

Can anyone save our high streets?

We're shopping on the internet. Recession is killing the big chains. So what should we do with the streets that were once the heart of our communities? Six big thinkers reveal their plans



Streets ahead: could the high street one day rediscover its sense of fun?

Illustration: Patrick Morgan for the Observer

When [Mary Portas](#) arrives in a new town centre, she sniffs – literally inhales the local air in her nostrils. She has visited hundreds of high streets over the years, initially in her day job as a retail guru and, since May 2011, heading up an independent review for David Cameron's government, and she claims – though it is sometimes hard to believe – that every one is unique.

"You need to get a feel for what consumers want," she says, sitting at her desk in central London, her 3in heels on the top. "I can't go: 'This is a solution for Margate,' if I don't see how Margate lives. It's like going into a big store: you sniff and try to work out what the issues are. How are these people living their lives? Why has it failed? Everyone is still spending. They might be spending less, but they are still spending."

The Kent seaside town is emblematic of the problems our high streets face. A survey in February 2011 showed it had the highest proportion of empty shops in the country: 37.4%. Across Britain, one in seven shops is now boarded up, as consumers drive to out-of-town malls or wait out the recession with their hands in their pockets. Then there is the one-click efficiency of online shopping: the UK is Europe's leading e-retail economy, with sales estimated at £68.2bn for 2011; the market grew 16% in 2011 and is predicted to increase by a further 13% this year. That is why high street chains such as Woolworths, Zavvi and Habitat have made way for an endless parade of mobile-phone stores and charity shops.

In December, the Portas Review outlined 28 recommendations that range from the creation of a new National Market Day to lowering the cost of town-centre parking. Hundreds of towns have applied to become a Portas Pilot Town, one of 12 towns that will share a £1m "golden ticket".

"What will be the future?" asks Portas. "It's not just, 'Here's a report,' but what can we do about it and what will be the new business model for high streets? For me, as a retailer, this is where the sexiness lies."

The retailer: Jane Shepherdson

The idea: offer lower rents to attract new British talent



Illustration: Patrick Morgan for the Observer

About two years ago, Whistles was invited by the landlords who own most of Covent Garden to look at their plans for the area. At that time, if you lived in London, you wouldn't really go down to Covent Garden: it was old scrappy shops full of tourists and the market didn't quite know what it was doing. But the landlords showed us what they wanted to do: the covered market was going to be for small perfume and jewellery stores; there would be an outer ring of prime real estate for stores like Apple and Burberry; fashion would be down Long Acre. They were going to bring in a big restaurant from New York, Balthazar, and a boutique hotel. They had a brand director whose job was to attract the right mix of brands for the right parts of the scheme. It was an amazing plan.

Town planning is so important – why would you not do it? These people are not doing it because they want Covent Garden to look lovely. They are investors securing their investments for the future. They are making sure their land becomes valuable because Covent Garden is so wonderful. It's the difference between taking a long-term view and a short-term one and it's what our high streets need.

There are a number of factors that are having an impact on our high streets now. Certainly the recession is one of them, no question: people are going out of business because there isn't as much money in the system. There's also online shopping, which is of course taking some of the spend away and forcing retailers to close shops.

But not everywhere is suffering equally. We are noticing that where there is a very pleasant village-style environment – where people in their leisure time will wonder around with a coffee with their kids, popping in and out of shops, getting fantastic service, having a little chat with the staff who they know quite well – these places are prospering. This is the reality of shopping: if it's not a pleasant experience, why would you go out and do it? You will just buy those things online.

I'm surprised that town planners are not more involved in our high streets. In any other industry you have a strategy: "Where do we want to be in five years' time?" It could be that you need to reduce the rents and actively target interesting independents and coffee shops to introduce a bit of variety. Landlords need to get real, too. Right now the only retailers who can afford the rents are phone shops, which is not great for your average customer and it's not sustainable either.

We certainly have the talent in Britain. Just look at the fashion industry: in the last few years we've home-grown global stars like Christopher Kane, Erdem, Peter Pilotto, Mary Katrantzou, Jonathan Saunders. What's happening now is that they are all going online because there's almost zero expense and no risk. But if there were more opportunities for them to showcase their skills, it would make the high street more exciting for all of us.

Jane Shepherdson is chief executive of Whistles

The fashion magazine editor: Lorraine Candy

The idea: create a lust for bespoke shopping



Illustration: Patrick Morgan for the Observer

When H&M launched their collaboration with Versace last November the first person started queuing outside the Regent Street store at 4.45pm the day before. It was a similar story for the range it created with the Italian label Marni last month; the queues were around the block, lots of people camped out overnight. One of the things that I've always felt about fashion on the high street is that retailers need to look at a more bespoke offering. While you can buy everything online, you need to offer something – a specific range or an experience – that you can only get in the shops. Then, once you have the customer in the store, you need to walk her round so she buys more than the special things she's come for.

The look of the store is absolutely crucial. It's about being that place that everyone wants to be; you need to create that lust. You see that at the top end when Louis Vuitton does an amazing window display with a very famous artist: you're going into an art gallery as much as you are going into a shop to buy something. Inside the store it is vital to create a distinct brand identity. This will be different for everyone: Reiss always makes their shops look incredibly beautiful, stylish and upmarket; there's always a lot of space between the hangers so the clothes are easily viewed. In Next, they fill in as much space as possible to say here's as much choice as possible.

Shopping online is always going to be huge, but the great hope for the high street is that nobody wants to stay indoors the whole time. For young women, a lot of their social life is based on being outside with their friends – shopping is always going to be part of it. You have to view it in a positive way: online can drive people into shops; you've got this whole audience via social media and you can reach them at any given point in their day.

What really impresses me about fashion on the British high street is that it works really hard to be wantable. They rotate their stock every four to six weeks and can respond very quickly to new trends. Something like *Mad Men*: it's on TV for a couple of months, it's a very definitive fashion statement and the stores are always very reactive to that.

When businesses are in recession and margins are decreased, fashion has to be very quick at coming up with new ideas and new ways of making it work – fortunately, it's a very creative industry, so people are very creative around it.

Lorraine Candy is editor-in-chief of Elle

The philosopher: Alain de Botton

The idea: make psychotherapy like a visit to the hairdresser



Illustration: Patrick Morgan for the Observer

For centuries in the west, there was a figure in society who fulfilled a function that is likely to sound very odd to modern secular ears. He (there were no she's in the role) didn't sell you anything or fulfil any material need, he couldn't fix your ox cart or store your wheat, he was there to take care of that part of you called rather unusually "the soul", by which we would understand the psychological inner part, the seat of our emotions and sense of deeper identity. I'm talking about the priest, the stock figure of pre-modern western life, who would accompany you, from earliest infancy to your dying breath, attempting to make sure that your soul was in a good state to meet its maker.

Because in many western countries, the priesthood is now a shadow of its former self, a key question to ask might be: where have our soul-related needs gone? What are we doing with all the stuff we used to go to the priest for? Who is looking after it?

My suggestion is that therapists should be secular society's new priests. From a distance psychotherapists look like they are already well settled in the priest-like role and that there is nothing further to be done or asked for, but there is, in a serious sense, an issue of branding here. Therapists are hidden away. You don't see them on the high street. They still aren't regulated as they should be. We don't make a place for them among other needs like those for bread or electrical goods. Imagine if the need for therapeutic dialogue was as honoured and recognised as the need for a haircut or a go on an exercise machine. Imagine if seeing a therapist wasn't a strange and still rather embarrassing pursuit. Imagine if one could be guaranteed a certain level of service. Imagine if the consulting rooms looked better and were more visible, to make a case for the dignity of the activity.

Therapy remains a minority activity, out of reach of most people, too expensive or simply not available in certain parts of the country. There have been laudable efforts on the parts of activists like Lord Layard to introduce therapy into the NHS, but progress is slow and vulnerable. But the issue isn't just economic. It's one of attitudes. Whereas Christian societies would imagine there was something wrong with you if you didn't visit a priest, we tend to assume that therapists are there solely for moments of extreme crisis – and are a sign that the visiting client might be a little unbalanced, rather than just human.

To survive, the high street will need to focus on all the things that cannot be done online – which chiefly means, things that involve the body or the social self. So restaurants will survive, as will anything that involves community. Moving psychotherapy onto the high street seems a natural progression. It means recognising that the high street is a natural place to take care of psychological needs that were previously attended to out of sight. Consulting a therapist should be seen as no less normal than going to a nail bar and a lot more useful.

Alain de Botton is a founder of The School of Life, and author of the recently published Religion for Atheists