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Learning from shopping centres: Perspectives for retail development in the centres of towns

Abstract

Shopping centres have been criticized for leading to 'identikit' high streets. But what do developers and operators of shopping centres get right? What can they teach us regarding the development of retail areas in towns and small cities? The competitive muscle of integrated shopping centres poses a major threat to small shops in towns. Moreover, many towns have been or will be hit by population shrinkage, significantly impacting on the development of their high streets. But since towns large and small remain important in Germany's regional planning structure, the author attempts to identify new solutions for the development of the high street based on shopping centres' success factors.

Keywords: Shopping centres, retail areas, small shops, high street, towns, small cities, *integration, urban development, steering, observation, marketing*

1. Current situation in towns and their importance in the German urban system

Towns are regional economic and employment centres and hence play a key role in Germany's economic, structural and social development. After all, "over half the population of Germany, around 54%, now lives in towns, and the majority of dependent employees work there." (Gatzweiler 2010: 17) About 50.6% of all jobs in Germany are located in towns, while their inhabitants account for 54.6% of the country's purchasing power. As a result, towns and municipalities with up to 100,000 inhabitants account for the lion's share of retail sales (60% of total retail turnover) and retail space (65% of total retail sales area). Accordingly, they are an essential component of German's spatial structure which, in line with its decentralized concentration, is divided into growth cores of different sizes and significance.

Being aware of this, in recent years German regional planning authorities have paid more attention to the internal development of urban areas and also the urban development of towns and small cities by revising their funding programmes (e.g. by promoting active town and borough centres as well as small towns and municipalities). Regarding the specific task of town-centre retail development, alongside 'traditional' (i.e. formal) planning instruments such as zoning and land use planning, informal yet practical planning instruments like retail location and centre strategies are increasingly being applied. However, the resulting strategies usually address the urban area as a whole. Only rarely do urban development planning authorities draw up concrete town-centre plans (e.g. in connection with strategic planning such as master planning) combined with marketing proposals for areas with precise boundaries. Moreover, translating planning intentions into concrete schemes is often impeded by a lack of both financial resources and expertise.

Furthermore, towns (especially in eastern Germany) are beset by shrinkage tendencies. In these areas, the already straitened municipal finances are exacerbated by (Bundesfinanzministerium 2012):

- Fluctuating trade tax revenue due to the economy leading to local government deficit
- Rising spending, especially in the social sphere
- Growing municipal debt

- Given this, it is interesting to note that a survey conducted among all large towns and small cities in Germany¹ revealed that above-average importance is attributed to retail in connection with urban development. Concrete expectations exist above all regarding “the functional strengthening of the town centre (93.1%), the strengthening of retail centrality (70.6%), and the improvement of the supply of goods and services to the town’s residents (61.8%).” (Hirsch 2011: 18)
- The retail landscape in towns is characterized by some specific features, such as the dominance of medium-sized, often owner-managed shops – whose popularity with customers is, however, dwindling. Other shortcomings include:
 - An unbalanced range with a tendency towards substandard items, in particular in clothing and consumer electronics
 - The absence of certain goods, especially at supermarkets
 - The absence of certain types of shops (e.g. attractive chain stores)
 - High vacancy rates
 - No standards opening times

These weaknesses are partly a reflection of the declining financial strength of medium-sized retailers in towns and small cities, the majority of whom are unable to fully withstand the sweeping changes taking place such as population decline, increasing competitive pressure and customers’ changing behaviour.

2. The problem and how to tackle it

Judging by the current environment, there is an urgent need for alternative action by local authorities to support local retailers in order to stabilize urban development in towns in Germany. On the one hand, it’s a question of safeguarding public services, i.e. providing the general public with basic institutions as well as retail, social and technical infrastructure services in as much of the country as possible. On the other hand, the increasing competition for people, jobs and investment means that towns are under pressure to improve or at least maintain their attractiveness. Town centres have an important part to play in this respect since they are the crystallization points of urban functions. Retail, an essential part of urban development, can help make town centres more attractive and stabilize them.

¹ The survey on the urban retail situation was carried out by IREBS International Real Estate Business School at the University of Regensburg among all German towns and cities with a population of between 50,000 and 250,000 (see Hirsch 2011).

But what strategies in the world of retail can lead to an improvement of the situation described? The currently successful format of the shopping centre (Urban Land Institute 1993: 4) provides some interesting pointers. Since their introduction in the USA, the development of shopping malls has been an economic success. The innovation of shopping centres boils down to their ability to identify the main qualities of urban spatial and functional networks and to implement them in a closed system, along with the introduction of a system of centre management handling the central organization of all the aspects of running a shopping centre.

According to the IfG Institute for Commercial Centres, by 2011 there were 644 shopping centres with at least 8,000 sq m of retail space in Germany. According to the EHI Retail Institute, 435 of them had a retail sales area of at least 10,000 sq m. Shopping centres are continuing to develop steadily in cities large and small with planning currently underway for another 57.

But not every town or small city makes a suitable location for a shopping centre. The growing focus on town centres has presented developers and local authorities with new challenges. The format of the traditional shopping centre (with a sales area of at least 10,000 sq m) can't usually be transplanted to town centres in an economically successful manner without upsetting urban development or local functions. The main reasons are the mostly small units available and aspects of the retail environment such as centrality, purchasing power, and the density and development of the population.

Consequently, alternative solutions are required. Back in 1998 Ulrich HATZFELD stated: "What is far more interesting than the question of how to counteract the impact of malls in Germany ... is to examine whether the success of the mall principle contains any pointers for urban planning strategies. Although a simulation of a simulation is out of the question, confronting the contradictory sometimes gets us further than continuing to pursue 'tried-and-trusted modes of thought'." (Hatzfeld 1998: 50) Adopting this approach, the author of this paper raises the following hypothesis:

In order to promote the economically viable and sustainable development of the high street and town centres, we can learn something from shopping centres.

To support this hypothesis, an extensive set of shopping centre success factors was identified from the literature based on my own empirical surveys and secondary statistical data. These success factors were divided into four overarching categories (see **Erro! Fonte de referência não encontrada.**):

Table 1: Success factors of shopping centres

Planning and layout Integration into the urban environment, architecture, functional networking Makeover of the development zone	Retail and marketing Adaptation to target groups Generation of synergy and agglomeration effects
Networking and steering Coordinated retail Coordinated marketing and management	Observation Continuous observation of the market based on market research

To harness these success factors on the high street, the overarching goals and action necessary to bring about sustainable, economically viable town-centre retail development were derived. The set of aims was then applied to the example of Torgau, a town in Saxony using the procedure described below.

3. The example of Torgau

Torgau is located in north Saxony, not far from the regions of Saxony-Anhalt and Brandenburg. The town itself has a population of 19,688 (Statistik Sachsen 2011). Torgau local authority covers 24,627 inhabitants, while including the surrounding area of influence the total population is 51,885 (Zentrenkonzept Torgau 2007: 5; 10).

Suffering steady population decline since 1990, Torgau is also located in a shrinking district. The proportion of the population aged over 65 is rising while that of younger residents aged 18–25 is decreasing. One positive factor is the stable number of employees paying national insurance in Torgau despite the negative trend in the Administrative District of North Saxony.

Classed as a middle-order centre in North Saxony, Torgau is a special case as a centre for the supply of goods and services since the district is mainly dominated by villages and small towns. This accounts for Torgau's above-average retail space of 2.88 sq m

per inhabitant based on the area of the town or 2.12 sq m taking into account the entire local authority.²

Torgau's retail sector mainly comprises the town centre (about 19,000 sq m retail space [Markt- und Standortgutachten Torgau 2003: 21]), the large shopping centre Prima-Einkaufs-Park (PEP, with retail space of about 25,000 sq m [IFG Shoppingcenter Report 2007: 152]) in northwest Torgau, and Kaufland hypermarket on Dahlemer Strasse (approx. 3,400 sq m [Gutachten Kauflanderweiterung 2008: 6]) in the south. PEP accounts for about 30% of total retail sales followed by central Torgau with just 20%.

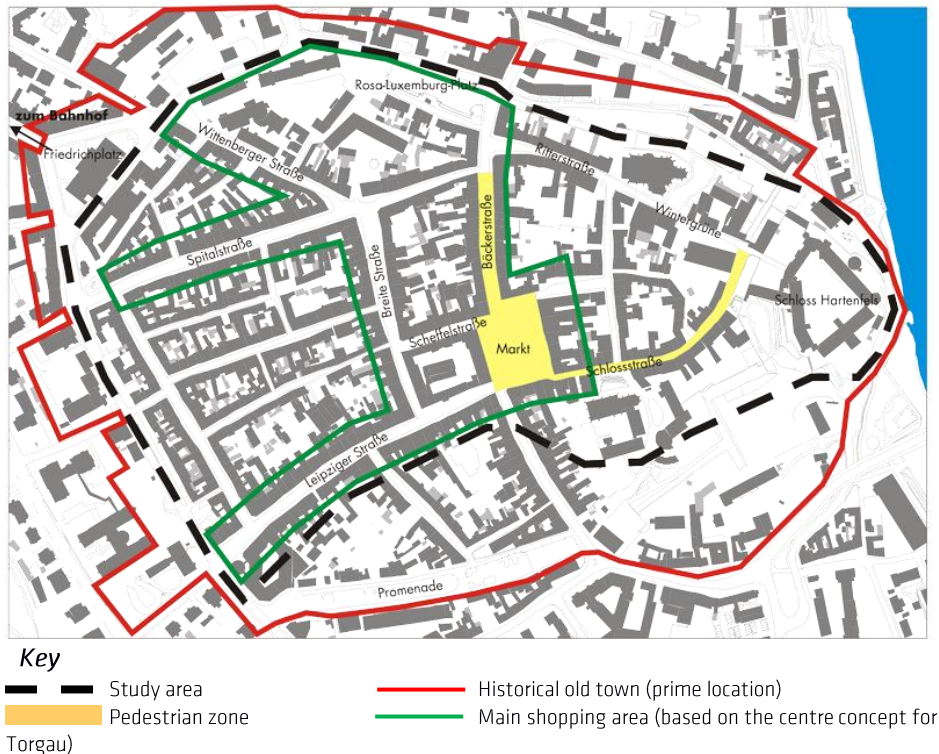


FIG. 1: The boundaries of the study area, the historical old town, and the main shopping area within the central supply district based on the centre concept for Torgau (Own diagram based on Zentrenkonzept Torgau 2007: 64)

² By comparison, the average sales area per inhabitant in Germany in 2011 was 1.49 sq m.

Central Torgau is characterized by an uninterrupted swathe of largely homogeneous historical buildings with no gaps or derelict land in the main shopping area. Its historical architecture is an important USP in the surrounding district (see Fig. 1). Below, the current situation in Torgau is outlined with reference to the categories identified where action is required (see Table. 1). Comparison with the aims derived from the analysis of shopping centres success factors will provide the basis for proposing concrete activities in an idealized strategy for Torgau town centre.

3.1. Planning and layout

Table 2: application of Success factors of shopping centres (planning and layout) to Torgau

Identified shopping centre success factors (overarching level)	Analysis in Torgau (examples)
Integration into the urban structure Architecture Functional networking Makeover of the development area	Hardly any scope for additional retail space Over 400 listed buildings in good repair Existing systems of open spaces with potential for development Fragmented locations with a lack of large retail areas exceeding 200 sq m Large number of vacant shops Lack of amenities
	
Aims To develop the town centre into a closely networked retail location with coordinated urban development and architecture To enhance public spaces and preserve their public function	

The analysis of the status quo revealed the need to concentrate the main shopping area in central Torgau. In addition, consideration of the current structure of the main shopping location (in terms of retail, urban development and architecture) and the retail projects currently planned in the town centre (e.g. the opening of an Edeka supermarket on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz) prompted the fundamental decision to apply an extended traditional shopping mall floor plan to central Torgau.

The double-strip structure selected includes the development of two anchors and two strips. Anchor 1 comprising a large supermarket (Edeka) and extensive parking is to be developed on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz. Anchor 2 consists in opening a large clothing retail area (Scheffelstrasse/Ecke Breite Strasse) and the development of a food court on the market square. The two strips (Breite Strasse und Bäckerstrasse) are the main axes of the defined core area of the main shopping district and are to be developed by strengthening their own characteristics and eliminating their weaknesses (see Fig. 2).

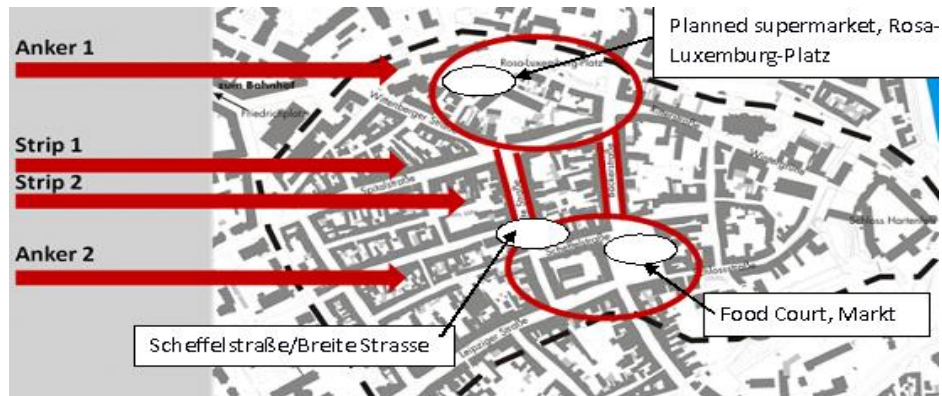


FIG. 2: The double-strip structure superimposed on central Torgau (Own diagram based on an official map of Torgau)

Urban development schemes as well as structural and functional measures intended to concentrate the development of retail in a core area of central Torgau are defined in the planning and layout category.

The development of Anchor 1 (Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz) will necessitate the extensive improvement of both Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz and the area between the former military supply depot and the start of Breite Strasse. To create the desired synergies between the planned Edeka supermarket (Anchor 1) and town-centre retail (Anchor 2

and the strips), an obvious, transparent structural connection is required with the town centre, which can be brought about by:

- Opening up the ground floor area of the former military supply depot
- Providing a clear and where possible wider route to the junction between Spitalstrasse and Breite Strasse
- Redeveloping the courtyard of the former military supply depot to include parking

The junction of Spitalstrasse/Breite Strasse will become an important gateway to the town-centre retail locations, whose attractive architecture significantly influences customer behaviour.

The second important anchor for the development of a core area in the main shopping district is to be established in the area of Scheffelstrasse/Breite Strasse/market square. The main elements are as follows:

- The creation of a retail unit which is as large as possible for a clothing store generating plenty of footfall
- The redevelopment of the market square to include a food court (measures include subdividing the large area as well as adding greenery and street furniture in accordance with the local authority's planning for the market square and the surrounding area), Scheffelstrasse also needs to be upgraded (including by adding roadside parking bays).

The makeover of Breite Strasse (Strip 1) should take into account its architectural potential (e.g. with Bürgermeister-Ringenhain-Haus as part of a historically precious ensemble) and functional aspects (e.g. the largely continuous line of shops and roadside parking). The objectives should be to renovate the remaining buildings in need of refurbishment, to enhance the road surfacing, and to improve roadside parking and public spaces.

Bäckerstrasse (Strip 2) is currently a pedestrian zone. Apart from debate over whether pedestrian precincts are still up to date, there is room for improvement regarding its amenities. Particular attention should be paid its public spaces (e.g. the creation of areas of seating, possibly with trees, and the improvement of the road surfacing and existing street furniture). Its functional continuity as a shopping street is disrupted by the presence of vacancies and the absence of certain retail segments. Especially the northern section of Bäckerstrasse contains noticeable gaps which could be solved by creating large retail premises at Bäckerstrasse 15 as well as letting Bäckerstrasse 20, Bäckerstrasse 22 and the units at the junction of Ritterstrasse and Bäckerstrasse.

3.2. Retail and marketing

Table 3: application of Success factors of shopping centres (Retail and marketing) to Torgau

Identified shopping centre success factors (overarching level)	Analysis in Torgau (examples)
Adaptation to target groups and customers requirements	Declining population and rising average age
Creation of synergies and agglomeration effects	Potential demand set to decline
	Few existing supplementary convenience services or leisure amenities
	Lack of anchor stores
	Low attractiveness of important segments such as clothing, shoes and sports

Key

Synergies of interconnections

Aims

To adapt the town-centre retail offering to customers' changing needs and to maximize diversity and depth in connection with the overall agglomeration of the town centre

Given the trends affecting population development, transport and demand as well as the changing requirements regarding convenience, service and leisure, the core of the main shopping area in central Torgau needs to be given a clear image by means of:

- Enhancing urban development coupled with structural and functional upgrading
- Steering an attractive centre-relevant combination of retail segments (see the Torgau List [Zentrenkonzept Torgau 2007: 95]) in order to boost existing agglomeration effects and create new synergies
- Bolstering efforts by retailers to carve out a profile for the area and to increase the range of services available
- Strengthening the links between the retail function and the cultural amenities in central Torgau (in connection with focused retail and tourism marketing)³

The aim should be to amplify and enhance the characteristics of each of the four main parts of the defined core area (Anchors 1 and 2, Strips 1 and 2). This requires above all input from each retailer to draw up a joint programme with corresponding marketing and management strategies. In this connection, local retailers need to review their individual marketing strategies, e.g. by defining their target groups, clear price positioning, and assessing the level of service they provide and the values communicated by the range of goods they stock.

By containing an Edeka supermarket, Anchor 1 would serve a target group aged 20–59 who have their own cars and are willing to pay medium to high prices. The greatest synergy effects can be achieved within the same sector (groceries) as well as with drugstores, perfume shops, pharmacies and medical supplies stores. In addition, opening at least one restaurant (medium price segment) and an accommodation establishment (e.g. a hotel or hostel) would make sense.

If the footfall generated by Anchor 1 is to be directed to the town centre, the range of shops on Strip 1 (Breite Strasse) needs to be improved. Based on the existing synergies (in the areas of clothing and household goods), there is above all a lack of shops selling accessories, sports equipment and shoes (medium price segment).

The shops on Strip 2 (Bäckerstrasse) concentrate on clothing and shoes, making for an area to relax and browse. Additional areas need to be developed and in some cases expanded. Particular attention should be paid to letting premises to fashion retailers such as Mona and Bonita (medium price segment, middle-aged target group). There is currently a lack of complementary segments such as books etc., shoes and bags.

³ These types of measures were confirmed at an ideas workshop on the town centre involving retailers and landlords in Torgau held on 12 January 2012.

The aim should be to spread possible synergies throughout Bäckerstrasse, activating them all the way up to the car park on Rosa-Luxemburg-Platz.⁴

Establishing a second anchor is an important part of developing and strengthening a core area. It includes opening a large fashion retailer (junction of Scheffelstrasse/Breite Strasse), if possible aimed at a young target group in the lower to medium price range (e.g. New Yorker or Pimky), letting Markt 5 to a shop selling shoes (e.g. Schuhmarkt Klauser) or electrical appliances, and developing the market square into a food court by for instance siting cafés and restaurants at Markt 13 and in the former rathskeller (the town hall basement).

3.3. Networking and steering

Table 4: application of Success factors of shopping centres (Networking and steering) to Torgau

Identified shopping centre success factors (overarching level)	Analysis in Torgau (examples)
Coordinated retail Coordinated marketing and management	There is no integrating organizational structure It's unclear how an overarching organizational structure could be financed There is no joint, overarching location marketing/management
Aims Development and establishment of a new town centre alliance based on the system of shopping centre management which opens up greater scope for retail and enables a jointly coordinated system of location marketing and management	

The main requirement for steering and supporting the proposed measures in terms of planning and location as well as retail and marketing is to set up a town-centre alliance. It needs to be legally established by a council resolution and given a clear organizational structure and clear tasks. This will provide the basis for the networking of local actors as well as the drafting of a common development strategy and financial strategy (see Fig. 3). Different organizational approaches are conceivable:

- A top-down approach involving the establishment of a development corporation (possibly wholly owned by the town council) as a suitable instrument for the

⁴ Benefits for retailers, customers and the town centre can be generated from various synergies (combining types of shops and hence increasing the diversity of the products and services available [see Frehn et al 2005:19]). Positive effects can be achieved especially for town centres by for example improving the variety of offerings, carving out a distinct image for a shopping area, increasing footfall and improving amenities (see Frehn et al 2005:23f.).

development, coordination and implementation of planning strategies and the necessary project development and management tasks

- A bottom-up approach comprising the initiation of private-sector cooperation in retail and urban development such as a BID (business improvement district)⁵
- Networking these structures and other stakeholders by setting up one or more working groups addressing related fields

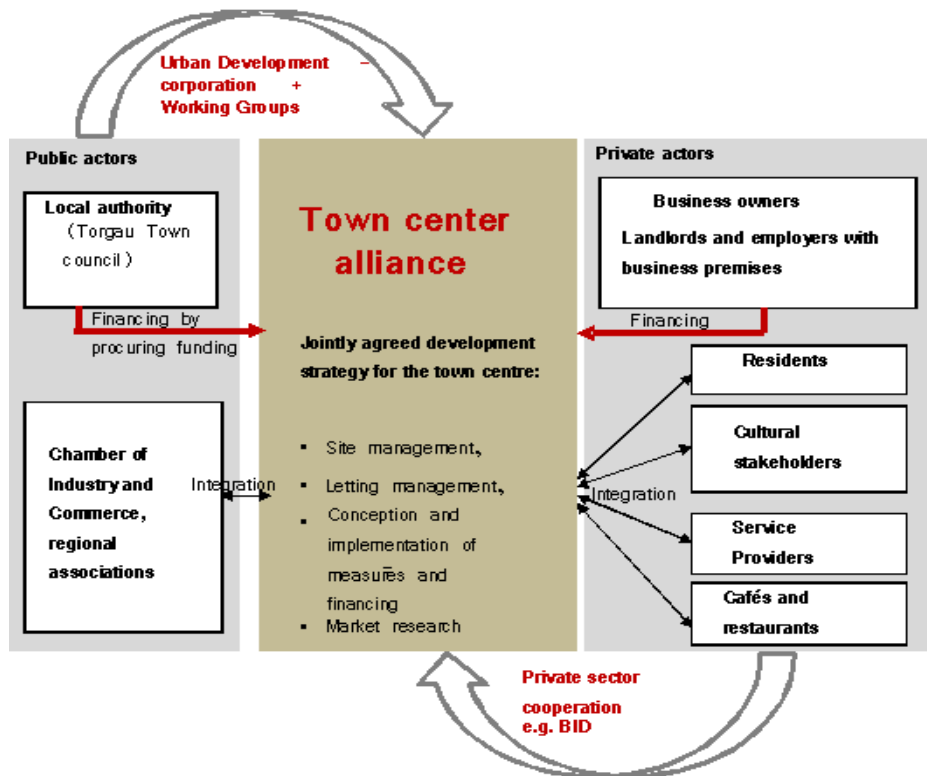


FIG. 3: Flow chart showing the activities of a town-centre alliance (Own diagram based on Findeisen 2008: 17f.; Behr 2006: 50)

⁵ Examples include the Marienviertel Property and Location Alliance in Neuss, various BID initiatives in Hamburg such as at Sachsentor, Neuer Wall and Hohe Bleichen, and Burbach BID in Saarbrücken (see DIHK 13/2011; Marienviertel Neuss 2011).

In order to take into account the specific problems in Torgau (e.g. small retail units, structural vacancies, fragmented locations, an incomplete range of segments and products, a lack of customer magnets, a lack of cooperation among local actors, and financial constraints), a complex approach is required which addresses demands such as:

▪ *Site management:*

- This includes safeguarding and developing key sites, attracting investors, and mediating between the town council and private actors.⁶
- Moreover, property investment is required to extend and merge commercial premises. To manage vacancies, a pool solution could be introduced managing all the properties which have been vacant for a long period so that viable spatial structures can be created and optimized based on jointly developed concepts, possibly funded by urban development grants.
- Improving public spaces.

▪ *Letting management:* Influencing an attractive range of segments and products significantly contributes to the economically successful development of a retail location. In connection with property management, it would thus be desirable to place all the commercial space in the defined core area under central management in order to arrange a jointly agreed rent scale for commercial premises and thus influence the mix of sectors.

▪ *Conception and implementation of measures and financing:* On the basis of a jointly agreed marketing and management strategy, a contributions-based system of financing is to be developed which incorporates as many as possible of the actors involved, enables standardized marketing (e.g. joint public relations and advertising, the same opening hours, etc.), and can also be used to fund tourism and cultural activities.

▪ *Market research:* The amount of continuous market research that can be carried out by individual retailers is limited. However, this is a service which could be performed by the town-centre alliance, providing the basis for a forward-looking retail sector. Active change can only take place if the initiative is taken by both the public and private sectors. The current situation in Torgau is, however, characterized by stakeholders' expectations of each other. For example, the local authority and local politicians want the retailers in central Torgau to take the initiative to improve the

⁶ These tasks can be taken on by establishing an urban development corporation. Interview with Rolf Fehr, head of location development and infrastructure at Innenstadt Duisburg Entwicklungsgesellschaft mbH, on 18 January 2012 in Duisburg.

situation,⁷ whereas retailers believe that the revitalization of the town centre ought to be launched by above all the local authority (see Annex 10). Nevertheless, there is fundamental motivation among both retailers and landlords in Torgau to work together to improve the town centre.⁸

3.4. Monitoring

Table 5: application of Success factors of shopping centres (Monitoring) to Torgau

Identified shopping centre success factors (overarching level)	Analysis in Torgau (examples)
Continuous monitoring Adjustment of strategic decisions by success measurement	Collection of some monitoring data No success measurement
	
Aims To create the basis for the active steering of the development of central Torgau as a retail location by means of observation, evaluation and reflection	

The continuous observation of urban development and retail development processes requires decision-making and executive competence. It is closely linked to the networking and steering category and should be set up as both monitoring (continuous location analysis) and success measurement.

Monitoring should cover at least the following criteria:

- Retail centrality
- Development of commercial rents
- Supply and demand for commercial premises
- Vacancies
- Changes in the segment and product mix
- Customers' walking behaviour
- Footfall

In addition, with central Torgau being a tourist attraction, businesses accompanying retail such as services, eateries and hotels are of interest.

⁷ Feedback at the presentation of findings at a meeting of the Technical Committee in Torgau on 29 November 2011.

⁸ Feedback during the ideas workshop on the town centre (World Café) with retailers and landlords in Torgau on 12 January 2012.

The extent to which the individual criteria are met should be judged against the aims developed for the core area, changing customer needs and demand preferences, and standards and features of retail (such as rising property expectations, the growing prominence of chain stores).

The necessary success measurement should consist in an evaluation of the measures developed and proposed in the categories retail and marketing, networking and steering, and planning and layout. The aim is to constantly review the effectiveness of the measures taken in order to enable the aims and strategies pursued to be continuously adapted to the changing environment. This should include at least the observation of the criteria used in the analysis. Parallel to this, the period within which the aims are to be achieved needs to be defined.

4. Summary

The development of a set of aims for town-centre retail development confirms the hypothesis raised and also answers the first part of the research question formulated at the start regarding the corresponding action categories and requirements.

Whether these findings can be generalized and transferred was assessed by applying these aims to Torgau. In the first step, the defined overarching aims were operationalized at the local level, and the strengths and weaknesses were analysed on the basis of the evaluation criteria identified. The second step aided the development of an idealized strategy for town-centre retail and discussion of it with public and private stakeholders.

This approach showed that the set of aims can indeed be translated into practice in a manner which is beneficial for urban development planning. The transfer of the goals and their operationalization provided a substantial share of the ideas for the development of town-centre planning and also highlighted weak spots of possible implementation in the four categories as outlined below:

Planning and layout:

- Failure to fully grasp and exploit the quality of the town-planning, architectural and functional aspects of a historically evolved town centre as a USP for the retail function.
- The almost non-existent possibility to develop new retail units owing to the dense nature of the built-up areas.
- Insufficient financial resources for necessary investment in public spaces.

Retail and marketing:

- The lack of agreement and organization of the actors involved leads to various problems.
- Developing a coordinated retail offering encouraging synergies requires a high level of liaison and management between retailers.

Networking and steering

- The mutual expectations of the local authority and the retailers make it difficult to establish a system of neutral, centrally geared town-centre coordination.
- The high number of individual landlords in a wide range of financial positions hampers concerted action.
- Obtaining financial support for urban development funding is increasingly difficult due to the declining levels of funding available and a lack of human resources at the local authority.

Observation

- Constant monitoring ties up a substantial number of personnel.

Even if the weaknesses mentioned pose a major challenge for the development of town-centre retail, the test results show that the key to the solution lies above all in persuading stakeholders of the need to work together and supporting coordination to encourage renewal within urban development.

The set of tools developed is mainly aimed at the local authorities of towns and small cities. They are designed to strengthen awareness of the importance of integrated planning and to regard towns and cities as both built-up areas and functional networks with important potential for future developments.

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