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Planning for Pop-Ups: How planners can help business thrive

Recent years have seen a significant shrinking of small businesses and employment opportunities for young people in regional towns such as Townsville, North Queensland. Pop-up retail may offer an alternative opportunity to create employment opportunities. Originally emerging as an innovative marketing solution, pop-ups have exponentially exploded in popularity and have now gone from marketing to mainstream. Although definitions of pop-ups vary, the enduring theme is temporariness. Pop-up businesses are generally interstitial, flexible enough to “pop-up” in small spaces and offer an alternative retail model within the current experiential consumer economy.

Due to the relative infancy of the phenomenon, limited literature on the topic is available to date, with current literature predominantly addressing pop-ups initiated by large business. The focus in this instance is on small business pop-ups whose function is primarily aimed at the sale of goods and services. This contrasts with pop-ups initiated by large retail business, whose focus is generally that of brand awareness and testing of new products, markets or localities. In Australia, the latter is not frequented in regional towns, but is centred in capital cities.

Pop-ups as a tool for urban revitalisation has enjoyed some success, with most programs to date centred on the facilitation of arts and culture-based enterprises into disused commercial property. With increasing pressures on small business in regional areas, there is an opportunity for this to expand to the wider small business landscape to enable the partial and temporary re-commodification of urban space.

Small business is an integral part of the Australian economy, and research demonstrates there is a substantial opportunity for planners to support pop-ups as a viable alternative small business model while simultaneously facilitating urban renewal. Potential exists for planners to inform policy and urban development approaches not only in Townsville but also more broadly across Australian regional centres.