Teaching urban change using the local area

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In this article Charles shows how a study of urban change can be enhanced by building on students' local knowledge and experience. He illustrates ways of understanding change in the urban environment, using examples from the local area to demonstrate wider social and economic processes.

Accompanying online materials

Change is ever-present in our society, so an understanding of change is central to the ability to think geographically. However, our students are bound to have a limited awareness of change, simply as a result of their youth. Year 7 students will only recall the last five or six years, while the awareness of 17-year-olds might extend to notions of change during the preceding decade. This article illustrates some ways of understanding urban change, using examples from the local area to demonstrate much wider social and economic processes; an approach which also enables acquired knowledge to be easily transferable between locations.

Given their very limited personal experience of urban change, it would be well worth asking students to discuss the tasks you set with their parents and grandparents. Their longer memories of changes within their own lifetimes could significantly enhance the students' insights. Other relevant sources might include a sequence of historic photographs and Ordnance Survey or Goad plans[1], which provide detailed information on retail outlets for urban areas.

Changing building use as an exemplar of wider social change

When we look around urban environments, we see a wide range of buildings that were constructed for one purpose, and which now serve very different purposes. Chapels and churches turned into shops or tyre depots; banks becoming bars; new uses for 1930s cinemas; and so on. Figures 1, 2 and 3 are examples of such buildings, taken from my own local area of Lancashire. Students could undertake photo interpretation activities to determine both the original and current uses. These activities could be followed by a discussion of wider social trends: the decline of religion, changes in banking practices, or evidence of population movements that have resulted in a change of land use.

Over the last half century, our society has become much more diverse and multicultural, and although it would be dangerous to suggest that earlier cultures were somehow 'purer' (Rawding, 2007b) there is increasing evidence of cultural hybridisation. As a simple example, the range of cuisines available in our towns and cities today makes them unrecognisable from the urban Britain of 40 years ago (Figure 4), and represents a sea-change in both our eating habits and the composition of our populations. Not only is there a far wider range of foods available, but there are also far more outlets per head of population, reflecting the changing lifestyles associated with higher living standards (Figure 5).

At the same time, significant groups of immigrants have arrived at various times into British towns and cities, bringing with them distinctive characteristics from their home cultures. The original waves of immigrants from the New Commonwealth that arrived from the late 1950s (West Indian, Indian, Pakistani etc) have been succeeded by migrants from areas such as Eastern Europe. The hypermobility of young adults has resulted in large numbers of Australians serving in our pubs while our gap year students do the same thing in Australia! Each of these developments has left clearly visible texts that can be read in our urban environments (Figure 6).

Changing building use as an exemplar of wider economic change

One of the key themes of the last 25 years has been an increase in globalisation, which is clearly visible in the domination of high streets and retail parks by national and global brands (Figure 7). The phrase 'clone towns' has been coined to describe this phenomenon, and clone towns have been compared unfavourably with towns with a more obvious local identity; *The Guardian* (Carvel, 2005) even published a league table of 'cloneness' a few years ago based on a New Economics Foundation survey of 103 towns in England, Wales and Scotland (see Figure 8) (Rawding, 2007a: p.73).

If students are familiar with the shops in more than one town, identifying instances of 'cloning' is relatively straightforward: you can simply ask whether they can think of more than one branch of a store, which could easily lead to the question 'to what extent is X a clone town?'

Figure 1: The Emporium, Clitheroe, Lancashire, an old Methodist Chapel, has been converted into cafés and shops.
Photo: Charles Rawding.

Figure 2: A womens' clothes shop in a former bank. **Photo:** Charles Rawding.
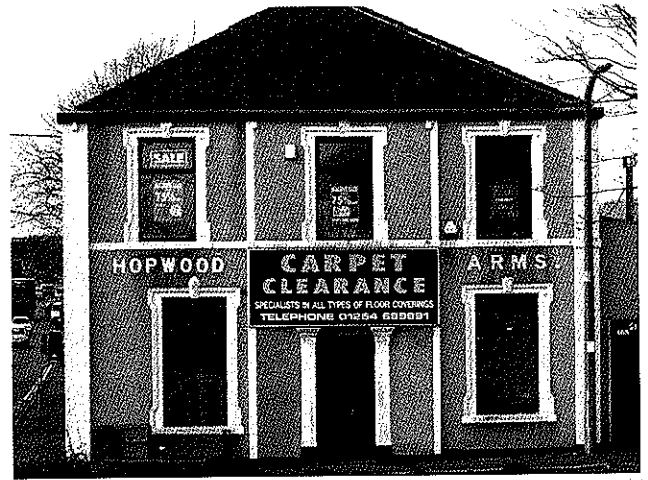

Figure 3: Carpet clearance shop, Blackburn, formerly a pub, the Hopwood Arms. **Photo:** Charles Rawding.
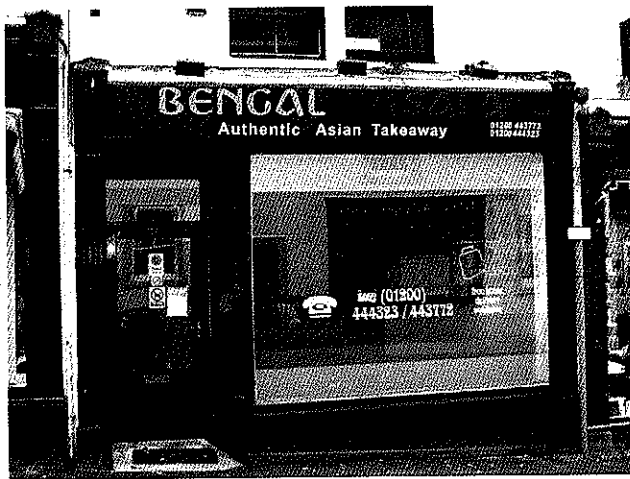

Figure 4: Asian takeaway in Clitheroe, Lancashire, demonstrates a sea-change in both our eating habits and the composition of our populations. **Photo:** Charles Rawding.

Figure 5: Café society in the Liverpool One complex shows changing lifestyles and increasing affluence. **Photo:** Charles Rawding.

Figure 6: This Polish food shop in Blackpool, Lancashire is evidence of population movement as a result of the enlargement of the EU. **Photo:** Charles Rawding.
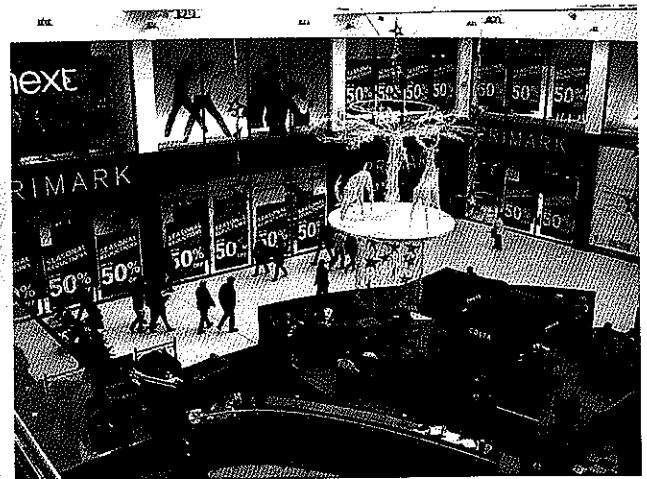

Figure 7: With only retail chains on view this shopping mall could be anywhere in the UK. It is The Mall in Blackburn. **Photo:** Charles Rawding.

Top 10 'cloned' towns with least local identity	Top 10 'home' towns with most local identity
Exeter, Devon	Hebden Bridge, West Yorkshire
Dumfries, Dumfries and Galloway	Peebles, Tweeddale
Stafford, Staffordshire	Bo'ness, Falkirk
Middlesbrough, North Yorkshire	Normanton, West Yorkshire
Weston-super-Mare, Somerset	Frodsham, Cheshire
Winchester, Hampshire	Emsworth, Hampshire
Newport, Gwent	Hadleigh, Suffolk
Dorchester, Dorset	Great Malvern, Worcestershire
Cheltenham, Gloucestershire	Lewes, East Sussex
Burton upon Trent, Staffordshire	Gainsborough, Lincolnshire

Figure 8: Cloned towns. Source: modified from *The Guardian*. 6th June 2005.

Changing land use as evidence of increasing mobility

A key element of the modern era has been the increasing mobility of society at almost all levels and all scales. Indeed, one might question the very use of the term 'settlement'! We travel further, more often and for a wider range of reasons than ever before. Such changes are vividly reflected in our landscapes. Congested roads, where residents have difficulty in parking, reflect a built environment created by a society where widespread car ownership was not anticipated; more recent housing developments have been heavily influenced by car ownership, whether in terms of garage construction, off-street parking or traffic calming measures. Again, a sequence of local photographs of housing of different ages will demonstrate how urban environments have changed as a result of increased car ownership. Public transport provision is another area that has seen quite dramatic change recently, with the provision of designated bus lanes, guided bus routes, transport interchanges and urban tram systems (Figure 9).

Summary

Change is all around us. Creating an awareness of such changes among students is crucial to developing geographical understanding of known environments. It is also a vital element in their cognitive development. By teaching about urban change through the local experience of students, it is possible to build effectively on their known world while at the same time enabling them to transfer this thinking to other geographical settings as their geographical thinking deepens. | **TG**

Figure 9: Sheffield's Supertram system encourages public transport. **Photo:** Wendy North.

Online resources
Go to *www.geography. org.uk/tg* and click 'Autumn 2012' for Charles's PowerPoint presentation of images showing urban change.

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References
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Notes
1. *www.experian.co.uk/goad/goad-plans.html* (last accessed 22 April 2012.)