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Viewpoint

Look up! Retailing, historic architecture and city centre distinctiveness

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ABSTRACT

This paper considers the role of historic architecture in the creation of distinctiveness in urban shopping destinations as part of a move towards a more experiential focus by urban management initiatives. Utilising the concept of the *servicescape*, the paper suggests that distinctiveness may not be apparent at ground floor level, given the consistency of retail fascia design to reflect the chosen brand image and the rigidity with which centralised directives regarding window displays etc. are implemented. However, above ground level the real distinctiveness of the built environment dimension of the servicescape becomes apparent, and may contribute to differential advantage in an increasingly competitive retail environment.

Introduction

Over twenty five years ago, as an undergraduate in Newcastle-upon-Tyne studying local history, I remember the professor—instead of lecturing on the architecture of the city, from the relative comfort of the seminar room—took us instead on a walking tour. As we proceeded down the main retail street, his advice was to "Look up", above ground level and the window displays of the usual retail suspects, to the first floor and beyond. Here, it seemed, the real historic nature and distinctiveness of the city became apparent. Now, as a management academic, it has struck me on many occasions—especially when visiting towns and cities, often as part of my own research into retailing, town centre management and the marketing of places – that as retailing in urban centres has become increasingly uniform (because of the ubiquity of the multiple retailer), then other aspects of the urban 'experience' may have to be emphasised. This is especially so if those responsible for managing towns and cities via urban management initiatives, such at town centre management (TCM) schemes and business improvement districts (BIDs), are to achieve the differentiation of their locale that is a clear commercial objective in 'clone town Britain' (Economics Foundation, 2004). This paper considers the potential for architecture to contribute to the experiences enjoyed by the retail, and other, users of towns and cities.

Towards an experiential orientation

The importance of the experiential dimension of retailing is increasingly highlighted. While the study of retail 'atmospherics' in the context of the selling environment is long-standing (see McGoldrick, 2002 for an overview), there has been an increasing focus on the experiential aspects of retailing, more overtly acknowledging the perspective that shopping is more than a functional, utilitarian activity, but also incorporates social motives (see, for example, Bloch et al., 1994; Buttle, 1992; Tauber, 1972; Underhill, 2000). More recently, this has been manifested in the notion of 'experiential retailing', regarded by Kim as a result of the merging of the merchandising and hospitality industries. He argues that retailers need to incorporate the experiential into their strategies in order to 'create an environment in which consumers can obtain a satisfactory total consumption experience by providing multiple product categories in a pleasing and enticing consumption atmosphere' (Kim, 2001, p. 289). This is particularly apparent in the concept of retailing as 'theatre' (see Baron et al., 2001; Davies and Ward, 2002).

It could be argued that this experiential emphasis is relevant not only in relation to individual retail outlets, but also with regard to the locales within which they exist, or indeed, towns and cities as a whole (see Hannigan, 1998). In a report titled *Future of Retail Property: Future Shopping Places*, the British Council of Shopping Centres states that 'customer 'experience' is the new battleground' (2007, p. 12). Indeed, over the last twenty years, it could be argued that there has been significant development in the objectives and aspirations of urban management initiatives towards the experiential. As many TCM schemes have matured, their scope has become more strategically oriented in terms of trying to influence and ensure the future development of the locale. This is manifested by a focus on managing the occupier mix within the town centre, and also promotional and marketing activities, in order to contribute to 'the long-term competitiveness and differentiation of the town centre' (Henley Centre/BCSC, 2002, p. 22). Here, a key emphasis

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has arguably been the differentiation imperative (Warnaby, 2006)—in other words, trying to make the place distinctive as a means of attracting customers.

Servicescape, architecture and the urban place experience

A more overtly managerial perspective interfaces with many of the concepts of urban design. If creating place distinctiveness is a key task, then the existence among users of some perception of sense of place for a particular urban centre is a key issue. Punter (1991) and Montgomery (1998) identified the elements of a sense of place as constituting the following: activity (i.e. land use and its diversity, the social milieu etc.); meaning/image (i.e. symbolism and memory, place legibility, cultural associations etc.); and physical setting/form (i.e. the built form in terms of its scale, permeability etc.). This has resonance with some of the more managerial conceptualisations of urban places as 'products', where both the physical setting and the social milieu can be manipulated to facilitate the customer experience of a locale (see Warnaby and Davies, 1997). More recently, it has been suggested that the emerging area of service science (see IfM & IBM, 2008) is relevant here. Maglio and Spohrer state that cities could be regarded as service systems, defined as 'dynamic value co-creation configurations of resources' (2008, p. 18).

Thinking more specifically about the role of architecture in achieving this, another concept from the management literature (with particular reference to services marketing) has some utility. The servicescape (Bitner, 1992, 2000), which is defined as the built environment surrounding the provision of a service, might help in the conceptualisation and subsequent creation of place distinctiveness, as long as shoppers can be persuaded not only to look in shop windows, but also to look around themselves and above themselves, and to appreciate the wider attributes of the shopping destination itself. Sharp (1968, p. 20) highlights the importance of the 'maintenance of character' of urban places, and a key aspect of this, according to Cullen (1961) is variation. Indeed, Sharp (1968, p. 23), stated that 'variousness' constitutes the 'essential character' of High Streets. Thus, according to Sharp (Sharp, 1968, p. 18), buildings should not be judged wholly by utility, but also by their 'character', 'personality' and their 'associations', arising 'as part of the history of the society that built them and has used them'. The concept of the 'townscape', resulting from 'the weaving together of buildings and all the other elements of the urban fabric and street scene...so that...visual drama is released' (Carmona et al., 2003, p. 147) has obvious parallels with the servicescape concept. From a managerial perspective, Bitner (2000) argues that the servicescape can play a critical role in, among other things, shaping customer expectations, differentiating service firms, and influencing the nature of customer experiences.

Bitner (2000) goes on to state that various servicescape dimensions, primarily the social and built environment (this latter element including ambience, function and design) can be controlled. Of course in an *urban* context, the extent to which these elements can be manipulated may vary, but what cannot be denied is that town and city centres are becoming, for better or worse, more overtly managed environments (see Minton, 2006; Reeve, 1996). Retailing is undoubtedly a significant contributor to urban economies, and urban management schemes increasingly rest on the application of 'shopping mall' principles to the public realm (Minton, 2006). However, a major constraining factor in such development activities may be the morphology and built environment of a place, particularly where architecture worthy of protection and preservation is involved. Retailers have a long tradition of re-using and adapting existing buildings, and perhaps this is part of the charm of—and competitive advantage of – urban shopping destinations, compared to the more sterile malls, which have been regarded as the epitome of *placelessness* (Relph, 1976), and as *non places* (Augé, 1995).

My home city of Manchester provides numerous examples of retail outlets where these principles may be applied. Fig. 1 shows

Fig. 1. Monsoon store, street level.