely an appropriate starting point for developing proposals of necessary changes and strategies for the future. A big strength of the report is the fact that it illustrates subsequent phases of project implementation with concrete examples of beneficiaries, which might serve as genuine inspiration for other cities.

The Report focuses on the analysis of the retail offer, however, it rightly notices that the strategy for retail revitalisation needs to include several supplementary aspects as medium-sized cities require a set of actions and policies that shall create conditions promoting retail, e.g. via spatial planning, mobility, organisation of cultural events, tax regulations, and promotion. Retail revitalisation is not about opening new shops, as that is not very realistic. Focus should be placed on populating city centres and developing innovative commercial initiatives, as illustrated by the example of actions undertaken in Iqualanda (Spain). Another important aspect is the establishment of local partnerships that follow one vision and have common leaders. This issue is handled differently by different cities, which is determined by the local polit-

ical, institutional or organisational conditions, or by conditions related to the power of social capital. Some cities appointed Business Improvement Districts (BID) or Zones (BIZ), which enable the collection of taxes that are then earmarked for the improvement of a particular area through modernisation, cleaning works, improvement of safety, or marketing. Here, digital platforms were presented as they are more and more popular in cities providing simultaneous access to different service and commercial offers, organisation of various events for retail area enlivenment, and place branding. What interested me the most, however, was the part devoted to the organisation and adaptation of space to proposals included in the retail revitalisation strategy. Please remember that, as the report confirms, local tools supporting retail development not only should follow general principles of planning connected with the fact that, essentially, a city centre is home of leisure and recreational shopping and that there should be shops and services satisfying basic needs in the places of daily shopping, but also they should be well suited to the local specificity.

The core of the report and its most inspiring part are collected operating plans for particular cities developed within the project. These plans show how visions and innovative strategies for retail revitalisation can be elaborated under different conditions, and how they can fit the context of a particular place and its identity. They also show ways of reaching proposed solutions. Each city presents its own perception of the problem, though within commonly established frames, which constitutes another substantial value of the study. Several interesting conclusions which are included in the report may inspire local governments to take similar actions within their areas. This study is worth recommending, especially to administrators of medium-sized European cities. The Report may also be an interesting starting point for researchers from different countries and fields of science for further analyses and studies within the field of retail revitalisation.

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**Christa REICHER, Fabio BAIRO-KAISER,
Päivi KATAIKKO-GRIGOLEIT, Sarah MÜLLER, Jan POLÍVKA
(eds), *Urban Integration. From Walled City To Integrated City,
Stadt- und Raumplanung*, vol. 19, Zürich: LIT, 2019, 100 pages**

Despite (or because of) the undeniable progress of the last two centuries, socio-economic exclusion and inequalities have not been effectively addressed yet. Not only is this observed when comparing countries or regions, but such problems are a constant concern locally, on a city or neighbourhood scales. Manifestations of those challenges – their scope, intensity, and the entities concerned – vary in space and time. Still, as they strike at the fundamental rights of individuals, households or larger communities, there is a pursuit for means and ways to mediate, level, balance, and overcome them, provided that is already within our capabilities. Much has already been said and written in this respect, however, quite often those issues are examined from too narrow points of view. The book by Reicher *et al.* aims at widening the perspective, combining multiple angles, visions, and experiences regarding social integration in the city against the context of contemporary global shifts and digital evolution.

Please consider some short technical information to start with. This publication has a small, handy format and a paper cover, which in hard times for traditional books might be an advantage for those who like to carry and read books not only in the office or at home. It was printed in colour (with the prevalence of striking pink) on acid-free paper, as the editorial page informs. The quality of the print is better where there is text and worse as far as graphic elements are concerned. However, that could be a deliberate act of the publisher or a result of using less environmentally damaging technology of print – it is hard to say. In any case, the content is legible enough, and the fact of supplementing it with coherent artworks by Antje Rieder, a professional graphic recorder, makes subsequent pieces of the text easier to comprehend and compare.

However, it is the content, not the cover or the illustrations that matters. The book is the result of an international symposium held in Essen (Germany) in 2018. The obvious implication of this fact is that it concerns problems of the pre-pandemic world, not to mention the recent war in eastern Europe. Contributions to this publication were made by practitioners, researchers, and their future successors, as students were also actively involved. The professional specialisations symposium participants included: urban and regional planning, architecture and urban design, economy, sustainable housing, heritage conservation, landscape architecture, and ecology.

The book consists of three major parts with an introduction and concluding thoughts by Christa Reicher, followed by information on contributors to this volume.

The major parts are divided further into sub-sections, two of which also have their own introductions (I could not understand why not all of them). The first part is entitled 'Transforming City Regions: Urban Integration in an International Perspective.' In general, it is a collection of abstracts, thematically organised into two parts: 1. *Polycentricity + Multi-Scale Spatial Models*; and 2. *Resilience + Diversity & Inclusion*. Some of the abstracts are insightful and extensive with a clear structure and useful references (e.g., 'Flexible Green Spaces' by Stephanie Haury, 'The Geographies of Urban Resilience in German Large Cities' by Asad Asadzadeh, Theo Kötter and Dominik Weiß, or 'Collective Challenges and Joint Arrangements in the Dispersed Territory of Flanders' by Maarten Gheysen, Kris Scheerlinck and Erik Van Daele), while a few remain more superficial and offer little to be learned. The abstracts are followed by section 3. *Integrated Urban Regions: Academia, Education, Practice*, which takes the form of a transcript illustrated with a few photographs. The reader learns about the moderated conversation with which the symposium was concluded.

The second part of the book, i.e., 'From walled City to Integrated City. International Summer School,' presents the course of a design workshop held in Zollverein Essen (formerly a hard coal mine and coking plant, today recognised as a UNESCO heritage site) and at Dortmund Technical University. The event was supposed to promote cooperation between schools of different geographical origins. The participants were associated with planning and architecture, so they tackled problems within urban planning and management, as well as small-scale integration. The framework of the workshop was built upon four anchor points, namely education, public space, housing, and work. Six thematic groups were established to explore different, though essentially intertwining, aspects of urban integration:

- 'The Triple F' with food and food-related activities as a core aspect (cultivation, preparation, 'green education' – both literally, which means, e.g., classrooms decorated with biotic elements, and figuratively, such as cooking schools or workshops);

- 'Nodes + Threads' focused on developing pedestrian and bike infrastructure. The aim of this part was to enhance integration by removing physical and social barriers in the Zollverein site;

- 'ART-HUNT' incorporated ideas such as art, learning, recognition, social participation, tourist attraction, and digital advancement so that economic development could occur to the benefit of local inhabitants;

- 'Blue Threads' accentuating the integrative role of surface waters. The participants worked on two types of water systems – of flat and linear structure, as well as two scenarios – within 'normal' conditions, and if water drainage devices no longer operate;

- 'Common ground' emphasised the role of common, long-life learning for fostering communication, and acquiring and sharing knowledge. That was supposed to be achieved through knowledge hubs, urban learning landscape, and the society that may take advantage of it.

– ‘Fragmentation Integrated’ aimed to develop a coherent vision of the area that consisted of the Zollverein site, as well as forest, semi-public spaces, and a car logistics centre. The idea was to, again, transform barriers into ‘keystones’ and opportunities for this area and its users.

For each of those thematic groups, the general idea and goals were presented in the book, together with some deeper thoughts and conclusions. However, adding some technical and practical details would be interesting, even if it were to take a much abbreviated form. What kinds of tasks were assigned? How long did it take to perform them? What were the routes they explored on the site? What kinds of difficulties did the participants and organisers encounter and how were they overcome? Something like that could be extremely useful for conducting analogous or loosely inspired workshops. Such an addition would further enhance the educational value of this book.

Finally, there is the question whether I would recommend the book. I think yes. Though I find it more suitable for those who are not very familiar with the ideas of polycentric development, sustainability, resilience, diversity, and integration within the city scale. Either senior students or PhD candidates and young academics who are just beginning to explore such fields as planning and architecture, sociology, and geography could benefit from it for sure. The same refers to local politicians or activists interested in social cohesion, diverse environments, economic shift, and adaptation in the global digital world. For more mature and experienced researchers, the content would probably be less gripping and surprising, as it is not an in-depth complex and coherent scientific analysis that enables tremendous theoretical or empirical advancement. Nevertheless, even reader advanced in the topic may find some useful pieces of knowledge here. After all, one cannot deny the fact that such events and post-conference books usually are inspirational and thought-provoking, and, therefore, facilitating future scientific, educational or practical achievements.

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