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ARTICLES

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CITY CENTRE MANAGEMENT:
Dutch and British experience of a new form of planning

Abstract: The contemporary city centre is overloaded with activities and with expectations. New forms of managing city centres which have been labelled 'city centre management' try to deal with this new situation. This article compares the experiences of two Western European countries, each with a relatively long tradition of public planning intervention, namely the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

Key words: urban policy, city management.

1. TRENDS AND EXPERIENCES IN URBAN POLICY

A generally discernible trend in the management of European cities during the 1980s has been a shift in emphasis in urban policy from a supply to a demand orientation: from a focus on facility provision to one on users (Voogd, 1995). This reflects broad changes in the philosophy of government and the nature of European societies and, more specifically, changes in the way cities are viewed by their governments and their citizens. This has resulted in many changes in public planning technique, organisational structure, and, above all, in underlying approaches to the management of cities.

One widespread consequence has been a reduction in both central government subsidies and control. Increasingly, local authorities have been forced to be creative and imaginative in their search for funding which has resulted in new roles for many types of private investment often within new organisational public-private partnership structures (cf. ATCM, 1993; DOE,

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1994). Simultaneously there has been a shift, discernible in many European countries, in the way cities, and especially their central areas, are perceived and used. To the traditional uses of central areas as commercial and administrative space have been successively added the recreational and entertainment demands of a leisured society (Jansen-Verbeke, 1988; Burgers, 1992), and the city as symbolic space, with its distinctive structures of the city as promoted product (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990). The city centre is expected to house, in addition to its central place market functions of shopping, commerce and government, the social and cultural facilities demanded by post-modern lifestyles (Keniston, 1968) and by the re-evaluation of the roles of the cultural industries (Bianchini and Parkinson, 1993), an expanded residential function, prompted by fears of the consequences of the uninhabited central city, and stimulated in many official 'back to the city' policies, and through its structures, its spaces and, more generally, its *genius loci* it represents the identity and self-image of the city as a whole, as projected to both citizens as civic consciousness and beyond as product branding. The city centre is simultaneously the economic engine, the administrative hub, the social pleasure dome (Oosterman, 1993), the cultural nursery and the urban signature for the city as a whole and often more widely the urban region and even in some cases, the nation-state. All of this is to be accomplished within the constraints of a new attention to quality environments whether these are 'green' or 'grey': the city as visual amenity and the city as heritage.

City centres were always multifunctional and none of the attributes listed above are new but the quantity of functions, their combination, the intensity of the use of space and the constraints within which they operate, have created a new situation. Simply the city centre is now overloaded with activities and with expectations. This is the core of the argument for new and sensitive forms of management of cities, and especially their central areas, quite different from those that have served adequately in the past. This article considers the policy reactions to these new valuations in the management of city centres which have been labelled 'city centre management' although not necessarily with precisely the same meaning in different countries. This will be exemplified by the experience of two Western European countries, each with a relatively long tradition of public planning intervention, namely the Netherlands and the United Kingdom.

In the Netherlands the term city centre management has emerged since 1990 as a form of public sector management beginning in a few experimental cities (van Dinteren *et al.* (1992) and currently being attempted or considered by forty local authorities and this number is still growing (figure 1). This occurred much later than in the United Kingdom, where a large number of city (or 'town') centre management departments were established in the 1980s. In several other Western European countries the idea is at least recognised and is being

investigated. In so far as the cities of Europe share a set of common urban problems, resulting from similar social trends, and seek solutions within similar political and economic contexts, this can be described as a European phenomenon. Certainly the cities of North America operate within quite different planning structures and, more fundamentally, political objectives and, with the exception of a handful of well publicised developments in an aberrant minority of cities, the central areas of North American cities are not loaded with such multidimensional expectations and have even in one currently influential school of planing ideas been dismissed as largely irrelevant (Garreau, 1991). It would thus seem sensible, in confining this discussion to Europe, to compare the experience of the United Kingdom, as the pioneer in the field and the Netherlands, as one of the currently most vigorous and experimental proponents of city centre management.

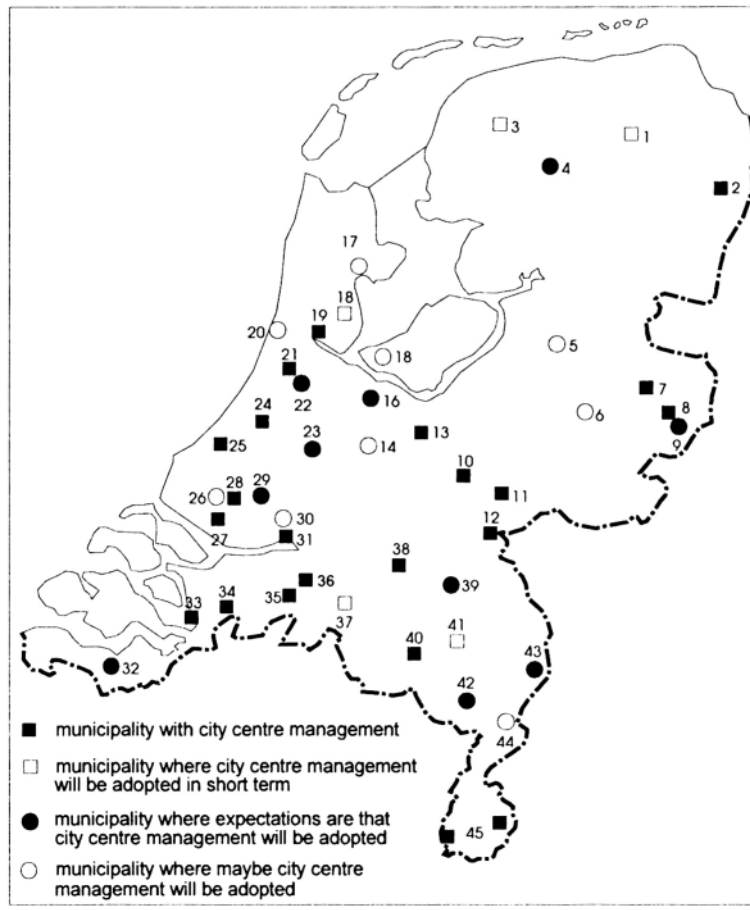

Fig. 1. Cities with city centre management in the Netherlands

2. CITY CENTRE MANAGEMENT IN THE NETHERLANDS

City centre management has acquired specific meanings other than only any form of managing the centres of cities, an activity that has always been intrinsic to public sector planning. However, these specific meanings have not always been made explicit and are subject to different interpretations, each emphasising a different aspect. According to Ashworth (1995), there is a broad discernible consensus that city centre management as a new form of management contains at least six different dimensions:

1. It is market-orientated both in the sense that the focus is upon understanding and managing the demands made upon city centres and also in the use of many of the terms, techniques and approaches of marketing science as a means of such management.

2. Following from the above, there is the implication that the city or city centre is viewed as a product. A marketing approach however must be more than just an understanding of markets. The transference of these concepts to cities has raised questions about what exactly is the product to be managed, who are the producers, where is the market and how does it operate and, more broadly, what are the implications of seeing cities in this way (Ashworth and Voogd, 1990)?

3. Central to the practice of city centre management is the establishment of new organisational structures and new instruments that flow from such structures. First, the organisations are horizontally rather then vertically structured. This is related to the shift in urban policy from a still dominantly function based planning towards a more holistic area based idea. This shift leads to organisational structures in which the professional expertise of several departments for planning (using the word broadly rather than in a narrow professional sense) of many different functions is combined in a defined spatial area, as opposed to the traditional specialist professional departmental divisions of local authorities responsible for the city as a whole.

4. In these new structures private individuals and agencies participate more actively, including financially, in management. They act as partners rather than as pressure groups, which accords with the continuing trend of government withdrawal. According to van Dinteren *et al.* (1992) there are three 'primary parties' involved, the local authority, the inner city entrepreneurs and the real estate owners. In addition, he specifies 'secondary parties' including the Chambers of Commerce, the real estate market, the banking sector, development agencies and project developers. However, if all concerned parties are to be involved in city centre management this list must be expanded to include residents and, in some cases, tourists.

5. With the introduction of city centre management the focus of urban policy has changed towards the medium and longer time period. The aim is now to avoid problems rather than merely react to specific problems after they have

arisen. When the focus is upon the medium and long term period, a clear vision and strategy are needed, subscribed to by all the parties concerned. Operationalisation, however, is a continuous process of implementation and monitoring which translates this strategy into concrete projects and day-to-day management.

6. The size of the city in particular has been used to explain why every municipality does not subscribe to the thesis that city centre management would be a necessary condition for the improvement and preservation of the inner city. Van Dinteren *et al.* (1992) has emphasised that in the Dutch context, small towns (having less than 50,000 inhabitants) do not need a separate management of their centres while, at the other extreme, large cities (having more than 200,000 inhabitants) mostly have more than one centre that requires area management.

Because of the different experience in the United Kingdom, it is important to investigate the above defining assumptions and compare them with the British experience.

3. COMPARISONS WITH THE UNITED KINGDOM

City centre management is not new in Britain. No less than fifty cities were members of the Association of Town Centre Management in 1993. The formal definition of town centre management is given by Wells (1991):

> ...town centre management is 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 (p. 9).

Wells emphasises the differences between shopping centre management and town centre management. The latter should include the whole of the town centre and cater for all its varied users. Furthermore he emphasises that town centre management should have broad based aims including social as well as economic goals. This is a wider definition than usually used in the Netherlands where participants have more narrowly defined economic interests.

The main purpose of city centre management is to improve the quality of the city centre. However, this intent can be differently understood especially as 'quality' is likely to have different meanings to different users. Specifically in the Dutch city centre management is seen as a more strategic affair than in the UK, where in most cities its focus is usually at an operational level. Many of the 'key tasks' formulated by British cities include items, such as Christmas lightning, public entertainment programmes and reducing litter and graffiti, which appear trivial to the Dutch observer. In part this is a reflection of the powerlessness of individual British cities to regulate effectively the development

of out of town shopping centres, which became widespread in the post-war period, and whose effects upon the existing city centres was evident by the 1980s (Wells, 1991). Therefore the British defence of the threatened central city shopping and the attempt to attract new functions back to the central city is understandable. The operational level is in many cases the only possibility for attracting people and activities as pubs, restaurants and museums back to the inner city as the strategic controls at the city-region level have become weakened. In this respect, as in others, the problems visible in British inner cities may be only the precursor of the crisis that will occur in the Dutch city if it does not now heed the warnings evident in the British city.

There is a growing awareness in both countries that multifunctionality is a desirable outcome for the inner city but in many British cities this has largely been lost and must be regained while in the Netherlands it is only under threat. Not only shopping but also the heritage function, the residential function and the leisure function in the inner city are regarded as absolutely necessary for a high quality inner city. Day-to-day issues as street entertainment programmes and Christmas lighting are therefore important. However, this does not mean that the tasks are only made for short term success. In most British cities, city centre management must be seen as an instrument alongside a more strategic city policy (Ennen and Seip, 1995).

Wells (1991) translates the above idea into an inventory of the various possible roles which town centre management could fulfil. He envisages a spectrum, ranging from short-term, day-to-day management to long-term, strategic management (figure 2). As any particular scheme develops, the role of management is likely to move along the continuum from left to right as slowly, most of the day-to-day problems are overcome and more time and resources can be devoted to looking at improving the longer term development of the city centre.

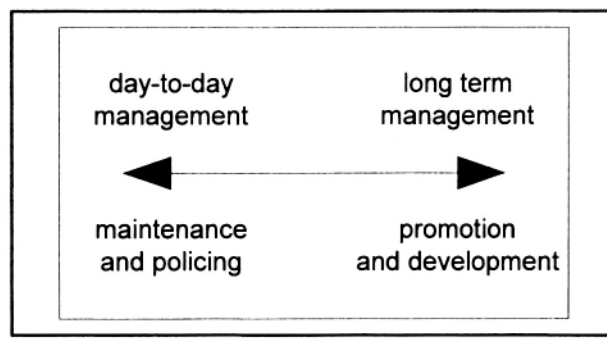

Fig. 2. A spectrum of town centre management roles (Wells, 1991)

Such a movement along the continuum is perhaps recognisable in York, the first city to implement city centre management (1987). The original general objective in this city was to shape and maintain a more attractive city centre in relation in particular with pedestrianisation. The post of the city centre manager was established to provide a public contact point for various groups of users with problems associated with pedestrianisation and the pedestrianised areas. The manager answered questions from users of the city centre, provided special permits to gain access by car to the heart of the pedestrian zone for disabled people, and promoted a range of activities for the central area to create interest and variety. Now that the original situation of these day-to-day management functions is under control this work has been increasingly delegated. The advisory and locally persuasive function (such as with specific parking regulations) is giving way to a more strategic activity (including, in this case, more authority to initiate prosecutions). Although the city centre manager is still a day-to-day manager of immediate and small scale problems for all kind of users of the inner city, the function in Britain can be seen as the critical meeting point in the network of users and decision makers. In many cities the city centre manager does have an office in or near the main shopping street so that a physical presence exists as well as the convenience of informal access and information distribution including temporary exhibitions. In York for instance the office is in Parliament street, in the heart of the pedestrian zone and in Nottingham in the Broadmarsh Shopping Centre.

The size of the cities does not appear to be an issue in the United Kingdom. The size of the cities using city centre management differs widely with Bathgate, for instance, having no more than 15,000 inhabitants and, at the other end of the spectrum, there is Birmingham, the second city of the country, with 1 million inhabitants. The assumption of van Dinteren, whose misgivings are shared by a number of Dutch local authorities, that the larger cities are almost inevitably multinodal and therefore cannot be managed by a single town centre management structure is not evident in a city such as Nottingham with 240,000 inhabitants. Dutch experience has been more cautious and tends to make the assumption that city centre management is most appropriate in cities with a single relatively compact and recognisable central area. Groningen (with 170,000 inhabitants and a very compact multifunctional core called the golden square kilometre) would be typical while cities such as Amsterdam or Rotterdam are viewed as just too extensive and multinuclear. However in both Nottingham (240,000 inhabitants) and York (100,000 inhabitants) the city centre management covers similar sized areas. It appears that the discussion as mentioned in Ashworth (1995) which illustrates the need of limitation and definition of the area in which city centre management is active is more important than to use such arbitrary limits as the population size of a city.

Being involved in city centre management means in practice being financially involved. Chambers of Commerce are responsible for representing business views and in this way they act as a communication intermediary between the local authority and individual firms. The interests of residents or visitors are rarely directly represented in either Britain or the Netherlands, although they may be indirectly represented through political groups and, less usually, through local associations. This is a major shortcoming in both countries but is perhaps especially evident in the Netherlands where there is a tendency to see city centre management as basically the management of the commercial functioning of central areas almost as an alternative to the city council where residents are represented by their elected councillors. There are two reasons why this may be especially serious in the Netherlands compared with Britain.

First there is a stronger tradition, still manifested, of city centre residence and secondly there is an absence of a direct link between elected representatives and specific area constituencies. This means that the residential function, although the most important land user and indeed generator of demand for many other central functions, may be seriously under-represented and is in some danger of being marginalised in policy decisions. This becomes significant when the interests of the residential function diverge sharply from the commercial interests and this has been most evident in Dutch cities in issues involving traffic circulation and parking.

A notable feature of the British experience has been the central role played by a few major commercial companies. The retail giants Marks and Spencer and Boots are one of the most important parties in almost every city centre management scheme. Their contribution is not only financial but also innovative in promoting the idea in urban centres where it did not previously exist. The Netherlands has similar firms with a long standing investment in city centre High Street premises and a dependence upon a city centre clientele but as yet they have not perceived the necessity for a contribution similar to their British counterparts. The threat to the commercial viability of the High Street is perhaps not so immediately evident in the Dutch context as government policy at both national and local level has largely protected the monopoly position of the city centres. The danger of course is that the major commercial enterprises may not recognise that their interests and investments are threatened until it is as obvious as in many British cities which will make the ensuing task more difficult.

4. LESSONS

This brief comparison of the motives, origins, operations and results of city centre management in two countries has inevitably raised more questions than it

resolves. Any attempt to draw lessons must reflect the intrinsic quality of the inner city as a multifunctional area where people come together in different ways for different activities and for different reasons. City centre management is an instrument of urban policy and not a substitute for the existence of such a policy. It sets out to solve specified problems, or more modestly to create structures within which such solutions may emerge, according to present goals.

As not only do the actors involved change rapidly, so also do the perceptions of the problems and the definition of the goals, and there is thus a need for a constant evaluation and flexible response. The simple question, does city centre management work in Britain or the Netherlands, let alone the more difficult question about the transferability of national experiences, depends upon prior, and locally specific, definitions of 'work'. However, some conclusions can be drawn even from the limited experience of some cities in two countries:

1. As city centre management is necessarily a response to rapidly changing needs, it is clear that the role of the city centre manager is indispensable. Amongst other advantages the manager has an opportunity to recognise trends and processes before they develop into wider problems with extensive consequences. This warning function implies swift and effective communication with other agencies and enterprises, not least the city council. Much depends upon the interest, knowledge, effort and enthusiasm of the city centre manager and the few people from the Council directly involved in such a city centre management organisation. It is therefore incomprehensible that in almost every Dutch city, a city centre manager is absent.

2. City centre management in both countries is strongly focused upon the economic functioning of the city centre. An approach that is too one-sided may be ineffective, even for the management of the function it stresses. Aspects of the city, such as historicity, environmental quality, cultural and artistic atmospheres and many others have proved to be essential factors in the location decisions of companies. City centre management obsessed only with the retailing function will miss much of the potential even for the future development of shopping centres. Therefore, more research must be initiated to understand what different roles the city centre plays, which changes are desirable, why and for whom?

3. The role played by big 'High Street' companies, such as Boots Plc and Marks and Spencer in city centre management in the United Kingdom is enviable. Marks and Spencer realises that all the different organisations and individuals involved in urban centres should provide input into their area's future. They emphasise that the multifunctionality of a city centre is an all important matter, and of course such retailers do have large investments in the High Streets. The contribution of these retail giants is to be welcomed with open arms. Their awareness that a multifunctional city can be the solution for many inner city problems, can be an example for other and smaller retailers to be less cautious in their welcome to city centre management. Peculiarly enough, in the

Netherlands such retail giants as Bijenkorf, HEMA and Vroom and Dreesman, rarely involve themselves in city centre management schemes despite their almost total dependence upon city centre locations. Smaller retailers do combine themselves in city wide or even district and street, associations but act more usually as pressure groups representing special interests rather than partners in a common endeavour responsible for the solution of more general problems. Is this because city centre problems are not perceived to be so serious as in British cities or are they still accustomed to adopting a passive attitude as a result of the stronger tradition of local public sector control? However, it is to be hoped that the British example may help to change the attitudes of the retail giants in the Netherlands.

4. In the United Kingdom the cities using city centre management are organised in an Association of Town Centre Management. Such an organisation has, through its publications, important stimulating and informative roles. No such organisation exists in the Netherlands and it is only through recent inventorisation among Dutch local authorities by the University of Groningen (van der Velde and Ennen, 1996) that the number beginning, or discussing the possibility, of city centre management has become known. At a further remove it would be instructive for the cities themselves to learn something of the current variety of organisational structures, partners, and fields of responsibilities.

5. The British and Dutch contexts are only two and these differ in a number of respects. Not only is the legislative and organisational structure of town planning within which city centre management occurs, significantly different, so also is the tradition of city government and the uses, expectations and values of the city centre. Every city is unique in its character, definition of problems, tradition of political and administrative intervention and not least access to financing. As there are no archetypal city centres, there can be no universally applicable blueprint for successful city centre management. However comparisons between cities and national urban systems are needed to provide a variety of answers not only to the question if city centre management works but also how it works in what context, where, why or why not and with which assumptions?

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