Streetsweeper

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Shopping is high on the agenda again for the UK media. Nervousness about the economy, inflation and interest rate rises has been calmed a little by high retail profits and pre-Christmas footfall, when it was predicted that the most personally indebted nation in Europe might hesitate to spend at the season for giving.

For urbanists, a more compelling issue has been the reporting of a much increased consumer spend last month via the internet. So we don't need to go to town to shop, and now many of us prefer not to go out-of-town: we just sit at our screen and spend, spend, spend without polluting the environment or sitting in traffic jams or fighting for car-parking spaces. Our holiday fare is also arriving by local delivery van in slowly increasing volume. Our virtual existence is almost complete: rubbish in, rubbish out.

Now at the same time BBC radio and breakfast TV broadcasts have recently focused on the difference between well-managed private shopping destinations – the out of town supermarket, retail parks and shopping malls – and what were our vital town centres.

It sounds as if BBC Radio Manchester thinks it doesn't much matter and that our town centres are a lost cause, while the BBC 1 'Breakfast' programme is not so sure, and is trying to explore in some depth the scope of the issues and the impacts on all sections of our society.

Most urbanists – and a great many other people – still believe our town centres are the essential setting for open engagement between all sections of a civilised society. As urban life's 'one stop shop' they still have the capacity to be the most environmentally and socially sustainable places for gathering people together for all of life's purposes and pursuits.

The private sector makes shopping malls and retail parks because it wants to control us and serve us in the most efficient way. Access by car must be quick and easy; car to outlet, likewise: shopping and eating timely and efficient; spend optimised as well as the use of resources per visitor. Lingering and non-spending activity is not forbidden, but carefully managed according to the needs and success of the operators.

In the States more than 30 years ago ice skating rinks and other family entertainments made shopping a lucrative leisure pursuit. With the use of internet

shopping, the UK malls with their identical offers may need to put more into their developments along these lines to maintain a return. At least one international developer 15 years ago was happy to put a 'public' library within an Australian shopping centre to demonstrate that new retail forms could be the alternative town centres of the future.

But tourism and the increasing migration of Britons to European countries that value the town and its centre should make it blindingly obvious that in a world of 'virtual' commonplaces, the special pleasures of human encounters – in the shop, at the market stall, the post office(!), the bar, the restaurant, the club, the gallery, the museum, the library, the theatre, the cinema and even the office, the workshop and the home – best take place in our towns and the centres and quarters of our cities.

Here alone, notwithstanding the current and potential threats to our collective democracy (imposed primarily by government and not by terrorism), we *all* have a right to be, to linger, to speak to strangers, to lobby – even to demonstrate! If our towns, with all our help and enthusiasm are to help us to be sustainable and stay civilized they need to smarten and improve real public transport (no more sad and inefficient UK versions of smart European 'park & rides'), manage and maintain our streets and pavements and work with all the stakeholders to restore all to the standards of the best European urban tourism destinations (or those worth only a detour), which combine a sense of special place and authenticity, for visitors and locals alike.