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# surveying the pop-up scene

**Peter Jones, Daphne Comfort and David Hillier** look at the development and characteristics of pop-up shops and consider their impact within the UK's towns and cities and the wider retail economy



**Boxpark in Shoreditch, East London – claims to be the world's first pop-up mall**

Street-trading has long been a part of the retail geography of towns and cities within the UK.<sup>1</sup> It has traditionally encompassed a wide range of entrepreneurial activities and typically includes street markets, fruit and vegetable stalls, flower sellers, ice cream carts, balloon and toy sellers, hot-food caravans, baked-potato kitchens, children's roundabouts, newspaper sellers, mime artists, and tourist souvenir stalls. While some street traders operate on a regular, sometimes daily and often weekly basis, others operate on a more seasonal,

periodic or occasional basis. More generally, street-trading lacks the permanent physical presence of traditional mainstream retailing.

More recently 'pop-up' shops, which are generally open for a short period and as such are defined in part by their ephemerality, have emerged as an innovative and rapidly evolving element in the ever-changing retail geography of a growing number of towns and cities within the UK. This article outlines the origins and nature of the pop-up phenomenon, outlines the development and characteristics of pop-

up shops within the UK, and offers some reflections on the impact of pop-up shops within the UK's towns and cities and on the future of pop-up shops within the wider retail economy.

### The 'pop-up' phenomenon

In general terms, Barras<sup>2</sup> defines a pop-up 'as any event that is temporary and involves people taking part as hosts and attendees'. More specifically, the Centre for Economics and Business Research<sup>3</sup> has defined a 'pop-up shop' as 'a temporary shop, stall or brand experience used to sell goods and services for a limited period of time' and has suggested that the term 'includes everything from market stalls and street food vendors, to fashion shops, galleries, cafés and bars'.

The Department for Communities and Local Government (DCLG) and the Association of Town and City Management (ATCM)<sup>4</sup> have suggested that 'a real pop up shop' will 'use an empty or underused space, have a clear start and end date, not aim for permanence, be designed to be moved, and have the potential to transfer to a different site' and will be 'in some way exclusive, distinct or special'. At the same time the DCLG and the ATCM seemed to favour a restricted approach to defining a pop-up shop in that they argued that 'a market is not a pop up and neither is a concession in a department store'. While pop-up shops are widely seen as temporary, their life span can range from just 24 hours through to a few days and weeks, and even up to a year, but the establishment of online stores by companies operating pop-up shops can effectively extend the shelf life of the products initially offered for just a short period of time in the pop-up format.

Various claims have been made for the origins of pop-up shops. Cradlepoint Technology,<sup>5</sup> for example, has suggested that pop-up stores, which were also referred to as 'flash retail', began to appear in US and European cities around 2003, that these shops had a 'consciously makeshift quality', and that they were usually located in vacated retail units and frontages. A number of existing store and online retailers, including Gap, Nike and Bluefly.com, were cited as being among the pioneers in exploring the pop-up concept. Hass and Schmidt<sup>6</sup> traced the origins of pop-up shop to the opening of a clothing store by the US-based company Vacant in Tokyo in 1999, with a similar pop-up shop being opened in New York the following year – which in turn led to the company opening stores that changed locations every few weeks.

The Centre for Economics and Business Research<sup>3</sup> has offered a timeline for pop-up retailing that includes the establishment of farmers' markets in towns and cities within the UK and the USA in the early 1990s, running through the opening in 2004 of a so-called 'guerrilla shop' in Berlin for one year by Comme des Garçons, part of the Japanese Fashion

chain Comme, which was followed by further shops in Warsaw, Singapore, Hong Kong and Glasgow, and Nike's opening of a pop-up shop in New York in 2006, offering a limited line of expensive shoes, and more recently the regeneration of Old Street Underground station in London in 2014 to create a number of pop-up outlets.

While pop-up shops, however defined, are currently a minor and in many ways a novel element in the overall retail mix, great claims have been made for the fundamental importance of the concept. On the supply side, Barras, for example, has argued:<sup>2</sup>

*'Pop Ups are changing how artisans make money: how commercial property owners are leasing their spaces; how big brands are launching new products; how celebrities are promoting themselves; and how e-tailers are marketing the merchandise they sell online. [At the same time on the demand side] consumers are now favouring locally made products, both for environmental reasons and because of a desire to know more about the merchandise they buy – where, how and by whom a product was made. They want an antidote to the homogenization of choices that are offered by chain stores and chain restaurants. And while e-commerce offers convenience it does that by eliminating the shopping experience that many shoppers feel is just as integral to the buying process as the items that are for sale.'*

### Pop-up shops in the UK

The Centre for Economics and Business Research<sup>3</sup> has estimated that in 2014 there were some 9,400 pop-up shops within the UK, generating a turnover of £2.1 billion and employing some 23,000 people; but such estimates should be treated as offering an indicative rather than a definitive picture of the pop-up scene. The pop-up concept has certainly been developed in a variety of spaces, shapes, sizes and locations, offering consumers a range of goods and services, and trading lifespans vary considerably.

Spaces and venues where pop-up shops have been created include vacant spaces and frontages within purpose-built shopping centres and in local shopping areas; buses, vans and lorries or former shipping containers at sporting events and music and arts festivals; disused factories and warehouses; public parks; car boot sales; and on canal boats, rooftop terraces, car parks and the street.

At one end of the scale, a changing range of small pop-up bars is a regular feature of night-life in and around the centre of Birmingham. Nowhere, for example, opened for just two nights in September 2014 on the second floor of a canal-side warehouse in Digbeth. During December 2013 Norjske, a Scandinavian themed bar, opened on the fourth floor of the Chamber of Commerce building in



**Dalegate Market, at Burnham Deepdale in Norfolk, where pop-up shops are welcome a week at a time throughout the summer and at various other times of the year**

Edgbaston. The Beermarket in The Square shopping centre in the centre of Birmingham opens between 12.00 and 16.00 on Fridays and offers a small range of craft beers and wines.

At the other end of the scale, Boxpark in Shoreditch, East London, claims to be the world's first pop-up mall. Boxpark was constructed from stripped and refitted shipping containers on formerly derelict land and opened in 2011. The 40 units offer a mixture of independent fashion and lifestyle retailers, galleries, cafés, bars and restaurants. Boxpark opens seven days a week, with the food and drink outlets being open until 23.00 on Monday to Saturday and until 22.00 on Sunday.

Geographically, pop-up shops have appeared in most towns and cities, but the ephemeral nature of the majority of pop-up shops makes it difficult to map their geography either at the national or the local scale. Nationally, consumer research undertaken in major UK cities for the Centre for Economics and Business Research<sup>3</sup> has suggested that the largest proportion (over 70%) of consumers who had visited a pop-up shop was in Cardiff, while over 40% of consumers in Sheffield, London and Birmingham had visited a pop-up shop, and in Brighton, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds, Edinburgh and Bristol the visiting figures were over 25%.

In Bristol, for example, in December 2015 there was a range of pop-up shops, including Harbourside Market, Esty Market, Lady Jane Bristol, the Independent Christmas Market, Spiegeltent, Stokes Croft Vintage Market, and Bare. The Esty Market, for example, located in a former police station in the city centre, offered a range of handmade local products, while the Stokes Croft Vintage Market, housed in a former motor cycle showroom, offered

a range of retro, vintage, classic and antique items, including vinyl records, clothes, furniture, toys, collectables and furniture.

Pop-up shops are not confined to towns and cities, and a number can be found in rural areas. For example, in Burnham Deepdale, Norfolk, for six days in October 2014 there was a range of pop-up shops offering handmade natural and organic skin care products, soft furnishings, metal and wooden garden models, watercolour paintings, and recycled furniture. Over two days in October 2014, the Natural Fibres Company ran a pop-up shop at the company's woollen mill in Launceston, Cornwall, and provided advice on how to treat and colour fleeces and turn them into products.

Lisa's Larder is a pop-up food store at Aubrey Farm at Keyhaven in Hampshire offering high-quality produce from small suppliers who do not have the capacity to supply larger retailers. The shop opens on a Friday and Saturday every four weeks and offers a range of seasonal and local produce, including bread, cheese, smoked fish, and lamb. Since 2013 a range of independently run pop-up shops have taken short-term leases for empty retail premises on the High Street in Selkirk in the Borders region of Scotland. The goods on offer have included foodstuffs, bicycles, clothes and locally produced craft products.

A number of factors have been important in driving and facilitating the development of pop-up shops within the UK, including high vacancy rates in many traditional shopping centres, relaxations in planning legislation relating to temporary shops, and the opportunity for retailers to test products and brands and to gain business experience without large-scale financial commitment. At the same time,

changes in consumer culture, as manifest in the growing interest in local produce and the desire for greater personal engagement with producers, have played an important role in pop-up shop development.

The number of empty retail units within the UK varies over space and time, but early in 2016 estimates suggested that vacancy rates were running at 12.5%, with vacancies in shopping centres (at 13.2%) more than double the level found in retail parks (6%).<sup>7</sup> In 2015 Colliers<sup>8</sup> reported that vacancy levels in 15 key locations within Britain were 'stubbornly high', but that vacancy rates were twice as high in secondary sites as those in primary sites within the chosen locations.

A number of companies, including Appear Here, We Are Pop Up, and Storefront, and some local authorities market space for pop-up shops within shopping centres. Appear Here, launched in 2012, is the UK's largest online marketplace and consultancy for short-term space. The company effectively connects landlords and property owners who have vacant space with independent retailers and brands that want to hire retail space to launch a pop-up shop. In September 2016, for example, the Appear Here website included details of a range of shopping centre spaces in the centre of Birmingham, with daily (and weekly) rentals ranging from £131 (£920) to £357 (£2,500). At the same time the Storefront website carried details of a range of available retail spaces within London, with daily rental rates of £49 in Soho, £78 in Shoreditch, £240 in Islington, £480 on the banks of the Regent's Canal, and £3,600 in the Royal Opera Arcade.

In 2012 the UK Government announced proposals designed to 'reactivate empty shops and to reclaim underused street space'.<sup>9</sup> Following consultation, the Government put in place permitted development rights to allow for the temporary retail use of buildings classed for business, office, assembly and leisure and other non-residential use for up to two years.<sup>10</sup> This change reduced the delay and the costs associated with having to submit a planning application. That said, other regulatory and licensing rules apply, and potential pop-up operators must secure the necessary formal leasing arrangements, and if their proposed pop-up shop is to be on public space they must obtain the relevant local authority's permission.

Local authority licensing is also required if a pop-up shop plans to sell alcoholic drinks and/or hot food or provide any form of regulated entertainment. Both existing health and safety and food safety regulations apply to pop-up shops.

The inherent character of pop-up shops has been important in driving their development. Flexibility is seen to be important in that a pop-up shop can offer both new entrepreneurs and established retailers an opportunity to test new products and market

segments on what can be seen as an experimental basis within a relatively low-cost retail format, and without a commitment to long and potentially complex leasing arrangements and contractual obligations. At the same time, in some ways pop-up shops also strike a chord with changing consumer behaviour in that a growing number of customers increasingly want to buy local and seasonal goods, to enjoy a different style of shopping experience, and to develop a more personal relationship with producers and retailers than is normally available with large corporate retailers.

Less tangibly, pop-up shops are seen to generate buzz and excitement among consumers, which is seen to be an important part of their appeal.

## Discussion

Pop-up shops are currently a small, diverse but popular element within the UK's retail landscape, and a number of issues concerning their role within town and city centres and their contribution to the overall retail mix merit reflective discussion.

While the opening of pop-up shops can be seen to create a sense of temporary excitement on the retail scene, the DCLG and the ATCM<sup>4</sup> have argued that they offer a number of longer-term benefits. Here, one of the arguments, for example, is that pop-up shops can play a valuable role in allowing their operators to explore whether a new retail offer is likely to be viable within a specific area. More specifically, the DCLG and the ATCM<sup>4</sup> suggested that testing the waters in this way 'means we'll see more sustainable businesses in future'. At the same time, the DCLG and the ATCM<sup>4</sup> also suggested that 'bringing together a number of pop up shops at the same time can rebrand a failing area', thereby 'creating a new identity and a critical mass of businesses which can support each other', and that 'pop up shops can inspire new uses for old buildings, showing them off to prospective tenants much better than a closed, dark unit'.

In a similar vein, Ian Anderson, Head of Retail Planning at CBRE, the commercial property consultants, has argued that pop-up shops have a vital role to play in the regeneration of the high street. He claimed that 'pop-ups benefit the High Street by creating new interest, driving footfall and preventing vacancies' and that 'pop-ups generate precisely the excitement of the new to drive more vital and viable town centres'.<sup>11</sup> In Swindon, the Borough Council, the town centre management company and two private sector regeneration companies launched a pop-up scheme in September 2016 designed to improve the town centre's retail mix. Under the scheme independent and start-up businesses and traders that are currently operating at markets, trade fairs or online will be able to take space within the town centre's empty retail units for a number of weeks.



However, while a number of commentators agree that pop-up shops may play a role in the regeneration of the high street, pop-ups cannot provide a long-term solution to the problems facing central shopping areas. Here, there are arguments, for example, that pop-up shops are the visible manifestations of more deep-seated problems on the high street, and that attracting retailers and businesses to occupy premises on a permanent basis must be the policy priority. Concerns have also been expressed that relaxations in the planning requirements, introduced in 2013, only allow pop-up shops to be in place for two years, which is not long enough to recuperate set-up costs and thus to encourage long-term sustainability.

There are also arguments that the emergence of pop-up shops in central shopping areas, trading on what are perceived to be favourable terms, can cause resentment among and generate competition for existing long-term retailers, who may then, in the increasingly competitive retail environment, review their own trading arrangements and consider relocation.

More generally, there are issues about the future role of pop-up shops within the wider retail economy. In looking to the future some analysts have argued that pop-up retailing will become a permanent feature within the retail mix. Shopify, an e-commerce company, for example, has argued that 'pop-up shops are here to stay'<sup>12</sup> and that 'pop-up shops are the future of physical retail'.<sup>13</sup> Here, one of the arguments is that at a time when an enhanced customer experience is seen as an increasingly powerful source of competitive advantage, pop-up shops are essentially a hybrid retail model which offers the personal intimacy and excitement lacking in both physical and online retailing.

The announcement in September 2016 that Amazon, the world's largest e-retailer, is to open a network of some 100 pop-up shops in shopping malls in the US would certainly seem to add force to this argument. In July 2016 eBay announced that it was exploring the possibility of opening pop-up shops within Sainsbury's stores within the UK – the rationale was again on linking online and physical retailing in a way that gives customers an opportunity to experience products at first hand.

In a similar vein, although at a much smaller scale, pop-up retailers at street craft fayres often showcase their products and offer customers their website details as a central part of their marketing strategy.

As growing numbers of customers are looking for innovative interactive experiences, so pop-up shops may become an increasingly important in retail marketing strategies. As such, pop-up shops might contribute more and more to the seamless and increasingly diverse shopping experience that is multi-channel retailing.

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## Notes

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