

Night-time and strategies for regeneration in two medium-sized town centres

Marion Roberts

To cite this article: Marion Roberts (02 Feb 2024): Night-time and strategies for regeneration in two medium-sized town centres, Journal of Urban Design, DOI: [10.1080/13574809.2024.2302972](https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2024.2302972)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2024.2302972>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 02 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 195



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Night-time and strategies for regeneration in two medium-sized town centres

Marion Roberts 

School of Architecture and Cities, University of Westminster, London, UK

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the regeneration proposals for two town centres in medium-sized towns in the north of England through the lens of urban design and nocturnal activities. Drawing from the field of night studies, it questions whether the hours of darkness have been included in the proposals and compares the extent to which findings and practical guidance from this emergent cross-disciplinary area of interest have been interpreted and incorporated. The paper argues that towns would benefit from addressing the specific characters and qualities of night time activities, including nightlife, in their policies and masterplans for revitalizing town centres.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 12 July 2023

Accepted 4 January 2024

KEYWORDS

Urban design; night-time economy; town centres; regeneration

Introduction

The ‘crisis’ in many British high streets, with their high level of vacant buildings and grim roll count of business closures has led policy makers to place an increased importance on their value as social spaces with functions apart from day-time retailing (Warnaby 2009). The term, the ‘experience economy’ has now reached general parlance within the media. Meanwhile, the night-time economy has moved more firmly into the mainstream as a tool for city boosterism and regeneration in major cities across the globe (GLA 2017; Leichsenring and Milan 2021). The UK government’s ‘Levelling Up’ agenda, started after the 2019 General Election, is targeted towards towns and cities suffering from the more extreme inequalities in Britain. This policy initiative includes funding for revitalizing town centres. Government’s ambition is to make these towns better places to ‘live, work and relax’ (MHCLG 2021). This portfolio of policies with its acknowledgement of the economic importance of hospitality, leisure and culture, carries the implication that the night-time economy should play a role in town centre revitalization. The increase in interest in hospitality and leisure prompts a question of whether the proposals made in response to the new funding streams, which in some cases involve significant spatial changes, have included consideration of the night and if so, to what extent do the proposals demonstrate learning from night studies research and practice.

The research question makes two queries:

CONTACT Marion Roberts  M.Roberts@westminster.ac.uk

© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.

This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

- Does the time/space of the evening and the night appear in the strategic proposals for 'levelling up' town centres?
- And to what extent have the practical experience and scholarly learning from night studies been incorporated into spatial proposals for regeneration?

The paper is structured in seven parts. The initial section provides a discussion of nightlife and regeneration, the second describes the choice of towns and the mixed methods approach to the empirical part of the study, the third discusses findings from night studies literature that modify and add to urban design analysis. The fourth and fifth sections provide an account of the proposals for the two case study towns. The sixth section sets out an analysis of their night-time strategies. The last section makes some concluding comments and points to directions for future research.

This article is derived from a wider study that sought to explore how the findings from the diverse literature of night studies might be mobilized in urban design. During the investigation, it became apparent that two towns in the north of England which bear some important similarities had incorporated different strategies for the night in their regeneration proposals. The article that follows explores these differences. It contrasts a project-based approach to a deeper engagement with planning and urban design. The article argues that although the proposals in one of the towns were more sophisticated and cognizant of the night studies literature and practice advice than the other, the formation of policies towards the hours of darkness for these medium-sized towns are at an early stage compared to that of the big cities. One conclusion is that strategies for regeneration would be improved through the production of surveys and plans for nightlife and the night-time economy, making use of research and practice guidance and the governance resources provided by the new institution of night mayors.

Background to the night-time economy and regeneration

The expansion of urban nightlife since the 1990s has been extensively documented (for example see, Acuto et al. 2022; Chatterton and Hollands 2003; Roberts and Eldridge 2009; Shaw 2018). From a British context early literature focused on the transformation of neighbourhoods and districts in city centres into 'party' scenes, where noisy late-night venues dominated. Policy responses were nuanced, as the economic value of increased night-time activities was welcomed, although the negative consequences of alcohol-led regeneration were not (Hobbs et al. 2003). More stringent regulation in licencing and policing and managerial interventions, such as the Purple Flag scheme helped local councils to improve their evening and night-time economies.

Official attitudes towards nightlife and the night-time economy changed in the period between 2010 and the global pandemic. Somewhat paradoxically, the cultural importance of nightlife venues as incubators for major artists in the music industry achieved recognition when local premises were threatened by gentrification and increased regulation (Music Venues Trust 2015). Similarly, a report from queer studies highlighted the social role of nightlife venues to the gay community (Campkin and Marshall 2017). The Night Time Industries Association, representing all sectors of the nightlife has provided evidence for the contribution of nightlife to the UK's economy since 2015 (Furedi 2015; NTIA 2022). Attitudes on the part of regional authorities shifted towards a perception that

nightlife has a social, cultural and artistic value which runs alongside its contribution to the economy of an area (London Night Time Commission 2017). Both London and Greater Manchester adopted specific planning policies towards the night-time economy (GMCA 2022; Mayor of London 2021). Changes were also reflected in a new form of governance, with the appointment of ‘night mayors’ (Seijas and Gelders 2021).

Experiences of the night are geographically and historically specific. This paper is written from the perspective of the United Kingdom and based on empirical evidence from England. This is not to exclude the possibility that the findings may have a wider applicability. It is important to note that the term ‘night-time economy’ is frequently taken to refer to nightlife. This is somewhat inaccurate because while nightlife has provided the ‘dominant discourse’ for night studies, it constitutes only one of the four sectors which make up economic activities taking place at night (GLA Economics 2018; Shaw 2018).

Methods

The study was conducted during and in the immediate aftermath of the global COVID-19 pandemic with the fieldwork undertaken in 2022–2023. The intention of the empirical component of the research was to investigate the regeneration proposals for five medium-sized towns. Medium-sized towns with substantial regeneration proposals were selected because they could accommodate a functioning nightlife and had received relatively little attention in night studies. The criteria for the selection were based on population size and response to the most recent calls for Government funding, reasoning that these towns would have had the possibility to develop the most mature thinking in terms of policy.

Middlesbrough and Oldham were selected as two out of the 101 recipients of the government’s Towns Fund which were being awarded substantial sums (see Table 1). They were required to set up public private partnerships, titled as Town Boards and to produce Town Investment Plans as part of the bidding process (MHCLG 2019; Middlesbrough 2020a, 2020b; Mott MacDonald and Oldham Council 2020). Both towns also won awards from the government’s Future High Streets Fund, which has the aim of renewing town centres and high streets, based on specific project proposals (Middlesbrough Council 2021; Oldham Council 2021).

Middlesbrough and Oldham have suffered from loss of their industrial base, with ‘failing’ town centres with a high level of vacancies and a low footfall. Indicators of inequality within the towns are amongst the highest in the UK. Both have previously suffered from market failure in their commercial and residential property markets. Both towns have a similar

Table 1. Middlesbrough and Oldham: key characteristics (source: author).

	Middlesbrough	Oldham
Population	140,600	101,000 (wider area 242,100)
Deprivation	30% pop. live in 10% most deprived wards in the UK, located around town centre	4 areas around town centre in top 1% most deprived in UK
Proportion Black & Minority Ethnic	12% + asylum seekers	14.5% + asylum seekers
Relation to Region	‘Primary centre’ for Tees Valley region	One of ten centres in Greater Manchester
Central Government Investment	Town Deal £21.9 m Future High Streets Fund £14.1 m	Town Deal £24.4 m Future High Streets Fund £10.75 m
Political Control	Independent Mayor	Labour Council

proportion of BAME residents, primarily of Asian heritage, who traditionally do not drink alcohol, which is relevant to the promotion of nightlife (see [Table 1](#)).

Alongside these similarities political differences provide a contrast and context to the investigation. The British 2019 General Election provided a political upset with a dramatic change of political control between Labour and Conservative in some northern constituencies. Oldham Council is Labour controlled within a Labour controlled regional authority, the GMCA (Greater Manchester Combined Authority). Middlesbrough Council was Labour controlled, apart from the period 2019–2023 when an independent Mayor was elected, and no political party had overall control of the Council. The region, Tees Valley Combined Authority is Conservative controlled.

The research investigation was conducted by a lone researcher with a limited budget. The focus of the study were the proposals and to understand these more fully, supplementary methods were employed. Nightwalks are an accepted method of inquiry, and each town centre was visited twice on Thursday and Friday nights, thereby incorporating a weekday and weekend night (Dunn [2022](#)). An enquiry by mapping exercise was undertaken in each town, to track the closing hours of different types of premises and represent them graphically (Dovey and Ristic [2017](#)). Further supplementary background to the proposals was sought from a selection of interviewees. Immediately after the pandemic, local authority officers and elected officials were overwhelmed, and it was difficult to find respondents. In the case of Middlesbrough, the most forthcoming officers were the director of regeneration, the town centre manager and the economic development officer. In Oldham, it was a senior urban design officer, the consultant who produced the town vision, the town centre manager and the night time economy advisor from the region who proved to be the most helpful. Attempts were made to pursue the issue of social inclusion in more depth through interviewing representatives from the BAME community in each town, but this proved impossible in Oldham, reducing this line of inquiry. In total seven more semi-structured interviews were conducted with council officers, elected politicians and one community representative in the towns, but these only added background context.

The next section considers the spatial inferences which might be drawn from the night studies literature in relation to urban design qualities. This is necessarily brief (for a more extended account see Roberts [2024](#)).

Night studies and spatiality

The diversity of the night studies literature which extends across the humanities, the social sciences and natural sciences has resulted in commentary addressing different registers of analysis, from ‘grand concepts’ derived from social theory in human geography and sociology to practical empirical observations. The key urban design qualities of character, public realm, continuity and enclosure, legibility and adaptability remain relevant as tools for analysis (Cowan [2021](#)), but are modified by darkness (Black and Sonbli [2019](#); Dunn [2016](#)). Darkness is itself modified by artificial lighting, and the employment of specialist lighting designers is relatively recent in the UK but is more commonly used on mainland Europe (Guérin, de Raphélis, and Mallet [2022](#)). While lighting design has become more sophisticated, academic critiques of over-illumination, manipulation of the senses and heightening inequalities have emerged (Edensor [2017](#)). As the developments in this study were at an early stage, observations about lighting are necessarily limited.

The Greater London Authority commissioned a consultant's report to advise its boroughs on developing strategies for their evening and night-time economies (Publica 2021a, 2021b). This report provides detailed guidance on processes, and includes some planning and urban design recommendations at a strategic level and others at a more detailed level, concerning, for example, waste bins, toilets, and seating. The report is comprehensive but as a practitioner guide, in contrast to Davoudian's (2019) evidence-based book on lighting, cites only precedents rather than published research.

Spatial issues and night-time

Character

A concentration of nightlife uses changes the character of streets and neighbourhoods. There is a tension between the heightened emotions that come with being in a crowd, the release associated with consuming alcohol and the anticipation of pleasure (Edensor and Sumartojo 2015; Tutgenes 2015). This contrasts with the 'negative externalities' connected with concentrations of alcohol-led nightlife. Research on exactly how many premises and what size leads to an increase in crime and disorder has been inconclusive, apart from noting that the type of venue is significant and that it is the concentration of alcohol-led venues, particularly late-night drinking and dancing that is significant (Van de Nouwelant and Steinmetz 2013).

Dovey (2016) refers to changes in urban character as daylight gives way to night as 'slippage'. These changes take place in land uses, movement patterns and behaviours. Early attempts to enliven 'dead' town centres after the shops closed included 'happy hours', whereby shoppers and workers could be encouraged to stay in town centres through discounted prices in bars and pubs. As this led to an increase in alcohol consumption the practice was later discouraged. There is little commentary on the further transition in British towns between night and late-night and early morning nightlife uses, although Publica (2021b) advise finding ways of bridging daytime, evening and night-time uses.

Mixed use and diversity

Mixed use and diversity are regarded as key tenets of ensuring a high quality of urbanity in town centres, especially at night (Davies and Mummery 2006). A concentration of businesses targeted towards a youthful alcohol fuelled customer base only serves a limited demographic, thereby excluding others from certain streets or even micro-neighbourhoods (Bromley, Tallon, and Thomas 2003). There is an ambiguity over whether 'diversity' refers to the premises or to the anticipated participants (Eldridge and Roberts 2022). This is particularly acute for a black and minority ethnic section of the population, who may not drink alcohol, have different tastes in food or listen to different genres of music and live performance (Wicks 2022).

Public realm

The importance of a public realm that appears to users as safe, walkable and welcoming is attested to in a number of research studies and supported by Publica's (2021b) design

guidance (Davies and Mummery 2006; Roberts and Eldridge 2009). Studies from diverse sources feature dark spaces, blind corners, blank facades with no openings as heightening feelings of insecurity. Crossing green spaces in the dark heightens perceptions of danger, particularly for women, but there is evidence that the presence of people and lighting can mitigate this. Issues of continuity and enclosure are impacted by barriers such as unlit green spaces and dark underpasses (Ceccato and Nalle 2020).

Insecurity is exacerbated by a lack of services at night, for example with public transport becoming less frequent and/or closing down early (Acuto et al. 2022). Nevertheless, concerns about safety on the streets, as opposed to sexual harassment or fighting inside nightlife venues are challenged by analysis from London's Metropolitan Police finding that crime levels are no higher during the period 6 am to 6 pm than 6 pm to midnight (GLA 2020).

Atmosphere and contact zones

Shaw (2018) developed the notion that different subjectivities are co-created in the night-time city and that 'contact zones' between them can sometimes promote a sense of communality, and friction at others. This meta-level of analysis offers a more sophisticated understanding of the types of target audiences that particular land uses and premises are likely to attract. It also highlights potential conflicts between different uses, such as late night bars and clubs and housing. While recent Government legislation has permitted greater flexibility, or 'slippage' between different uses in the same buildings, its policies may cause greater friction too, as the functions of many town centre buildings are allowed to convert to housing without the need for planning permission (Carmona 2022).

Night studies research augments and modifies the qualities commonly used in urban design analysis with concepts such as the 'slippage' between daylight, twilight and darkness and a greater attention to atmosphere. The categories of character, mixed use and diversity, public realm and atmosphere and contact zones will be used to analyse the town centre proposals which follow.

Brief description and proposals Middlesbrough

Middlesbrough's town centre is bounded to the north by a railway line and a major road. The residential neighbourhoods closest to the town centre have high levels of deprivation (Middlesbrough Council 2019a, 2019b).

The former industrial area between the road and rail infrastructure and the River Tees was rebranded as Middlehaven in 2008 and a complete new mixed use urban quarter planned. By 2020, due to market failure, the proposals had been altered and the area closest to the railway line designated as the Boho Quarter (Price 2019). Flats and workspaces for the digital industries, particularly computer gaming, have been built in the Boho Quarter since 2014 and more are planned and under construction. This area is physically connected to the town centre by a pedestrian underpass. The underpass connects to a pedestrianized retail centre which is dominated by a number of large floor-plate shopping centres, which close at 5pm (Figure 1).

According to PublicFirst's *Night Out Index*, Middlesbrough's evening and night-time economy declined by 4.5% between 2012 and 2022 and is rated 85th out of the 112 towns sampled (Corfe 2023). The index measures the density of licenced pubs, clubs, bars and restaurants per 10,000 population districts (see Figure 2(a,b)).

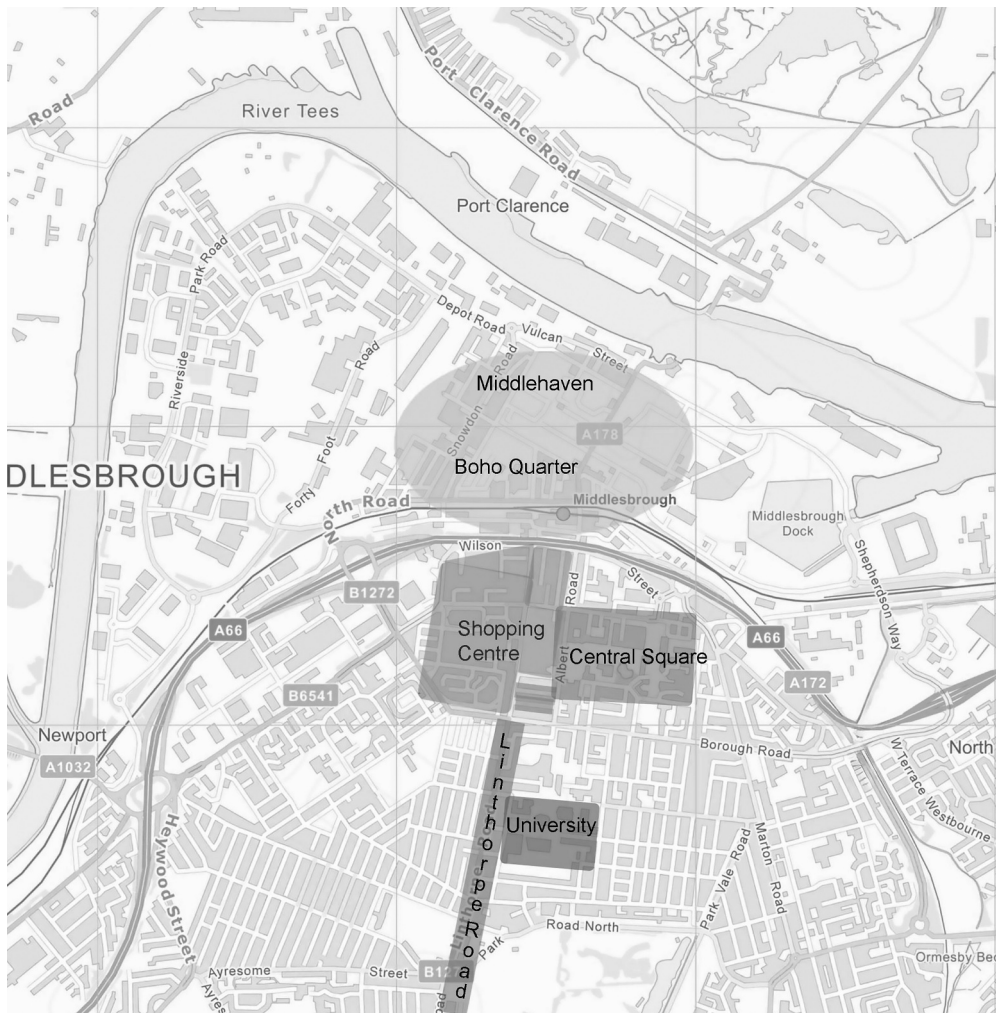
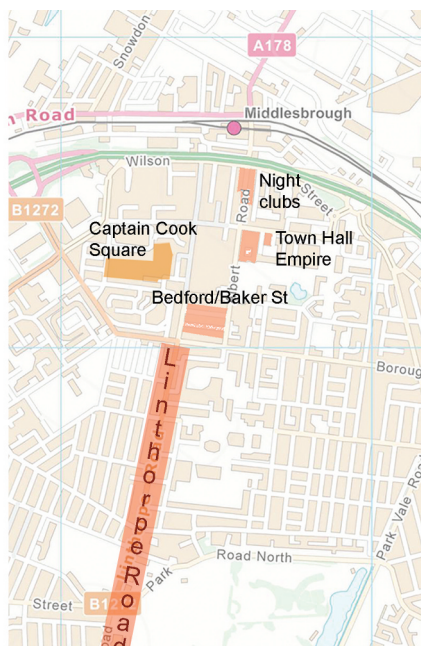


Figure 1. Plan of Middlesbrough with areas highlighted (© crown copyright 2023 ordnance survey (100025252) and author).

There is a small cluster of nightclubs. Two major performance venues stand side by side, a refurbished Town Hall and the commercially run Empire. Two smaller roads, Bedford/Baker street were revitalized between 2012 and 2016 through a partnership between the Council and local landlords, as ‘hipster’ streets with a micro-brewery, cafes and restaurants. Linthorpe Road provides a long, lively, ‘strip’ of restaurants, hot food takeaways, dessert cafes and convenience stores run by mainly ethnic minority owners leading out towards the suburbs. The adjacent university campus provides a student clientele, but direct observation suggests that the restaurants attract a wider customer base. There is also a multiplex cinema and fast-food restaurants adjacent to the football stadium, some ten minutes’ walk from the core of the town centre. [Figure 3\(a-c\)](#) reveal the fragmentation of these clusters at different times in the night.



(a)



(b)

Figure 2. (a) Night time economy areas Middlesbrough's town centre (© crown copyright 2023 ordnance survey (100025252) and author) (b) Night time economy areas Middlesbrough's town centre (author).

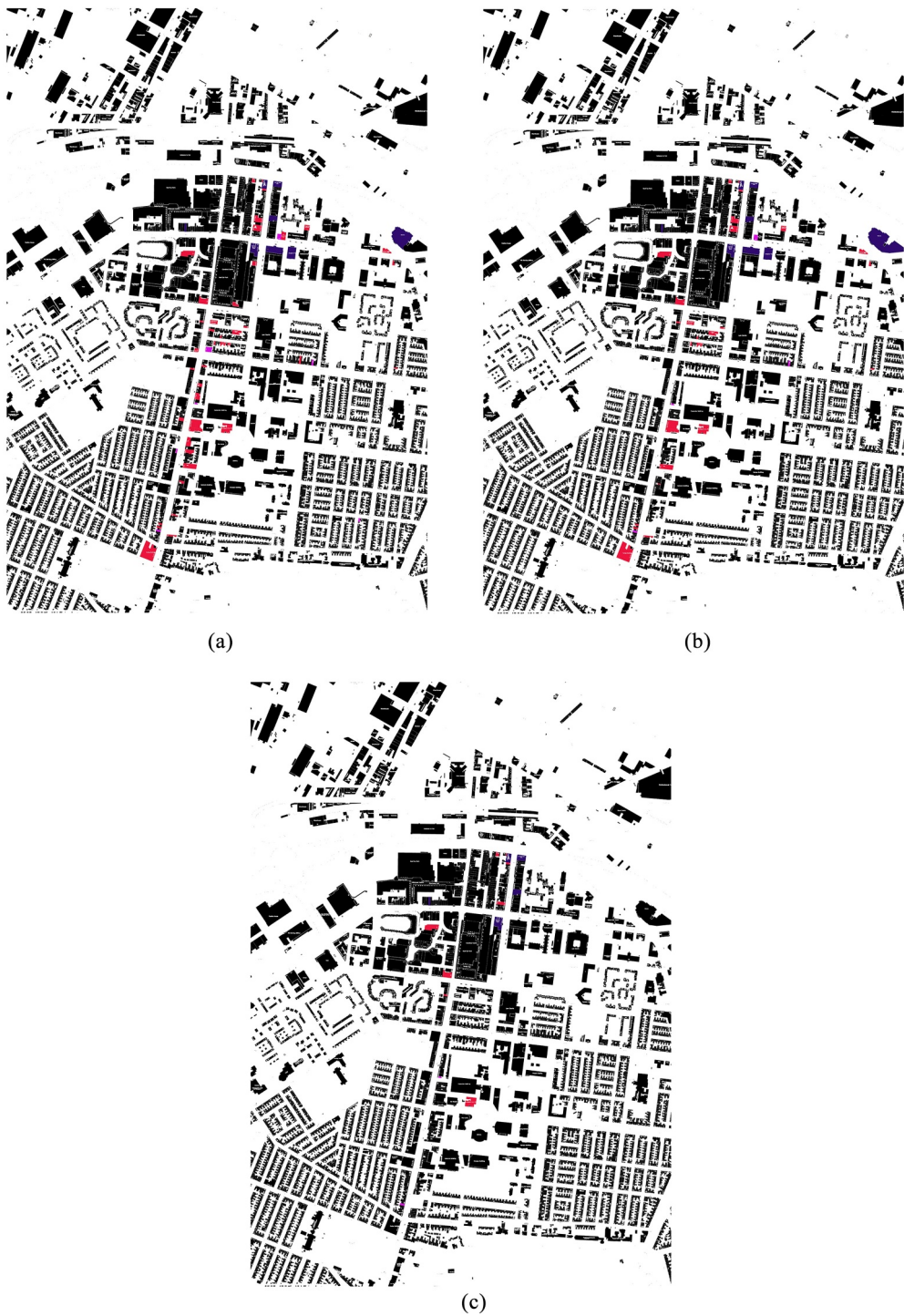


Figure 3. The coloured footprints identify hospitality, entertainment and cultural uses in operation (source: © crown copyright 2023 ordnance survey (100025252) and author) (a) 18.00–22.00 (b) 22.00–24.00 (c) after 24.00. Note: A colour version can be viewed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2024.2302972>.

With a background in property development, the independent mayor championed a series of flagship projects which were presented to the public via a website. The local plan, adopted in 2013, was not updated after 2019. When asked, none of the interviewees recalled a consultation process for the *Town Investment Plan*. The Town Board's partnership with businesses forms the main thrust of Middlesbrough's economic development. Their aim is to attract a middle-income demographic with disposable incomes from the outskirts of Middlesbrough and the wider region into the town centre in the evening and night. The proposals also have an objective of promoting 'urban living', characterized as attracting younger workers in the digital industries to live in the Boho Quarter. The Future High Streets Fund will fund a public/private partnership to convert an office block adjacent to Bedford/Baker Street into flats for urban living, but at the time of writing, no progress on the scheme had been made public.

The key night-time economy intervention financed through the Towns Fund was the Council's purchase of one of the failing shopping centres, Captain Cook Square, for conversion as a commercial leisure destination. Two flagship businesses offering virtual reality gaming and indoor sports replace the department store at the focal point of the square (see [Figure 4](#)). A 773 space multi-storey car park is linked to this building. The square itself is open air and surrounded by commercial units, some of which were under offer to a boutique cinema and bar/restaurant uses in 2023.

Brief description and proposals Oldham

Oldham's town centre is situated on a hill, with a large shopping centre, the Spindles, previously operating over two floors, located in the heart of the town. It is served by three Metrolink tram stations, each positioned on a direct connection to Manchester city centre. Both the Spindles and a nearby covered market, Tommyfields were struggling, pre-pandemic (See [Figure 5](#)). The town has many fine historic buildings, some of which are empty. A consultant's report in 2019 found that there were 73 restaurants/cafes, two theatres, an arts centre and performance space, a cinema, bingo hall, gym and 19 bars/pubs and there was capacity for more food and beverage outlets (Stantec 2020, 21). There is also a mainstream nightclub and a live music venue, both located in side streets.

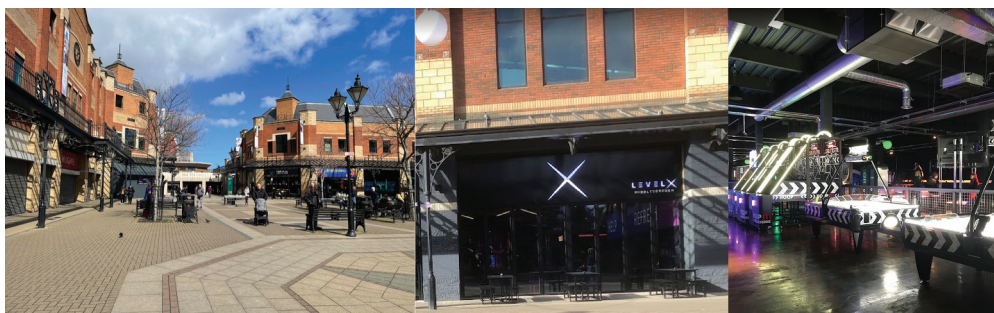


Figure 4. Captain cook square 2022 and 2023. (source left, author 2022, middle and right google streetview).

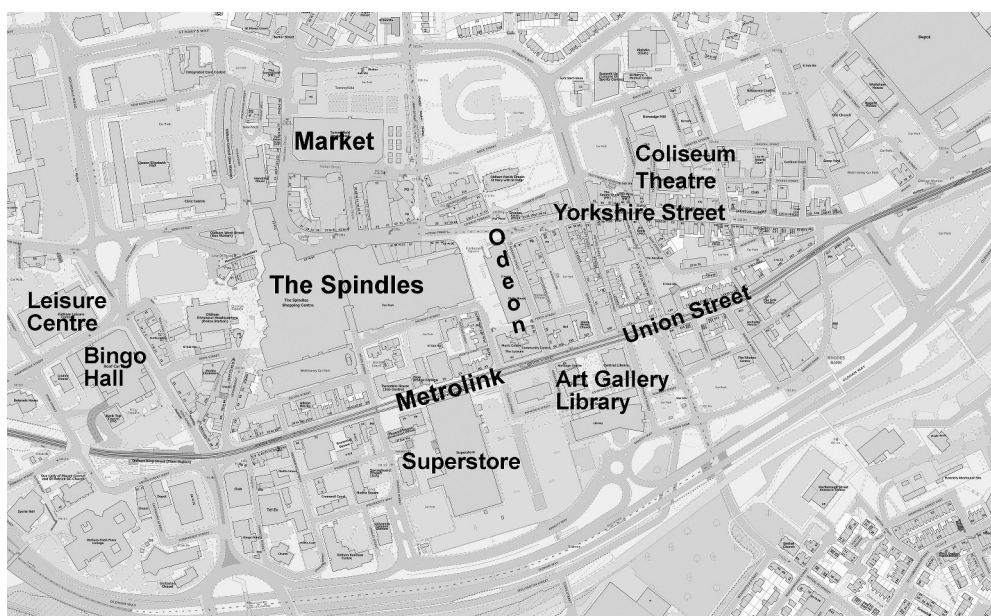


Figure 5. Oldham town centre: key locations (© crown copyright 2023 ordnance survey (100025252) and author).

The Night Out Index records Oldham's night-time economy as having declined by 22.4% between 2012 and 2022 and is rated as 100th out of 112 towns and cities. While many venues are open between 6 pm and midnight, few are open after midnight (Figure 6).

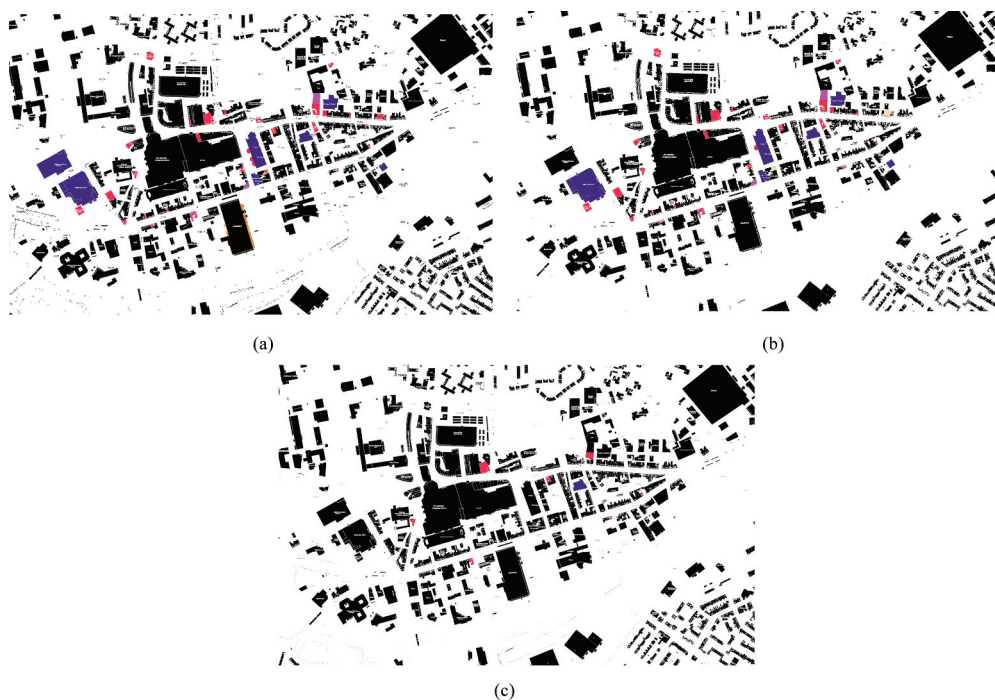


Figure 6. The coloured footprints identify hospitality, entertainment, and cultural uses in operation (© crown copyright 2023 ordnance survey (100025252) and author) (a) 18.00–22.00 (b) 22.00–24.00 (c) after 24.00. Note: A colour version can be viewed online at <https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2024.2302972>

The consultant who prepared Oldham's *Town Investment Plan* remarked on how it was able to draw on previous planning policies (MottMacDonald and Oldham Council 2020). In 2018, recognizing the challenges facing town centres, the authority carried out a programme of consultation on the development of proposals for a refreshed *Town Centre Vision*.

This was informed by consultants' reports commissioned between 2018 and 2019 (Donald Insall Associates 2019; Oldham Council 2019). The *Town Centre Vision* identified the ambition of having 'a diverse, cultural, leisure and night time economy' as the third in six building blocks/priority areas for creating an inclusive town centre. The commentary noted the need to provide an offer for families, young professionals, for older generations, for local communities, especially during the period between work and the opening of the night-time economy, 5-8pm. An indicative spatial plan proposed an evening and night-time economy area between the two main streets of Yorkshire Street and Union Street. Some steps towards improving the town centre for visitors at night had already been taken through the conversion of the Old Town Hall to a cinema and restaurants, with associated public realm and lighting improvements. This award-winning scheme provides an enhanced pedestrian link from the central Metrolink tram stop to the town centre (see Figures 5 and 7).

The GMCA's night-time economy adviser, Sacha Lord, launched a BluePrint for the night-time economy in 2019, updated to a Recovery Plan in 2020 with a strategy appearing in 2022 (GMCA 2022). A night-time economy officer from the GMCA worked with officers in Oldham Council on their proposals and projects. The GMCA's night-time economy vision is 'GREATER MANCHESTER WILL BE ONE OF THE BEST PLACES IN THE WORLD TO GO OUT, STAY OUT, WORK AND RUN A BUSINESS BETWEEN THE HOURS OF 6 PM AND 6 AM. (capitals in original). The strategy supports the strengthening and development of the night-time economy in towns in the GMCA area. Oldham is selected to pilot a Creative Improvement District. This is intended to be a defined geographical area, with a property component combined with events to support, enhance and grow 'creatives, individuals and night-time economy businesses' (GMCA 2022, 19). The strategic framework for regenerating the town centre was further refreshed and re-introduced in 2020, under a project title *Creating a Better Place*, following further consultation (Oldham Council 2023).



Figure 7. Town hall converted to Odeon cinema and restaurants. (source author).

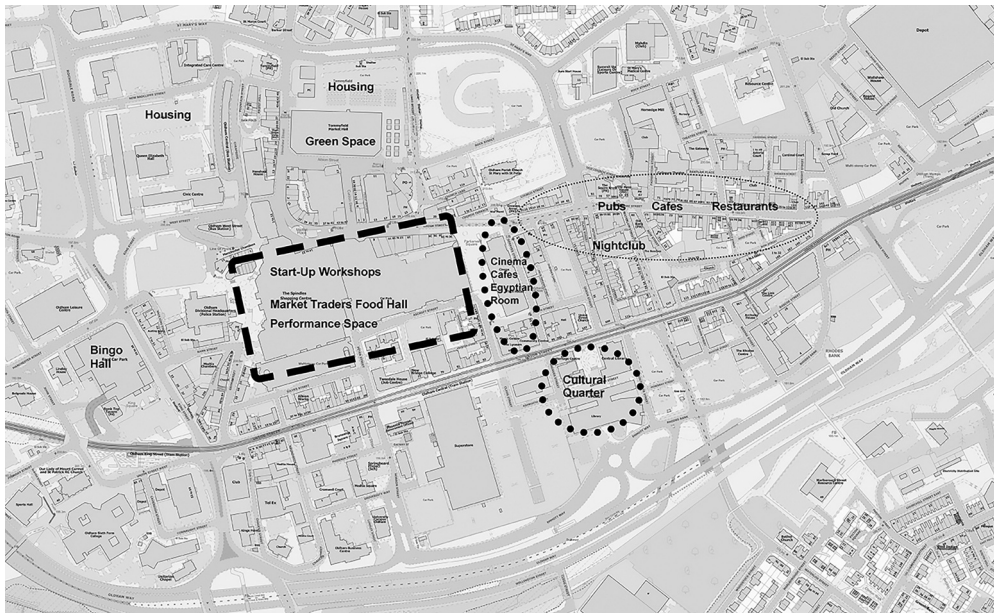


Figure 8. Oldham night time economy strategy (© crown copyright 2023 ordnance survey (100025252) and author).

The aim to improve the evening and night-time economy is supported in the following ways. The Council bought the Spindles in October 2020. The retail area will be substantially reduced. The existing 1970s Tommyfields covered market building will be demolished and the traders will move into the refurbished Spindles, with a retail market on one floor and a food court on the lower floor, opening out onto Parliament Square. Parts of the upper mall will be converted into space for entrepreneurial workers in the creative trades. There will be a dedicated event space, with a roof top terrace, available for private hire and for music events. Some Council staff will be relocated to the centre. A final stage of the Town Hall's conversion will be achieved with the opening of the historic Egyptian Room with food stalls and a bar (Figure 8).

The cultural quarter will house a new performance/theatre space in a radical conversion of two Victorian buildings. This performance space had been intended to house the nationally recognized Coliseum Theatre company, whose building is no longer fit for purpose. This proposal has been threatened by the Arts Council for England withdrawing its revenue support and the company closed its doors in March 2023. Eight new housing sites have been identified in and adjacent to the town centre, including one on the site of the former covered market. Further public realm improvements are proposed around the town centre.

Discussion

Is there a strategy for the night?

In Middlesbrough council officers affirmed the importance of the night to their regeneration proposals, describing it as 'pivotal'. Nevertheless, the only proposition which directly addresses

evening and night-time uses is the conversion of Captain Cooke Square. The introduction of e-sports and gaming follows the rise in popularity of these pursuits as recorded by the market research company Mintel. It also adds further weight to Middlesbrough's new identity as a centre for the digital industry.

Central Square is identified as a potential hub in town's Cultural Strategy, citing the 'cultural anchors' of the Town Hall and the art gallery. This proposition ignores the lack of evening events in the art gallery. Interviews revealed an ambition to attract the new 'urban living' residents into the town centre to the hipster enclave of Bedford/Baker Street, referring to the success of the farmers and craft market held in the streets, held once a month during the daytime.

Oldham has benefited from a night time economy advisor and a regional strategy. While no dedicated document elaborating a night-time strategy is publicly available, comments from the interviews combined with the project proposals put forward a coherent set of differentiated evening and early night-time clusters, with public realm improvements, transport, housing and new workplaces providing an overlapping synergy. This strategy is based on a series of research reports and extensive consultation, which stand in contrast to Middlesbrough's initial 'build it and they will come' approach.

Spatial issues

Character

In both Middlesbrough and Oldham, lessons have been learned from the 1990s and non-alcohol-based uses are given support in the transition from daytime to evening and night-time land uses and activities. Oldham has the most complex and subtle of the propositions. Council officers suggested placing workplaces in the centre of town, combined with housing, would create footfall and a demand for food and beverage uses in the early evening. A smooth segue is also anticipated in Captain Cooke Square, between games-oriented family entertainment in the afternoon and a later food and beverage and cultural offer in the evening. However as noted, Captain Cook Square forms only one enclave in a centre dominated by retail.

Oldham's proposal included a 'night-time economy area', incorporating two late night venues, suggests that these would be supported and encouraged to continue, although this is not made explicit in the documentation. The desire to avoid the stigma of solely being identified with late night, drunken excess is an understandable ambition for policy makers. However, night studies researchers and activists attest to the presence of late night 'club culture' as part of the eco-system that sustains a creative and socially inclusive nightlife (VibeLab 2019).

Mixed use and diversity

Both Middlesbrough and Oldham have a vibrant range of community groups representing minority ethnic interests. Middlesbrough had the highest number of asylum seekers in England and most are housed in a neighbourhood which borders on to the south of the town centre. Although the authority offers support with a dedicated officer there was no consultation with her prior to the publication of the *Town Deal*. The regeneration proposals are targeted at a middle-income demographic. In 2022 council officers had talks with representatives from Teeside University and were pursuing conversations about the types of facilities which the families of their overseas students might be attracted by.

Greater Manchester's night-time strategy is explicitly inclusive. Oldham has a relatively high percentage of citizens of Pakistani and Kashmiri heritage. Many are Muslim and do not drink alcohol. The night-time economy officer expressed exasperation that the economic model for many night-time activities is alcohol-led. He pointed out that the exclusion that follows does not follow an economic logic, asking 'why would you exclude 15% of your potential trade'. This ambition did not have an immediate impact on built form but there was a mention of a need for larger banqueting halls for celebrations.

Public realm

The proposals in Oldham were able to build upon previous improvements to the movement pattern in the town centre. The Metrolink's town centre stop provides a connection between a major supermarket, which stays open until 10 pm and the pedestrianized street leading up to the Spindles shopping centre and the cinema and restaurants in the Town Hall. Further proposed public realm improvements will also provide attractive pedestrian routes around the centre. Officers were unconcerned about safety in the town centre and argued that it is equivalent to daylight hours. Providing better late night transport options is part of GMCA's objectives for the night.

By contrast, officers in Middlesbrough were concerned about safety. This was seen as a major barrier to the town centre's development at night. Early in 2023 the Council acknowledged the lack of a coherent town centre strategy, a component of which would be to improve the night-time economy and the need to present 'a combined, and compelling vision' in a new masterplan (Local Government Association 2023). The public realm issues that will need to be resolved are the facilitation of pedestrian movement from Captain Cook Square through to other clusters in the town. Visitors who might want to explore the town centre beyond the enclave of the square need to walk through a dark pedestrianized street, past the blank, closed facades of the adjacent shops, then through another deserted square to reach the lively food and beverage offer of the Linthorpe Road (Figure 9). In a similar vein, residents from the Boho quarter who wished to walk past the nightclub cluster and the performance spaces of the Town Hall or the Empire are required to walk past the darkened green space of Central Square, albeit lit by decorative lighting in the trees. In addition, council officers expressed a particular frustration about the lack of public transport after mid-evening so that Middlesbrough becomes a 'taxi-town'.



Figure 9. Pedestrianised route in Middlesbrough town centre after dark. (source author).

Atmosphere and contact zones

Interview material from Middlesbrough offered an ambition to create an 'urban buzz'. 'Why can't we be like Shoreditch asked a local councillor'. As noted, this ambition is stymied by the lack of a coherent public realm strategy connecting the nightlife clusters in the town. Interview material in Oldham revealed a different ambition, to create distinctive sense of place, based on the town's assets and history. This aspiration has not yet been clearly articulated in the documentation.

In Middlesbrough a potential clash between visitors to the revitalized Captain Cook Square development and an adjacent council housing estate was resolved through the intervention of a local councillor. By locating a green space between new housing and the town centre, a clash between noisy night-time uses and residential uses are avoided in Oldham's proposals. However, the spectre of change of use from commercial to residential, allowed through central government's permitted development rules, remains.

In summary, both authorities have moved away from reliance on an alcohol fuelled night-time economy. Both have considered 'slippage' in the 'twilight' period between normal retail hours and the time at which British people go out to eat and drink, between 5 pm and 8pm. As both town centres have suffered from market failure, each has been eligible for central government support whose aim is to kick start the revitalization of their centres. That the support had to be justified by a strong business case and is project-led placed limitations on their proposals. Oldham, benefiting from the advice of a dedicated night-time economy officer, has a set of proposals which promises to provide clusters of night-time activities, connected by attractive pedestrian routes. Middlesbrough's are fragmented and in 2022, lacked the connectivity and attention to issues of social justice championed by the GLA and the GMCA.

Concluding comments

The background to this paper is the perceived need to revitalize British high streets. The research explored how two medium-sized towns had approached proposals for regeneration during the hours of darkness. Urban design concepts were modified and augmented from the night studies and urban design literature. The mix of land-uses and their locations, 'slippage' between different phases of the evening and night, the connectivity and quality of the public realm, atmosphere and contact zones have been raised in night studies research. These modifications are capable of application to other urban centres in the UK and internationally.

The empirical research found both authorities consider the night-time experience to be important. Lessons have been learned from the expansion of the 1990s and both towns were keen to move away from a dependence of alcohol fuelled hospitality, particularly in the transition from daytime to early evening and night-time uses. Middlesbrough's adoption of e-sports and commercial leisure provides an intriguing new direction in the night-time economy. Tracking this development and other similar endeavours would be of interest to both future researchers and policy makers.

Nightlife is multi-faceted and the night-time economy even more so. Neither town had strategies for all the time zones of the night. Oldham's more developed proposals were informed by GMCA's regional strategy and the funding of night-time economy advisers. More detailed research is needed to assess the extent and impact of such assistance for all

the towns within Greater Manchester and the city centre. This would also apply elsewhere. There is a need for more research to understand the role of different types of night-time economy sectors within regions and how they might interact. For example, Oldham's search for a unique identity poses the question of whether it will function as an overspill for Manchester city centre, or whether it will succeed in creating a distinctive sense of place at night.

What is clear from the research is that developing strategies for town centres at night is at an early stage outside of the big cities. A recommendation from the findings is that medium-sized towns would benefit from more explicit proposals for the night-time hours, informed research, practice and advice from specialists. As strategies towards the hours of darkness are developed further, more research is needed to assess their implementation. The extent to which the diverse preferences of different demographics are answered has been under-researched. The potential clashes between different land-uses remains an issue. Night studies scholarship demonstrates that a more expansive consideration of possibilities lies beyond project-based initiatives, offering fresh creative possibilities for urban design policies and practices.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

This work was supported by the Leverhulme Trust under grant no. [EM-2020-077].

ORCID

Marion Roberts  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0194-3513>

References

- Acuto, M., A. Seijas, J. McArthur, and E. Robin. 2022. *Managing Cities at Night. A Practitioner Guide to the Urban Governance of the Night-Time Economy*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.
- Black, P., and T. E. Sonbli. 2019. *The Urban Design Process*. London: Lund Humphries.
- Bromley, R. D. F., A. R. Tallon, and C. J. Thomas. 2003. "Disaggregating the Space-Time Layers of City-Centre Activities and Their Users." *Environment and Planning A: Economy and Space* 35 (10): 1831–1851. <https://doi.org/10.1068/a35294>.
- Campkin, B., and L. Marshall. 2017. *LGBTQ+ Cultural Infrastructure in London: Night Venues, 2006-Present*. London: UCL Urban Laboratory.
- Carmona, M. 2022. "The Existential Crisis of Traditional Shopping Streets: The Sun Model and the Place Attraction Paradigm." *Journal of Urban Design* 27 (1): 1–35. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2021.1951605>.
- Ceccato, V., and M. K. Nalle, eds. 2020. *Crime and Fear in Public Places: Towards Safe, Inclusive and Sustainable Cities*. London: Routledge.
- Chatterton, P., and R. Hollands. 2003. *Urban Nightscapes: Youth Cultures, Pleasure Spaces and Corporate Power*. London: Routledge.
- Corfe, S. 2023. *Is Britain's Night Time Economy Dying? And Where's the Best Place for an Evening Out?* PublicFirst. <https://www.publicfirst.co.uk/night-out-index.html>.

- Cowan, R. 2021. *Essential Urban Design*. London: RIBA.
- Davies, P., and H. Mummery. 2006. *NightVision.Town Centres for All*. London: The Civic Trust.
- Davoudian, N. 2019. *Urban Lighting for People*. London: RIBA Publishing.
- Donald Insall Associates. 2019. *Oldham Town Centre Conservation Area Appraisal and Management Plan: Supplementary Planning Document*. Oldham: Oldham Council.
- Dovey, K. 2016. *Urban Design Thinking*. London: Bloomsbury Academic.
- Dovey, K., and M. Ristic. 2017. "Mapping Urban Assemblages: The production of Spatial Knowledge." *Journal of Urbanism: International Research on Placemaking and Urban Sustainability* 10 (1): 15–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17549175.2015.1112298>.
- Dunn, N. 2016. *Dark Matters: A Manifesto for the Nocturnal City*. London: John Hunt Publishing.
- Dunn, N. 2022. "Nocturnal Imaginaries: Rethinking and Redesigning the City After Dark." *Ethnologies* 44 (1): 107–128. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1096059ar>.
- Edensor, T. 2017. *From Light to Dark: Daylight, Illumination and Gloom*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Edensor, T., and S. Sumartojo. 2015. "Designing Atmospheres: Introduction to Special Issue." *Visual Communication* 14 (3): 251–265. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1470357215582305>.
- Eldridge, A., and M. Roberts. 2022. "Midlife, Diversification and Inclusive Town Centres at Night." *City, Culture & Society* 31:100485. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ccs.2022.100485>.
- Furedi, F. 2015. *Forward into the Night. The Changing Landscape of Britain's Cultural and Economic Life*. London: NTIA (Night Time Industries Association).
- GLA Economics. 2018. *London at Night: An Evidence Base for a 24-Hour City*. London: Greater London Authority.
- GLA. Greater London Authority. 2017. *From Good Night to Great Night. A Vision for London as a 24-Hour City*. London: Greater London Authority.
- GLA (Greater London Authority). 2020. *London Data Set. Metropolitan Police Notifiable Offences by Time of Day (2010–2018)*. <https://data.london.gov.uk/dataset/notifiable-offences-by-time-of-day/>.
- GMCA. 2022. *Greater Manchester Night Time Economy Strategy*. Manchester: GMCA.
- Guérin, F., M. de Raphélis, and S. Mallet. 2022. "Night-Time as a Strategic Referent for an Intermediary City: Between Attractiveness and Standardization of the Uses. The Case of the Reims Grand Centre Urban Project." *European Planning Studies* 30 (8): 1401–1420. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09654313.2021.1877260>.
- Hobbs, D., P. Hadfield, S. Lister, and S. Lister. 2003. *Bouncers: Violence and Governance in the Night-Time Economy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Leichenring, L., and M. Milan. 2021. *The Global Nighttime Recovery Plan*. Accessed December 6, 2023. <https://www.nighttime.org/recoveryplan/>.
- Local Government Association. 2023. *Case Study: Urban and Town Centre Living Strategy for Middlesbrough*. London: Local Government Association.
- London Night Time Commission. 2017. *Think Night: London's Neighbourhoods from 6pm to 6am*. London: Greater London Authority.
- Mayor of London. 2021. *The London Plan. The Spatial Development Strategy for Greater London March 2021*. London: Greater London Authority.
- Mayor of London's Music Venues Taskforce. 2015. *London's Music Venues Rescue Plan*. London: Greater London Authority.
- MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government). 2019. *Towns Fund Prospectus*. London: MHCLG.
- MHCLG (Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government). 2021. *Build Back Better High Streets*. London: MHCLG.
- Middlesbrough Council. 2019a. *Central Ward 2019 Report*. Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Council.
- Middlesbrough Council. 2019b. *Newport Ward 2019 Report*. Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Council.
- Middlesbrough Council. 2020a. *Middlesbrough Town Investment Plan Summary*. Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Council.
- Middlesbrough Council. 2020b. *Strategic Plan 2020–2023*. Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Council.
- Middlesbrough Council. 2021. *Future High Streets Fund*. Middlesbrough: Middlesbrough Council.

- Mott MacDonald and Oldham Council. 2020. *Oldham Town Investment Plan*. Oldham: Oldham Council.
- NTIA (Night Time Industries Association). 2022. *A Study of the Night Time Economy: Establishing the Economic, Cultural and Community Value of the Night Time Economy and the Contribution of the Night Time Cultural Economy within the UK*. London: NTIA.
- Oldham Council. 2019. *Oldham in Profile 2019.V.2.0*. Oldham: Oldham Council Business Intelligence Services.
- Oldham Council. 2021. *Future High Streets Fund*. Oldham: Oldham Council.
- Oldham Council. 2023. *Creating a Better Place*. Oldham: Oldham Council.
- Price, K. 2019. "Did the Middlehaven Dream-maker' Achieve What He Set Out to Do?" <https://www.gazettelive.co.uk/news/teesside-news/highs-lows-middlehavens-regeneration-dream-16251398>.
- Publica. 2021a. *Developing a Night Time Strategy, Part 1. Guidance on Process*. London: Mayor of London.
- Publica. 2021b. *Developing a Night Time Strategy, Part 2. Guidance, Precedents and Case Studies*. London: Mayor of London.
- Roberts, M. 2024. "Extending Urban Design into the Hours of Darkness." In *Research Handbook on Urban Design*, edited by M. Roberts and S. Nelson, 153–172. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.
- Roberts, M., and A. Eldridge. 2009. *Planning the Night-Time City*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Seijas, A., and M. M. Gelders. 2021. "Governing the Night-Time City: The Rise of Night Mayors as a New Form of Urban Governance After Dark." *Urban Studies* 58 (2): 316–334. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042098019895224>.
- Shaw, R. 2018. *The Nocturnal City*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Stantec. 2020. *Oldham Retail and Leisure Study, Main Report*. Oldham: Oldham Council.
- Tutgenes, S. 2015. "Pub Crawls at a Bulgarian Resort: A Case Study Using Crowd Theory." *Tourist Studies* 15 (3): 283–299. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468797615597856>.
- Van de Nouwelant, R., and C. Steinmetz. 2013. "Concentration vs. Dispersal of a Late Night Economy." *Spaces & Flows: An International Journal of Urban & Extra Urban Studies* 3 (4): 31–43. <https://doi.org/10.18848/2154-8676/CGP/v03i04/53715>.
- VibeLab. 2019. *Creative Footprint: Understanding Music and Nightlife Spaces in the City*. <https://vibelab.org/creative-footprint-study>.
- Warnaby, G. 2009. "Managing the Urban Consumption Experience?" *Local Economy* 24 (2): 1–5–110. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02690940902717139>.
- Wicks, N. 2022. "'You Wanna Come to the 'Urban' Night Tomorrow...It's the Wrong Night Tonight' Black Consumers as Both 'Wanted' and 'Unwanted' in the Night-Time Economy." 8 (1): 20–37. <https://doi.org/10.3167/arcs.2022.080102>.