word on the street

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Going West? Lessons from forty years of shopping in West London.

TOM HAYHOE recounts some lessons from forty years of shopping, eating out and going to the movies

Recently my local authority hung banners from the lampposts and sent round leaflets door to door urging me to "shop local" and "eat local" in response the opening of Westfield, the UK's newest and, arguably, most exciting retail development. The cornucopia of choice now facing my neighbours points to one of the biggest challenges facing businesses providing services from fixed premises – whether selling goods, meals out, or entertainment. How should you respond to the opportunity presented by new shopping and leisure centres, and how do you defend your existing sites?

I have lived in the same part of west London for all but two of the last forty years. As a teenager in the late 1960s and the 1970s I would abandon my local high street – King Street in Hammersmith – at Christmas and head into central London to shop on Oxford Street.

Returning from a short spell living in the United States in my mid 20s, I welcomed the arrival of the covered malls I had become accustomed to while away: the small but bright and shiny Kings Mall that added to the tired retail offer on Hammersmith's King Street, and – a new destination for my Christmas shopping – Brent Cross in north London.

Move the clock on to my 30s. Instead of being lured north for the big comparison shopping trip at Christmas, I would head south west to a Kingston transformed by a pedestrianised town centre, the opening of a John Lewis branch whose imaginative layout cracked the department store challenge of how to get customers to the upper floors, and the conversion of Bentalls into a multi-storey mall. Kingston sucked in shoppers from all over the southern and western sides of London and deep into Surrey and the adjoining counties.

Now, somewhere the better side of 50, I have Westfield on my doorstep. I am presented with acres of shops within ten minutes' walk and a cornucopia of opportunities for my Christmas shopping. (And this is before making allowance for the Christmas presents that I may choose to buy with the click of a mouse).

I could write a similar account of the opportunities for eating out and for going to the movies.

For as long as I can remember, we have been spoilt for choice in terms of restaurants in this relatively affluent part of west London. The opportunities grew throughout the 1980s and 1990s as the British population chose to eat out more and more, but with Westfield we are now treated to another 40 restaurants. While at the time of writing this I have yet to sample any, the reviews have generally been pretty promising and I know that I will soon be taking a break from visiting old favourites to check out the arrivals.

The picture is not dissimilar for cinemas: the 1970s were a grim time for British cinema going and of our five local cinemas, offering six screens between them, only one survived into the 1980s as a cinema. Two – remembering that this is in part of a bigger city – became venues for pop concerts, another became a bingo hall and the last was demolished.

But over the intervening twenty five or so years, the surviving local cinema was refurbished and extended and now has five screens, and in Shepherds Bush a new multiplex opened with 12 screens. Westfield's arrival with a 17 screen multiplex now doubles the cinema capacity within walking distance of my home.

During an economic recession it is easy to forget that over the past forty years living standards and consumer spending power have been transformed. Such is the power of compound growth that over the period relatively small annual increases in real terms have resulted in national income per head more than doubling. Eating out, measured both in quantity and value, has also increased many times over as a result of increased disposable income and changing lifestyles. Cinema-going, after hitting a low in the 1970s was rediscovered by the British in the closing years of the twentieth century.

However, the growth in consumer demand has been much less than the growth in retail space because this is driven by the big wins potentially available to the successful property developer and the competitive penalty for the retailer, chain restaurateur, or cinema group of not being in the right new location.

What is left behind when the new centre opens? Many of the units on Kings Mall – now more than 25 years old – are vacant; surviving tenants are increasingly dominated by discount stores. The cinema that was the last man standing in the 1970s is now likely to be replaced by yet another town centre unit for one of the big supermarket chains, and closure signs have cropped up on some of my favourite local restaurants.

This raises big challenges for retailers, landlords and for local authority planners.

As a retailer …
Can you, or should you, resist the business case for going into the new retail centre even if it cannibalises your existing business? (Probably not). Is there anything that you can do to protect existing stores that will be damaged by the new openings? (Only so much, and anything that you can do can probably only be achieved in collaboration with other local retailers).

As a landlord …
Should you sit idly by and let your investment in retail real estate be destroyed by the prospect of a new competitive entry down the road? (You probably have most opportunity to make a difference, certainly if you own a retail mall – but you need to be thinking about the long term future of your centres well before the new threat materialises, In terms of investment in major refits and examining the store configurations, tenant mix and services).

As a planner …
How do you balance regeneration, response to new consumer requirements, and respect for the signals of the market as you develop and administer the local authority structure plan? (A tough one indeed, not least because as a local authority you may be competing to host the latest regional shopping centre and addressing one regeneration need may create another - Westfield, for example, is a great brownfield development that will create employment in the deprived northern part of my borough, but will create another regeneration challenge just a couple of miles down the road.)