Introduction

Britain's town and city centres are in a state of crisis. All over the country, urban centres face a set of challenges caused principally by a marked decline in the business of shopping in the town centre. The evidence of this decline is there for all to see in store closures, vacant shops, mass retail redundancies and underused high streets. Recent years have been a litany of crisis and collapse in high street retailing. In 2018, more than 14,500 stores closed with the loss of more than 117,000 jobs. In 2020, more than 16,000 stores closed and over 182,000 jobs were lost. Some of the medium-term causes of these severe contractions have been building steadily for some time. The proportion of shopping done online, for example, has increased rapidly since the early 2000s, and now makes up around a quarter of all sales. Footfall in town centres has sagged year on year across the same period. Crucially, real wages and household disposable incomes in Britain have stagnated since the 2008 financial crisis – for a sector that relies upon hoovering up consumers' spending money, this is critical. Taken together, these darkening prospects meant that even before the Coronavirus crisis struck in early 2020 the United Kingdom had an estimated oversupply of retail space in the order of 25–30 per cent.[1] In practice, this means a lot of empty shops in a lot of urban centres. The economic dislocation, job losses and forced shop closures of the Coronavirus pandemic have made a very bad situation significantly worse; the contraction of high street retailing and the shift to online purchasing have accelerated markedly, and many shops will never reopen. Today we see government task forces, advisory commissions, industry experts and local authorities searching desperately for new solutions to these problems. The death of the high street and the future of the town centre has become an urgent public policy issue.

[1] These details in Centre for Retail Research, *The Crisis in Retailing: Closures and Job Losses*, 2021, available online; Chris Rhodes, *Retail Sector in the UK*, House of Commons Briefing Paper SN06186, 29 October 2018; Helen Thomas, 'Why John Lewis Tells Us This Retail Crisis is Just Beginning', *The Financial Times*, 17 March 2021.

At first glance the causes of these urban woes can seem intensely modern and contemporary; the rise of internet shopping, pandemic-driven dislocation and the dwindling spending power of consumers in post-crash, austerity Britain, are all very much twenty-first century problems. And yet, the current crisis facing town centres has been brewing for a long time. It represents the collapse of an urban developmental model that has held sway in Britain since the 1940s – that of 'the shopping city' – in which urban centres seeking growth and prosperity have competed to establish themselves as the most successful shopping destinations for their region. Since the middle of the twentieth century, retailing has been accepted and promoted as the mainstay of urban economies and, as a result, the demands of the sector have been allowed to dictate the form and function of central areas. The present challenges are so acute precisely because urban centres have come to rely so heavily upon the business of retailing for their economic and social vitality (while, conversely, those places with a more diverse economic structure and a richer mix of social functions face a less existential threat). And it is a very particular form of retailing that has come to dominate Britain's urban centres, specifically the highly organised and efficient multiple retail chains whose sophisticated sales and management techniques enabled them to pay the highest commercial rents. This has produced what one industry expert recently called a 'retail monoculture' in urban Britain, with identikit high streets dominated everywhere by the same nationally organised retail chains.[2] Like all monocultures, this urban economic formation is brittle and vulnerable, lacking resilience and liable to collapse under stress.

The importance of the commercial rents generated by high street retailing points to another critical part of this story, and one that also has a long genesis across the second half of the twentieth century – namely, the transformation of central urban space into a lucrative tradeable commodity and its enlistment in complex financial systems of wealth-holding, investment and accumulation. The dominance of the most efficient and profitable forms of retailing in urban centres has been consistently advanced by the dynamics of property-based wealth-creation, as owners and investors in urban property seek to wring the maximum returns out of this valuable physical asset. Indeed, alongside organised retailing, the commercial property sector also emerged as a mainstay of urban economies from the mid-twentieth century onwards. Commercial property *development* in particular – the 'creative destruction'

[2] Jonathan Eley, 'Retail Crisis is the Mother of Urban Centre Reinvention', *The Financial Times*, 23 November 2020.

of the extant urban fabric and its reconstruction as a much more valuable property asset – exploded in size and significance after 1945, and quickly emerged as a significant force within the national economy as a whole. By the early 1960s there were five times as many property companies listed on the London Stock Exchange as there had been before the war, when property development remained a decidedly marginal economic activity. The value of these companies, along with the properties they owned and built and Britain's urban centres, skyrocketed. The property business produced more millionaires in the three decades after the war than any other industry, and the price of urban land soared. Owning and redeveloping valuable central area property became an attractive investment for Britain's sophisticated financial sector, particularly the large financial institutions that became the chief holders of British capital in this era; their annual investments in property went from £8 m in 1946 to over £1bn in 1976.[3] The rise of this dynamic new mode of wealth-creation transformed the physical, economic and social geography of Britain's cities, making redevelopment a profitable end in its own right and conditioning the types of environment and activity that could stand in the town centre. In the period after 1945, the property sector established itself as a major commercial force and a decisive influence on urban form and function.

The life of the shopping city was thus firmly shaped by two important commercial forces – the modern, organised retail sector and the commercial property business – which operated in tandem to overhaul urban economies and environments. By the later decades of the twentieth century, the growth and profitability of both of these sectors in Britain was an internationally recognised business success.[4] Of course, the rise of the shopping city was also inextricable from the societal and structural shift towards mass affluence and a consumer-driven economy which took place in the second half of the twentieth century. This process had long historical genealogies and plenty of pre-war precursors, but the coming of 'the affluent society' – in which the majority saw their real wages and

[3] These details in Oliver Marriott, *The Property Boom* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1967), Appendix 4; 'Property: The Philosopher's Stone', *The Economist*, 18 March 1972, 135–136; Peter Scott, *The Property Masters: A History of the British Commercial Property Sector* (London: E&FN Spon, 1996), Table 10.1.

[4] Carlo Morelli, 'Increasing Value? Modern British Retailing in the Late Twentieth Century', in Richard Coopey & Peter Lyth (eds.), *Business in Britain in the Twentieth Century: Decline and Renaissance?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 271–295; Martin Boddy, 'The Property Sector in Late-Capitalism: The Case of Britain', in Michael Dear & Allen J. Scott (eds.), *Urbanization and Urban Planning in Capitalist Society* (London: Routledge, 1981), 267–286; Alistair Kefford, 'Actually Existing Managerialism: Planning, Politics and Property Development in Post-1945 Britain', *Urban Studies* 58:12 (2021), 2441–2455.

disposable incomes rise significantly – was a post-war phenomenon. In an economy fuelled increasingly by personal consumption, and where traditional sources of urban growth and employment in areas like manufacturing were flagging, towns and cities reoriented themselves towards the dynamic domain of affluent consumerism. Large retailers and commercial property developers were able to operate so successfully in urban Britain, transforming central areas with elaborate and expensive new shopping facilities, because of the new patterns of individual wealth and consumer spending associated with mass affluence.[5]

And yet, despite these new commercial trends and underlying structural dynamics, the reorganisation of urban centres around new modes of retailing and consumption was not a project that unfolded 'naturally' as a result of a free interplay of market forces and commercial development pressures. The life of the shopping city was shaped as much by public planning and initiative as it was by private entrepreneurial endeavour. The period in which the shopping city model was so comprehensively installed in the nation's urban centres was precisely synchronous with the establishment of a modern planning system in Britain, when local authorities were granted much stronger powers over urban land use and redevelopment and took on a heightened responsibility for local economic performance and growth.[6] Local authorities repeatedly deployed these new powers in the service of retail expansion and redevelopment in the town centre, aiming to reinvent their towns as exciting and prosperous shopping destinations. Councils reconfigured and re-zoned central districts, pushing out a wide mix of alternative uses and reorganising the infrastructure and environment of the town centre around the needs of the retail economy. They courted the biggest retailers, hoping to attract the most successful and prestigious retail brands to their towns. And they forged alliances with commercial property developers, who promised to install the latest modern shopping facilities that would secure towns' regional status and future prosperity. Local authorities encouraged and promoted these new modes of commercial urbanism through a variety of means, but the most obvious and effective mechanism was the compulsory public acquisition of central area land, which was assembled into

[5] On structural change in the period see Nicholas Crafts, 'The British Economy', in Francesca Carnevali & Julie-Marie Strange (eds.), *20th Century Britain: Economic, Cultural and Social Change* (London: Routledge, 2007), 7–25; Avner Offer, 'British Manual Workers: From Producers to Consumers, c. 1950-2000', *Contemporary British History* 22:4 (2008), 537–571.

[6] For the detailed development of the planning system see Barry Cullingworth & Vincent Nadin, *Town and Country Planning in the UK* (London: Routledge, 2006); Peter Hall & Mark Tewdwr-Jones, *Urban and Regional Planning* (London: Routledge, 2019). Both of these classic texts run to many editions.

large plots and delivered to commercial interests for profitable redevelopment. The creation of the modern shopping city thus rested upon a curious union between the newly interventionist planning powers of the post-war polity and the burgeoning commercial domain of retail property development.

This book places this public–private dynamic at the heart of urban transformation since the 1940s, a period that saw successive waves of urban remodelling in Britain from post-war reconstruction, to 1960s-style urban renewal, to late-century urban regeneration. It shows how public planning and private redevelopment came together to reconstitute Britain's towns and cities, remaking urban geographies and economies in the name of efficiency, growth and consumer satisfaction. All over Britain, urban centres large and small were transformed by vast new stores; expanded and beautified shopping districts; supermarkets, precincts and shopping parades; and megalithic new shopping malls. These carefully curated landscapes of consumption amounted to a fundamental restructuring of not just the built environment but of urban public space, culture and experience too. This was a period in which shopping became not just a leading sector of the economy but also a key sphere of post-war social and cultural life – tied to the expanding domains of leisure, pleasure and commercial entertainment, and powerfully connected with individuals' psychosocial worlds, with their identities, and sense of self.[7] New shopping spaces had a cultural resonance and social significance that went far beyond their function within urban economies and local planning strategies. These were the sites in which, for many ordinary Britons, the affluent society was encountered, accommodated and made concrete, and where new cultures of consumption, acquisition and self-curation were most intensively propagated. This book pays close attention to the cultural significance of these projects of urban reinvention, as well as attending to the range of private interests that shaped and profited from these new social and spatial forms – the multiple retailers, property developers, marketing experts, builders and financiers who did so much to steer the course of urban transformation and yet remain almost entirely absent from the many scholarly accounts of British urbanism in this period.

Attending to the way public planning worked in concert with these new commercial forces at the construction of the shopping city raises important questions about the character, aims and impact of 'planning' in post-war

[7] Erika Rappaport, Sandra Trudgen Dawson & Mark J. Crowley (eds.), *Consuming Behaviours: Identity, Politics and Pleasure in Twentieth-Century Britain* (London: Routledge, 2015); Daniel Miller, Peter Jackson, Nigel Thrift, Beverley Holbrook & Michael Rowlands (eds.), *Shopping, Place and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998).

Britain. The creation of a comprehensive public planning system in the 1940s was one element of the wider mid-century reformation of the British polity, in which the state assumed a heightened responsibility for economic management and individual welfare.[8] As a result, the story of planning in this period is frequently subsumed within the familiar narrative of the rise of the welfare state and the coming of social democracy. Indeed, town planning is often understood as the spatial arm of the welfare state – a moralising but meliorist endeavour that cleared slums, rehoused citizens, cleaned up cities and improved the urban environment. These are important stories of course, and town planning – as both a profession and an idea – always contained a strong reformist streak. But, just as recent historical reassessments have stressed that the post-war polity should not be understood solely in terms of welfare statehood, so this work shows that the aims and impact of the post-war planning system are not fully captured by these traditional welfarist terms of reference.[9]

In remaking the nation's urban centres, the planning system as it actually operated was shaped by a complex range of agendas and rationales, some of which were rather less benign than others. In particular, I stress the *developmentalism* of the post-war planning regime – the drive to grow local economies through stimulating and sponsoring the most profitable forms of private enterprise. This was an especially strong impulse within local authorities, who continued to work with their own long traditions of civic boosterism and local growth promotion. Local authorities frequently viewed their expanded post-war planning powers as an opportunity to engage in new forms of urban economic husbandry. In an era of consumer-fuelled growth and – for many places – urban industrial decline, councils focused their developmental efforts on growing the local retail economy. But I also stress the political and financial constraints upon local authorities, particularly when it came to central area redevelopment, where councils were impelled by statute and by necessity to work in partnership with private interests. If they had ever been empowered to do so, local authorities would no doubt have reforged urban centres as an image of civic progress and municipal modernism (as indeed many attempted to do in the reconstruction era). But this was never really the

[8] John Stevenson, 'Planners' Moon? The Second World War and the Planning Movement', in Harold L. Smith (ed.), *War and Social Change: British Society in the Second World War* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), 58–77.

[9] See, e.g. David Edgerton, *The Rise and Fall of the British Nation: A Twentieth-Century History* (London: Allen Lane, 2018); James Vernon, 'Heathrow and the Making of Neoliberal Britain', *Past & Present* 252:1 (2021), 213–247. Also Sam Wetherell's recent *Foundations: How the Built Environment Made Twentieth-Century Britain* (University of Princeton Press, 2020), which applies Edgerton's notion of a post-war developmental state to British urbanism and planning as an alternative to the conventional welfare state framing.

flavour of redevelopment in the town centre, where local public enterprise was consistently constrained and pared back by the political and legal strictures imposed by central government. In part this was simply a result of the central state's differing view of the importance of urban renewal as a national spending priority, but it was also related to underlying tensions within the new political economy of post-war Britain. This book shows how the post-war redevelopment regime was shaped by continued conflicts over the role of the state and the appropriate balance between public government and private enterprise. In particular, I highlight the continued influence of broadly liberal ideas of political economy and statehood amongst planners, civil servants and politicians (especially those on the right), in which there was unease and hostility to ideas of 'excessive' public intervention and an attempt instead to make planning work with the grain of the market in support of private sector growth.

The upshot of this hybrid and at times confused political economy of planning was an urban redevelopment regime in which new public planning powers were deployed in support of commercial projects of urban renewal and reinvention. This saw the developmentalism of the post-war state harnessed to the expertise of retailers and the entrepreneurial energies of commercial property developers. It produced a curious mode of urban renewal – brash, commercialist and consumer-oriented, and yet imposed arbitrarily upon cities through the use of sweeping state powers of compulsory purchase and comprehensive redevelopment. This book traces the social and economic impact of this mode of redevelopment upon towns and cities all over the country, stressing the deleterious effects it had upon many smaller and less profitable retailers along with the swathes of other small-scale business enterprise that were priced out of redeveloped urban centres. The public–private cultivation of retailing and central area property values also worked to expel many other social activities and patterns of use, and this transformed the social make-up and experience of the town centre. No longer characterised by a rich mix of social functions and experiences, town centres became increasingly monotonous and regimented, with ever-growing portions of central urban space given over to privatised and carefully managed landscapes of consumer seduction.

Far from enriching and revitalising urban social and economic life, these modes of redevelopment quickly came to look exploitative, exclusionary and iniquitous, as the commodified spaces of the city were reworked in the interests of retailers' sales figures and rentiers' investment strategies. And, despite the consuming enthusiasms of the age of affluence, there was never a clear *demand* to remodel cities in this fashion. On the contrary, extravagant new shopping complexes were often widely

resisted and a great many failed to live up to their commercial promise. They also failed utterly to arrest the decline and alleviate the severe structural economic woes of many towns and cities in struggling regions. The notion of retail redevelopment as a form of local economic regeneration stretches back far beyond the 1980s. Many of Britain's urban centres were facing signs of industrial collapse as early as the 1920s, and by the mid-century retail-led reinvention was already established as a favoured strategy for local economic and social revitalisation. Yet such struggling locales were also the least likely to successfully relaunch themselves as affluent shopping destinations and the public–private embrace of the shopping city model ultimately did little to address their underlying structural woes. Indeed, many of these same places – Boltons, Blackburns, Grimsbys and Middlesbroughs – have re-emerged at the centre of current policy debates about the death of the high street and the existential collapse of smaller, second-order urban centres, their underlying developmental prospects seemingly little improved by seventy years of state-sponsored urban renewal efforts. The current crisis of the shopping city thus represents the collapse of an urban developmental model whose lifespan stretches back across the second half of the twentieth century to the reconstruction era. It was a model that was pursued vigorously by public policymakers, town planners and property developers, but its installation was deeply contentious and its social and economic impacts were always questionable.

The City and the Affluent Society

Mass affluence, along with the various actors and interests who steered and stimulated consumer expansion, is placed at the heart of urban transformation right across the period under study here. In common with other capitalist democracies, Britain experienced an economic golden age in the post-war decades, in which historically high levels of growth and a worker-friendly economic and employment structure fuelled substantial rises in real wages.[10] Although historians are often keen to highlight the limits of post-war affluence and the persistence of social and economic disadvantage, it remains the case that Britain

[10] Nicholas Crafts, 'The British Economy'. Crafts gives the figures for real wage growth in this period in Table 2.5 (3.16% p.a.), which are more than double that of other periods. See also Hugh Pemberton, 'The Transformation of the Economy', in Paul Addison and Harriet Jones (eds.), *A Companion to Contemporary Britain 1939–2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2007), 180–202; Robert Millward, 'The Rise of the Service Economy', in Roderick Floud and Paul Johnson (eds.), *Cambridge Economic History of Modern Britain Volume 3: Structural Change and Growth, 1939–2000* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 238–266.

underwent an unprecedented process of economic transformation in this period, in which the majority of the population saw their living standards and disposable incomes rise significantly.[11] I call this mass affluence, without claiming that all Britons lived lives of luxury and leisure. Mass affluence unleashed a bewildering array of new social forces, as the changed material circumstances of ordinary Britons afforded them new opportunities to participate in, and reshape, the economic, cultural and political life of the nation. The affluent society, and the affluent subject, had to be accommodated, and this meant transformations in economic structure and organisation, in politics and public culture and in the wider cultural currents and collective experiences of British life.[12] Notions of citizenship, for example, were reworked around the figure of the affluent consumer, with their new rights and expectations. Crucially, mass affluence saw a remarkable burgeoning of the dynamic commercial-cultural sphere of personal consumption, which connected the deeply subjective realm of individual identity and experience to the commercial logics and corporate strategies of production, accumulation, distribution and marketing.[13]

The nation's urban centres also had to accommodate mass affluence, and the adaptations were simultaneously physical, economic and cultural. Urban space and society were remodelled around the new demands of an affluent citizenry and an increasingly consumer-driven economy. Large swathes of Britain's towns and cities were reconstructed as

[11] For accounts which stress the social limits of affluence see Pat Thane, *Divided Kingdom: A History of Britain, 1900 to the Present* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018); Selina Todd, *The People: The Rise and Fall of the Working Class 1910–2010* (London: John Murray, 2014).

[12] Vernon Bogdanor & Robert Skidelsky (eds.), *The Age of Affluence 1951–1964* (London: Macmillan, 1970); John Benson, *The Rise of Consumer Society in Britain, 1880–1980* (London: Longman, 1994); Arthur Marwick, *British Society since 1945* (London: Penguin, 2003); Lawrence Black & Hugh Pemberton (eds.), *An Affluent Society? Britain's Post-war 'Golden Age' Revisited* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004); Lawrence Black, *Redefining British Politics: Culture, Consumerism and Participation, 1954–70* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010); Matthew Hilton, *Consumerism in Twentieth-Century Britain: The Search for a Historical Movement* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Kerstin Brückweh (ed.), *The Voice of the Citizen Consumer: A History of Market Research, Consumer Movements, and the Political Public Sphere* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Frank Trentmann (ed.), *The Making of the Consumer: Knowledge, Power and Identity in the Modern World* (Oxford: Berg, 2006).

[13] Frank Mort, 'The Commercial Domain: Advertising and the Cultural Management of Demand', in Peter Jackson, Michelle Lowe, Daniel Miller & Frank Mort (eds.), *Commercial Cultures: Economies, Practices, Spaces* (Oxford: Berg, 2000); Sean Nixon, *Hard Sell: Advertising, Affluence and Transatlantic Relations, c. 1951–69* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013); Daniel Miller, Peter Jackson, Nigel Thrift, Beverley Holbrook & Michael Rowlands (eds.), *Shopping, Place and Identity* (London: Routledge, 1998).

consumer playgrounds, dominated by elaborate shopping facilities and curious new landscapes of consumption. Expensive new shopping spaces, offering new types of consumer experience in increasingly spectacular environments, sprang up rapidly all over the country in the post-war decades. In the earlier post-war period this usually involved the construction of individual large stores in the town centre, or else of modern shopping parades. These new shopping spaces housed Britain's prosperous and expansionary retail chains whose dominance over the town centre and the retail economy had been advancing steadily since the interwar years. In the mid-1950s there were already plenty of retail chains in Britain with a hundred or more stores; by 1970 multiple retailers had captured something like 40 per cent of the total retail trade, and much more in many individual sectors. From the 1960s, individual shop developments were increasingly superseded by the development of various types of holistically planned shopping complex, more elaborate and totalising than what had gone before, housing many different stores arranged together around pedestrianised precincts or in new mall environments. By 1975 around 300 such centres had already been built in Britain's town centres. This process accelerated towards the end of the century, so that by 1993 there were around 800 shopping centres in Britain, and these also now included many ex-urban locations and regional megamalls.[14] The accessibility and mobility of shoppers (particularly 'car-shoppers') was firmly prioritised so that town centres were reworked with major new roads, mammoth car parking facilities and enormous bus stations. Somewhat counterintuitively, the pedestrianisation of urban centres proceeded in tandem with this motorisation of shoppers' mobility, as car-borne shoppers were channelled into the town centre to stroll around the new urban landscapes of affluence.

Shopping was transformed as part of this process and went – albeit with much variation – from being characterised by small, independent shops and more prosaic purchases, to be dominated by nationally organised retail chains retailing high volumes of goods out of large new stores.[15] These changes went hand in hand with a decisive shift from shopping for provisions to shopping for pleasure in which spectacular new shopping environments played a key role. Indeed, shopping was increasingly recast

[14] Figures taken from: E. MacFadyen, 'Retailers at the Crossroads', *Building with Steel* 10 (May, 1972), 2–6; John Trafford, 'Shopping Centres: Hiatus for Stocktaking', *The Financial Times*, 2 April 1975, 28; Tony Taylor, 'The British Council of Shopping Centres', *Planning Practice and Research* 8:3 (1993), 43–44.

[15] Michael Winstanley, 'Concentration and Competition in the Retail Sector c.1800-1990', in Maurice W. Kirby & Mary B. Rose (eds.), *Business Enterprise in Modern Britain: From the Eighteenth Century to the Twentieth Century* (London: Routledge, 1994), 236–262.