The changing face of retail

Carpentry traditions and timber-frame buildings

Protecting historic routes
A sense of place

The future of Scotland’s towns and retail high streets depends on linking culture, heritage and storytelling to present a distinctive sense of themselves to residents and visitors.

The last few years have brought a dawning realisation that all is not well in our high streets and towns. The scale of the problem has rather shaken even those who assumed the situation would right itself. With average retail high street vacancy rates in 2010–2012 exceeding 15 per cent and in some towns getting close to 50 per cent, it became a problem everyone could see. The reaction from the government was to ask Mary Portas to review the high street. Bill Grimsey, a former retailer, set himself up to present an independent ‘beyond Portas’ report. The Scottish Government commissioned a National Review of Town Centres (for a comparison of these reports, see Findlay and Sparks, 2014). Other interested bodies, some professional, some governmental, have also had their say. High streets and town centres have become big news.

For some, this concern is focused on the short-term impacts of the recession, as the state of high streets is blamed on the financial crisis and its continuing reverberations. However many have come to realise that the issues confronting the high street are neither short-term nor limited to retailing. For decades we have been encouraging decentralisation of many activities, not just retail, and providing fewer and fewer reasons for people to visit the high street or the town centre. Schools, cinemas, hotels, offices, workshops, as well as retail, are now mainly found outside the town centre. Add to that the irresistible rise of the internet since the turn of the century and we should not be surprised that high street retail is in crisis.

Beyond that, it should be clear that the relationship between the high street and the town (or town centre) has been both ruptured and misconceived. The problems of the high street can not be treated in isolation to the town centre or the town, despite the approach in the Portas report. Retailing is a component of a place, but not the only element. Town centres need multiple and diverse activities to support and nurture them. As we have allowed the nature of towns to alter and have decentralised much of our everyday activities, so the high street has suffered. This is not just due to the recession, and coming out of recession will not bring a resolution.

Such changes have affected many high streets and towns across Britain, though not all have been affected equally. Some high streets have proved remarkably resilient in the face of this turmoil (see Wrigley and Brookes, 2014) and have survived or even prospered. The reasons for this are not well understood, tending to comprise a variety of aspects in different places, but related to the focus on multiple reasons for footfall for a place, the investment by some retailers, service providers and others in developing the street or centre, and by the protection of or focus on, a sense of distinctiveness about a town or high street, making it more attractive as a destination. As consumers have changed and developed more of both a convenience culture and a leisure culture, so too our high streets and town centres have to adapt to these new demands.

Within Scotland, the emphasis has been more on the town centre and the wider town than directly on the retail issues of the high street alone. The Fraser Review of Town Centres proposed six key themes to the government: town centre living, vibrant local economies, enterprising communities, accessible public services, proactive planning and digital towns. The government has responded by agreeing a Town Centre First principle with COSLA (the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities), and focusing and aligning internal and external activities on these themes (Scottish Government, 2013, 2014). The intention is that by focusing on the wider issues of the town and town centre and how they work, activities will be concentrated and centralised, and more people will be given more reasons to take part in their town.

At the heart of this approach is the view that people associate with places and have an affinity for them. This is the belief of Scotland’s Towns Partnership (STP), the go-to body for information and activity about the
possibly and actions underway across Scotland’s towns. Supported by the Scottish Government, STP aims to become invaluable to all those involved in seeing Scotland’s towns regain their key place in society and economy. STP brings together those in Scotland interested in practice and policy for Scotland’s towns. It acts as the single space to learn about the many activities underway in revitalising Scotland’s towns, puts groups and individuals in touch with one another across the country to aid learning, and monitoring and reporting on progress against the Town Centre Action Plan.

More than half of Scotland’s population lives in Scotland’s towns. The towns are a distinctive feature of the country. They vary enormously, from towns such as Ayr that are larger than some of our cities, to the archetypal Scottish county town, such as Haddington. At the core of many of them is an architecture that provides the sense of place and/or the sense of history. The more forward-looking of our town centres are using this history and heritage to present a distinctive sense of place, for both residents and visitors alike.

One of the key themes emerging from the STP’s recent annual conference in Paisley was that every place has a story to tell; heritage is one of the ways in which this story can be told. This requires at least three things to be aligned: coherence, culture and storytelling. One of the problems of many towns is that there are so many potential buildings and/or spaces that can form part of the history, but given the changes to economy and society, they no longer form a coherent sense of place. There has to be editing of the possibilities so as to provide coherence to the streetscape, townscape and fabric of the town. Too often isolated buildings, widely separated, are rescued, but that very piecemeal approach produces no narrative sense to either a resident or a visitor.

Second, in many cases heritage alone is not enough to bring a place alive, and it may not be either what a town is about or what the visitors or residents desire. There needs to be a marriage of heritage with culture, though not necessarily culture in a purely historical sense. Cultural history can be an important theme for some places, but the heritage needs also to be able to accommodate the culture and lives of today in suitable spaces. Towns can not simply be museum pieces, but need to be able to live in today’s world as well.

In Kilmarnock the renovation of the Opera House on the important John Finnie Street brought life to a derelict but valuable building, and its new use as council offices has breathe life back into Stirling’s retail spaces, providing a point of attraction and difference to the retailing and a route to market for local creative makers.

Third, this coherence and culture needs to combine to show a sense of place, often through the means of storytelling. What does a town or a place represent to its visitors or its residents? Is this obvious from the places, spaces and activities in that town? Town managers need to look again at how many of our towns are presented (in both physical and virtual worlds).

Too often either there is an almost random clutter or an absence of sense of place to how towns are presented. In many cases towns are simply not making enough of the story they have to tell. Stromness has seen investment in the built environment that has brought new and decaying buildings back to life, using historically accurate materials and providing a sense of the place through the buildings.

All towns have assets of one form or another. Some assets are historically or culturally important and could be destinations in their own right, but in many towns it is the sum of the parts that makes them special. Using the buildings and the streets, being sympathetic to distinctive and attractive business users (including retail) and telling the story of the place can go a long way towards making people feel more positive about their towns. Too often we focus on what are perceived as the problems of towns and high streets, and thus focus on the barriers to use (cost, parking access, blandness) and not on those elements that make a place special.

There are many great towns across Scotland and lots of examples of towns attempting to re-energise themselves. It is invidious to select one example, but Paisley has had a bad press in Scotland for its decline and vacancy and lack of a sense of itself. It was chosen as the host for the STP 2014 conference to showcase the changes it is making. Paisley has tremendous cultural and heritage attributes, fabulous buildings and now a clear sense of what it wants to be known for and to achieve for its town, town centre and high street. This vision starts not with the retail vacancy, for which Paisley has been renowned, but with the cultural, heritage and other assets and attributes it possesses but has hidden for too long. Paisley is seeking to use heritage and culture to drive a wide-ranging programme of regeneration and to become a centre of excellence in creative industries.

Paisley, the home of the Paisley pattern, has a legacy as the centre of the world’s textile industry. It has the second highest concentration of listed buildings in Scotland and a museum collection of international significance. Important buildings such as the abbey, the town hall, the Coats Observatory and the Russell Institute are a vibrant university, theatre and arts culture. All these elements are being brought together to reinvigorate the Paisley story.

It is all too easy to believe that the recession has caused our issues with place and that all will be well in due course. It is not that simple. We are having to rethink our sense of place. The best towns are linking culture, heritage and storytelling to present a distinctive and interesting sense of themselves to residents and visitors and. By recognising and championing this history and the opportunities it brings, and linking it to our present day requirements, towns and the retail high streets within them can have a prosperous future.

References

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