

The challenges of creating co-existing and competitive retail centres in the North West of England

Abstract

A combination of changing consumer behaviour, fluctuating economic conditions, advances in technology and changing government policy have left many British centres suffering from varying degrees of decline. As modern technologies and transportation have altered the way we shop, research suggests that a centre's culture and identity can provide a successful foundation with which to create experiential retail that can attract footfall back into town centres (see for example El Hedhli & Chebat 2009; Verhoef et al. 2009; Padilla & Eastlick 2009; Robertson 1997; Runyan & Huddleston 2006). This chapter provides an overview of some of the challenges facing declining centres in the North West of England and, focusing on the regeneration of Liverpool's core retail area, explores the ways in which identity and culture have been incorporated into its urban design to enhance the retail experience on offer in the city centre.

1. Introduction

In Britain the term 'high street' refers to the main commercial street(s) of a town or city, and is often perceived to be the core retail and shopping area of urban centres (Carmona 2015). The term is also synonymous with smaller, suburban commercial streets, which can therefore cause confusion and debate regarding the specific definition of the term. However, for the purposes of this chapter, the term refers to any retail location, large or small, from small suburban shopping parades to large city centre retail areas.

Since the industrial revolution high streets have played a significant role in British society. Prior to advances in modern transportation, local communities were heavily reliant on their local shops and services which they would access, predominantly, by foot or bicycle. Wild and Shaw (1975) report how geographical parallels between store locations and custom were at their highest in mid-1800. However, over the last 50 years, cultural changes - including an increase in the number of women choosing to work; an increase in private car ownership; and the increasingly busy lives led by individuals – have altered consumer shopping habits and have driven an increasing demand for ease and

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convenience. Consequently alternative retail approaches, such as out-of-town and online retail, have developed to meet the consumer's evolving needs. These retail approaches have also provided benefits to the retailers themselves: reducing store overhead costs, and in the case of out-of-town units, providing built-for-purpose units which are easily accessible for delivery vans and lorries. The ability for out-of-town and online retail to meet the changing needs of the consumer and retailer has often left traditional centres lagging behind, and many British high streets have fallen into decline as they struggle to compete for consumer preference.

2. Case study high streets suffering from decline

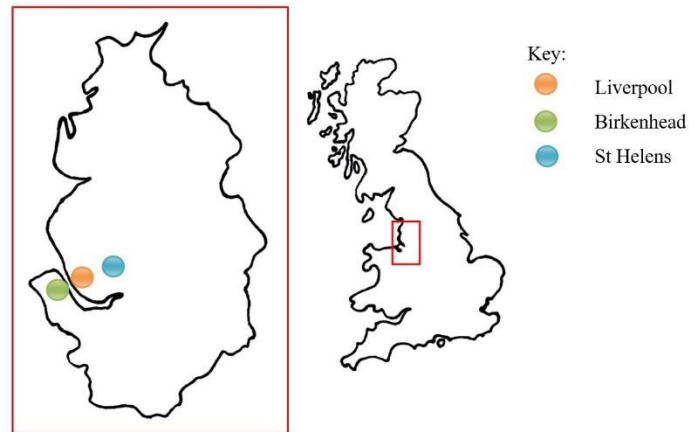


Figure 1: Locations of Birkenhead, St Helens and Liverpool (Source: author's own)

2.1 Birkenhead, Wirral

Birkenhead is a town located on the Wirral Peninsula, in the North West of England (see figure 1). The town sits on the bank of the River Mersey, directly opposite the famous Liverpool waterfront. During the 19th century the town flourished thanks to the employment opportunities presented by the Birkenhead docks and the shipping industry. However, economic changes during the latter half of the 20th century saw Birkenhead fall into decline, and this decline was reflected in the town's core retail area. In recent years the success of the nearby Liverpool ONE development (see chapter 4) has placed further strain on the town centre, and the planning approval of the 'Wirral Waters' scheme – a £4.5bn scheme comprising residential, leisure, commercial and retail development scheduled for completion in approximately 30 years – creates further uncertainty for the future of Birkenhead's existing high street. In 2010 Wirral Council commissioned GVA Grimley Ltd to conduct an integrated regeneration study for Birkenhead and Wirral Waters. The document notes that "Birkenhead town centre is in significant decline and needs to find a new purpose and direction" (GVA 2010). Since 2010 efforts have been made to rejuvenate the town centre, including new signage, outdoor repairs and a new heating system. Additionally, the centre has reportedly observed a decrease in store vacancy rates from

40% in 2011 to 9% in 2014 (Liverpool Echo 2014). However, with plans recently approved for a new leisure centre, including bars and restaurants, on the periphery of the site, and the proposed development of the aforementioned Wirral Waters scheme, the sustained survival of Birkenhead town centre remains uncertain.

2.2 St Helens, Merseyside

Located in the North West of England (see figure 1), within commuting distance of both Liverpool and Manchester, is the town of St Helens. In its heyday the town thrived thanks to the coal, glass and copper refining industries. However, as Britain moved towards a more service based economy, such industries fell into decline. Like Birkenhead, the decline of St Helens was reflected in the core retail centre.

Between 2004 and 2008 St Helens fell from 92nd place to 118th place in the National Regional Hierarchy and issues were identified regarding vacancy rates, management of the centre and the number of visitors to the high street, amongst others (St Helens Council 2009). In 1992 the town's vacancy rate stood at 3%. By 1999 it had increased to 7% and, ten years on, the rate had risen again to 10.27% (2008/09) (St Helens Council 2009). Since 2009 St Helens has witnessed the closure of some of its most prominent stores including WH Smith, Burtons and Dorothy Perkins (St Helens Star 2014). Additionally, in 2014 the council published a report citing the need for public realm investment, parking improvements, shop front improvements and initiatives to promote and support businesses on all of the high streets within the local authority's boundary, not just the town centre (St Helens Council 2014).

2.3 Resident data: Birkenhead and St Helens

Between December 2013 and April 2014 data was obtained in the suburbs surrounding Birkenhead (61 participants) and St Helens (75 participants), in order to gauge the opinions of residents with respect to their local high street. The data observed that 70% of Birkenhead participants and 71% of St Helens participants preferred to shop at other retail destinations, rather than their respective local high street.

With reference to the Birkenhead participants, the data suggests that they seek greater choice when opting to shop in other retail destinations, with 99% of those who preferred to shop elsewhere stating this reason. The three main preferred destinations were observed to be the city centres of Liverpool and Chester, and the out-of-town outlet village, Cheshire Oaks. 44% of all participants stated that they would choose to visit Liverpool city centre in order to access greater choice. Participants also noted the increased prosperity, better quality environment and better quality goods on sale in Liverpool. These results would appear to support previous observations that middle order centres in particular are adversely affected by increasingly prosperous larger town and city centres (see for example Department of the Environment 1992; British Council of Shopping Centres 1996; Ravenscroft 2000). Additionally, less than half (44%) of the participant sample stated that they conducted non-food shopping in Birkenhead high street, and 64% said

they conducted their food shopping in supermarkets located outside of the town centre. The results indicate that Birkenhead's high street is struggling to compete with the retail offering of nearby city centres and suburban supermarkets.

St Helens presents a slightly different scenario in that the town is home to two decentralised retail parks, located on the edge of the town centre. 61% of the St Helens participants said that they preferred to shop at the retail centres rather than St Helens town centre. 50% of those participants stated that they sought more variety and better quality shops from the decentralised developments. Furthermore, 75% of the total sample said that they would prefer St Helens' high street if the range of shops was similar to that of the retail parks.

Of all participants 88% indicated a desire for a greater variety of retailers in St Helens' high street, 56% believed more parking would improve the retail centre, and 56% believed more locally owned/ independent shops would benefit the high street. These figures suggest that local residents seek attributes more commonly found in larger city centres, out-of-town locations and in online retail, to be present in their local high street.

Participants were also asked about their views on the identity and image of their local town centres. Birkenhead's participants appear to have been divided in their opinions of the centre as 26% believed that the high street negatively contributed to the image of Birkenhead, however 30% felt that it positively contributed to the town's identity. The further 44% did not express an opinion either way. Additionally, 45% of St Helens' participants did not feel that the high street represented the local community.

3. Image and the retail experience

In a retail agglomeration, the success of individual stores is often dependent on the image of the overall shopping destination (Bell 1999) and image is observed to play a key role in consumer patronage (El Hedhli & Chebat 2009; Verhoef et al. 2009). Whilst only a small amount of research has explored town centre image from a consumer's perspective (Hart et al. 2013), the literature available suggests that a customer's experience of a retail centre plays a fundamental role in their image of that destination (MacInnis & Price 1987). Over the last 20 years increased importance has been placed on the 'experiential' elements of management initiatives (Warnaby 2009); this is often reflected in the mix of occupiers, and the focus on achieving competitive and diverse centres (Henley Centre/ BCSC 2002).

It is recognised that the shopping experience can be shaped by unique characteristics such as buildings of historical interest and themed zones (Padilla & Eastlick 2009; Robertson 1997; Runyan & Huddleston 2006). Additionally, Erkip et al. (2013) report that town and city centres play an important role in the identity of a local area and its residents. As diversity is considered to be a fundamental characteristic of thriving high streets (Carmona 2015), creating retail centres with identities can be an effective way of creating distinctive centres which will stimulate positive consumer experiences, therefore encouraging increased consumer patronage.

The New Economics Foundation (2005) believe that the domination of chain stores, leading to 'clone towns', has left British high streets less resilient to changing market forces. Moreover, they note how the process of regeneration can, in some cases, further strip centres of their identities, as local materials are replaced with modern, sterile facades which mimic other high streets across the country.

4. Liverpool ONE

Located in the North West of England is the city of Liverpool. For decades the city's core retail area was in need of investment and revitalisation, and in 2004 funding was secured for the redevelopment of Paradise Street to create the Liverpool ONE retail development.

Liverpool ONE is recognised as the largest regeneration project of its kind in Europe, and is considered to be the most important development within Liverpool in over 60 years (Daramola-Martin 2009). The development – which involved the collaboration of 22 architectural firms (Building 2008) and the acquisition of land through compulsory purchase orders - covers a 42 acre site within the city centre and comprises 148,500 square metres of retail space, leisure and business facilities and a new bus station (BDP 2014). The first phase of the redevelopment involved the construction of 30 new buildings in amongst the streetscape of refurbished existing stock (Laing O'Rourke 2014). Grosvenor's retail project director Rod Holmes oversaw the construction of Liverpool ONE. Given the competition posed by nearby centres and out-of-town retail developments, Holmes believed that incorporating ample 'variety, choice and surprise' was key to success (Building 2014). The design of the scheme has integrated the culture of Liverpool into the development - from its maritime past, to its connections with music and sport - to create a high street with a relevant and unique identity.

4.1 Physical linkages

The Liverpool ONE development has been successful in creating a more unified city as physical linkages between the retail area and the city's other major land marks have been redefined and enhanced. Additionally, as illustrated in Figure 2, the development has been intertwined into the city's previous primary high street.

Figure 2 illustrates how an entrance into 'Liverpool ONE', situated on the previous main high street, blends into the existing street scape, mimicking the facades of the surrounding shops. This subtle entrance provides access between new and old without detracting from the traditional streetscape or appearing to be an entirely separate entity.

Materials used to construct parts of Liverpool ONE were chosen due to their connection to the local area (One Community no date), and Chavasse Park - a designated area of public green space within the city centre since the 1980's – was revitalised. Following the completion of the developments underground car parking facility, the park was reinstated above to provide 22,000 square metres of landscaped greenspace (Willerby-Landscapes

2008). The new park – which comprises plants which formerly grew wild in the area (One Community no date) - has been integrated among the bars and restaurants which occupy the top floor of the development. The park also provides an attractive physical linkage between Liverpool ONE and the Albert Dock - an important historical land mark and a popular visitor destination for both local residents and tourists.



Figure 2: Entrance to Liverpool ONE via the former main high street (Source: author's own)

4.2 Land marks, monuments and signage

Scattered across the development are various landmarks and monuments which provide connections to Liverpool's past. Examples include the 'Sugar House Steps' which provide access to Chavasse Park and also act as an outdoor seating area. The steps acquired their name due to their location, which is the approximate site of Liverpool's first sugar house (Liverpool ONE no date). Other examples include the Liverpool Sailors' Home Gateway, which stands near to the site of the former sailors' home, and a monument which enables the public to view Liverpool's underground dock, which was built by Thomas Steers between 1709 and 1715.

The design of the Liverpool ONE development also introduced new streets which had previously not existed. This was considered an opportunity to further incorporate history

and culture into the scheme. Some examples include 'Wall Street' which was named in commemoration of the walls of the historic Liverpool castle; 'Custom House Place' was named in memory of the former custom houses; and 'Thomas Steers Way' was named after the aforementioned developer of Liverpool's old dock (Liverpool ONE no date).

4.3 Retail units and organised events

The integration of culture and identity into the Liverpool ONE development extends beyond the physical streetscape, having filtered into some of the retail units in a number of ways. For example, the HMV music store features a 30ft image of The Beatles in its main window, overlooking the main high street. Additionally, the Liverpool FC and Everton FC shops are located within the development, reflecting the city's love of football. Liverpool ONE also regularly plays host to a variety of events which have included ice festivals in Chavasse Park, piano festivals and specified weekends where retailers offer additional discounts and offers to consumers.

5. A thriving retail centre

Liverpool ONE was officially opened to the public in 2008. Since opening the development has recorded impressive sales and footfall figures. In June 2014 a review was published into the ongoing progress of Liverpool's main retail area. The review observed a 52% increase in trading within the style and leisure sector between 2008 and 2012, and a consistent 99% or higher occupancy rate of units within the Liverpool ONE development (Liverpool Vision 2014). Additionally, footfall figures between 2009 and 2012 were observed to increase by approximately 2.3 million (One Community no date), and those for 2014 observed an increase of 1 million compared with those reported for 2013 (Move Commercial 2014). Furthermore, in the year March 2014 to March 2015 sales within Liverpool ONE rose by 15% and footfall increased by a further 4% (Grosvenor 2015). These figures demonstrate how resilient the development has proved to be during a time of economic uncertainty on a global scale.

Since opening Liverpool ONE has continued to welcome new stores and new brands to the city, and of those new stores which have opened in the last two years, 90% have been new to region (Grosvenor 2015). Additionally, in 2002 Liverpool was ranked 13th place in a ranking of Britain's best retail destinations (Daramola-Martin 2009), however, by 2013 the city had climbed to 5th place (JCDecaux 2014).

The ideologies of place identity have helped Liverpool to reinvigorate its retail experience by embedding the city's maritime history, and music and sporting culture into Liverpool ONE through its physical environment and organised events. This experience, along with the growing range of stores, has enabled the city's popularity to prosper. This popularity has been reflected in the rising levels of footfall and increased sales figures over the course

of the developments existence. Liverpool ONE has also won numerous awards (Visit Liverpool no date; e-architect 2014) and the development's masterplan was also the first to be shortlisted for the RIBA Stirling Prize in 2009. Additionally, Chavasse Park was awarded 'Green Flag' status and has been praised for its commitment to community involvement, heritage conservation and biodiversity (Liverpool ONE no date).

6. Conclusion

As Liverpool city centre's popularity as a shopping destination has grown, it poses increased competition for town centres in the city-region such as Birkenhead and St Helens. The resident data outlined above suggests that the two retail areas do not offer the desired range of retail sought by the local consumer base, and they are failing to emit a wholly positive identity which is identifiable by the local community. As consumer trends increasingly favour alternative retail approaches such as online and out-of-town retail, pressure grows on high streets to adapt and provide a unique service to customers; one that cannot be replicated, or bettered, by these competing entities. However, given the investment and collaboration required to create a holistic identity, smaller, less nationally significant centres such as Birkenhead and St Helens are often left struggling to compete with close neighbours. Moreover, the result of the recent referendum – resulting in a vote for the United Kingdom (UK) to leave the European Union (EU) – creates further uncertainty for these towns. Birkenhead has benefitted from EU funding since the 1990's and the town's award winning bus station was part funded by the EU (Financial Times, 2016). However, as yet, there is no guarantee that any future shortfall of funding – as a consequence of leaving the EU – will be made up by the UK Government. Additionally, the economic uncertainty sparked by the vote to leave has led to a drop in consumer confidence (to its lowest level in 3 years) (YouGov, 2016). YouGov has also warned that the sharp drop in household financial expectations for the next 12 months may have a significant effect on retail spending.

In light of the issues outlined above, smaller retail centres such as Birkenhead and St Helens may be forced to re-think their functions. One possible solution is provided by the Governments recent relaxation of development rights to allow for conversion of empty shops into a range of uses including residential use, without the need for planning permission. Whilst there may be concerns about the loss of traditional high street functions, such development would reduce the environmental problems caused by vacant shops, and an increased resident population could stimulate demand for alternate health, leisure and social uses. For example Birkenhead has already welcomed a "midwife shop" which opened in 2009 providing a walk-in service for pregnancy and post-natal issues. Other innovative solutions include the conversion of vacant units into school classrooms.

This is particularly pertinent given the recent figures released by the Local Government Association (LGA) estimating the need for an extra 336,000 school places in England by 2024 to meet growing demand (The Guardian, 2016). This type of approach may secure the traditional role of high streets as the centre of the community and enable them to successfully co-exist alongside their metropolitan neighbours.

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