

Retail Values

Am I the only one who is deeply uncomfortable with the notion of one section of our community (football supporters), being played off against another (local retailers, environmentalists, heritage lovers) all for the benefit of corporate retail – so that they can secure stores advantageous for themselves, but socially and environmentally destructive for us? How is it that we have got to such a state where the only way we can secure our football club is by accepting an out of town development based on a model of town planning that has been thoroughly discredited elsewhere? With large development sites laying vacant within the city why does Monk's Cross 2 look as though it is going to happen?

In a nutshell, it's all about the stadium. No one actually believes the cheerleaders for this project when they say it will create *loads of jobs*. In an already stagnant retail market we see a huge shift from bricks and mortar to online sales. So any new jobs created in shops will just come from somewhere else – if not York, then tough luck Malton, Selby and Easingwold. It's a zero sum game. But hey, we get a stadium.

The ruling Labour group will support it because they may get to keep the business rate revenue from new developments – and this is very low hanging fruit. Plus, they get the electoral silver lining – a cheap stadium. And after all, who's against it? Well just a bunch of greens, some fuddy-duddy conservationists and the 'old establishment' of the York business elite (e.g. Tories).

And then there's that curious phenomenon of the shopping lobby - the people whose lives will remain incomplete until John Lewis sets out its store in York. No one, not even the Greens, dares to speak a word against *this* lobby. Most of the opponents of MX2 are more than happy to welcome John Lewis, so long as they set up in the centre.

Well odd though it may seem, coming from a retailer, I think the real issue here is *not about shopping* – personally I think that we have rather too much of it. I'd better add before I continue, that my business is not directly threatened by this development. This is not about the competition, it is much more important than that.

It is about the whole future of this city – what makes it special, and what we want it to be. I'm not from York but I decided to stay here and start a business twenty years ago and have lived on the same street ever since. I stopped here because it's a great place to live - and it works.

What makes it work is its geography. York is a relatively compact city. The centre is not far from its residential areas - within walking distance of a large proportion of its population. Most parts are accessible by public transport and no part is more than 20 minutes cycle ride away from any other. It is built on a human scale, which is what makes it such a congenial place to live.

It is still a place where you can get to know not just your next door neighbour, but half of the street; a place where you can meet them in the convivial surroundings of a neighbourhood pub; a place where you can still meet them *on the street*, a place that still actually has a street life that has not been obliterated by traffic.

It's a place that is still built on neighbourhoods – *real* neighbourhoods that are sustained by a diverse mix of human activities. All such things go together to give the city its special character and contribute to the quality of life here.

Other places have followed a different planning model – let's call it *out of town* (OOT). It consists of suburbs, retail parks and roundabouts. With OOT everything gets separated out – commercial, retail, recreational, or residential – and it's pretty *boring*. I've lived in such places and most of the time you get to experience them in isolation - looking out from the inside of a metal box – which is one reason why, unlike York, they have no sense of community. Community relies upon geography. As the 'Queen of Shops' Mary Portas reminds us in her recent report, community depends on the many

encounters that you get in places where multiple activities co-exist. Community happens in places where people live and work and chat and shop and socialise – like traditional shopping streets.

As a neighbourhood based retailer, I get to see this every day – how ours, and neighbouring businesses, impact on the community in ways that amount to much more than simple economic transactions. This comes about because we get to know lots of people – even those who never set foot in our store. We constitute a social space – so we’re a conduit for neighbourhood news and gossip; and we’re the ‘eyes on the street’ - part of a natural system of community surveillance that watches out for trouble. That’s because we are located within the community and have a direct stake in it - unlike those corporate retailers camped out on the edge.

We also, of course, contribute to the local economy. We pay high rates relative to our size compared with OOT corporates who, it transpires, get a quantity discount. We are also a source of direct local employment and we employ *far more* people relative to our size than do the corporates (self service till anyone?). We also *spend locally* – on services that support our businesses – be they local plumbers or printers, electricians or designers. Corporates generally don’t, so with them York will miss out on what economists call the *local multiplier effect*.

There’s a lot of bland talk from developers about how much ‘value’ these corporate retailers will put into our community, but no one stops to consider what they *take out*. As we all know life cannot be measured in pounds, shillings and pence. And out of town corporate retail is perhaps one of the most efficient instruments ever devised for extracting the *life* out of a community – be it social *or* economic. With their promise of jobs and a ‘Community Stadium’ they offer us a Trojan horse. We should be ready to defend our real communities from these raiders at the gates.

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