

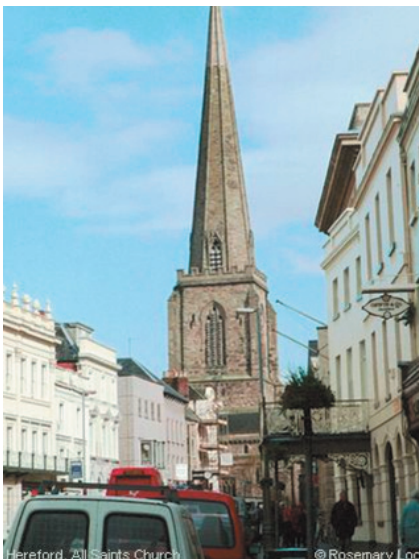
Retail development in historic town and city centres – why? & how?

Bristol 7 - 8 June 2007

Delegates arriving on Thursday evening enjoyed a walking tour of the City exploring several of the regeneration areas. This was followed by a special tour of the ss Great Britain with a welcome reception hosted by **The Rt Hon the Lord Mayor of Bristol, Cllr Royston Griffey JP LLB**, followed by supper in the 1st class dining saloon. Returning to the hotel by ferry delegates enjoyed a commentary on the City given by **George Ferguson, past president of the RIBA, Honorary Member of EHTF** and resident and champion of Bristol.

Introducing the conference on Friday morning, **Brian Human, Chair of EHTF** said that retail development in historic towns is an issue; as centres for trade of long standing they face numerous pressures for change alongside the other imperatives of prosperity, conservation, character and access. He identified the challenges, threats and opportunities that retail development offers and the necessity for a clear vision and positive approach to these, a firm planning framework, an emphasis on design and complementary actions in order to maintain quality and distinctiveness.

He introduced **Chris Smith, representing English Heritage and the Urban Panel**, who looked at the impact of retail development in the South West and West Midlands, using the Birmingham Bull Ring as an example of reconnecting parts of the City and creating an iconic image, however, he regretted the lack of design emphasis. He explained the role of the Urban Panel in talking to all stakeholders and taking an overview in order to avoid the misfit between the standard mall format and complex places, in particular the 'closed door malls' with inflexible single structures, unsustainable access requirements and design monocultures. Cities, he said, are complex structures and some schemes, for example Exeter Princesshay, have begun to build 'streets', with an understanding of the place, although the competition between towns to be a 'sub regional centre' is unrealistic. His personal conclusions from his work in the area were a list of priorities: characterisation, realism, complexity, interdependence and design. By building on the strength of its heritage, towns can achieve competitive advantage as well as design excellence, although developers prepared to take a long term vision will be difficult to find, as there are only the more difficult projects left to do, he said.



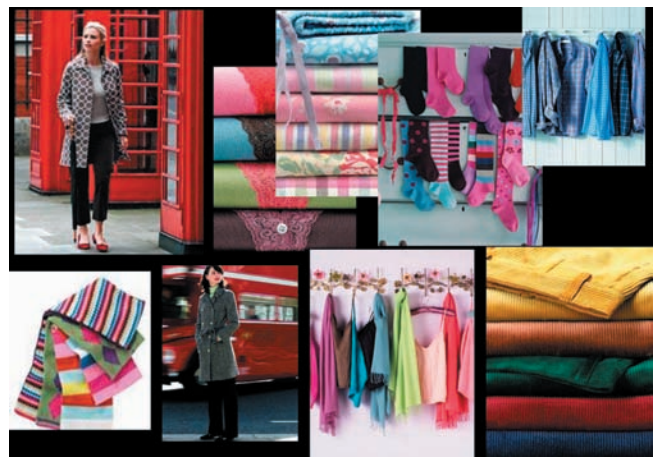
Hereford - Building on the strength of its heritage

Graeme Tulley, of Donaldsons, said it was time to reflect on consumer trends, town centre development trends and the planning policies that affect them. He identified the first as:

- A rise in disposable incomes
- A rise in entertainment and leisure expenditure
- New shoppers – especially 'silver shoppers'
- Convenience, quality, choice & safety
- The customer experience – it is not longer just a functional trip
- And the fact that 'we like to shop'!

He showed graphs and images to demonstrate the rise in expenditure and brand recognition. He also identified the phases of town centre development since the 1950s and the growth in the size of schemes up to date, with those 'in the pipeline' and their national distribution, and the re-ordering of the retail hierarchy.

Planning policy has supported an increase in the percentage of town centre retail development over the last ten years as well as the urban design agenda. However, following the recent Planning White Paper the future is unclear especially with regards to the proposed replacement of the 'needs test'. Climate change is also a significant factor affecting new development. Graeme agreed with Chris that every town could not be the 'sub-regional centre' so truly mixed use development may not always be retail led, but would need to provide local services – which might include among other things health and education facilities. Planning, he concluded, would play an important role in this development.



Brand recognition has become crucial

Peter Cleary, of Land Securities plc, outlined some of the issues impacting on the Exeter Princesshay retail development, updating delegates on progress on the scheme since the conference held there in December 2005. He considered that the 'experience' offered to shoppers was key, and that historic towns can take the initiative here as they have a lot more to offer than just shops, which might increase 'dwell time' and 'spend'.

He said that the key aspects of the Exeter scheme are:

- Consultation & partnership
- Design innovation
- High quality public realm
- The tenant & merchandise mix
- City living



Exeter - A new approach - open streets and squares

A significant variation on previous retail schemes was the breakdown of the area into individual building blocks with a range of different architects, creating an 'authentic destination'. The public realm – its design and functions – has also been key to the scheme, in view of its proximity to the Cathedral and its role in 'gluing' the whole scheme together and connecting it to the rest of the City. A clear leasing strategy has ensured a good tenant mix with flexible terms and incentives, together with a significant proportion of small independent traders which should also help to create and sustain vitality and vibrancy.

Using Bath as a case study, **Jeremy Smalley of Bath & North East Somerset** and **Jane Elliott of Urban Practitioners**, explored retail strategies as part of city centre planning. Jeremy began by outlining where retail fits in the context of Bath and how it can be easy to be complacent; however, change happens and doing nothing to manage it is not an option in the City. The Vision for Bath has been developed which focuses on the distinctiveness of the place, recognising the constraints as well as its assets. Projecting a 'lifestyle', not just a retail offer, is at the heart of the vision, competing on quality not volume. Urban Practitioners had been invited to look at the needs and demands in this unique context. Jane went on to explain how the evolution and context of the City had been explored in detail to establish an understanding of the current situation and the issues to be addressed. These included an environment, the quality of which no longer lives up to its reputation, and the competition and economic pressures, which are eroding Bath's retail legacy. The high representation of independent retailers, the distinctive built environment and the grid structure are all assets which require reinforcement to maximise their positive impact. The evening economy, provision of new attractions for visitors and residents, the permeability of the City and the inclusion of the River Avon in the whole experience are all issues which the Vision will address. Retail trends also need to be recognised and their impact on Bath understood. Enhancement of the public realm is one of the most important elements, affecting as it does all aspects of the City. Transport and parking strategies must also be linked in order to get the most out of the retail and other offers and to accommodate future growth.



Bath - its USP!

Andrew Ogg, of Leslie Jones Architects and the BCSC, considered that retail has been a key driver to regeneration in major cities, but the approach in smaller historic towns could unlock a new approach and deliver social change, as indicated in The Small Town Report commissioned by the BCSC in 2004. He listed the issues affecting the small towns' offer as the five Cs:

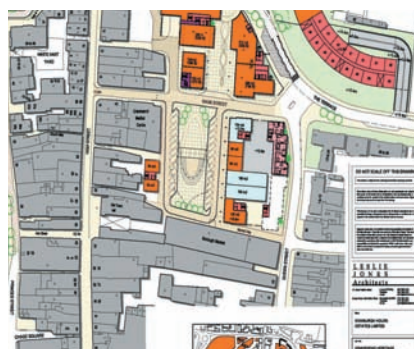
- Catchment – and the demographic
- Competition
- Choice
- Character
- Convenience

He emphasised the importance of Masterplanning, with a strong vision to create value, considering multiple sites and using compulsory purchase as appropriate. He also recommended the creation of:

- Streets and squares – not malls and atriums
- Retail quarters – not shopping centres
- A mix of uses – in particular residential
- A range of values

He talked about the critical mass and scale of the project which influenced the perception of the offer; the footplate is important to the retailer as is the tenant mix to the shopper and the landlord. Smaller towns need a greater number of convenience stores in the mix, with complementary strategies for residential development, leisure facilities, the public realm, transport and management – with variations in approach including extending the idea of 'shopping centre management' to the town, issues of private management of public space and Business Improvement Districts.

Andrew used the Gravesend case study to explore the issues: the strategy includes the expansion of the hub of the town through mixed use development, the creation of pedestrian friendly routes and new public realm, re-focusing the town on the unique river frontage, providing a range of uses to encourage both residents and visitors to experience the heritage of Gravesend, enhancement of the character areas and provision of a suitable setting for the town icons and the provision of new community uses and spaces.



Gravesend - The Masterplan is vital, with a strong vision to create value

For small scale developments he recommended a limited palette of materials, with contemporary buildings but interpretation of historic materials. Landmark buildings may be appropriate but need to be in proportion. He also stressed the importance of cross party consultation. If approached in an integrated way he concluded that retail development can be used effectively to regenerate smaller historic towns.

Kim Bennett, of Canterbury City Council, looked at the Whitefriars retail development to explore whether it had delivered on expectations, and the lessons that could be learned. He gave the background to the scheme, which replaced the post war development, in the 1990s. It was a very complex scheme, with extensive archaeological implications, and one of the key issues was to keep the City working during the six-year construction period. It was a mixed use scheme comprising a department store, three other large stores, 44 additional shops, 37 residential units, a new public square and streets, a cycling facility and a 530 space car park. He considered the keys to success were:

- Partnership to deliver: needing a proactive approach, public/private project groups, elected member involvement and resources
- Community involvement: which required a development brief, an architectural competition, community groups and limited opposition to the planning application.

It was important to recognise the differing public and private sector objectives and to focus on several imperatives: that it should be a street frontage scheme (not a mall), the commercial viability and retaining the community objectives. Managing change was also crucial as there was a great deal of disruption to the City. The strategy included an information centre, hoardings, a job centre and a regular newsletter.

Kim then asked, "What would we have done differently?" There was, he said, temporarily, a number of empty shops on the high street. This should have been addressed as part of the strategy. He wondered whether the architectural style was 'too safe', although it would have been difficult to obtain planning permission had it been too adventurous. He suggested that you should know who your partners really are! Although the withdrawal of one of the partners turned out to be an opportunity in the end. Practical issues that need consideration are: design and build contracts, communications channels and the impact of changing personnel over a long project. He suggested that community feedback should be listened to; in this case this related to the lack of soft landscaping, the 'clone town' scenario which might be addressed through subsidy for small units, variation on retail house styles and public art, which was a new concept in Canterbury in 1996. The £100,000 agreed for art had resulted in archaeological details being etched on the paving, which had not been very successful and a sculpture – a small lamb - which had been disappointing. On balance however he considered that the scheme had been successful.

During questions from the floor it was noted that:

- It had taken time to regain the confidence to invest in city centres
- Historic towns do have 'the edge'
- Achieving the right mix of uses and owners not just investors is not easy
- Housing is now a key driver in city centre development
- Increasing the skills required is essential – in both the public and private sectors
- Making the upper floors work in some cities was difficult
- Places which function both day and night was also important
- Residential development without parking is now easier to 'sell' due to different lifestyle choices

- Improvements in the public realm have been shown to increase rental income
- The current dependence on the credit culture is not sustainable and could impact on the retail sector in the future
- Masterplanning is vital for long term success and to avoid the 'clone town' trap

Following lunch and walking tours of the retail development in Bristol, delegates re-convened on the 16th floor of the Castlemead building, in the Bristol Alliance marketing suite, which offered a bird's eye view of the site.



Canterbury - Communication is vital to managing the change effectively

Richard Matthews, Bristol City Council's planning co-ordinator for the Broadmead expansion project, explained the background to the project and the extent of the scheme. The 100,000 sq m retail and leisure floorspace will include: a 15,000 sq m department store, 15 major stores and 100 other shops, a 13 screen cinema, bars and restaurants, new cycle routes, street level crossings, bus and coach stops, 2,600 car park spaces and a new shopmobility facility. There will also be 240 new apartments, 24 affordable houses, student accommodation and 30,000sq m of new office / hotel space, as well as new public spaces.

He said that this was another significant component of the regeneration of Bristol City Centre and the economic strength of the region, reconnecting many parts of the City. The partnerships and the consultation processes have been key to the delivery of the scheme, as have the expertise and the financial resources of the Bristol Alliance.



Cabot's circus, Bristol - The innovative roof offers an open street effect with protection from the weather

Steve Wehrle, of the Bristol Alliance, said that each era is represented in a town or city and that we have the opportunity to make a contribution to this, but we also have responsibilities. An understanding of the trends in the retail sector is vital, and in the light of this Bristol's current city centre offer is 'at best useful, although uninviting and down market, and at its worst simply inadequate.' Complex and extensive research is required to plan for retail development which would serve the needs of the next decade. This scheme could be divided into three main parts – Cabot Circus, Quakers' Friars and Eastside, which Steve explained in detail. He considered that the strategy for success was:

- Differentiation of the environment
- Differentiation of the retail offer
- Target lettings at mismatches in the retail mix
- Provide efficient retail space
- Ease of use is as important as price
- Offer the whole experience – more than shopping – include catering & leisure
- The same shops are everywhere - do something different
- Lever retail assets

Each of these had been addressed by the Alliance, within the development. He explained the sheer size of the undertaking in terms of volumes of materials etc, but was confident of completion in the autumn of 2008 and Bristol's future rise in the retail ranking.



Quakers' friars will house a high quality restaurant at the hub of the public realm

Questions covered a range of topics including parking controls, bus corridors, energy strategies, public art, the residential / retail mix and the number of independent retailers (14 units in the Cabot Circus scheme).

A visit to Quakers' Friars was led by Bob Jones of Bristol City Council and David Ricks of Alec French Architects. This building, on the site of an 11th century friary, would become a high quality restaurant at the hub of the public realm created by the redevelopment scheme.

Copies of the handouts of the speakers' Powerpoint presentations are available from the EHTF office; also available on a cd; prices on application.



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