

Enterprise and Business Committee

Inquiry into Town Centre Regeneration

Evidence from Trilein Ltd

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Preface

The paper that follows endeavours to set out responses to the Committee's request for views on the following issue in particular:

- The factors affecting the mix of residential, commercial and retail premises found in town centres - for example, the impact of business rates policy; footfall patterns and issues surrounding the night-time and daytime economies within town centres.

This outline discussion also comments on the related issues:

- The impact of out-of-town retail sites on nearby town centres .
- The use of funding sources and innovative financial solutions to contribute to town centre regeneration – including the Regeneration Investment Fund for Wales; the use of Business Improvement Districts; structural funds; Welsh Government, local authority and private sector investment.
- The importance of sustainable and integrated transport in town centres– including traffic management, parking and access.
- The potential impact of marketing and image on the regeneration of town centres – such as tourism, signage, public art, street furniture, lighting and safety concerns.
- The extent to which town centre regeneration initiatives can seek to provide greater employment opportunities for local people.

Despite our experience in this field, we are not able, given time constraints, to address the issue of public engagement. We would be happy to provide further comment if requested.

At the end of this paper, we have provided references and links to further relevant material by ourselves and others.

Introduction

Wales has many examples of town centres with qualities that others should aspire to. Examples of successful regeneration and, not least, town centre regeneration are less abundant.

By 'successful', we mean improvements that can be seen to have made a sustained impact on the social and economic environment over a period of years, perhaps decades. For us, such 'success' is at the very heart of the definition of 'sustainable city'.

Model town centres in Wales

The best models are those town centre locations that survive due to their fundamental qualities. The identification and study of our examples of these qualities is key to future policy and approaches. Positive socio-economic environments are precious and often hard to recognise. From Wales, and neither comprehensive or in any particular order, we recommend: -

Llandudno main street (Mostyn), a difficult, isolated town that has retained a certain vitality and character, against the odds;

The Hayes in Cardiff, the street, shows real signs for optimism (1) despite having been conceived on the back of a second massive mall whose inscrutable character, typical of malls the world over, is that it is a more modern version of what went before (It is early days yet to be properly objective about The Hayes);

Machynlleth, Abergavenny and Llandeilo retain a healthy mix of local and national businesses and heritage although the latter is much hampered by a narrow main street and heavy traffic [No, not a by-pass!];

Porthmadoc, one of Wales most inspiring and vibrant main streets, extraordinarily long for such a small town (and under threat of disaster from another by-pass proposal); or, much smaller,

Penrhyndeudraeth along the road, just about surviving.

What are the key qualities of these places?

For simplicity and brevity;

1. People - families - live there, in the centres, in relatively high numbers, or within reasonable (5 minute) walking distance.
2. The centres of activity are located on main routes and the street system (grid) feeds the footfall.
- 3 A third quality, 'mixed use', unlike its planning theory predecessor, 'zoning', which was (and remains) a fundamental part of the problem (zoning = segregation), is a product of the first two. When the market is there (that is people, footfall, residents, employees and visitors seeking their daily needs), retail, commerce, culture and much more will follow. The task is to help create the conditions in which small local businesses, shops, artisans and others can establish themselves in environments where it is possible to make a living, to thrive, rather than leave it to, or depend (exclusively) on big nationals that take all the surplus away. [At the other extreme, planning has often expected small local businesses to make their way in low density suburbs or low income council estates.]

City planning has got locked into retail led regeneration. Without 'magnets' or 'anchors' like John Lewis, Debenhams or, worse, Tesco or Sainsbury, developers cannot assemble the capital required to drive forward the often expensive grand plans that have convinced planners and local politicians to bring in all the special funding they can lay their hands on - to subsidise the development. Developers seek high yields; they want large floor-space users for quick take-up and this suits planners and politicians who seek high-profile, visible outcomes. Bartering plays one town's potential subsidy against another's. Investing in and providing opportunities for small local enterprises is quite a different ball-game.

One of the most prominent and apparently unlikely characteristics of New York is the preponderance of small shops and businesses all over town. The best bits of town, such as Greenwich Village (as good as it gets), comprise, in the main, of small retail and business units, quirky special interest stores and businesses, nurseries, cobblers, bakeries, nail and hair salons, clothes shops, eateries, hardware stores (a great litmus test of Welsh towns, large and small) and so much more. Vitality breaks down where more recent new-build (eg for New York University or major corporate interests) has often been monolithic, whole-block developments that satisfy none of the criteria that made Jane Jacobs' Village such a desirable place to invest in. (1)

The very essence of 'good town', or 'sustainable city' as we may now call it, as propounded by Jane Jacobs in her famous book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (2), published fifty years ago this year, is all but lost in many new developments. In her study of cities, Jacobs saw residential density and social and economic diversity as vital ingredients of successful urban form. Residents are good for business.

There are, of course, other factors but these three, in urban-design-speak, *residential density, connectivity and mixed-use*, are vital and set terms that have been pushed aside by two cultures that have dominated regeneration - retail/ commercial pressure and the highways lobby. Both of these latter are closely related to 'zoning'.

And so to the all too many examples of, at best, inconclusive outcomes of 'regeneration', or to downright failure and heartbreak for some Welsh communities, let alone for those responsible for the allocation of budgets and funding.

The Failings of Retail-led Regeneration.

Wales has much first-hand evidence available to reveal that retail led regeneration is too narrow a theory for strategic regeneration of our towns and cities (and rural communities). It has failed us miserably in Llanelli, Swansea, Bridgend, Newport, Bangor and Wrexham (of the ones we readily bring to mind) and currently threatens Carmarthen. Only in Cardiff have we recently seen any reason for optimism and there, were it not for the Design Commission and the financial pressures on the development market, we may have seen just another mall. The private sector has picked up the baton and reinforced its

(otherwise conservative) mall and retail led St Davids 2 and Morgans projects with volume housing both sides of The Hayes. The outcome is the best of other encouraging signs of inner city housing new-build elsewhere in the city centre, albeit currently somewhat up-market.

The sorry tale for the others is not always the same but, for example, in our home city of Swansea, for 60 years, since the disaster of the war blitz (and slum-clearance), scheme after city centre scheme has been commissioned then fallen by the wayside, either in theory (Castle Quays) or in practice (the post-war renewal, St Davids, Castle Gardens, Princess Way, Oxford Street, Wind Street, and more), and at great public expense. Even now, the most recent big idea (bizarrely, to shift the centre of gravity of city centre retail and commerce to new untested areas - in fact, to the location of a failed previous grand plan), is already unravelling despite further Assembly and European funding. (3)

Retail and the 'uses' imbalance - other consequences.

Estate regeneration and Enterprise Zones may be seen as separate problems; the reality is that the richness of urban form does not lend itself to simple solutions or, to put it another way, simple solutions have knock-on consequences often well beyond their boundaries.

Arguably, the new dynamic force in city regeneration in Swansea is the Housing Associations and a limited number of private sector developers bringing apartments and housing to the heart of the city against a retail-led planning framework that essentially opposed housing and especially family housing, in favour of singles and starter homes. The real give-away was the closure of the city centre school; investment in it would have been one of the most positive indicators possible for city centre regeneration.

Similarly, the retail legacy of zoning encourages secondary desires and aspirations amongst city centre traders - measures seeking investment to solve perceived problems:

- demands for more parking provision in the false belief that bringing more motor vehicles will make a difference to trade. Again, there is much evidence from Gronigen to Times Square in New York that the opposite brings in the business, namely reductions in traffic, improved pedestrian environments and public transport.
 - calls for reduction in business rates, which only serve to subsidise commercial activity in environments where viability is currently dubious. On the other hand, there is certainly a case for reductions or (say) a year of zero rates for new businesses and for the elimination of charges that are made for street activities, such as tables and chairs, that bring additional vitality and variety to public spaces.
 - cosmetic improvements to streetscapes - Swansea is currently undertaking its 'n'th street upgrade in Lower Oxford Street with little evidence that it will improve the commercial base. Indeed no evidence has been provided to demonstrate that previous upgradings have made any significant difference to commercial environments, quite the contrary. The only example that we can bring to mind of successful 'cosmetic' improvements is Mill Lane in Cardiff and that was and is related to other spatial factors (movement routes and footfall) and a much wider commitment.
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Regeneration - people versus motor vehicles

Prior to the emergent influence of city centre housebuilders, the dominant force in city planning has been and continues to be local authority Highways and Transportation Departments.

Elaborate road schemes, many of which have been in the bottom drawer of highways departments since the 1970s and the Buchanan thinking that still pervades that profession, have been a major influence on our town and city centre strategies to the point that they are first on the table when new proposals are being discussed and are least flexible when the hard talking begins. Parking, traffic flows and volumes often now dressed up with pedestrian safety, park and ride, tree lined roads, 'European Boulevards' and the like [readers may detect the Swansea influence here again], are the immutables for new proposals.

Swansea's city centre has, amongst other things, been seriously damaged by this thinking. Its recent expensive Kingsway road scheme, with its gyratory one-ways and multi-ways, is wholly unsatisfactory, widely disliked by local people, drivers and the business community and, much worse, is thoroughly inconsiderate of pedestrians and cyclists. Similar outcomes are guaranteed for the Tawe Bridges and Boulevard schemes currently underway (also Assembly funded).

This problem is not exclusive to Swansea and its engineers. Other Counties and the Assembly itself have much to answer for: perhaps solutions are valid at the level of the motor vehicle, but they frequently undermine sustainable urban communities, let alone some of our fragile rural and urban settlements in Wales. For example:

The Late 90s new valley road in Rhondda Fach put the final nail in the coffin of fragile economies that were Pontygwaith, Wattstown, Ynyshir, and Porth; and that incredible bridge that helped to destroy the historic valleys gathering place that was Porth; and, just down the road -

Has the elaborate road system in Pontypridd done anything other than undermine the social and economic vitality of that hitherto fine community?

The heartbreaking and almost instant impact of the A487 by-pass on the socio-economic life of Groeslon, Penygroes and Llanllyfni in Gwynedd.

The by-pass threat to Porthmadoc main street, so dependent on through traffic and accessibility;

The disruption of main streets through Llanelli (combined with the destruction of the town centre); Llanelli appears to have lost its will to live(!);

Or look back to the gorge that was allowed cut the centre of Caernarfon from the bulk of its population, and the subsequent collapse of vitality in the centre - a good example as it shows perhaps a quarter of a century of impact.

Much older, see how the 'out-of-town' station and the 'New Road' has impacted on how Llandovery has functioned for the last century and more.

Other examples combine retail-led regeneration with Highways schemes: Ebbw Vale, still seeking to find a balance between pedestrianisation and transport, having failed more than once. Merthyr; to think these were once world centres of urban vitality.

Regeneration - People Versus Regeneration!

National and 'up-market' retail-led regeneration may even contribute to the youth alienation that resulted in this summer's riots. "It ... only takes five minutes to walk from the sparkling Liverpool One shopping complex to the first block of boarded-up flats. [Liverpool's] shopping centre provides low-paying jobs in an environment that encourages high spending, and does nothing to stimulate the local economies of nearby areas." (4)

Why are young people so alienated from their social and physical environments, from their own towns and cities? They aren't just increasingly segregated from jobs and education. They find their homes in run down estates with even less chance of regeneration investment now, if they ever had any. Estate transformation has always been a daunting fiscal commitment, not least because they were conceived as zoned residential areas housing, in practice, single tenure, relatively low-income households. At the other end of their urban experience young people see the regeneration of their town and city centres creating vast malls and shopping centres dominated by corporate and global retailers largely out of the reach of their meagre incomes.

The provision of legitimate space for young people in our town centres, not to mention their local neighbourhoods, is just one other expression of the richness that the term 'mixed-use' embraces.

Seeking the positives, learning from the negatives

There are many examples here in Wales of both good and bad bits of town, old and new, providing ample evidence of success and failure, vitality and decline, positive and negative qualities. Or, compare our Welsh small towns and villages to small rural communities in Brittany, where sensitive improvements have resulted in the retention of small businesses, pharmacies, cafes, grocers, and banks, with shared surfaces in village centres, places to stop for a coffee, pick up some shopping, wander - all with a remarkable lack of large road signs. It is often difficult to find a shop in many Welsh small towns and villages.

Urban design, planning and architecture require much more detail to design 'good town' but, fortunately, we are not starting from scratch. Wales is full of great places, with rich histories and physical legacies. Clearly, every effort has to be made to support large national retailers and other commerce to conduct business in our town and city centres but, if we take our examples from some of our most vibrant main streets in Wales (measured by the economic activity v population; number of local businesses v population; amount of local employment etc), let alone from the best of them in Greenwich Village, Amsterdam, Barcelona, Berlin, or many sub-districts of London, the number one criterion for regeneration is to go back to the original driver of vitality: residential density.

People living in, working in and loving their city centres will soon create, by demand, the conditions for 'mixed use town'. That is not just shops. It is cultural life, education, small manufacturing, artisans, artists, professions, health and exercise, provisions for young people to be a legitimate part of city life, quiet spaces, loud spaces, public recreation spaces, civic activity. This is not the stuff of theoretical design and we do not need new 'big ideas' or road schemes. Concentrate on quality and on bringing people of all shapes and sizes, household sizes, back into the daily 24-hour life of our cities. Support new local start ups, not least the immigrant communities that will make the world majority urbanised in the very near future. (5)

Local people drive the developing economies of cities. It may be different people now from a hundred and two hundred years ago, but it is the same process that brought innovation, entrepreneurship, risk-taking, development: vitality and dynamism, from the countryside and abroad to our towns and cities for as long as we can remember.

Essentially, all they need is some recognition of the existing strengths of our town and city centres, and some encouragement.

Notes and References

- 1 The Hayes is discussed in more detail in Gibson, Gordon (2009) City Centre Regeneration: Homes People, Shops and Malls <http://4cities.wordpress.com/2009/11/12/city-centre-regeneration-homes-people-shops-and-malls/>
2. For further discussion on this theme, see Gibson, Gordon (2011) *Jane Jacobs' Village is Alive and Well* <http://4cities.wordpress.com/2011/08/15/jane-jacobs-village-is-alive-and-well/>
- 3 Jacobs, Jane (1961) *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*. Random House
4. Our draft paper on the history of and options for Swansea City Centre Regeneration can be found at <http://4cities.wordpress.com/2011/09/09/swansea-city-centre-regeneration-a-discussion-paper/>
- 5 Hanley, Linsey (2011) *Invisible forcefields surround our estates*. The Guardian, 11 August 2011 <http://m.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2011/aug/11/invisible-forcefield-regeneration-estates?cat=commentisfree&type=article>
6. Saunders, Doug. (2010) *Arrival City* William Heinemann, Random House, London