Buying Power

Graham Black and Angela Phelps

‘Touchwood and Bluewater are celebrations of the purity of one’s life, celebrations of the heritage of community’

ERIC KUHNE, designer of Bluewater Park shopping centre, from the Times, but quoted in the Private Eye Pseuds Corner website

Are we as a profession confident that the right actions are being taken now to secure our general audiences into the 21st century? In the aftermath of the MORI survey on visitors to museums and galleries, published by Resource - which revealed a decade-long decline in attendances - and following a year of very mixed fortunes across the country, in terms of admissions to museums, galleries and heritage sites generally, as a result of foot-and-mouth disease and the September 11th outrage, we need to think hard about this.

As more museums and galleries engage in visitor surveys, a striking consistency in motivation has emerged. Despite curators’ enthusiasm for promoting the excellence of their collections, three out of four visitors to museums and galleries are there out of 'general interest'. The profession tends to interpret this as meaning people want to ‘see everything’. Another explanation might be that they had no particular interest in the subject matter of the sites that they visit and are seeking no more than an interesting day out. How can we guarantee that these visitors will spend their leisure time with us in the future – at least giving us the opportunity to light a fire of interest in them? A key starting point, if current attendance levels are to be maintained, let alone increased, is to develop a clear understanding of the competition so that it can be challenged.

The museums and galleries profession can be very insular, not least in how to analyse attendances. Part of this is an almost inevitable tendency both to assume that the visit to a site is the primary motivation behind a visitor’s day out and to interpret changes in individual site performance only in terms of competition within the restricted field of other leisure attractions. Yet visiting leisure attractions is only one alternative. The options for the use of our visitors’ leisure time are open-ended. There is increasing evidence that the promotion of museums, galleries and other attractions is taking insufficient account of quite different types of activity, such as a visit to the cinema, eating out with friends or, most important of all, shopping trips.

Bluewater Park Shopping Centre in Kent and the Trafford Centre in Manchester each attract over 30 million visitors a year – more than all of our national museums, or all of our cathedrals, put together. Other shopping malls are not far behind. However, please forget the idea that people are simply going to shop or to wander aimlessly in the corridors. In recent years there has been a growing understanding of the social importance of shopping, and a realisation of its rapid development as a leisure activity.

A significant observation is the social change from a solitary activity, usually engaged in by women, to a family-centred event. The pleasurable aspects of the activity are enhanced by the interaction afforded within groups, and this encourages people to extend the period of time involved. Not surprisingly, developers of shopping malls and retail outlets have exploited this concept of shopping as a social 'event'. They no longer offer just shopping opportunities, but also include a range of eating and entertainment facilities. In recent years whole complexes have been designed with themes that create a holiday atmosphere, for example eating facilities styled as tavernas grouped around Mediterranean style patios. The business motivation for this is the close relationship between length of stay and spend per visit; shoppers who can relax, even for a short time, will continue shopping for longer. By offering a range of eating opportunities the shopping activity can be extended through the day into the evening. In this respect, the range of opportunities on offer transforms the function of the space: spaces that were once classified simply as retail have become leisure places, the location for 'integrated leisure experiences'. The change in function may also be seen in the nature of the shopping, with an emphasis on providing for further leisure activities through shops specialising in sports clothing, games and sports equipment, and home entertainment.

These centres do not fall into the restricted definition of an ‘attraction’ still in use in the UK:

> ....those attractions where it is feasible to charge admission solely for the purpose of sightseeing. The attraction must be a permanently established excursion destination, a primary purpose of which is to allow public access for entertainment, interest or education. It must be open to the public without prior booking, for published periods each year, and should be capable of attracting day visitors or tourists as well as local residents....

English Tourism Council

However, they offer a clear comparison, in their style of marketing, with tourist destinations. A simple assessment of their strengths and opportunities shows that they are in tune with a car culture in providing free parking, often in huge open areas rather than the out of favour multi-storied car-parks. They are free to enter, and visitors can stay as long as they wish, provided they fit the image of potential consumers. They provide an appearance of safety, by surveillance and security staff. They are open long hours, catering for day and evening visits every day of the week. They provide for a variety of activities, with multiple choices for all categories: retail, eating, entertainment. The volume of visitors justifies the use of additional 'spectacle' activities to extend stay (and of course, spend per stay): childcare, music, street theatre, temporary exhibitions (often as part of retail).

Effectively, these shopping centres are at the cutting edge of the ‘experience economy’:

> “All prior economic offerings remain at arms-length, outside the buyer, while **experiences are inherently personal. They actually occur within any individual who has been engaged on an emotional, physical, intellectual, or even spiritual level.** The result? No two people can have the same experience - period. Each experience derives from the interaction between the staged event and the individual’s prior state of mind and being.” (our bold)

Pine, B.J. & Gilmore, J.H. (1999) *The Experience Economy,* Boston: Harvard Business School, p12.

This definition may sound remarkably like what we feel we provide in our museums and galleries. It is now being applied as a means of adding value in a purely commercial context.

The success of these ventures is clearly indicated by their enormous pulling-power, and the fact that visitors are prepared to tolerate often high levels of traffic congestion in reaching them. There is no doubt that visits to these centres are absorbing a considerable amount of available leisure time, and as such they present significant competition to conventional attractions. This has become of particular significance since the relaxation in restrictions on Sunday trading. The new generation of entertainment/shopping centres are at their busiest on a Sunday, replacing for many people, and especially families, the 'day out' to a museum or gallery.

Recently there has been a planning reaction against the development of more out-of-town centres, with the realisation of the negative effects on traditional town centres. The towns are beginning to fight back with the development of a café culture also emphasising a transition from the function of purchase to leisure. This is encouraged by the development of pedestrian ways and the relaxation of trading restrictions on Sundays. The peripheral activities to encourage spending time pleasurably in social groups (window shopping, browsing, eating, drinking) are gradually overtaking the importance of the purchase. It is clear that such spaces are no longer devoted to retail, but have become visitor destinations in their own right.

The relationship with leisure and travel is clear. There is also some evidence of a growing trend in shopping tourism. This is recognised in the marketing of some city weekend breaks, but is perhaps more notable in the huge trans-channel market initially developed by the ferry companies but now fostered by the development of the Eurotunnel. However, it is a commonplace in terms of the motivation for visits to our historic towns. While the built fabric of historic towns is a core element of heritage tourism, and a ‘critical mass’ of relevant attractions, mainly museums and galleries, is seen as essential, shopping and dining out are frequently the key factors:

> ‘Visitors can experience heritage first hand in a way that cannot be achieved at a purpose built facility such as a heritage centre. They can engage with history while undertaking activities that could be carried out elsewhere, e.g. shopping’. ETC, EH, EHTF (1999) *Making the connections: a practical guide to tourism management in historic towns,* p11.

So, what can we learn from all this? Shopping is now the second most popular leisure activity in the UK, after watching television (of course, the two are inter-related, not only through advertising but in the lifestyles represented in programmes and interactive shopping opportunities). It is still a growing phenomenon. It is in direct competition for the audience to our museums and galleries. We must learn how to fight it <u>and</u> how to benefit from it. Understanding shopping as competition and fighting back are two different things. Should museums and galleries emphasise our differences to ‘retail therapy’ or must we seek to become our own versions of the ‘integrated leisure experience’? Can we provide all visitors’ requirements in one location - museum galleries; shopping; an animated public space in which to meet; eating; activities, events and changing exhibitions; extended opening hours which reflect this usage?

Undoubtedly, some locations are already exploring these issues directly. The shopping concept is a specific element of the Millennium Galleries in Sheffield while, in Birmingham, the Julian Opie exhibition at the Ikon Gallery during October 2001 extended into the front window of the Habitat store opposite. It is certainly worth considering Tate Modern and the Great Court development at the British Museum as going part way towards the creation of the integrated leisure outing? However, the bulk of museums and galleries seem currently to be letting the question pass them by. There is much that can and must be learned from retailing – in creating a sense of welcome; in there ‘always being something new’; in object display and lighting; and particularly in the quality and training of front-of-house staff and the service they provide. The profession needs to take these lessons on board urgently.

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