

A TOWN CENTRE FOR ALL SEASONS

Key information

- Location: **Šibenik (Croatia)**
- Population: **34 301**
- Involved in URBACT network: **RetailLink**
- More information: <http://urbact.eu/retailink>



The old city centre of Šibenik is not recognised as a high quality retail destination, and demand fluctuates enormously between busy summer months and a lacklustre winter. The city set out with URBACT to create a marketing and cultural pull to the old town in order to balance this out.

It seems almost impossible to imagine that a town as beautiful as Šibenik could have any problems attracting people to shop there. Its large old town is a stunning collection of medieval and Renaissance buildings on the Adriatic coast of Croatia. The city has not just one but two UNESCO World Heritage sites: one more than New York. These are the exceptional Renaissance Cathedral of St James and the highly unusual 16th-century fort of St Nicholas.

And yet in many ways Šibenik is a victim of its own success. Tourism has replaced the aluminium and steel industry as the city's major employer, and as a result the shops in the old town – subject to all the pressures of out-of-town and online retail – are becoming over-reliant on it. "We are in danger of going in the direction of other coastal cities in Croatia but we still have people who live in the city centre. It's not only touristic, it has all the administration and business functions, and we want to keep it that way," says Petar Mišura, Head of Department for Economy, Entrepreneurship and Development at Šibenik City Council. Therefore the town wanted to reach beyond its local context for international support. This is why the city joined the RetailLink network.



A view from picturesque Šibenik

◆ New relationship: public and private

For Mr Mišura, the real triumph was the formation of an URBACT Local Group, a group of local stakeholders with the objective to define actions and boost the retail sector. Kristijan Domdjoni, representative of the Association of Entrepreneurs of the Old Town, became URBACT Local Group Coordinator and helped gain local support. "We are an ex-Communist society and our government always had a top-down approach, so we are in a situation where our

group of shopkeepers didn't have that informal relationship with the administration. There was suspicion, and it was hard to convince people to work with us," says Mr Mišura.

In that first meeting of the group there was a strong sense that both the local government and the retail community in Šibenik were coming from different perspectives. "[The shopowners'] complaint was that we don't have enough parking, and not only don't we have enough but it isn't cheap parking. So whilst they insisted on infrastructure, we were insisting on a marketing approach using social network and Instagram and promotional webpages," says Mr Mišura.

◆ Better infrastructure, access... and identity

It is highly unusual for local governments to become involved in helping the retail sector in Croatia, normally confining themselves to hard infrastructure: bridges, houses and so on. The success of the URBACT Local Group was really to get dialogue going between local government and the retail community. "During the time they changed their opinion but we also changed ours too," says Mr Mišura. One of the outcomes of URBACT for Šibenik was to encourage a proposal – approved though not yet implemented – for parking under the city's main square, while also improving access to parts of the old town. With so many small alleys and steps for visitors to navigate, signage is an area around

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Petar Mišura

which consensus grew, both as a means for making access easier and as an opportunity to give the old town an identity.

The council in turn was able to gain support from the retail sector through the URBACT process. As their integrated plan puts it, "the local action group's efforts should

also lead to a range of stronger marketing activities, promoting the shopping experience in the old city centre by using online tools, mobile apps, organising sales events and all kinds of events to ensure longer stays in the old town centre throughout the year, not only in summer." Training programmes and workshops have been introduced to improve customer care and market research amongst retailers – run by the Croatian Chamber of Economy, Croatian Chamber of Trades and Crafts, and Šibenik Polytechnic.

As part of the local group team's extensive research into the problems facing retail in the old town, they interviewed several residents, including Želimir Mikulić, a professor at the polytechnic. He considered retail businesses located in the old town of Šibenik in this balanced way: "Today, people visit shopping centres in order to spend time, not money. If the city centre manages to provide a good cultural and leisure proposal together with a good retail offer, it will get people back."



A pedestrian street in the centre of the city