



Town centre management models: A European perspective

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ABSTRACT

Town centre management (TCM) has evolved considerably over the last 25 years in terms of both its purpose and methods. Whilst most reviews of TCM to date have focused on its development within the Anglo-Saxon world (typically North America and the United Kingdom), comparatively little attention has been given to other models of place and town centre management that have emerged across Europe. This paper seeks to redress the balance by exploring the relevance of other models from a number of European countries, which were researched using a case study approach and conceptualised within a framework which seeks to classify TCM schemes by their funding sources and structural formality. It is argued that, despite their lower budgets or lack of formal recognition, other models of TCM such as informal place management schemes or hybrids of formal and informal TCM schemes can often be just as effective in delivering positive outcomes for urban communities.

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Introduction

It has become commonly accepted that places, however broadly or narrowly defined, need to be managed actively (Oc and Tiesdell, 1998; McGill, 1998; Symes and Steel, 2003; van Dijk, 2006; Seisdedos, 2008) to ensure their sustainability (Girardet, 2006). This is in line with Elkington's (1994) conceptual "triple bottom line" principle of economic, social and environmental performance. Nowhere is this more apparent than at the level of individual towns and cities – in spite of the abundance of definitions that this process has generated in the urban management literature (Mattingly, 1994) – as growing megacities compete for prosperity on a global scale (Marcuse and Van Kempen, 2000) whilst striving to retain a local identity (Borja and Castells, 1997; Czarniawska, 2002).

Over the last quarter of a century, TCM has emerged as a practical response to the complexities of urban revitalisation (Page and Hardyman, 1996) at the local level with valuable contributions through area-based marketing (Stubbs et al., 2002; Warnaby et al., 2005), sustainable development (Banister, 1998), the engagement of disadvantaged socio-economic groups (Woolley, 2000; Guy and Duckett, 2003), frameworks for place making and regeneration (Otsuka and Reeve, 2007a) and the development of inte-

grated area-based public–private sector partnerships (Jones et al., 2003; Lloyd et al., 2003; de Nisco et al., 2008).

Against this backdrop, we present an overview of how TCM has evolved in Europe in the recent past. By taking a pan-European perspective, this study seeks to widen previous debates – generally centred around British perspectives of the concept – by exploring parallels in the development of TCM across different national contexts, as suggested by Reeve (2004), following a transnational comparative study approach.

In the next section, the concept of TCM, first in the British context and then in its different European derivations, is considered. Following this, models of TCM are considered and a matrix containing European TCM schemes is presented. This matrix (after Medway et al., 2006), seeks to elucidate the contribution of various types of schemes (including, for example, informal SME retailer-led schemes) to the future of TCM in the UK and continental Europe. The matrix is utilised, in the following section, to illustrate specific case studies of individual schemes from Italy, Spain, the UK and Austria which were informed by questionnaires translated into four languages and answered by practising town centre managers. The purpose of this is to establish whether it offers a useful and workable tool for academics and practitioners. The final section outlines how TCM might best evolve into the future.

Defining town centre management

In the early days of its development in the United Kingdom, TCM was seen primarily as a response to external factors and

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consisted of “a comprehensive response to competitive pressures, which involves development, management and promotion of both public and private areas within town centres, for the benefit of all concerned” (Wells, 1991, p. 24). Guy suggested a more specific vision of this role, with TCM incorporating:

“many of the hitherto usually separate concerns of town planning, leisure, public health and publicity departments. Secondly, it implies a co-operative rather than confrontational relationship with the private sector” (Guy, 1993, p. 36)

Other (British) authors have built on this to suggest a more strategic marketing facet to TCM. For instance, Warnaby et al.’s widely-cited definition suggests that it involves:

“the search for competitive advantage through the maintenance and/or strategic development of both public and private areas and interests within town centres, initiated and undertaken by stakeholders drawn from a combination of the public, private and voluntary sectors” (1998, pp. 17–18)

More recently, the concept of TCM has also been defined through the pivotal strategic management role that each town centre manager plays in:

“gathering and sharing market information, enabling stakeholders to work together in the strategic planning process, setting up formal and informal communication and social networks between partners, training the town’s stakeholder employees to implement the regeneration strategy and maintain a marketing orientation, and evaluating success, in order to both motivate all involved and to assess progress” (Whyatt, 2004, p. 352)

In the UK, the Association of Town Centre Management (ATCM) – the leading body representing town centre management schemes across the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland with 550 members in 2008 – defines (town/city) centre management as:

“a co-ordinated pro-active initiative designed to ensure that our town and city centres are desirable and attractive places. In nearly all instances the initiative is a partnership between the public and private sectors and brings together a wide-range of key interests” (nd, unpaginated)

Parallel to the development of TCM in the United Kingdom, similar initiatives began to arise in Spain (AGECU, nd; Martn Rojas, 1997; Dirección General de Comercio Interior, 1998; Sánchez del Río, 2001), Italy (Moras et al., 2004; Zanderighi, 2004; Codato et al., 2005), Sweden (Sandahl and Lindh, 1995; Forsberg et al., 1999; Svenska Stads kärnor, nd), Austria (Stadtmarketing Austria, nd), France (Cossardeaux, 1999), Norway (Norsk Sentrumsforum, 2008), Belgium (AMCV, nd), Germany (BCSD, nd) and other European countries. Although there was much in common with the UK factors initiating TCM, e.g. the need to revitalise town centres which faced decline due to the emergence of alternative retail formats such as out-of-centre and edge-of-centre shopping centres and retail parks (Dawson and Burton, 1999), the means to achieve this were altogether different. Unlike in the UK, most Spanish, Italian and French TCM schemes, for example, were led from the outset by small and medium sized independent retailers (Molinillo Jiménez, 2001). This led to a greater focus on retailing, customer service and the development of local trade associations. Although a single generally accepted definition is yet to be agreed upon in Spain following various attempts at the local and regional levels (e.g. Pascual, 1995; Frechoso Remiro, 2000; Torres Outón, 2005), the concept of *centros comerciales urbanos* or *centros comerciales abiertos* first coined by Castresana (1999) – both of which can be translated as “retailer-led town centre management schemes” –

has been defined geographically and functionally (i.e. in terms of retailing) as:

“[a scheme aimed to manage] retail outlets in a section of the town or city, normally bound by a number of streets, which tends to coincide with the historical old town where, traditionally, street markets existed and, therefore, most trade used to take place outdoors” (translated from Vilariño et al., 2002, p. 35).

In spite of this spatial definition of a typical TCM scheme, the conceptual description of this management model would not be complete without reference to the importance of the high level of cooperation that must exist between retailers, other small businesses in the service sector (e.g. restaurants, cafes, entertainment outlets, and so forth) and local authorities. It is through such cooperation that the model can achieve its full potential in terms of the facilitation of an integrated approach to the management of public and private space through effective public–private partnerships (Rovira Lara, 2000).

In line with this philosophy, a similar model of retailer-led TCM has emerged in Italy under the name of *centro commerciale naturale*, which has been defined as:

“an aggregation of small sized retail shops located in a homogeneous area of the historic city centre that, through a proper company scheme, position themselves in a privileged position with the town council for the development of common strategies ... not only from the commercial competitiveness point of view, but above all from that of the peculiarity of the retail framework to safeguard and valorise, through the reinforcement of the business structure, the urban places of interaction, liveability and socio-environmental balance” (translated from Valente, 2004, p. 894)

Unlike its Spanish and Italian counterparts, the French TCM model, reported by Molinillo Jiménez (2001), based originally on the *Vitrines de* retailer-led formula (e.g. *Vitrines de Mulhouse* – the Retailers of Mulhouse), relies on the creation of a public–private partnership to finance the position of the town centre manager. This hybrid model has been linked by Cossardeaux (1999) to a “French variation of the British town centre management model” (translated from Molinillo Jiménez, 2001, p. 34).

Overall, there are various major themes that are common across the European definitions of TCM reviewed above – a common purpose, working in partnership and the presence of a mix of stakeholders (both public and private). However, differences are clearly apparent between the UK definitions of TCM and the French, Italian, and Spanish ones. The continental European approaches are dependent upon the involvement of retailers and other town centre small businesses, with the aggregation of these businesses being the major objective. This is in contrast to the UK approach, which typically makes explicit reference to the building of competitive advantage for town and city centres (e.g. through better quality of life for residents, diversity in the retail and leisure offer, attractions for visitors, etc.) being the *raison-d’être* for TCM.

Models of town centre management

Whilst a review of the different definitions of TCM is helpful in establishing the various European interpretations of the concept and its current state of development (in light of the fact that a formal definition does not exist in many countries), it tells us little about the structure and operations of TCM. These are now reviewed.

Warnaby et al. (1998, p. 19) “believe that the criteria of organizational structure and resource are central to a proper understand-

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