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A COMMENTARY ON POP UP SHOPS IN THE UK

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## *ABSTRACT*

**Purpose -**This commentary paper outlines the origins and nature of the pop up retail phenomenon, examines 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 town and city centres and on the role of pop up shops within the wider retail economy.

**Design/Methodology/Approach -**The paper begins with a brief review of the pop up retail phenomenon and this is followed by an examination of the development and characteristics of pop up shops in the UK. The information on which the paper is based is drawn from the corporate websites of pop up shop operators and property management companies and agencies.

**Findings –** The paper reveals that pop up shops have been developed in a variety of formats and locations within the UK and a number of factors driving pop up shop development are identified including high retail vacancy rates in shopping centres, relaxations in planning regulations, the opportunity for retailers and entrepreneurs to market test products and brands and changes in customer behaviour and consumer culture. Looking to the future pop up shops may make but a small physical contribution to increasing the number of retail units on the High Street but by enhancing the experiential environment for consumers they may make an important contribution to the quality of shopping.

**Originality/Value** – The paper provides an accessible review of the origins, development and possible impact of pop up shops within the UK and as such will interest property professionals, academics and students interested in changes in the retail environment.


**KEYWORDS-**Pop up shops, vacancy rates, town centre management, experiential retailing

## *Introduction*

Within the UK concerns about empty shop units, often referred to as voids, have become an important property management issue for a range of companies and organisations. In 2011 a British Council for Shopping Centres' report entitled *'Empty Shops'* chronicled a steady rise in town centre void rates from the late 1990s onwards and suggested that *'the burden of maintaining empty properties, as well as continuing to service debts, responding to pressure from other tenants for lower rents, and paying empty property rents on void units could prove too much for some landlords'* (Rogers and Blake 2011, p.25). In the foreword to this report Ricard Akers, then Managing Director of the Retail Portfolio at Land Securities the largest commercial property company in the UK, suggested that *'the image of empty shops is one of the most powerful indicators of the pressure on retailers to survive in the current trading conditions'* (Rogers and Blake 2011, Foreword/ii). More recently Wrigley and Lambiri (2015, p.3) reported that the number of empty retail property units had more than doubled from 7% in 2008 to 16.3% in late 2012 but suggested that such average figures *'concealed wide geographical variations with substantially higher rates being recorded notably in norther regions.'* Colliers International's (2015, p.3 ) '*National Retail Barometer'* suggested that void rates remained *'stubbornly high'* but revealed that in a sample of 15 'indicative' retail centres within the UK *'it is increasing secondary voids, measured as a percentage of both total units and floorspace, that is driving the overall decline in occupancy.'*

The problems of empty retail units in shopping centres are part of deeper structural economic problems. Wrigley, N. and Lambiri, D. (2015, p. 8-9), for example, have argued that three *'structural forces'* namely *'the progressive rise of online shopping'*, *'the long-term and cumulative impacts of competition from out-of-town "one stop" retail development'* and *'the rise of convenience culture'* have combined to produce *'a period of profound change in the UK town centres and high streets.'* More popularly the closure of shops in town centres have been depicted continuing concern about the future of the 'High Street' by many commentators. A variety of reports, reviews and policy initiatives have been undertaken in an attempt to address these concerns and to secure the retail future of the UK's town and city centres. These include the Portas Review (Portas 2011), the Department for Communities and Local Government (2013) response to that review and progress made in responding to the challenges identified within it, a review by Deloitte's (2013) which sought to re-invent the High Street, and the establishment of the Future High Streets Forum by the Government (Gov. UK 2016). While each report and review has its own individual approach and flavour the focus is on coordinating a range of measures and initiatives. Collectively these measures and initiatives include the development of a coordinated strategy and regular measurement and monitoring of associated dedicated action plans; the establishment of local partnerships to drive change; the need to understand changing consumer behaviour and consumption and to manage the customer experience more effectively; changes to the planning system to make it more flexible and responsive to commercial stakeholders; and the encouragement of innovation and creativity. In a number of reports the concept of the 'pop up shop' receives passing mention but there is no sustained or illustrative treatment of how the encouragement of pop up shops within empty retail units might contribute to the revitalisation of town and city centres. With this in mind this short commentary paper outlines the origins and nature of the pop up retail 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 town and city centres and on the role and future of pop up shops within the wider retail economy. The paper draws its data from a range of corporate websites but while the authors recognise that such an approach is narrowly circumscribed they are minded that it does provide a basic introduction to pop up retailing within the UK, that it serves to underpin a broader discussion of the challenges faces the High Street and that it provides a platform for future research.

***The 'Pop Up' Retail Phenomenon***

In general terms Barras (2016, p.3) 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 (2015, p. 8) 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 suggested that *'it includes everything from market stalls and street food vendors, to fashion shops, galleries, cafes and bars.'* The Department for Communities and Local Government and Association of Town Centre Managers' (2013, p.6) 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 *'be in some way exclusive, distinct or special.'* At the same the Department for Communities and Local Government and Association of Town Centre Managers' (2013, p.6) seemed to favour a restricted approach to defining a pop up shop in that it argued that *'a market is not a pop up and neither is a concession in a department store.'* Pop up shops are widely seen as temporary their life span can range from just 24 hours, through a few days and weeks, 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 available for just a short period of time in the pop up format.

In reality the term pop up shop has been used to refer to temporary outlets that offer a wide range of products. At one end of the spectrum there are luxury brand pop up shops in prestigious locations and Klein et al. (2016, p.5761) defined *'pop up brand stores'* as *'temporary stores that seek to offer customers more approachable access to luxury brands'* that *'are usually open for only a couple of weeks.'* Hermes, Louis Vuitton and Rick Owens, for example, all ran luxury brand pop up stores for short periods of time in up market shopping centres in New York in 2013. Here the focus is usually seen to be on introducing potential new customers to the brand, on changing the brand perceptions of existing customers and on looking to provide customers with a unique retail experience rather than on selling products. At the other end of the spectrum the principal goal of individuals and companies opening the vast majority of pop up shops in more everyday locations is to sell their products and services and thus to generate sales revenue and to grow the business. That said a farmers' market, for example, where local food products are on sale, does provide producers/traders with valuable opportunities to develop relationships with their customers and with an opportunity to educate them about their production methods. In a similar vein while small pop up bars may look to create a new drinking and social experience and possibly to showcase new brands of beer or spirits but here again the principal focus is on sales.

While the pop up retail phenomena has been reported in many parts of the world including many cities in North America, Western Europe and in Russia, Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Africa and Rio de Janeiro different claims have been made for the origins of pop up shops. Cradlepoint Technology (2015, webpage), for example suggested that pop up stores, which were also referred to as *'flash retail'* began to appear in the 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 MTV and Bluefly.com, were cited as being amongst the pioneers in exploring the pop up concept. Hass and Schmidt (2016) traced the origins of the 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's (2015, p.11) has offered a timeline for pop up retailing which included the establishment of farmers' markets in towns and cities within the UK in the early 1990's; through the opening in 2004 of a so called *'Guerrilla Shop'* in Berlin for one year by Comme des Garcons, the Japanese Fashion chain Comme, which was followed by further shops in Warsaw, Singapore, Hong Kong and Glasgow; to Nike's opening of a pop up shop in New York offering a limited line of expensive shoes; and more recently to the regeneration of Old Street Underground Station in London in 2014 to provide 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 (2016, p.ix), for example, argued *'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.'* (p. ix) At the same time on the demand side *'consumers are now favouring locally made products, both for environmental reasons and because of 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 an integral to the buying process as the items that are for sale'* (Barras 2016,pp.ix-x).

***Pop Up Shops in the UK***

The Centre for Economics and Business Research (2015) estimated that in 2014 there were some 9,400 pop up shops within the UK (which had an estimated 281,000 shops in 2017 Centre for Retail Research 2017), generating a turnover of £2.1 billion and employing some 23,000 people. 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 their trading lifespans vary considerably. Spaces where pop up shops have been created include vacant spaces and frontages within purpose built shopping centres and on local shopping areas, in buses, vans and lorries or former shipping containers, at sporting events, at music and arts festivals, disused factories and warehouses, public parks, sporting events, car boot sales, on canal boats, rooftop terraces, car parks and on the street.

On the one hand there are a large number of individual pop up stores often within existing shopping centres. Within the Saint David's Shopping Centre in Cardiff, for example, Newport-based footwear and clothing supplier Bedroom Athletics, Natuzzi, which designs , produces and sells sofas, armchairs and living room accessories, and Bonnie and Pearl, the children’s doll maker, have opened pop up shops of varying tenancies. Bedroom Athletic, for example, took an empty unit in the centre from October 2012 to January 2013 with the main focus being on creating brand awareness while Natuzzi focused on creating awareness and sales of a new product line. On the other hand Boxpark in Shoreditch, East London which claims to be the world's first pop up mall. This was constructed with 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, cafes, bars and restaurants and it 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 many 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 the major UK cities for the Centre for Economics and Business Research (2015) 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 were 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 Bridewell 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. In Burnham Deepdale, Norfolk for six days in October 2014, for example, 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 a range of products. Lisa’s Larder is a pop up food store at Aubrey Farm at Keyhaven in Hampshire offering high quality produce from small suppliers which 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 High Street in Selkirk in the Borders Region of Scotland. The goods on offer have included foodstuffs, bicycles, clothes and locally produced craft products.

Pubs, bars and cafes are also an important element in the UK’s pop up mix. A changing range of small pop up bars are 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 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. Spacial Installations, supplies pop up pubs in free standing locations. The company's standard two storey pop up pub, which includes a traditional bar area on the ground floor and an enclosed seating area and open air terrace on the first floor, is built around a core of three shipping containers and takes a day to erect and another to dismantle. These pubs can be customised to suit particular occasions and supplied with floral arrangements, widescreen televisions and sound systems. In 2016 pubs were supplied for the Goodwood Revival event in West Sussex, for a Barclaycard Promotional event in Hyde Park, the Silverstone Classic motor racing festival and at Blenheim Palace for the BBC's 'Country Matters' television programme.

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 customer behaviour and expectations and consumer culture are also playing an important role in driving pop up shop development as shopping is increasingly seen not to be just concerned with buying goods and services but also with the nature and quality of the shopping experience. This is manifest, for example, in the growing interest in local produce and the apparent desire for greater personal engagement with producers.

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 (13.2%) more than double those (6%) on retail parks (Local Data Company 2016). Colliers International (2015) reported that vacancy levels in 15 key locations within Britain were twice as high in secondary sites compared to those in primary sites within the chosen locations. A number of companies, including Appear Here, We Are Pop Up, and Store Front and some local authorities, market space for pop up shops within shopping centres. Appear Here, for example, launched in 2012, is the UK's largest online market place and consultancy for short term space. The company effectively connects landlords and property owners which have vacant space with independent retailers and brands which want to hire retail space to launch a pop up shop. The rental rates for pop up shops vary widely depending on the size and location of the available premises. 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 (weekly rentals for the units) 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 Canal and £3,600 in the Royal Opera Arcade. These rates stand in marked contrast to those in district shopping centres and markets in smaller towns. Weekly rates for the pop up shop unit in Cheltenham Market on the town's Bath Road vary from £300 to £400 depending on the time of the year and daily rates for market stalls at Worcester Market vary from £30 to £50.

In 2012 the UK Government announced proposals designed to *'reactivate empty shops and to reclaim underused street space'* (Gov. UK. 2012, webpage). Following consultations the UK Government put in place permitted development rights to allow for the temporary use of buildings classed for business, office, assembly and leisure and other non-residential for retail use for up to two years (Department for Communities and Local Government 2013). These changes reduce 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 and to provide any form of regulated entertainment. Both normal 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 behaviours 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 amongst consumers which is seen to be an integral 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 temporary sense of excitement on the retail scene the Department for Communities and Association of Town Centre Managers (2013) argued that they also 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 if a new retail offer is likely to be economically viable within a specific area. More specifically the Department for Communities and Association of Town Centre Managers (2013, p.7) suggested testing the waters in this way *'means we'll see more sustainable businesses in the future.'* At the same time the Department for Communities and Association of Town Centre Managers (2013, p.7) 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 the Head of Retail Planning at CBRE, the commercial property consultants, argued that pop up shops have a vital role to play in the regeneration of the High Street. More specifically Anderson 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'* (CBRE 2014, webpage). In Swindon the Borough Council, the city's 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 this scheme independent and start-up businesses and traders which 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 limited number of weeks.

However while a number of commentators agree pop up shops may play a role in the regeneration of the High Street they 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 business that 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 and that is not long enough to recuperate set up costs and thus to promote long term sustainability. There are also arguments that the emergence of pop up shops, trading on what are perceived to be favourable terms, in central shopping areas can cause resentment amongst and generate unfair competition for existing long term retailers which may then , in the increasingly competitive retail environment, review their own trading arrangements and relocate. At the same time under the banner *'An Alternative Future for the High Street'* The Grimsey Review argued that *'there is too much retail space in the UK'* (Grimsey p. 6) and that *'landlords of empty shop units should be required to apply for a change of use and make the asset productive in the community as housing, health, leisure, culture or educational facilities'* (Grimsey 2013, p.7).

More generally there are issues about the future role of pop up shops within the wider retail economy. In looking to the future some commentators have argued that pop up retailing will become a permanent feature within the retail mix. Shopify, an e-commerce company, for example, argued that *'pop up shops are here to stay'* (Shopify 2016a, webpage) and that *'pop up shops are the future of physical retail'* (Shopify 2016b). Niehm et al. (2007) suggested that *'firms large and small have begun to embrace pop-up retail as a new marketing tool to provide the experiential environment desired by consumers'* (Niehm et. al. 2007, p. 4) and argued that pop up shops are *'continuously evolving into real world "learning labs" for retailers and marketers'* (Niehm et al. 2007, p. 25). As such pop up shops can be seen as a hybrid retail model which offers the personal intimacy lacking in both physical and online retailing. The announcement in September 2016 that Amazon, the world's largest e-retailers, 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 E-Bay announced that it was exploring the possibility of opening pop up shops within Sainsbury's stores within the UK and here again the rationale was on linking online and physical retailing in a way that would give customers an opportunity to experience products at first hand. In a similar vein, though 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 more innovative and interactive retail experiences so pop up shops may become increasingly important in retail marketing strategies. As such pop up shops might increasingly contribute to the seamless shopping experience that is multi-channel retailing.

## *Conclusion*

A wide variety of pop up stores have emerged as an innovative element in the ever changing retail landscape within the UK and initially they have proved attractive to consumers, retailers, entrepreneurs, landlords, local authorities and property managers. Only time will tell whether the pop up concept, which is defined by its ephemerality, will endure within the UK. On the one hand pop up shops will, at best, make but a minor physical contribution to the enhancing the vibrancy and vitality and to increasing the numbers of retail units on the High Street and in shopping centres. On the other hand in enhancing the experiential environment that consumers increasingly crave pop up shops may make an important contribution to the quality of shopping in those locations. Looking to the future property managers in the UK will certainly want to maintain a watching brief on the retail pop up phenomena. Looking to the future this paper provides a platform for further research which may explore the continuing role of pop up retailing in the development of the retail offer within towns and cities within the UK and empirical investigations of how customers perceive and engage with the pop up experience.

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