

Retail development in historic towns and cites

Case Study: Exeter, Princesshay

26 - 27 March 2008

On Wednesday evening, at the Royal Clarence Hotel, delegates were welcomed to Exeter at a reception hosted by The Right Honourable, the Lord Mayor of Exeter, Cllr Hazel Slack. This was followed by the conference dinner at which EHTF's 'Focus on Retail' was launched by John Thompson, Chair of the Academy of Urbanism and John Thompson & Partners. The document, which follows on from the publication produced jointly by English Heritage and EHTF in December 2005, is a compilation of articles written by well-regarded practitioners in the field, together with case studies, a checklist and list of key principles together with a substantial bibliography and reference list.



Retail is at the heart of many historic towns

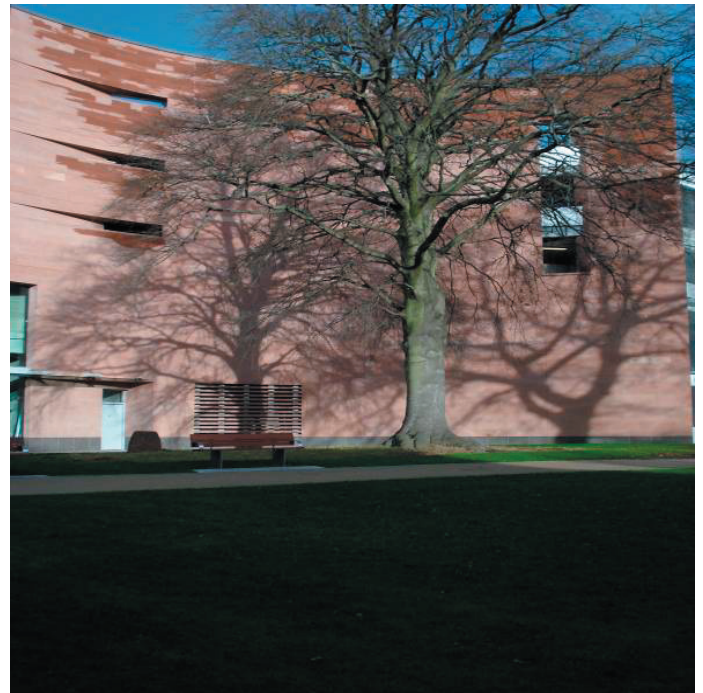
The conference the next day began with a tour of the Princesshay retail development led by stakeholder representatives. On their return, **Brian Human, Chair of EHTF**, introduced the subject and the background to the Forum's work. He then introduced speakers involved in the Princesshay development in Exeter.



Public Art - Bedford Square

John Rigby, Director of Economy and Development at Exeter City Council talked about the Planning Background which included the need for the scheme (and the false starts) which led to a design-led approach, taking account of the quality of the conservation area buildings, key routes and view points. Through an urban design appraisal, principles were established and three architects engaged, and together the stakeholder project team agreed the details of the layers of the scheme and the mix of uses.

The scheme's architecture included principles of the design, materials / key elevations, pedestrianisation, public realm, public art, access and parking. Due to the extent of the archaeology of the site and disruption to the City centre an important element of the project was constant communication with residents.



The car park was designed around the Copper Beech

Ian Awcock, Senior Technical Director of WSP, talking about the traffic and highways management issues said that it had been important to recognise the desire lines and to understand the delivery requirements. A holistic approach had to include improvements to bus services and cycling access as well as car parking considerations. Through studies and forecasting the project need was for only 275 spaces, and with other improvements related to the scheme the results benefited the whole City. Ian suggested a bold approach which might challenge some assumptions!

David Stuart, Historic Areas Advisor at English Heritage explored the lessons learnt through the project. He explained the concerns with the original scheme and identified some of the process deficiencies. However, this had been 'of its time' and our approach has changed as has the need for Exeter to increase its vitality and viability. He said that a full understanding and analysis was essential for a positive outcome, as was the decision to use a number of architects – and to choose the right ones. Team work, high quality design and sound architectural and planning judgements, have established good practice for the future. David considered it vital to take time to get a scheme right, and when there are doubts to ask for advice – that is what CABE, English Heritage and organisations like ATLAS are for.

Sarah Wiggin, Development Manager at Land Securities plc talked about 'Delivering Princesshay'. This included site assembly, helped by the fact that much of the land was owned by Land Securities, but 62 tenants needed to be relocated – with only one lost – to maintain continuity of trade. Hoardings and a dedicated website were used to encourage community engagement. Delivery was completed ahead of the programme and was 95% let on opening. The leasing strategy ensured the introduction of independent retailers, new restaurants and cafes, establishing a thriving evening economy, as well as a mix of residential accommodation.



Community engagement with a website and information on hoardings

Deborah Jones, Retail Operations Director at Land Securities plc explained the management and operation of Princesshay. An extensive team was essential, she said, to 'cover all bases' including cleaning and security services. Performance is monitored through footfall measurements, meetings with retailers, 'path intelligence' and recording of sales and turnover. Marketing activities continue with promotion of key calendar events, a busking programme and cross promotions with retailers. The challenges of managing the public realm – cleaning, graffiti, cycling etc – are addressed by the operations team.

After lunch the panel of speakers responded to questions from delegates.

- David Stuart said that advice from English Heritage would change depending on the scheme and the circumstances, in response to each case.
- The gross cost of the scheme was discussed and the level of local authority investment; this was minimal (the salaries of the project team) and John Rigby considered this to be well worth it – in fact, doing it again, he would want to invest more.

- The car parking outcomes were discussed further.
- Issues of sustainability were discussed together with the local distinctiveness and high quality design of the scheme.
- Brian commented that the sustainability agenda had moved on with regard to energy use, water consumption, affordable housing etc and asked how developers might be responding with regard to future developments. Representatives of Land Securities responded that they needed to be ahead of competitors with regard to the available technology and simpler methodologies – ie: encouraging retailers to adopt 'close the door' policies. The 'cutting edge', it was agreed, moves forward constantly and both carrot and stick are needed (ie: legislation).
- The challenge of achieving sustainability targets and high quality design whilst not compromising the historic fabric was discussed, as well as encouraging changes in behaviour through travel plans and leading by example.
- Predicting retail trends and ensuring a depth of offer as well as a whole town approach were vital to the viability of Exeter.
- Asked what they might do differently, given the opportunity, speakers responded in very pragmatic terms: a cheaper, better solution than bollards; the height of the block; getting staff in earlier; asking cyclists to dismount through the shopping area; engaging architects at an earlier stage; the level of residential accommodation might have been greater – although this is not an easy area.

In summary, Brian said that he thought it was "a pretty good scheme!" which had contributed to a City-wide strategy to revitalise Exeter. This included retail and tourism destination management, sustainable transport issues, provision of high quality public realm, extension of the economic activity into the evening and at the same time the historic fabric had been safeguarded.



The historic fabric of Exeter has been safeguarded

Copies of the speakers' presentations can be found in the Members' Area of www.ehtf.org.uk. Alternatively they can be purchased on CD for £10.



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