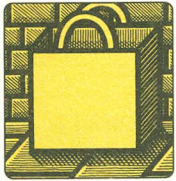


it used to be so simple...



For a long time the job of planning for retailing was, when seen through (no doubt) rose-tinted spectacles, rather simple; or so it seems now. The certainty of a central place-based hierarchy, coupled with the certainty of retail activity focused on high streets and local stores, meant that the demands on retailers and planners were straightforward.

As suburbs expanded and as new towns were developed there were new projects to be undertaken and some planning to be done, but, with hindsight, much of the retail planning activity of 50 or 60 years ago now appears to have been relatively routine. Planning was a key part of our political culture, designed to serve the public interest and as such included both social and economic considerations,¹ and 'planning for retail' is still included within the definition of 'town planning services' in the RTPI Code of Conduct.²

But that vision of (a no doubt false) utopia has been shattered in the intervening 50-60 years. None of the elements have remained stable; consumers, retailers, capabilities and local authorities themselves have all changed. The place of planning in our political culture has also changed. One only needs to read the pages of this journal, not just in Tom Pain's 'Notes from the Dark Side' column but much more widely, to recognise that planners are feeling betrayed by current attitudes to planning in contemporary political culture.³ So how did we get here, and what are the issues from a retail planning perspective?

We begin with aspects of retail complexity. Consumers' horizons began to alter and expand from the late 1950s onwards. The predictability of patterns of behaviour fractured as consumers' ability to travel widely developed significantly. No longer was the local high street the focus of daily shopping and the regional city the destination for the 'big trip'. Instead, differing demands, shopping patterns and abilities saw consumers travelling further more often, to use their new-found economic and physical freedom. The range of products and prices

demanded could not be met through traditional retail processes.

The retailers' responses to this are well known. Retailer demand for new off-centre space has been felt from as far back as the late 1950s. New formats in new locations, often much larger in scale than before, have transformed the retail landscape and added new destinations to the assortment of places from which consumers can choose. Larger stores on cheaper land allowed different forms of competition to develop, aided by the rising personal mobility of shoppers and the ability of retailers to plan in some locations for car-based shopping.

The adjustment of the planning system to these new demands has not been straightforward. Initial reactions were defensive, and aspects of national productivity began to be cited in relation to the stifling of modern retail practices.¹ Debate over the impact on existing businesses began to emerge. In some locations such tensions were only resolved when planning was removed, as in 'Enterprise Zones' in the 1980s. 'The world has changed, but have planners kept up?' became a common refrain.

More recently, the transforming revolution in technology has more dramatically changed consumer behaviour and business operations in retailing. Our ability to purchase products from anywhere and to research and identify products and places 'on the move' has had a major impact. Significantly, it has had a dramatic effect on what we think retail is about and how it is delivered. The most obvious examples are Amazon and eBay, but the revolution is in everyone's hands and homes, as well as in the business systems of local and global retailers. Recent figures claim that 20% of non-food shopping in the UK is done online,⁴ and questions are now being raised about having too many shops in the wrong places.⁵

Retailing is no longer focused on traditional shops in traditional spaces. There are a multitude of formats and places with physical stores in all sorts of new locations, as well, of course, as the emergence of virtual stores. But as we have developed these new formats and places, have we really enabled or encouraged the system to help other places adjust to these changes? The current problems of town centres suggest not. One retail response has been to trial new ideas

