Book Review

Planning for Retail Development

Clifford Guy

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This is a book that encourages the reader to want to learn more about the subject. What could have been a very dry analysis of planning law becomes, in Clifford Guy's hands, a lively and intriguing essay, illustrating in some detail the conflicting policies, changes in government strategy and lack of substantive evidence which bedevils planning for retail development.

It is a book, as the author states, in two parts. First a broadly chronological examination of the planning legislation relating to retail building from the 1960s to the present time in which he examines the changes in government approach from hands-on to *laissez faire*, and reliance on market forces and their consequences.

The second half examines three or four key issues, some of which such as demand, need and impact, have been around for some time and others such as sustainability which are relatively new. Here lies the meat of the book for Guy not only exposes some of the fallacies of current planning dogma, but also highlights the conflicts between the policies of different government departments and the frequent lack of good factual information on which to base conclusions.

He asserts that much of the research which is undertaken is aimed mainly at supporting current policy and assumptions rather than making fundamental reassessments of the industry as a basis for suggesting what government objectives ought to be.

Guy makes the reader aware of the breadth of the issues to be considered and it is here that one is left wanting more information. Should this have been a larger book or is there scope for a further volume? For example, under the heading of sustainability the author identifies two main land use implications: first the possible loss of agricultural land and secondly that new development should not increase travel requirements. He focuses on the latter and argues cogently that reducing travel is not simply a matter of sequential testing or providing all development in the town centre, but does not go into the economic and social aspects of sustainability although he is fully aware of these issues and refers briefly to them in the previous chapter.

Emphasis on a broader understanding of sustainability would also show the importance of the use of local suppliers, local materials and maintenance undertaken by local tradesmen. Once a planning committee recognises the political power of such considerations then these aspects, rather than just the carbon footprint of the development, might be a far more potent influence on future retailing trends.

Greater local identity in the design of the development, suppliers and services, could lead to retail buildings being founded more firmly in the local community.

Guy points out that often the challenge is not the out-of-town centre or the off-centre development but developments in other town centres which shows all the more reason to develop a clear brand and identity for each town. Or perhaps the contradictions and complexities of town centres are actually why so many people like shopping in them because of the different experiences they provide.

On the subject of regeneration Guy is even more sceptical about the value of retail development and questions whether the word 'regeneration' should be used in connection with retail development, particularly if it overrides other policy tests. He thus appears to be at odds with Tiesdell, Oc and Heath whom he quotes earlier in the book. They take a more positive view of its role in revitalising historic centres.

The final chapter provides a summary of planning policies and the question of who determines policy and what has been its main impact. Based on his conclusions, Guy makes suggestions for improving the process.

Reading this book is a must for anyone involved in retail development whether it be in establishing policy, challenging fixed ideas of different forms of shopping, designing new or revitalising existing areas. Don't miss it!

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