Losing Heart?
Re-imagining our town and city centres

“What is the city but the people?”
William Shakespeare

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PLUS OTHER NEWS, COMMENTS, BOOKS...

RSGS: helping to make the connections between people, places & the planet
The news has recently been full of the demise of the high street and our town and city centres. Retail has perhaps unsurprisingly struggled in the recession, with many household names becoming consigned to history. Some of this change is in technology, some in buying patterns, some in our use of time, but overall it spells an end to the dominant role of retail in our town centres.

So what then is the future of town centres? Retail will still remain but, with out-of-town developments and online shopping, it alone is not enough to maintain vibrancy and life in the hearts of our towns and cities. We need something else. But what?

A thriving, social town surely needs a healthy beating heart. But how do we achieve that? Should we increase opening hours? Should we find new ways to use redundant space? Can communities play more of a leading role? Should we and can we reverse the trend of moving shops, offices and leisure facilities to out-of-town sites? And can we consider the bigger picture – how we build in sustainability, redesign space and address transport, poverty and degradation, and reinvigorate these hubs of municipal life?

Town centres are important for much more than simply retail. They have a cultural role in helping people define their sense of place and feel a sense of belonging. They have a social role in bringing people together, part of the diminishing social glue in which people share experiences. And they are a focal point for vibrant communities, a space for informality, for bumping into friends and acquaintances, for people-watching, and for immersing ourselves in the human condition.

This is all grist to the mill for geographers. Defining the sense of place. Understanding the way we interact culturally and practically with spaces. Analysing and synthesising the various pressures on an area, to help to re-imagine it. Integrating this into wider urban design. As a live debate within the policy and media arenas, it once again underlines the relevance and centrality of geography in everyday modern life.

My thanks to Anne Findlay at the University of Stirling for her help in securing articles for this edition of The Geographer.

Mike Robinson, Chief Executive

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The Fair Trade House

Scotland has become a Fair Trade Nation after achieving its target of having all seven cities and 18 of its 32 councils garnering Fairtrade status. The RSGS helped boost the Fair Trade Nation Campaign by partnering with Perth & Kinross Council to host a Fairtrade Fortnight event in the Fair Maid’s House. The event gave attendees the chance to learn from some of the varied experiences of successful Fair Trade Towns in the area, and to hear from the Scottish Fair Trade Forum about the opportunities it represents.

The purpose of the evening was to launch a campaign to achieve Fair Trade Zone status for the Perth & Kinross Council area, and to establish a steering group to help drive this forwards.

By February, 62 Scottish towns either had achieved Fairtrade status or had active steering groups. Almost two-thirds of higher education institutions and 171 schools had also achieved the standard.

Membership Prices

There will be a small increase in the price of membership, effective in May of this year, the first increase since 2011. From Monday 20th May 2013, the new standard membership rates will be:

- Student/SAGT Member £26
- Single Member £40
- Joint/Overseas/School Member(s) £60

Could any members with Direct Debit payments please let us know if they have changed bank accounts during the last year.

Huge vote (of thanks)

We would like to express a huge thank you to everyone who stood for Board recently, and to all of you who took the time to vote. We had an overwhelmingly positive response, by post and online and at the AGM in March, and as a result we are pleased to be able to welcome two new Board members in Roger Crofts and Lorna Ogilvie. Thank you also to Andrew Parrott and Flora Adamson for making sure it was all correctly administered.

We are also pleased to welcome a new Vice-President to the Society in Professor John Briggs. John is the Clerk of Senate with Vice-Principal status at the University of Glasgow, with his most current research interests focusing on the relationship between the use and management of natural resources and sustainable rural development in low income countries.

Professor John Briggs
**NEWS People • Places • Planet**

**Whisper of the Stars**

23rd April - 15th June

An exhibition of stunning images of traditional life in Arctic Russia will go on display at the Fair Maid’s House visitor centre from 23rd April to 15th June. The Whisper of the Stars exhibition provides glimpses into Northern Siberian cultures like the Chukchi, Dolgan, Even, Khanty, Komi, Nenets, Nganasan, and Yakut. Photographer Bryan Alexander has spent a total of ten of the past 40 years living in isolated native camps and villages around the Arctic. The 40 photographs in the exhibition give a fascinating insight into daily life in this harsh environment.

**Developing RSGS: A Personal View from a New Board Member**

Roger Crofts

Thanks to all those who voted for me to join the RSGS Board at the recent election. I have been reflecting about the future. First, I am delighted to see that RSGS has made so much progress in recent years: the move from the inaccessible base in Glasgow, the opening of the excellent facilities at the Fair Maid’s House, the stimulating content of The Geographer, and the continuing engagement of the local groups. But, there is always more to do and challenges to be met and overcome. Top of my list is the need to address the declining financial position through a combination of generating new income sources and having a hard look at our costs of operation, especially those activities which make a loss. The Board has the responsibility to come up with answers, and I hope that we will pursue these at our planned away-day in June.

There are two key words in our name: Royal and Geographical. Many Royal Societies have an almost automatic voice in the media and with key influencers. Geography has too often been pushed off the agenda: for example the declining place of geography in the schools curriculum and in some universities. But we all know the formative role which geography and geographers can play in addressing many of today’s societal and environmental problems. So I would like the Society to lead in putting geography higher up others’ agendas and to be the oft-quoted voice on issues of the day. This means capturing the intellectual capital within our membership, convening debate and ideas about new futures, and addressing issues which others are concerned about. Also, I would like to see how we can use the local groups around the country to be the points of outreach on geographical issues, as well as organising talks programmes.

Not all will agree but, at least, we must debate our future to secure the active longevity of the Society and geography.

Roger

**Leading Mountaineers to Talk in Aberfeldy**

The RSGS is hosting an exciting double bill of talks as part of Highland Perthshire’s Adventure Festival in June. One of Britain’s most prolific and accomplished exploratory mountaineers, Simon Yates (best known for his role in Touching the Void), will be talking about his recent adventures and his new book, The Wild Within, in a double bill with Jamie Andrew OBE, an incredible Scottish mountaineer who has led an inspirational life overcoming adversity.

The talks will take place at Breadalbane Community Campus in Aberfeldy on the night of Saturday 22nd June. Advance tickets are £6 for RSGS members and young people, £10 for adult non-members. (Tickets will also be available on the night for £8 and £12 respectively.)

From 21st to 23rd June, the Perth & Kinross Outdoor Education team are offering a full and varied weekend for families and individuals from eight years upwards, starting with a talk by Cameron McNeish on the life and works of John Muir, and concluding with the Craghopper Best of Kendal Mountain Film Festival on the Sunday evening.

See www.pkc.gov.uk/adventurefestival or www.facebook.com/perthshireadventurefestival for more information. To book, please contact: outdooreducation@pkc.gov.uk or 01738 472236.

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Write Handy Volunteers Sought

Volunteers are vitally important to the RSGS’s day-to-day running and longer-term planning. We are lucky to have a great many enthusiastic and skilled people contributing their time to support our work.

We are now looking for two volunteers with new skills:
1) a researcher and writer to help us unearth and share many more stories from the RSGS’s past and present;
2) a general handy-person to carry out practical DIY and repair jobs at HQ and the Fair Maid’s House.

If you are interested in joining our happy team, please contact Fiona Parker on fiona.parker@rsgs.org or 01738 455050.

Leaving a Legacy

In December, we learned that Miss Moyra Scott, who had been a Life Member of the RSGS from 1951 until her death in August 2012, had left an unrestricted legacy to the Society of £1,000. Her kindness will help us to continue to deliver a range of educational activities for general public and school audiences, and we are grateful for her support.

Legacies can make such a positive difference in the world we leave behind, and have been an important source of income for the RSGS for decades. We hope that other members and supporters will also consider naming the RSGS in their Wills, to help us in the future. Legacies may be unrestricted (supporting the Society’s general work and current priorities), or they may be directed towards specific aspects of our work. In 2011, we established four special funds – Talks Fund, Education Fund, Collections Fund, Science Grants Fund – to help target donations, grants and legacies towards particular areas of interest; individuals and organisations can contribute towards these funds at any time.

Anyone wishing to leave a gift in their Will can contact Mike Robinson or Susan Watt at RSGS HQ.

After Hurricane Sandy

New York is now moving to strengthen its existing network of wetlands, which cover some 2,300–4,000 hectares. The mayor’s budget plan for 2013–17 includes more than $200 million to restore wetlands as part of an effort to protect and redesign coastal developments.

Officials estimate that two-thirds of the homes damaged by the storm were outside the 100-year-flood area. But scientists say that the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) flood maps were out of date, so even century-scale storms could cause damage well beyond the designated areas. In February, FEMA began releasing new flood maps for the New York region that substantially expand this zone.

Researchers argue that the city should commit to protecting all areas to a 500-year-flood standard, at an estimated cost of $11 billion, but not all the solutions are physical. A growing chorus of academics and government officials stress that the city must also bolster its response capacity and shore up the basic social services that help people to rebuild and recover.

Freshwater Losses in Middle East

A new study using data from a pair of gravity-measuring NASA satellites has found that large parts of the arid Middle East region lost freshwater reserves rapidly during the past decade. During a seven-year period beginning in 2003, parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq and Iran along the Tigris and Euphrates river basins lost 144 km³ of their total stored freshwater. The researchers attribute about 60% of the loss to pumping of groundwater from underground reservoirs.

The findings are the result of one of the first comprehensive hydrological assessments of the area, revealing “an alarming rate of decrease in total water storage in these river basins,” according to Jay Famiglietti, principal investigator and a professor at UC Irvine. “Meanwhile, demand for freshwater continues to rise, and the region does not co-ordinate its water management because of different interpretations of international laws. The Middle East just does not have that much water to begin with, and it’s a part of the world that will be experiencing less rainfall with climate change.”

See www.nasa.gov/grace for more information.

Drill Baby Drill

According to a report by the Post Carbon Institute, the USA cannot drill and frack its way to ‘energy independence’. At best, shale gas, light oil, tar sands, and other unconventional resources provide a temporary reprieve from having to deal with the real problems: fossil fuels are finite, and production of new fossil fuel resources tends to be increasingly expensive and environmentally damaging. The best responses to this conundrum will entail a rethink of the current energy trajectory.

The report’s author, J David Hughes, said “Despite the rhetoric, the United States is highly unlikely to become energy independent unless rates of energy consumption are radically reduced. The much-heralded reduction of oil imports in the past few years has in fact been just as much a story of reduced consumption, primarily related to the Great Recession, as it has been a story of increased production.”
UK Human Geography Ranked Top

The International Benchmarking Review of UK Human Geography (available online at www.esrc.ac.uk) was launched at the RGS (with IBG) offices in March 2013. The Review findings suggest that:

• UK human geography ranks first in the world; it is an empirically and conceptually innovative, diverse, vibrant discipline that in many areas sets the intellectual agenda;
• the UK publishes more than its share of major disciplinary journals;
• UK human geography is radically interdisciplinary and has become an exporter of ideas and faculty to other disciplines.

Professor James B Caird

Margaret Wilkes

Professor James B Caird, Emeritus Professor of Geography in the University of Dundee, long-term RSGS Council Member, Trustee, and Chairman of RSGS Dundee Group, died on 30th December 2012 at the age of 84.

A memorial service in Broughty Ferry in January brought back vivid memories of this most kindly and hospitable of men, and of a remarkable RSGS field trip to the Outer Hebrides which he led a quarter of a century ago, in August 1988. As a historical geographer, Jimmy Caird spent many research hours tracking down missing early maps of these islands, and involving others in the fascinating hunt. His Gaelic-speaking wife, Isa, who accompanied us on the trip, came from the crofting settlement of Sollas on North Uist, and it is on this island that Jimmy’s remains are laid to rest.

He will be sorely missed.

Bartholomew Globe

The RSGS’s Bartholomew Globe, which recognises an exceptional contribution to cartography, mapping and related techniques, was awarded to Petr Přidal in December. Petr, from the Czech Republic, has made a remarkable contribution to online mapping, directly enabling the pioneering work which has taken place in the National Library of Scotland, and in the Moravian Library, in relation to making historical mapping available.

Retail struggling

Multiple retailers closed 20 stores a day on average across Great Britain’s town centres in 2012, according to an analysis of 500 town centres by PricewaterhouseCoopers (PwC) and the Local Data Company. In Scotland, the figures were 353 store closures and 276 store openings, a net reduction of 77.

The analysis suggested that cards, computer games, clothes, health foods, jewellers, travel agents, recruitment agencies, banks and sports goods shops are all failing in numbers. Meanwhile, pound shops, pawnbrokers, charity shops, cheque cashing (payday loans), betting shops, supermarkets and coffee shops are bucking the trend.

Mike Jervis, insolvency partner and retail specialist at PwC said “2012 saw more retail chains go into insolvency than ever before. The failed chains generally shared two problems – too many stores and too little multi-channel activity. 2013 has seen the downward trend become even worse.”
**Fellowships**

Lewis Pugh, Lucy Conway and William McKay have been awarded Honorary Fellowship of the Society. Lewis Pugh was awarded a Fellowship in recognition of his work as an Ocean Ambassador, using his swims to highlight knock-on effects of our relationship with the sea. Lucy Conway has been very involved with sustainability, particularly at a local level on Eigg, itself a vibrant and active community. William Mackay is Vice-Chairman and Treasurer of the RSGS Edinburgh Group, and served on RSGS Council for many years; he continues to take great interest in the work of the Society, and is well known for his dedicated service.

**Geology conference shows that Scotland Rocks**

The RSGS helped organise Scotland Rocks!, a conference for Higher geology students, which took place in Perth and St Monans in March. The drive to organise the conference came from a desire to highlight the threat to school geology, which has suffered from a gradual decline in Scotland. No geology teachers have been trained since 1985, only a handful of schools continue to deliver the course, and the science has now been dropped as an examinable subject by the SQA. The replacement qualification retains little geology content and there are fears that this will lead to a decline in further study of the subject.

Jim Hansom, a geologist at the University of Glasgow said “The Scottish Government needs to wake up and smell the coffee! At a time when it has supported a Scottish Geodiversity Charter to highlight the value of geology and earth sciences as the fundamental underpinning of our natural and built environment, the government agency SQA aims to axe the teaching of geology in schools (as well as watering down the physical science content of the geography Higher)!”

The idea for the conference came from a group of geology students at Perth High School, who are now hoping to present their views at a parliamentary lunch. You can read more about their experience at the conference on page 18.

**RSGS joins debates**

RSGS Chief Executive Mike Robinson was invited to give evidence to the Rural Affairs and Climate Change Committee of the Scottish Parliament in February, in response to the Scottish Government publishing the draft Report on Policies and Proposals (RPP2). The Report is intended to outline Scotland’s path towards a low carbon future, and details by sector some of the Government’s firm intentions (policies) and outline plans (proposals) to help achieve the Scottish Climate Act targets. See www.scotland.gov.uk for more information about the RPP2.

Mike was also involved in a public debate around the theme of public engagement and transport, organised by the Business Engagement Sub-Group of Scotland’s 2020 Climate Group, a body of all the main companies trying to help work towards a lower carbon economy. The debate focused on the plans and possibilities for helping to increase active travel and reduce emissions, and challenging misconceptions around travel. See www.2020climateregion.org.uk/taking-a-lead-on-transport for more information. A webcast will be made available soon.

Mike also spoke in March at the University of St Andrews at the One World Film Festival screening of Chasing Ice, a film by US photographer and geomorphologist James Balog of his quest to visually record glacial change.

**RSGS Digital Drive**

Our recent fundraising appeal, sent to members in March, aims to help us develop the Society’s digital communications, in particular our website and social media communications, so that we can engage better with more and younger people. We want to excite new audiences about geography, and to use modern means to broaden access to the RSGS’s vast repository of some of the greatest geographical and adventure stories of the past 150 years. We want to share our passion for geography and prove the vitality of our subject.

If you wish to Gift Aid your donation so that the RSGS can claim an extra 25% from HMRC, you will need to sign a new Gift Aid declaration, even if you have signed one before. This is because the rules have recently changed, and statements must now include a specific reference to taxes such as VAT and Council Tax not qualifying.

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NEWS  People • Places • Planet

Plants to clear pollution

Scientists from five UK universities are researching how plants such as ferns and alyssum could be used to clean polluted industrial land. The plants will soak up metals, including potentially high levels of harmful metals like arsenic and platinum, from derelict land previously occupied by factories, mines and landfill sites. They will then be harvested and processed in a bio-refinery. The researchers are testing a way of extracting the chemicals through a process called phytoremediation. A specially designed bacteria will be added to the waste to transform the toxic metal ions into metallic nanoparticles, which could then be used to develop cancer treatments or to make catalytic converters for cars.

Dr Louise Horsfall, of the University of Edinburgh’s School of Biological Sciences, said, “Land is a finite resource. As the world’s population grows along with the associated demand for food and shelter, we believe that it is worth decontaminating land to unlock vast areas for better food security and housing. I hope to use synthetic biology to enable bacteria to produce high value nanoparticles and thereby help make land decontamination financially viable.”

Australia’s new highs

This January’s record-breaking heatwave in Australia forced a change to the Australian Bureau of Meteorology’s interactive weather forecasting chart. New colours (deep purple and pink) were added to extend its temperature range, previously capped at 50°C. Moomba in South Australia saw the highest temperature recorded, at 49.6°C, but large parts of Australia have limited recording.

The Bureau of Meteorology’s manager of climate monitoring and prediction, David Jones, said “Clearly, the climate system is responding to the background warming trend. Everything that happens in the climate system now is taking place on a planet which is a degree hotter than it used to be. We know that global climate doesn’t respond monotonically – it does go up and down with natural variation. That’s why some years are hotter than others because of a range of factors. But we’re getting many more hot records than we’re getting cold records. That’s not an issue that is explained away by natural variation.”

RSGS Stirling Group News

Peter Ireland

For some years now, the RSGS Stirling Group has held a schools’ evening in March, designed to help senior pupils with their preparation for the Higher Examination in Geography. This year they were given detailed advice on exam technique by a former Principal Assessor in Geography at the SQA, and an illustrated talk on the problems in providing effective health care in developing countries by a doctor who has worked in local hospitals in Sierra Leone.

In March, a small group of members from the Stirling area also enjoyed a special visit to the Fair Maid’s House. We were extremely well treated on our arrival, and were introduced to the visitor centre by Mike Robinson, who took the time to welcome us on the day of the AGM, when he doubtless had much else on his agenda. The Chairman, Barrie Brown, and several expert volunteers explained the resources held by the Society and showed us some of their treasures. This was a super experience, and is to be recommended most strongly.

New flats in old offices

Consensus Capital, a private equity firm, has launched a £50m pilot scheme in Perth aimed at converting vacant city centre office buildings into social housing. A former office block near Tay Street is being turned into 18 apartments for the Caledonia Housing Association.

Six further developments will follow in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Manchester, Birmingham and London, with plans for 25 UK schemes over the next two years, resulting in 1,200 city centre apartments being built for leading UK housing associations. Construction on the Perth development begins in April and is scheduled for completion in the autumn.

Julie Cosgrove, chief executive of Caledonia Housing Association, said “This project will help address two key local priorities – the regeneration of empty properties in Perth city centre, and the provision of much needed affordable housing in the city.”

Email Updates

You may have noticed that we have started to send out regular emails to members to highlight activities. However, if you haven’t been receiving these, please consider taking the following steps. Firstly, please make sure that you have provided us with your current email address. If not, please send a message to enquiries@rsgs.org. And secondly, please add Fraser’s email address, fraser.shand@rsgs.org, to your email address book to ensure messages are not blocked by your email provider.
Scotland’s Town Centres – looking to the future
Anne Findlay and Leigh Sparks, Institute for Retail Studies, University of Stirling

“The success of most high streets depends on their role not as retail destination centres but as an integral part of a functioning business and civic, social and economic ‘place’.”

In 2012, crowds gathered in Scottish town centres to see the Olympic Torch relay. In contrast with this image of vibrancy, 2012 was also a year when a number of high profile high street retailers closed and the media forecast the death of the high street. So, what is the future for the Scottish town centre? On the one hand, there is some nostalgia for the town centres and high streets of the past with their independent retailers and small shops. On the other hand, many Scottish households seem to have abandoned town centres in favour of out-of-town retailing or online shopping.

It is necessary to distinguish between ‘high streets’ and ‘town centres’. The term ‘town centre’ includes the high street but also encompasses a wider environment and a greater mix of activities – business, leisure, cultural, educational, residential and civic. Much of the media hype has been focused on issues relating to retail change, probably because retailing is so important to the Scottish economy, generating 11% of turnover and employing 10% of the workforce. Whilst what is happening on the high street affects how people feel about a town centre, what is happening in the wider town centre equally impacts on the prosperity of the high street.

Whilst out-of-town retailing is often seen as the ‘bogeyman’ causing town centre failure, the reality is that we have, over decades, allowed the decentralisation of many functions. Most activities now have a preference for greenfield sites, including schools, cinemas, light industry, offices, football grounds, hotels, local authority headquarters, and so on. This has taken its toll on reasons for going to town centres, and they have been left behind by a lack of care and management and by cost and pricing structures that work against them.

The Scottish Towns Policy Group prepared a paper in 2012 entitled Scotland’s Towns and Town Centres: Creating Confidence – Changing Futures. Scotland’s nearly 200 (population 3,000 or more) town centres are the heartbeat of Scotland, contributing to the Scottish economy and the fabric of Scottish society. There are many different types – market towns, commuter-belt towns, new towns, tourist towns, suburban town centres, etc. The heterogeneity and local nature of town centres creates a vital sense of place. They are not just shopping locations. They are important hubs for small businesses and for locating civic, cultural and leisure functions. And they are a driver of essential services, the social and ‘perceptual glue’ for places and people.

Sadly, many town centres are much less attractive than they should be and many are experiencing decline and decay. Town centres sit well within Scottish Government policy objectives and all parties are supportive of regeneration policies, but this does not, however, mean that they are necessarily a high priority.

The problem is not only about investment and finance but also about how to enact place-based thinking in planning and service delivery. Transport policies need to deliver good access to town centres. Rethinking taxation and charging elements is necessary. Facilitating compulsory purchase orders, use class changes, remedies for defective buildings, and encouraging architecturally inspired solutions for obsolete properties could make a big difference. Freeing up space and activities for varied and diverse use is vital. And valuing the broader contribution of town centres when considering ‘value for money’ is essential to offset the now often unstoppable tendency to ‘go out-of-town’.

Over the past few years, important new thinking on town centres has begun to emerge in Scotland in both the public and private sectors, arising from the Scottish Government and other professionals, although it has not received the publicity which retail guru Mary Portas’ review of high streets in England received.

The Scottish Government has set up Business Improvement Districts Scotland, and in 2009 the Town Centre Regeneration Fund was established as a one-off £60 million capital fund. It was hugely oversubscribed, attracting a very diverse range of projects (one small part of which of course was the RSGS’s Fair Maid’s House redevelopment). The legacy of the Fund lies as much in the way it energised communities as in the projects themselves, affirming that there is a will to improve town centres (though more regular investment would be sensible).

The Scottish Government is currently rethinking planning policy and conducting a review of town centres. Academics and practitioners are engaged in the process of re-making Scotland’s town centres through the Scottish Towns Policy Group, Scotland’s Towns Partnership, and the Annual Towns Conference indicating a will to bring about change. The success of most high streets depends on their role not as retail destination centres but as an integral part of a functioning business and civic, social and economic ‘place’. Whilst retail failure may have set the alarm bells ringing, the solutions required are much broader than retailing and must envisage a town centre less reliant on retailing.

Place identities are important to well-being, and town centres are central to place identity for the majority of people in Scotland’s towns and cities. The Town Centre Regeneration Fund may have been a beacon, and the Olympic Torch an affirmation of the community importance of town centres, but the challenge is how to follow these ‘shining lights’.
A Strategic Approach – a must or a maybe?

Dr Andres Coca-Stefaniak, Royal Docks Business School, University of East London

The world is becoming increasingly urban. Towns and cities compete regionally, nationally or globally to attract and retain visitors. They compete for investment, for leading thinkers and entrepreneurs, as well as for a diverse cultural and family-focused offer to enable existing residents to thrive sustainably. The way our town and city centres are managed is consequently gaining growing levels of recognition and interest. Gone are the days when we could adopt a simplistic approach to the development of our town centres by seeing them solely as shopping destinations.

Although retail still remains an important reason for people to visit town centres today, there is growing research evidence showing that there is much more to how people interact with their high street beyond mere retail transactions. The way town and city centres are managed can make a considerable difference to the quality of this experience. Town centre management – a geographically specific form of place management – has existed in the European Union, formally or informally, for over 30 years. As a profession, it remains one of the most multi-disciplinary activities anyone could engage in. Although town centre managers may work for local authorities, public-private partnerships, or private sector place management organisations, they will often juggle the management of events with other activities such as place branding and marketing, tourism, local economic development, urban regeneration, community engagement, fundraising, strategic stakeholder management, and business support, to mention but a few. In spite of the fact that the size of the town centre and its budget will often dictate the scale of the activities outlined above, this need not apply to their diversity as well as the scale of challenges faced by today’s high street.

Historically, the vast majority of town centre management schemes in countries like Spain and Italy has been led by the private sector – often local associations of family-owned small independent retailers – albeit with an intense focus on local identity and often as a reaction to globalisation trends, including the growth of hypermarkets and out-of-town shopping malls. In the UK, town centre management originated with stronger links to the public sector (local authorities) but evolved rapidly in the 1990s towards formalised public-private partnerships that often included large retail brands as well as smaller independent retailers. In some locations, this eventually resulted in the creation of private sector-led Business Improvement Districts (BIDs), a model that originates in North America. Although the BIDs model and the wider concept of significant parts of our town centres being managed by the private sector have not been implemented without criticism from some circles, there is a growing number of success stories among BIDs that have managed to link effectively place management with large-scale urban regeneration investment and successful area-based re-branding. In spite of this, research evidence continues to point out that urban revitalisation and place branding campaigns will tend to be short-lived if not supported by local communities, and this will remain a key challenge for town and city management professionals in the future.

Recent government reports, policy (eg Localism Act) as well as the Mary Portas report recommendations for the future of high streets, seem to converge on the fact that we need to change our thinking with regard to the function of our high streets if many of them are to survive – and indeed compete successfully – in a post-credit crunch economy with shrinking consumer spending power but growing numbers of visitors to shopping malls and purchases made via the internet. In fact, the challenge for place management is not just to reclaim town and city centres as the beating hearts of our communities but, indeed, to regain the links they always had with local communities regardless of other strategic concerns. Perhaps it is time for consumers, residents, planners, businesses, local authorities and town centre managers to realise that just as the agora of ancient Greece was built on trust, commitment, exchange of ideas beyond mere business transactions, and strong local identity, the choices we make at different levels today could have an impact on generations to come. The Greek agora thrived and survived thousands of years of change. Will our high street?...
“...the insertion of an urban metro system in the 1970s, has enabled Newcastle to retain a thriving central retail function in the face of out-of-town competition.”

The retail sector in Britain is the third largest in the world, accounts for one in 12 UK companies, and contributes £280 billion to the UK economy annually.

Concentration
In the decades immediately after the Second World War, the emphasis in retailing in the UK was on inner urban renewal, especially in cities damaged by wartime bombing. In marked contrast to the situation in the USA, in the UK this period was characterised by the application of strict planning controls over retail suburbanisation and the relative protection afforded to the central area and other inner-city shopping areas. From the 1970s onwards, however, increasing pressure for retail decentralisation through suburban development was reflected in a growing number of applications for planning permission to build hypermarkets, superstores, discount stores and various sizes of shopping centre on predominantly greenfield sites.

Decentralisation
With the election of the Conservative government in 1979, there was a general presumption in favour of development, enterprise and employment creation. Government liberalisation of planning controls was taken furthest within enterprise zones, and in several of these major retail developments were permitted, as in the 150,000m² Metro Centre, built on the site of the ash tip of a disused power station within the Gateshead Enterprise Zone, six kilometres west of Newcastle city centre.

The Metro Centre is one of the largest enclosed shopping centres in Europe with, in addition to retail floor space, 9,900m² of leisure floor space and 10,000 car-parking spaces. This ‘shopertainment’ locus has redirected consumer trips from Newcastle city centre. One result has been a compaction process in Newcastle, with a refocusing of the CBD on the refurbished enclosed central mall (Eldon Square) and contraction of retailing in peripheral shopping streets. In general, however, large-scale and prescient redevelopment of the city centre retailing area, together with the insertion of an urban metro system in the 1970s, has enabled Newcastle to retain a thriving central retail function in the face of out-of-town competition.

The impact of other regional shopping centres on nearby central areas has been more severe. The central shopping area of Dudley in the West Midlands lost 70% of its market share to the Merry Hill mall, with more than half the retailers present in 1986 gone by 1992; some of them moved direct to the new 115,000m² regional shopping centre. In 1997, an application from the developers to expand the centre by the construction of an additional 35,000m² of gross floor space for retail and leisure uses was refused by the Secretary of State in order to protect the ‘vitality and viability’ of existing centres. By then, however, the Merry Hill regional shopping centre had effectively replaced Dudley town centre as the main retail focus of the area.

Re-Centralisation
In 1996, a new retail policy “to sustain and enhance the vitality and viability of town centres” introduced a ‘sequential approach’ to site selection for major new retail developments. This gave priority to development in existing town centres; then to edge-of-town locations; then finally to out-of-town centre sites. The change in retail planning policy had an impact on the pattern of new retail development in the UK by restricting the flow of new regional shopping centres, out-of-centre food superstores, and retail parks.

Significantly, the policy note was intended to apply not solely to retail but to a range of other town centre land uses including leisure and entertainment facilities, offices, and arts, cultural and tourism activities, as well as residential developments, in order to promote mixed-use urban regeneration. The policy has been implemented in several large in-town shopping-leisure-entertainment-residential redevelopments, including the Westfield in Shepherd’s Bush, London, and Broadmead in Bristol, the latter being an effort to counter competition from the out-of-town centre at Cribb’s Causeway.

Prospect
The traditional geography of town centre retailing is being challenged by competition from out-of-town centres and the growth of internet shopping. There are currently 20,000 town centre business units lying empty in Scotland. These are unlikely to be reoccupied by traditional retail outlets. Changing economic, social and demographic patterns and consumer preferences will impact directly on the future geography of retailing and will require more innovative responses.

The Changing Geography of Urban Retailing in the UK
Professor Michael Pacione FRSGS, Chair of Geography, University of Strathclyde
Expanding the Night-time Economy
Professor Marion Roberts, Professor of Urban Design, University of Westminster

The current recession and the dramatic decline of local high streets throughout the UK presents a challenge to all those involved in urban policy and practice. It might seem that there is little hope for reviving the high street. Yet the recent experience of the expansion of night-time economy offers both lessons from the past and suggestions for the future.

In the UK, the growth of activities that extend into the evening and the night has been dominated by alcohol-related consumption, with a dramatic rise in the numbers and size of bars and clubs directed towards a youthful clientele. This expansion did not come without a cost. The issues involved are complex, and debate has moved from an initial focus on law and order to heightened attention on the health and personal risks associated with drinking to excess. Policy responses have been confused and contradictory, starting with a loosening of licensing legislation in the Licensing Act 2003, followed by a tightening and a proliferation of criminal justice measures. Sustained lobbying by health professionals has influenced Scottish legislation such that protecting and improving public health has been a statutory licensing objective since 2009. Government has provided support for the better management and planning of town and city centres at night through the Purple Flag scheme, run by the Association of Town Centre Managers. This 'badge' or accreditation scheme offers benchmarking for well-run night-time economies in specific neighbourhoods or areas within a town centre, and the promotion of partnership working between the stakeholders involved.

Proponents of the scheme point to benefits in decreased levels of crime and disorder, a more comfortable environment, better transport links, and a more diverse entertainment and hospitality offer. Critics point to the scheme's dependence on the status quo in looking towards the economic benefits that nightlife offers to operators and providers.

Another way of thinking about the evening and night-time hours is to consider what is special about them. Technology, in the form of electricity and increased means of interconnection and mobility, both physical and virtual, has helped to blur the distinctions between the hours of daylight and darkness. This opens the possibility for extending everyday activities into the evening and the night. There are a number of factors that prevent changes in working and living patterns. These are not simply about cultural conservatism. Workers resist exploitation through being asked to work longer hours or to work when their families are at leisure. There is also a chicken and egg argument, that services and functions will not stay open if there is not sufficient footfall, and then if the services are not there, there are insufficient attractions to support 'going out'. Nevertheless there have been shifts and changes. The major supermarkets now have smaller branches in town centres which open until late in the evening. While their domination of retail grocery is regrettable, the extension in trading hours does give a service to people who are unable to shop in the daytime.

There are new opportunities to try different shopping experiences. For example, a night market, similar to those found on mainland Europe and Asia, was recently successfully piloted in Bermondsey.

The expansion of the night-time economy in the last decade and a half was a narrative of corporate expansion. Lessons have been learnt about better regulation and management. The current downturn provides opportunities for a configuration of services and hours around the mainstream needs of a wider demographic, seeking to promote conviviality rather than pure profit.

‘…a night market, similar to those found on mainland Europe and Asia, was recently successfully piloted in Bermondsey.’
This map showing the two hemispheres of the world was designed for the Chinese Emperor Kangxi (1662-1722) by the Jesuit Father Ferdinand Verbiest (1623-88), in 1674. Verbiest was one of a handful of Jesuits who were employed at the Chinese court during the 17th-18th century and who introduced ideas of Western science to China. Printed from woodblocks using a stereoscopic projection much like that of Joan Blaeu’s world map of 1648, *Nova totius terrarium orbis tabula*, the map was part of a larger geographical work called *Kunyu tushuo* (Illustrated Discussion of the Geography of the World), which included information on different lands as well as the physical map itself.

Cartouches provide information on the size, climate, landforms, customs and history of various parts of the world, and details of natural phenomena such as eclipses and earthquakes. Columbus’ discovery of America is also discussed. Images of ships, real and imaginary animals and sea creatures pepper both hemispheres, creating a visually stunning as well as historically important object.

The map is very rare. In Britain, only the British Library has another copy and of only one hemisphere. The one displayed here came to Europe in 1734 and entered William Hunter’s collection between 1765 and 1779. It is one of the earliest known examples to reach Europe directly from Beijing. Although it had been on display in the Hunterian Museum in the past, it was kept in storage for many years until its importance was recognised and its provenance traced by Professor Nick Pearce, Head of the School of Culture and Creative Arts at the University of Glasgow, and an expert in Chinese art studies and the history of collectors and collecting in China. It is now on display in the Hunterian Museum at the University of Glasgow (www.gla.ac.uk/hunterian).

“The map is very rare. In Britain, only the British Library has another copy...”
Warm Fronts – the town centre timeline

Dr Lindsay Lennie

Town centres represent a historical timeline which provides us with a sense of place and connection with where we live and work. As the way in which we use high streets changes, it is worth considering the value of retaining the historic timeline which is represented in our retail buildings. The oldest shop-fronts in Scotland date to the late 18th century. The intervening 200 years reflect invention, enterprise and experiment. Shop owners throughout history were brave in embracing the newest available materials, techniques and styles; standing out in a crowd was essential and being left behind in the style wars was not an option. The adoption of change was often led by the most fashionable and wealthiest of the retailers, the drapers and jewellers.

During the later 19th century, the marriage of cast iron and plate glass transformed shop-fronts from low, dark rooms to light and welcoming emporia. The image was completed with the use of decorative ceramics for the interiors of fresh food shops for the first time. Like cast iron, ceramic was both practical and decorative. A surprising number of Victorian shop-fronts survive in our towns and cities. They tell the story of exciting Victorian innovation combined with a fondness for decoration and elaboration.

By the turn of the 20th century, shopkeepers were, through necessity, experimenting with fire-proof construction, new layouts for larger stores, and introducing technology such as electric lighting, passenger lifts and escalators. The early 19th century wealthy draperies evolved into the turn of the 20th century department stores. Our great department stores such as Jenners, House of Fraser, and Wylie & Lochhead developed some of the most prominent and important buildings, which continue to grace our city streets even if the ownership has changed.

During the inter-war period, shop owners faced economic challenges which retailers today can certainly relate to. Fussy Victorian shop-fronts gave way to clean and clinical Art Deco lines using sleek Vitrolite (a coloured glass), bronze, green marble and shiny chrome. Shopping streets were transformed by teams of shop-fitters who were more comfortable than their architect counterparts in dealing with these materials. Sadly, there are very few surviving examples from this important period of shop design. Looking above shop-front level, evidence of gleaming white faience, stepped parapets or geometric motifs can be found, while the ground floors have been denuded of their connection with the past, often replaced with the post-war materials of choice – aluminium and plastic.

The immediate post-war period was more tentative than the bold designs of the 1930s. While materials like Vitrolite and chrome endured for a while, the impact of six years of savage war left its mark, and 1950s shops are generally modest, featuring angled windows complemented by terrazzo entrances. By the 1960s, the courage was re-emerging with rectangular ‘fish tank’ windows and quirky designs for smaller shops. Chain stores like Woolworths replaced their older shops with tall, sentinel boxes imitating the residential tower blocks rapidly being erected on the sites of demolished tenement slums. While many of these buildings remain, the smaller, quirky shops are largely gone, quickly out of fashion and soon replaced by a retail trade eager for the next new style or design.

More recent retail contributions are less satisfactory. Innovative and interesting design has largely been lost, sometimes in favour of poor pastiche versions of Victorian shops executed in MDF and plastic; others are flush uPVC frontages which lack sensitivity to the historic parent buildings they occupy. Few are of memorable design.

“Walking along many Scottish high streets we can enjoy an eclectic blend of Victorian elaboration, Edwardian elegance, inter-war minimalism and post-war simplicity...”

Walking along many Scottish high streets we can enjoy an eclectic blend of Victorian elaboration, Edwardian elegance, inter-war minimalism and post-war simplicity. Quality shop-fronts of all periods are worthy of retention and conservation. Focus should not just be on our Victorian heritage, but respect given to the sometimes simple and understated designs which contribute to our understanding of retail history and strengthen our sense of place and belonging.
Business Improvement Districts
Ian Davison Porter, Business Improvement Districts Scotland

“A Business Improvement District (BID) can be established wherever additional services to those which the statutory authorities provide are desired by the local business community. A BID involves businesses and organisations working together and investing collectively in local improvements, which will be of benefit to the businesses involved whilst contributing to the sustainable economic growth of the local economy. They are often, although not exclusively, a partnership arrangement through which the local business community and the statutory authorities can take forward projects which will benefit the local economy. A BID is not a substitute for central or local government investment. BIDs are developed, managed and paid for by the business sector by means of a compulsory BID levy which the businesses must vote in favour of before the BID can be established.

Business Improvement Districts Scotland (BIDS) was established in 2006 within the Scottish Government to support and encourage the development of BIDs across Scotland and to aid the regeneration, asset and facilities management of Scotland’s towns and villages, business parks, and tourism and visitor areas. The Scottish Government provides a seed-corn grant of upwards of £20,000 to support sustainable economic growth – a vital part of their regeneration strategy for towns and local high streets.

BIDs in Scotland follow the basic principles of BIDs worldwide:
• BIDs should be a partnership between the public and private sectors;
• BIDs provide a sustainable financial model and on-site management structure;
• projects should provide services additional to baseline statutory services;
• projects should address a specific local concern and deliver specific, measurable impacts and outcomes;
• a BID is shaped by the business community in partnership with the local authority;
• a BID is democratic, open and accountable to the members.

However, the Scottish model of BIDs also has some differences from that employed elsewhere in the UK. Whilst the focus in BIDs to date has been on town centres, in Scotland BIDs can cover a sector or theme rather than a geographical space. Property owners are also included in BIDs due to the benefits that can accrue from BID projects, including increased rental levels and higher asset values. There are also differences in process. BIDs in Scotland aim to deliver (as elsewhere in the world) by:
• bringing clarity of vision, leadership and strategic focus to an area;
• harnessing the drive, initiative and involvement of the private sector;
• acting as a catalyst for private sector investment by raising investor confidence;
• co-ordinating project delivery and reducing duplication and fragmentation;
• speeding up the pace of delivery and maximising the use of public sector assets;
• developing and encouraging civic pride;
• developing marketing and communications strategies;
• recording, evaluating and measuring performance;
• delivering local support and developing public-private partnerships.

There are now 18 operational BIDs with a further 19 in development. Established BIDs include Aberdeen City Centre, Alloa Town Centre, BID4Oban, Clacksfirst Limited, Dunfermline Delivers, Edinburgh Grassmarket, Essential Edinburgh, Falkirk Delivers, Hamilton, I Love Clarkston, Inverness City Centre, Kirkcaldy4All, Largs Matters, Living Lerwick, Queensferry Ambition, and Kirkwall.

The BID strategy is already proving effective, delivering real, often long-awaited and now innovative change in Scottish town centres, with individual BIDs pushing the boundaries of the possible, challenging the often stale status quo and delivering positive benefits to all involved, and more (see www.bids-scotland.com).

There is no doubt that BIDs across Scotland face a challenging, yet exciting, time over these next few years, placed as they are in a position to help reshape the public-private interface and create a more sustainable, partnership environment for business start-up, development and growth in Scotland’s town centres. BIDS will continue to lead this drive to ensure resilience in the face of economic adversity.

“...in Scotland BIDs can cover a sector or theme rather than a geographical space.”
A Social Scottish Townscape
Malcolm Fraser, Chair, Scottish Government’s National Review of Town Centres

There’s a disconnect in our lives, between the places we like – spend our holidays in, go on city-breaks to, feel energised by – and the everyday we have grown numb to – stuck in a metal box, going from dormitory suburb to Business Park, Retail Park for the shopping then back to the suburb for tea, then out to the multi in the evening.

Ample parking everywhere, and everything in its place for efficient business-delivery; from the development giants who threw up the boxes on the greenfield sites to the chains who feed our consumer needs. No mess and no surprises. And no ambiguity, no history, no belonging, nowhere for dissidence, no community, no grit, no creativity...

I’m lucky: I live in an old community and walk or cycle through the park to work. (My shops are near, entertainment too.) I get rained-on sometimes, and sometimes even sunned-on too; I hear the birdies and see the trees, and say hello to friends. And on occasion one of them tells me something helpful to me, to my advantage in my work. So I arrive at work healthier, happier, and maybe even a wee bit more business-like.

It’s a nice corner of town that I live in; but the principles that work for me, of nearness and amenity, work anywhere and save me money – never mind all the lucrative things I can do with the time spent not sitting in traffic.

I’m far from alone in my recognition of this. In fact there’s a huge amount of activity around a number of urban-centred ideas: such as recognition that cities are the nation’s creative and economic powerhouses; or that the ideals of community, heritage and belonging that towns embody need recovered; or, and this crucial aspect is less recognised, that in pursuing a low-carbon economy and fighting climate change, the ‘Eco-town’ title, that is spun by those marketing some new, car-dependent (and green-washed) suburb built on farmland, really should apply to the nearby, existing (but struggling) community, that the new development aims to suck the middle class money out of.

It’s our existing communities, with their infrastructure of roads, drains, schools and transport – and people! – that are our Eco-towns, our true, sustainable communities. Finally, we note that a society based on the car excludes those who lack one, so that towns, with their public transport and their ‘walkability’, represent accessibility for all. I believe that the tide has turned, and we are coming to understand that the post-war vision of a built environment seen exclusively through a car windscreen has run its course; and that if we knit together these ideals – of creativity, community, sustainability and accessibility – we could replace it by a vision of the future which emphasises some old, homespun urban virtues...

Of course, just as we are understanding their value, the challenges to the retail market are adding greatly to the problems of communities who have struggled to replace their former agricultural and industrial focuses, and been devastated by road engineering. I have been asked, by the Scottish Government, to lead a National Review of Town Centres, to suggest what might be done to revive them. The Advisory Group I lead is wide-ranging, involving people from business and the community, industry and the arts. Unfortunately we can’t do anything about the daft VAT regime which sees 20% applied to repair, zero to new build, on a greenfield site – a Westminster matter – but we are looking for the same sort of structural issues, under some simple and broad themes, and trying to put them in kilter.

We want our proposals to be deliverable, utilising existing legislation, levers and partners; to work from the bottom-up, enabling and encouraging communities to find their own ways rather than have us lecture them; and to recognise that the glory of the town is its many and varied functions – places to live, work and play, as well as shop. We are looking to bring more people back to live in towns, to assist community groups and entrepreneurs to access property and funding, to ensure local authorities locate their services in the hearts of their communities, to make the planning system friendlier, to set out the sort of physical changes towns can make, to suggest changes to the rating regime, and to encourage digital link-ups.

We will report in the spring. And we think our Ministers are listening...

“It’s our existing communities, with their infrastructure of roads, drains, schools and transport – and people! – that are our Eco-towns...”
Give the Space Away

David Cook, Wasps Artists’ Studios

To try to tackle the decline in our high streets, the Scottish Government has commissioned a review of our town centres policy and practice. But it seems to me that we are, probably, asking the wrong questions of, almost certainly, the wrong people.

Back in November, as someone who has spent a lot of time breathing new life into redundant buildings, I was asked to give a social enterprise perspective on our town centres to a session on retail. I spoke briefly to a room chock-full of high profile, experienced and very serious retailers who were being asked to come up with solutions to alleviate vacancy in shops; shops that they and their fellow retailers no longer want.

It could hardly be a surprise to anyone that we find ourselves with empty shops. For decades we have been permitting out-of, edge-of and centre-of town, car-centric shopping centre sprawl, pretending to ourselves that this won’t affect our traditional town centres, yet failing to see the evidence, with ‘To Let’ boards spreading like a rash across our shop fronts. Masked perhaps by the credit-led spending boom, it is starkly apparent now in the throes of recession.

One in ten retail spaces are now vacant in Scotland, according to the Scottish Retail Consortium. Their UK partner organisation, the British Retail Consortium (BRC) warns of worst to come, with up to 30% of shops likely to be vacant in future... the virtual death of the high street. And ‘virtual’ is apposite, given the huge rise in online transactions also pressurising traditional retailing, as well as new competition in all manner of products from the supermarket oligopoly.

BRC’s bleak presentation forecasting the virtual death of the high street was followed by a retail surveyor bemoaning the dearth of new retail currently being built: the development pipeline is jammed.

So, we have too many shops and we need more shops? How can both be true? The answer, it seems, is that the shops we have are in the wrong places. These wrong places are otherwise known as the towns and city streets where we live, work, eat, drink and shop. What we can expect is more Braeheads, Overgates and Eastgates, and fewer butchers and bakers. No surprise there too.

Retailers seem to believe that the solution is more parking in our towns and cities. Though many retailers want to be seen as good corporate citizens, their business is to sell, not to worry about the townscapes. Town centre vitality is only as a means to an end.

High streets with lots of empty shops are not going to go away any time soon. Surely retail, as we knew it, is not coming back, certainly not to our Nairns, Ivines or Kirkintillochs, and maybe not to the Paisleys or Perths too.

So what to do? At the risk of sounding like a utopian, my solution is to give the space away.

Instead of silently watching retail’s inexorable decline, why not invite our world-beating artists, designers, and social entrepreneurs to re-imagine our city streets...

Away

David Cook, Wasps Artists’ Studios

The huge rise in online transactions also pressurising traditional retailing, as well as new competition in all manner of products from the supermarket oligopoly. Instead of silently watching retail’s inexorable decline, why not invite our world-beating artists, designers, and social entrepreneurs to re-imagine our city streets, taking shops on, meeting the basic costs, giving a bit of love and attention to a once vibrant urban space, and revitalising our streets. They will surprise us again and again.

Private landlords will do what they believe is most profitable and who would argue, but our councils, development agencies, emergency services and other public authorities have vast property holdings sitting empty and earning them next to nothing, costing them money. The returns they hope for will never be achieved. Put the assets to good use, generate social impact, social capital and economic return for no cash outlay.

But to do this we need to liberate our civic property surveyors. Rather than paying them to maximise illogical rental values on empty property, the politicians need to free them up to release the property estate in their control for beneficial use.

Let the shops get used, let our high streets and centres have life and our town centres energy. Who knows, there may even be new industries and ways of selling that emerge, and a new economic future built on taking a chance with an otherwise idle resource. One or two token gestures won’t do. We need something on a bigger scale. There are plenty out there with energy and ideas to address this challenge to our towns and cities. They just need the chance.

The Briggait (see front cover) had lain largely empty for the best part of 20 years, before Wasps Studios redeveloped it to enable public and private space, including studios, offices and shop-front units. Much work went into repairing the historic fabric; the stunning 1873 courtyard is open to the public.

The South Block studio of artist and designer Nicola Atkinson.

South Block is a new studio complex in the heart of Glasgow’s Merchant City, designed by award winning architects NORD and providing 96 studio, workshop and office spaces for Glasgow’s creative community.

All images © Wasps Artists’ Studios

Opinions: Town Centres – New Approaches
Genuine community-led action offers a new and exciting approach to town centre regeneration, and one that maximises the chance of achieving successful regeneration outcomes within a challenging economic context. A community-led and holistic approach to town centre regeneration can significantly increase the sense of local ownership and buy-in. It can unleash local creativity, strengthen existing retail provision, develop both civic space and community use, and lever in additional resources. And it can increase opportunities to access other programmes (such as Business Improvement Districts, social enterprise development, community ownership of assets, community renewable energy, training and employment initiatives, amongst others).

While many existing agencies may well have a key role to play as partners in regeneration efforts, they are unlikely to come up with any fundamentally new ideas or approaches. As such, the Development Trusts Association Scotland would argue that the current review of town centre regeneration presents a unique opportunity to directly link community-led regeneration, as advocated in Scottish Government’s Regeneration Strategy 2011, to town centre regeneration, and to explore how what is effectively a bottom-up process can be nurtured, encouraged and supported.

A great example of this approach can be seen in West Kilbride, which was once a thriving coastal town with a range of industries and a blossoming tourism sector. However, a decline in manufacturing and an increase in unemployment in the 1990s meant the fortunes of the town took a serious dip. This was no more evident than in the town centre, which was in a state of disrepair, with endless empty buildings. West Kilbride is now somewhere that local residents can truly be proud of living. In place of the closed shops there are nine studios, including a silversmith, an embroidery specialist, and a business offering fashion and sewing workshops run by professionals of international repute. It has also attracted an award-winning bridal shop, a children’s clothes shop, a delicatessen, a florist and a book shop.

This turnaround in West Kilbride’s fortunes lies in the fact that the initiative was, and still is, driven by passionate local residents, which created a real sense of community ownership. By drawing on the skills, knowledge and strategic thinking of local residents, the town has been able to identify and develop an idea to re-energise its town centre that is truly unique and innovative.

“In 1996, the sight of an empty town centre with boarded and derelict buildings riddled with vandalism forced the community to come together and act.”
Tactical Urbanism - an American perspective

Mike Lydon, The Street Plans Collaborative

“...tactical urbanism is capable of building trust amongst various interest groups, community leaders, and city leaders who are often at odds with each other.”

North America’s central cities are healthier now than they have been since the 1950s. The changing lifestyle preferences of young adults and retiring ‘baby boomers’ is causing a demographic shift toward compact, walkable, and transit-served neighbourhood living. In these places, a variety of commercial, cultural, and recreational amenities are more readily accessible, so that driving a car is a choice not a requirement. In short, smaller living spaces are traded for greater convenience. The return to urban living supports broad social and environmental goals, and is occurring despite still anti-urban government policies struggling to address fast-changing social, environmental, and economic realities. This mismatch between outdated software (government policy) and the demand for new hardware (new infrastructure, urban amenities, etc) has become particularly noticeable in the aftermath of the global economic slowdown - government budgets continue to dwindle while the demand for urban living continues to grow.

So, what’s to be done?

Creating liveable towns and cities commonly starts with addressing small issues found at the street, block, or building scale. Incremental, small-scale improvements are increasingly viewed as an affordable way to stage larger investments in the built environment. This approach to city-making, called ‘tactical urbanism’, allows a host of local actors and organizations to work creatively and iteratively so that new concepts may be tested before making long-term political and financial commitments. Sometimes sanctioned by municipal governments, but often carried out by unsanctioned activists and social entrepreneurs, tactical urbanism is, as Nabeel Hamdi says, planning without the preponderance of plans.

Tactical urbanism projects feature the following five characteristics:

• a deliberate, phased approach to instigating physical and/or social change;
• an offering of local ideas for local planning challenges;
• short-term commitment and realistic expectations;
• low risks, with possible high reward; and
• the development of social capital between citizens, and building organizational capacity between public-private institutions, non-profits, and their many constituents.

Tactical urbanism is commonly applied to what urban sociologist William ‘Holly’ Whyte called the “huge reservoir of space yet untapped by imagination”. Today’s reservoirs – vacant lots, empty storefronts, underutilized public spaces, excessively wide streets, surface parking lots, etc – remain prominent in our towns and cities and have become the preferred targets of undercapitalized entrepreneurs, artists, and activists looking for an opportunity to quickly test their ideas while also making a civic contribution; food trucks, pop-up stores, build-a-better-block initiatives, pavement-to-parks programs, and guerrilla gardens have become the low-cost hallmarks of the tactical urbanism movement.

Typically carried out inexpensively and with designed flexibility, these types of citizen-led projects ensure that adjustments are possible before committing to large outlays of capital spending. Indeed, there is a conservative intelligence to spending small sums on a short-term project before investing millions on the build-out of permanent infrastructure. If the pilot project isn’t as effective as hoped, entire budgets are not exhausted, political capital is not wasted, and future designs may be calibrated to absorb the lessons learned from what is surely a unique and dynamic urban context.

Thus, tactical urbanism’s nimbleness is akin to the iterative build-measure-learn feedback loop employed by so many start-up companies. This ethos posits that the faster an idea is realized, the faster results will be measured and lessons learned from its successes and failures, which can then be integrated into the next project phase. If it’s a total flop, then one can abandon the initiative altogether and redirect precious economic resources to other more pressing needs.

When included as part of a public planning process, tactical urbanism is capable of building trust amongst various interest groups, community leaders, and city leaders who are often at odds with each other. Indeed, if the public is able to physically participate in the improvement of a given neighbourhood, no matter how small the effort, there is an increased likelihood of gaining increased public support for more permanent change later. Allowing citizens to physically test desired improvements also builds social capital, and might also yield unique insight into user expectations and the types of design features they want to utilize; truly participatory urban planning efforts must go beyond drawing on flip charts and maps. This much we’ve learned.

Despite the emphasis on the short-term, tactical urbanism is most effective when used in conjunction with long-term planning efforts that marry the needs of today with the patience required to create permanence later. Tactical urbanism may also be used to recover the momentum gained during a previous public planning process so that some of the most realistic or exciting ideas may be brought closer to fruition. After all, plans are only that without action.
Today, I met some skaters. They have taken over a shop in Inverness on a temporary lease. They are a community with a mission. They like to skate. That’s what they do, and that’s what they want to share. And they are good, real good. To get here, I have passed through the massive Cairngorms, beautifully dusted with snow. I am on a train from Edinburgh. It’s February. Christmas has passed. There isn’t much demand for shopping, for skating or anything else.

Some time ago, a colleague told me a story about a rowing team that won the Olympics. They were good, real good. No one though had them down as winners of the Olympics. They would do OK, give it a go, and be praised for it. But win? No. Except. Except the team believed they could. They knew they could.

They had a single purpose, to win. To get there, they had to negotiate all sorts of things; home life, training, dieting, psychology, work, rest, decision making. Like anyone, they had a life full of demands, full of tensions. So how did they win, what was the strategy? For every single decision they had to make, whether it be more milk on the Weetabix, looking at TV a little longer, getting up or staying asleep, they asked a single question: will it make the boat go faster? Everybody in the entire team asked this question of themselves for every decision every day for every action. They won the Olympics.

So what? What does it have to do with town centres? The skaters know they love to skate. To skate in a city like Inverness, you need to keep mixing up the things you do to create income to have the resources to support the skating. These skaters sell skating gear. They organise music performances, film nights, skate demonstrations. They sublet the space to others, to let people who want to have a go at setting up a business in the city centre have a go. They facilitate Saturday markets, they print t-shirts, they have a photography lab. When sales of skater stuff are low, they ramp up the other activities. When skater sales are high, they offer the opportunity of doing the other stuff to other people. Everything, everything they do is informed by a single purpose: let’s skate.

Except. Except that these guys are in Inverness, not Hoxton, not Temple Bar, not the Merchant City nor Brooklyn. They are there, in Inverness, where they are from, doing what they like doing. They know where they are and who they are. Their supplier come from down south. When it snows in Inverness, no supplies get up to Inverness. Despite that, they still do what they do. They mix it up. They are focused. They have an average age of about 22.

Talk to the establishment in Inverness. Who knows these guys are doing what they do? In all probability, it’s likely only a few. There probably were a few key supporters, people who were useful and helpful and worked with them to help make things happen. Hardly anyone else knows. Does it matter? Yes, it absolutely does. It matters because these skaters are investing in a place, bringing activity to the town centre, trying to make a difference often in spite of the efforts of others to regenerate the same centre. This is not collective thinking about the boat going faster.

Not far away is a bike shop. It is a social enterprise. It is a café, a workshop to learn bike skills, a place to buy stuff for bikes. It was established by a team of people building on an opportunity of funding from the Climate Challenge Fund. Creative thinking, working a funding opportunity into a sustainable long-term legacy for a place around a single purpose: let’s bike. The café faces south. It catches the sun and coats the space in the most beautiful welcoming light. This is a place where you are likely to have the most compelling conversation about the most unexpected thing sitting at the table across from a stranger.

Not too far away is one of the most spectacular bookshops, possibly in the world. An old church cloaked in brick. It serves great tea and home-made cakes. It is nearly impossible not to tempt personal bankruptcy in this space, and the friendly service makes it more difficult to resist.

Nice stories. So what? The so what is this. Because of and in spite of the place, its bureaucracies, its spatial remoteness, the failing high street rhetoric, the lack of opportunity, the draw of other places, the lack of finance, the internet, the damn world, people are doing things. These are ‘to do’ stories. This is a picture of a town as a verb, a place to do. Does it make sense in pure market terms, does it make sense in corporate terms; does it make sense in bureaucratic terms? Who cares. It works. Go there. Meet these people. Experience the humility of people doing something because they believe in themselves, in the place, in the possibilities. Be inspired. Be challenged. Leave each of these places richer for the opportunity of people making a difference and ask: what can I do? How will it make the boat go faster?
Scotland Rocks!

Rachel Hay, Geography Department, Perth High School

On 3rd and 4th March, the Higher Geology class took part in a conference organised by the RSGS and other partners for pupils from all over Scotland. Perth High pupils played a key role in deciding the content and format of the conference, and were a credit to the school as they took on the responsibility for the reception desk and ‘goody bags’.

On Sunday we took part in a field trip run by Dr Ruth Robinson and her Geobus team from the University of St Andrews. We ‘played detective’ in St Monans in Fife, and pieced together the geological history of the area – warm seas, volcanoes, and faulting! There was then a reception at the RSGS’s headquarters, where there was an opportunity to meet other pupils, as well as university students, workshop organisers, RSGS staff, and even Professor Iain Stewart off the telly!

Monday was another action-packed day. Professor Stewart gave a fascinating talk about the importance of geology, as we got a preview of his new BBC series about plate tectonics. Pupils then took part in an active indoor geological mapping session – more detective work! After that, it was time to take part in three different workshops, which pupils had selected before the event.

The next few hours saw pupils predicting when a volcanic eruption would occur and deciding when to evacuate the island of Montserrat, and getting their hands dirty with sediment cores to find evidence of tsunami deposits. Other activities included deciding how to enthuse others about the geodiversity of Shetland, and hearing about studying Geology at university and the amazing travel opportunities it can offer. Other pupils also had a close look at Perth Museum’s fossil collection.

There was then a ‘careers speed dating’ session, in which pupils could quiz employees of Maersk, Dart Energy, Centrica, Geoparks Shetland, and Scotgold, as well as students from the University of Edinburgh. Pupils asked the representatives about what an average working day is like, necessary qualifications for their roles, opportunities for promotion, and their salaries.

An expert panel then answered questions about our future energy challenges, including the risk of extracting oil, and the controversy of ‘fracking’.

A huge thank you to everyone involved for supporting our pupils and making the event possible.
Learning for Sustainability
The report of the One Planet Schools Working Group was published in November 2012. The Working Group defined ‘learning for sustainability’ as “a whole school approach that enables the school and its wider community to build the values, attitudes, knowledge, skills and confidence needed to develop practices and take decisions which are compatible with a sustainable and equitable society.”

The over-riding ambition of the Working Group was that learning for sustainability should become the everyday experience of every learner in every school in every community in Scotland. This would require that current, excellent and inspiring practice would become the universal norm, moving from a system reliant on the enthusiasm and commitment of individuals, to one where a learner’s access to learning for sustainability was recognised as core to their learning experience.

The Working Group’s high-level recommendations were:
1. All learners should have an entitlement to learning for sustainability.
2. Every practitioner, school and education leader should demonstrate learning for sustainability in their practice.
3. Every school should have a whole school approach to learning for sustainability that is robust, demonstrable, evaluated and supported by leadership at all levels.
4. School buildings, grounds and policies should support learning for sustainability.
5. A strategic national approach to supporting learning for sustainability should be established.

University of Edinburgh
Wreford Watson Lecture
In September 2012, novelist and critic Will Self gave the annual Wreford Watson Lecture, a long-standing event in the University’s calendar, which aims to bring geographical ideas and scholars into circulation within a wider culture of public intellectualism. Given Wreford Watson’s academic interest in the relationship between geography and literature, it seemed appropriate to invite one of Britain’s most celebrated writers.

Self’s lecture, Decontaminating the Union: post-industrial landscapes and the British psyche, took the audience on a ‘psychogeographical’ drift through the less trodden paths of post-industrial Scotland, culminating in a detailed exploration of Motherwell and its surrounds. “I am no kind of orthodox academic” Self told the audience. “Rather, I am a writer – specifically of prose fiction – who in the past quarter century or so has taken an increasing interest in a practice known as psychogeography.” The lecture will be published in the Scottish Geographical Journal.

Making an Impact
The RSGS is in a great position to help academics deliver impact for their research, by using our various work streams to support public and policy communication. The best example to date has been our work in support of geodiversity.

The RSGS helped to instigate and find funding for the December 2010 Geodiversity Conference, which we ran in conjunction with BGS, SNH and BSSS, supported by Jim Hansom at Glasgow University and Mike Thomas at Stirling University. The conference was promoted through a geodiversity themed edition of The Geographer, helping to highlight and celebrate Scotland’s geodiversity. This led in turn to a number of geodiversity talks given by leading academics and others within our Inspiring People talks programme.

The conference generated other specific outcomes. Firstly, it spawned the Scottish Geodiversity Forum; thanks to the Chair, Angus Miller, and the enthusiasm of the many participants, this resulted in June 2012 in the Geodiversity Charter, to which the Scottish Government has signed up, and which is now being used as a basis for similar charters in England, Wales and even possibly Europe. Secondly, the conference papers were pulled together in a double edition Scottish Geographical Journal, published in late 2012.

The Scottish Geodiversity Forum continues to flourish. As we enter 2013, it has been supportive of the need to reinstate geology in Scottish schools, working in partnership with the RSGS and St Andrews University Geobus to run the recent Scotland Rocks! conference for school pupils.

This coalescing of the RSGS’s various work streams and functions is a great example of how we can add impact to a whole range of research interests and academic programmes. Please contact Mike Robinson at RSGS HQ if you would like to discuss how RSGS can help you with delivering impact for your research work.

Open University
Deforested triggers carbon collapse of tropical peatlands
Deforested tropical peatlands are haemorrhaging carbon from deep within their peat soils, with consequences for the release of CO₂ to the atmosphere, according to new research by The Open University and partners, published in Nature.

Dr Vincent Gauci, Senior Lecturer in Earth Systems and Ecosystem Science at The Open University, said “Essentially, ancient carbon is being dissolved out of Asian peatlands as they are increasingly being turned over to agriculture to meet global demands for food and biofuels. This has led to a large increase in carbon loss from Southeast Asian rivers draining peatland ecosystems – up by 32% over the last 20 years, which is more than half the entire annual carbon loss from all European peatlands. The destruction of the Asian peat swamps is a globally significant environmental disaster, but unlike deforestation of the Amazon, few people know that it is happening”.

The authors concluded that their results increase the urgency for protecting these ecosystems from ongoing destruction for oil palm and other uses.

Scottish Geographical Journal
The RSGS’s academic journal is available from Taylor & Francis on-line at www.tandf.co.uk/journals/RSGJ or in hard copy. All RSGS members are entitled to receive the Scottish Geographical Journal for free. If you are not currently receiving the SGJ but would like to, please contact us by emailing enquiries@rsgs.org or phoning 01738 455050.
Beacons of the future
Mike Robinson, RSGS

In 2007, I was asked to give a presentation to a group of Scottish arts-based organisations about climate change and sustainability. They assumed I was going to talk about how they could recycle stage equipment and outfits, but actually I wanted to talk about the difficulty in communicating issues of climate change and sustainability. These issues seem high-level and esoteric, yet they affect us all, and whilst scientists have been communicating the science for decades, this is not enough to truly engage people in one of the greatest concerns of our time.

How could we find people who could reach those parts of our psyche that science alone cannot reach? More than ever, I felt we needed our artists and writers to help personalise the issues, to voice concerns and build up the confidence to act. By experimenting with different scenarios, they could appeal to people’s right brain, heart, soul, gut, eyes, fingers, ears and skin; they could immerse readers in, and create a mood for, new thinking in a way that constant recycling of the science simply cannot. They could help interpret what the future might look like, and take the fear out of change.

Then I met a writer, Gregory Norminton, and we devised a plan to challenge some of the best writers in the UK to help. With some financial support from the Climate Challenge Funded Guildtown & Wolfhill Carbon Community Action Project and the Sibthorp Trust, and the backing of Oneworld Publications, the project began to materialise. Authors visited the Perthshire villages of Guildtown and Wolfhill for a long weekend of briefings and conversation, giving readings and cartoon drawing classes to residents, and drawing inspiration from the area.

The result is a book of 21 new short stories for our not so distant future, each story thrilling the senses as it attempts to make sense of a world warping into something unfamiliar. Original, eclectic and inventive, Beacons warns and inspires by offering stories that are as various as our possible futures.

JENNY CRISP
Geography Graduate and Public Health & International Development Student

“What Geography Means To Me

Having just completed an undergraduate degree in Geography, and currently studying for an MPH in Public Health and International Development, geography’s influence so far in my life has been mainly in an academic environment. Nevertheless, geography in my opinion not only contributes to societal debates and concerns but encourages us all to question what we observe in our daily lives, whether it be regarding landscape formation or our concept of femininity.

Thus, geography for me is the ability to question and understand. Geography provides the means and knowledge through which we can critique the world and a wide range of issues, from demography, gender and urban development to more philosophical debates around ideas of representation and the power of language.

Geography has encouraged me to critique what I see around me and has provided me with methods, tools and means with which to do so effectively. It has given me the ability to engage in and question many features and debates in society, including the analysis of obesity in Scotland using statistical datasets, conducting interviews with focus groups regarding perceptions of the elderly, and critically evaluating archival sources in relation to the portrayal of femininity in World War One.

The development of these academic and practical skills during my geographical education has been invaluable to me. I am now able to critique norms, to identify relations, even if the direction of causality is unclear, and I believe I can, simultaneously, see the big picture while focusing on the local specificities. I have been able to apply my ability to question, identify and connect multiple factors at a variety of scales and through a variety of methods in a wide variety of projects.

I am not entirely sure what the future holds for me after my masters, but the skills I have gained from studying geography so far will hopefully stand me in good stead in either the academic or corporate world. However, I am confident that a geographical lens, the ability to question social, political, economic and environmental issues, and the practical geographical skills that I have will continue to shape and influence whatever I decide to do in the future.
As a journalist specialising in environmental and development issues, I’ve visited over 20 countries in Africa. I have reported on how people live, the difficulties they face, the aspirations they have. And I have met a number of people who are affected by climate change.

In 1985, for example, I was in Ethiopia, the year after the famine that kicked off Bob Geldof’s Live Aid. I went to a village in the east of the country, and noticed a gully where it seemed to me that a stream once flowed. I spoke with local farmers who told me that yes, that stream had flowed for years, but was now dry for most of the year. They told me that the climate had changed, that they used to get two rainy seasons a year, a long and a short one. But the short season rains had completely disappeared, and they were too poor to afford irrigation.

Without rain, there were no crops in that short season. For people living on the margin of existence anyway, the change spelt disaster. It meant hoping to harvest enough in October to last for 12 months. And that was almost impossible. There were several hungry months of the year which some people did not survive. Change had changed everything. This was 28 years ago, several years before really anyone, other than scientists, was talking about climate change.

More recently, I was in Senegal in West Africa to look at a UN agency project. I visited a village in the Sahel region and was told that about 400 people used to live there. But now only a hundred remain. The problem is water. The climate had changed; gradually lower rainfall, over the last ten years especially, had left them with not enough water for themselves, their crops and livestock. People had left to survive.

I talked with a family who were leaving that very day, and realised that what I was seeing was probably being repeated every day in Africa. The people affected have done nothing to cause climate change but are victims of it, turned into refugees in their own country. In 2010, according to the Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre of the Norwegian Refugee Council, 38 million people were forced to flee their homes because of hazards that were related to climate change – almost three-quarters of a million people every week. Villages like this made me realise the importance of us in developed countries reducing our carbon emissions. So after writing nine non-fiction books on development and poverty issues, plus a novel on the Make Poverty History campaign, I wanted to write a book about the impact of climate change on people. I did not want to write anything academic, but rather a book that I hoped many people would find interesting. A novel, it seemed to me, was the best way to do it.

My book, Let Live: A bike ride, climate change and the CIA, is told through the eyes of an environmental journalist on a bike in Africa. It’s about the people he meets on a six-month journey through six countries – Senegal, Mali, Côte d’Ivoire, Kenya, Tanzania and Zambia – and draws on my experiences.

The cyclist makes dire yet credible warnings about what is coming if nothing is done to tackle climate change. The articles he writes for his paper are strong enough to attract the attention of the CIA who decide that he cannot be allowed to besmirch the name of the US. A plot is hatched to remove him. The book has humour, sex and corrupt cops, and aims to challenge Western government policies on climate change, and all of us also. Just as we are part of the problem, so we can be part of the solution.
The Firth of Forth combines a rich wildlife with a history of long and intense human activity around its shores and in its waters. At one time, herring, cod and haddock, with many other edible fish, were vastly more numerous, but seals and seabirds were much rarer than now. Once, the rivers running into the Firth were so polluted that people could set fire to some of the burns; now the water is often as pure as it has ever been since records began. Illustrated with black-and-white and colour photographs, this is a captivating exploration into the life of the Firth of Forth which considers a wide range of questions. How have people affected and exploited the wildlife, and how in turn has it determined the lives of people? Why has pollution been easier to control than over-fishing? What were the unintended consequences to the natural heritage both of pollution and of cleaning-up, and what role has conservation had in bringing about changes?

Cities and Low Carbon Transitions
edited by Harriet Bulkeley, Vanesa Castán Broto, Mike Hodson, Simon Marvin (Routledge, December 2010)

Current societies face unprecedented risks and challenges connected to climate change. Addressing them will require fundamental transformations in the infrastructures that sustain everyday life, such as energy, water, waste and mobility. Cities and Low Carbon Transitions presents a ground-breaking analysis of the role of cities in low carbon transitions. The book outlines the key concepts underpinning theories of socio-technical transition and assesses its potential strengths and limits for understanding the social and technological responses to climate change that are emerging in cities. It draws on a diverse range of examples including world cities, ordinary cities and transition towns, to provide evidence that expectations, aspirations and plans to undertake purposive transitions are emerging in some very different urban contexts.

Reader Offer - save 30%
Offer ends 30th June 2013.

Beacons
Stories for our not so distant future
edited by Gregory Norminton (Oneworld Publications, March 2013)

Throughout history, writers have been spokespeople for social change. Beacons threw down the gauntlet to some of our best award-winning writers, challenging them to devise original responses to the climate crisis. In this riveting and provocative collection of short fiction, 21 great storytellers, including Alasdair Gray, Laurence Norfolk, Liz Jensen and A L Kennedy, bring their best writing to one of our biggest issues. From Joanne Harris’ techno-dystopia where parks and bees are no more, to Jem Poster’s soldiers patrolling the ravaged Welsh landscapes, we’re shown our world, altered. Toby Litt uses the analogy of a knickerbocker glory to explain what we’re all about, and Nick Hayes tells the tale of a mysterious woodland hunt through striking illustrations in his graphic story. All author royalties will go to the Stop Climate Chaos Coalition.