

Retail Led Regeneration In Historic Towns

Birmingham Conference Report 20 - 21 April 2005



Delegates were welcomed to Birmingham on the Wednesday evening before the conference by **Cllr Mike Nangle, Lord Mayor of the City** and then enjoyed a meal at a nearby restaurant.

On Thursday morning, **Clive Dutton, Director of Planning & Regeneration at Birmingham City Council**, explained to delegates that they had arrived at a 'seminal moment' referring to the impact of the crisis at the Longbridge car factory on the City. As Chair of the Jewellery Quarter Partnership, Clive was very aware of this as part of its long industrial and architectural history.

Ian Poole, Chair of EHTF, introducing the programme for the day, said that it related to the chapters of the Retail Guidance document published in 1997 and would serve to bring delegates up to date with retail development activities in historic towns and how they effect regeneration.

As Commissioner for CABE and English Heritage, a founding member of EHTF and resident and former head of planning at Birmingham City Council, **Les Sparks** was well placed to comment on the position played by retail development in Birmingham as well as nationally. He felt that planners should be able to resist the drive for further retail development when and where it was inappropriate. The original purpose of PPG6 in 1988 had been to protect "the vitality and viability of a nearby town centre

as a whole". Through several revisions and changes in Government, certain principles remained the same – one of which was that out of town developments did not meet these criteria. There is now an appreciation that even in places like London's West End, the retail offer must be continually refreshed and revitalized, and changes in the fortunes of many towns and cities are reflected in the retail destination league tables which had reversed the positions of Bath and Birmingham in recent years.

Diversification, specialisation and larger retail units are essential, he said, to help the industry to achieve its priorities. The public also had needs which had to be met to maintain successful centres – these did not always sit comfortably side by side. Planners had a third agenda which had to be satisfied.

Les considered that resolution of these potential conflicts was one of the important roles played by design. Design also influences place-making, profitability, image creation, public acceptance and 'future-proofing'. Masterplanning, as a strategy, could address important issues such as:

- Freestanding blocks (which can be phased) rather than monolithic megastructures (which limit future modification)
- Extending street networks rather than enclosing malls
- Outward facing rather than inward looking
- Four-dimensional thinking – cross sections and phasing plans

Using these case studies, Les explained how principles could be put into practice:

- Exeter Princesshay: area character appraisal and urban design study led to revised masterplan approach.
- Liverpool Paradise Street: development seen as integrated part of city centre
- Sheffield's New Retail Quarter: use of topography and recreation of an historic space to make a new piece of city linked into the past.

Jonathan Baldock, a Partner at Donaldsons, explained the research that he had carried out at CB Richard Ellis for the National Retail Planning Forum to define secondary shopping and identify the key national trends which affected it. He showed graphs detailing trends and developments and market share distribution over several decades.

Key implications for secondary shopping areas were:

- Larger centres attract key multiples and command the highest rental values
- Over 1,000 town, district and local centres have suffered relative decline; smaller centres are increasingly reliant upon independent businesses and local catchments
- Rental values in secondary areas have fallen whilst those in prime areas have increased, indicating a decline in demand by retailers for secondary shopping
- Shopping centres in the pipeline are predominantly large-scale and located within the larger centres, reinforcing the trend of activity away from smaller centres

Further research in case study locations in both small and large town centres was carried out over a ten year period. He listed the principle findings and explained the recommendations made for regeneration, which were:

- Improve coherence and avoid fragmenting pedestrian flows
- Anticipate market change and manage its effects
- Extend environmental improvements into secondary shopping areas
- Find new ways of improving building maintenance eg through internal repairing leases and engaging building owners in management
- Provide low cost support services for independent businesses
- Identify and grow niche markets
- Pro-actively apply the sequential approach to create new town centre or edge of centre development opportunities
- Seek high density mixed use development
- Properly assess the impact of new developments on secondary shopping locations
- Limit competing attractions in superstores, eg pharmacy, Post Office, dry cleaner, photo processor, newsagent
- Apply more sophisticated retail frontage policies in secondary shopping areas
- Create and support town centre partnerships, and apply good town centre management principles

He concluded that secondary shopping was vital to the health and vitality of towns and cities.

Peter Cleary, Head of Retail Development at Land Securities plc, established the company's depth of skill and understanding in the sector and the contribution made by the retail industry to the UK economy. He went on to discuss the role of the developer – as a conductor (not a shark).

The challenge, he said, had been outlined in the EHTF document some years ago and it remained the same: 'If historic centres are to remain vital or viable, they must not be allowed to stagnate but must be renewed to respond to modern needs. The challenge is to ensure that such renewal can be a positive insertion into the fabric of these towns reflecting their character and context and contributing positively to the life and vitality of the town centre.' In order to achieve this he recommended:

- Site analysis
- Continual consultation
- Design & Planning brief
- Appointment of specialist project team & design
- Planning
- Site assembly
- Delivery
- Managing the change

To further demonstrate these points, Peter used four of the Land Securities developments as case studies:

– Caxtongate, Birmingham; Whitefriars, Canterbury; Princeshay, Exeter and Bardwells' Court, Cambridge. The next challenge – or opportunity – would be Coppergate in York. Although the developer has a key role, he insisted that the solution should come from the local authority in all of these cases.

Mike Taylor, Group Leader, City Centre Planning, at Birmingham City Council, began his one-man double act (standing in for Gary Taylor – no relation – who was moving house, so could not be with us) with a brief look at the post war history of Birmingham, which had seen development dominated by the car. The new vision for the City included emphasis on:

- Economic restructuring
- Highbury Initiative
- Environment and Access
- "Break the Concrete Collar"
- Pedestrian Priority – remodelling the inner ring road and establishing "streets and squares"
- Mixed uses
- Quarters
- Leadership

The establishment of the International Convention Centre started a sequence of development which included Brindleyplace and the Bull Ring, both of which included the innovation of introducing housing into city centre schemes. Having had to insist that developers include housing in these early days, it is now the case that they are the ones keen to build residential elements into schemes. Growth in all the sectors has followed but over a period of almost four decades – not overnight. The development of the Bull Ring had to address a variety of issues, including public squares, pedestrian connections, gradients, the use of iconic buildings, public art and archaeology.

The benefits to Birmingham of this major redevelopment has been to generate more visitors, to extend the catchment, increase the 'spend' and to put £500m into the local economy. It has also transformed the image of the City and encouraged wider regeneration (the Rotunda is to be refurbished by Urban Splash) – it has 'unlocked the potential of the City'.

There remain problems to address, including those surrounding the renovated, but unused, Moor Street Station, the Eastside Regeneration Area and New Street Station, which is no longer able to handle the vast numbers of people who pass through it every day (more than those using Gatwick airport).

Mike concluded that there were lessons that could be learned which included:

- the need for a robust strategy
- improvements must be made to access and the environment
- the use of land ownership and CPO to support schemes
- the local authority must be prepared to 'let go' – to privatise public space as long as access is assured
- public transport issues are very difficult
- it is about retail and other things!

Mike changed hats and presentations in order to show "The Developer's Perspective" on behalf of Gary Taylor of the Argent Group. The Brindley Place development began in 1993 in a transient area close to the centre of activity and near to the Conference Centre. It has become a place of high quality public spaces with a wide range of activities including a hotel, bars, restaurants, offices, an art gallery and housing.

The key, he considered, was for the local authority to provide the conditions in which the private sector want to come in. The high quality of the design and of the public realm is crucial to the success of the scheme and to the profile of the private sector companies. In this case it has paid dividends in that there has been only one incidence of graffiti in ten years and three incidences of car crime in 6 years with a through-put of 3 million cars, leading to increased public confidence. Maintenance costs are high but high values have been maintained. Single ownership has made all of this possible and this ethos is to be continued into Broad Street where a BID feasibility study is being carried out involving 260 businesses – to manage the whole not the parts.

A discussion period followed which included:

- the need for the local authority to maintain control in order to keep coherence and linkages; if schemes are plan-led then the Council has sovereignty
- a strong plan is required in order to influence the anchor stores
- the expertise of retailers and developers is essential therefore collaboration and communication is crucial to the process
- control over diversity must be established via the original planning permission – conditions can be imposed (eg: no pharmacy within a supermarket in order to protect the local independent retailer)
- there are still some problems to be addressed between private ownership and public access
- the percentage of 'affordable housing' can be critical – the key is negotiation – including with politicians of course.



After lunch delegates had a guided walk through Birmingham and the Bull Ring to St Martin's Centre – a newly restored church with arts café where they enjoyed tea and scones.

With recent publication of the long awaited Planning Policy Statement 6, the conference offered the opportunity for examination of the document by the experts who had been gathered together. **Brian Raggett**, Senior Executive Director and Head of Public Sector Consulting for CB Richard Ellis led the discussion and circulated a brief document prepared by CBRE to aid digestion of the contents and implications of the Statement.

The emphasis on higher density of development could be difficult for smaller historic towns, he said, as it was essential to encourage development which was consistent with the scale of the town. Congestion and conflicts between retail uses and new leisure and office space were likely to arise. He questioned whether any "meaningful follow-up guidance" was to come to help authorities to address other needs and uses, and to evaluate need, as there was little past experience of carrying out such studies.

Matching role, function and catchment was another problematic area when selecting sites for development. Networks and hierarchies needed to be addressed in order to avoid over concentration of growth in the higher sectors. Designation of new centres was also an issue which needed further guidance, he thought, although para 2.52 did indicate how local authorities should use planning and CPO powers to assemble re-development sites.

Brian went on to use case studies in Exeter, Cambridge and Newark to illustrate points. He concluded that "tools have been re-sharpened rather than replaced".

Les Sparks was also called upon to comment on the document and said that he was glad to see more mixed use

was being encourage and reference to designating new centres. However, he also had concerns regarding the call for local authorities to be more pro-active and to assess impacts and more. How would they cope? he asked, would they end up being commissioned from the private sector? There was no mention of qualitative elements – only the 'quantitative value'. Both Les and Brian agreed that they looked forward to seeing the supporting documents.

Ian Poole said that EHTF welcomed several aspects of the Statement including:

- ✓ The need for high quality and inclusive design
- ✓ Homes above shops
- ✓ Diversity of uses including tourism, leisure and cultural activities
- ✓ Importance of markets

However, he expressed several reservations:

- ✗ Has the sequential test gone too far?
- ✗ Too many competing uses for limited land
- ✗ Encouraging development in smaller towns may not save the centre from people voting with their cars
- ✗ Inclusion of "tourism" not a replacement for PPG21
 - ✗ Different types of tourism
 - ✗ Identifying Hotels need not addressed
 - ✗ Assessing needs – v – changing demands from tourism
 - ✗ What about tourism when measuring V & V??
- ✗ Lack of recognition of importance of information to arrive and move around a centre

He also hoped that additional guidance would address some of the issues around design and implementation tools, assessing need and impact and preparing town centre strategies for smaller centres.

He said that EHTF would continue to work with English Heritage on the retail guidance, which Duncan would speak about, and to review the previously published guidance on retailing, shop fronts, security and other related topics. He would be looking for examples of good practice and to place emphasis on historic town centres and the importance of local identity and local distinctiveness. There were also plans to publish further guidance notes on various elements of the Public Realm.

Ian said that EHTF would be issuing a response to PPS6 and position statement which would be circulated to delegates as well as government and other organisations. The Forum maintains a firm interest in the subject as:

- Retailing is bedrock of many historic towns' characteristics
- Significant proportions of listed buildings are shops
- Retailing supports historic fabric, directly or indirectly = retention of key heritage/tourism asset
- Retail/tourism/heritage mix unique to historic towns
- Fabric provides both opportunities and constraints

He concluded that town centres are more than a set of uses ... the built environment is just as important to keep customers coming back.

Duncan McCallum, Head of Land Use, Planning and Regeneration at English Heritage, (although constrained by the strictures of the forthcoming general election) explained the background and progress of the forthcoming retail guidance publication. He said that he had been keen to work with EHTF and other stakeholders to bring together expert advice for a wide audience in order to achieve better schemes. He acknowledged the importance of the retail sector – both in new centres and in historic centres - and hoped that the document would help to develop consensus and offer case studies for discussion and guidance. He thanked EHTF for the opportunity to speak although it was unfortunate that it had not been possible to launch the document, which he hoped would be ready in the summer for circulation to all local authorities.

Ian concluded the conference with thanks to all the speakers and organisers and to Birmingham City Council for its hospitality.



Copies of speakers' power point presentations and CPD certificates for those attending the conference are available from the EHTF office.



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