



Regenerating town centres through retail creativity

Designer Wayne Hemingway hopes to breathe life back into town centres. Liz Morrell reports

In a world where saving the high street has become a cause célèbre, designer Wayne Hemingway thinks people are missing a trick and shouldn't even be talking about high streets at all.

His philosophy is that success is not just about a parade of shops, but a town centre offer that brings people together for more than shopping and creates true communities as a result.

That principle will be key to 'creative-led regeneration', and explains why Wayne Hemingway won't use the term 'high street' in the presentation he will be making at the Retail Week Shop event this November.

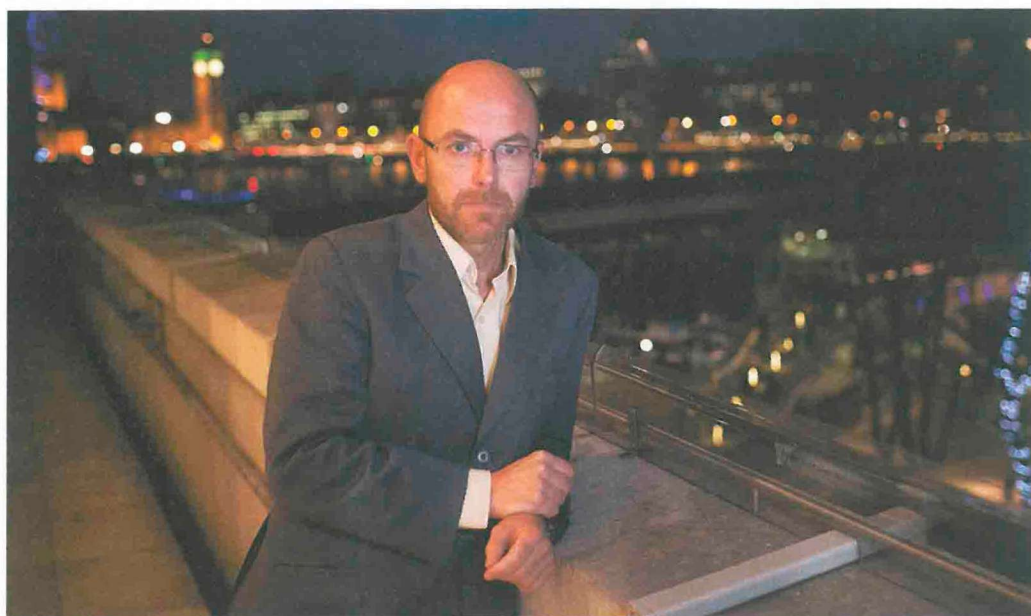
"You have to understand what a joy it is for human beings to get together," he says. "Human interaction is what most people want and there have to be places for people to do that. The town centre has always been that but we end up talking about the high street."

Social shopping

Hemingway even questions whether the demise in bricks-and-mortar shopping is a problem. He sets out his thinking: "When I grew up in Blackburn the town centre experience for me at the weekend was partly about shopping, but a big chunk was to meet and chat in the boulevard, then have potato pie with gravy on it, then go and watch a match and then have a kickabout before heading to a pub or nightclub.

"We have lost all of that and the choices to go out are considerably reduced. There is more shopping and it's become more one-dimensional and less attractive to many people."

The fashion designer, who launched his Red or Dead fashion chain in the town he was born and raised in, laments the loss of the vibrant centre that Blackburn once was – a mix of pubs, cafes, live bands, comedy venues and a cinema. In a bid to breathe life into the area he launched the Blackburn is Open campaign – an initiative that he believes many other town centres could adopt.



Designer Wayne Hemingway will be one of the star speakers at the Retail Week Shop event in November

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Wayne Hemingway

As head of Hemingway Design, a team of designers that specialises in affordable and social design, he is a man with a conscience who knows what he is talking about. So, what will make the difference?

A shift in the perceptions of town planning teams would be a great start, he says. "It's about getting behind and celebrating what planning has achieved and is achieving. People celebrate architecture and design but don't celebrate planning, because it doesn't photograph so well."

Creativity also counts. Support for new ideas, such as pop-up stores, is one example, and is at the heart of the campaign in Blackburn.

The regeneration project is designed to fill empty premises in the town – whether shops, offices or other spaces – with entrepreneurs. Discounted premises are offered, as well as mentoring to help build trades and showcase craftspeople at work.

"That's how things were," says Hemingway. "People used to marvel at fishmongers doing their stuff and it's marvellous watching a bike being repaired. You do see craftsmen and

people doing things and that's part of the fabric of life, but in a lot of towns that's been relegated to behind the scenes as a result of overinflated land values that force anything that's slightly interesting out."

Whether the trades bring income or not, the idea is to create a buzz in the centre – and that means filling empty space. New rules that limit the time properties are left vacant would help, he adds.

"Having a photography studio at work in front of people keeps life in a town centre and can inspire a young generation. It may not bring any income in, but it adds something to the town," he says.

Inspiration and risk-taking is key to Hemingway's philosophy. He started his fashion career in 1982 when he emptied and sold the contents of his and his wife-to-be's wardrobe at London's Camden market after blowing their rent money on his band.

Within a year he'd gone from a single stall to 16, selling second-hand clothing and footwear before launching the Red or Dead collection in 1983. "We were young and impetuous – we took a

space and had a go," he says. But he is the first to admit that it was easier then. "When we started it was full of people our age because you could get in front of people for a tenner," he says.

More than 30 years on, with corporate giants dominating the retail scene, finding a niche is far from easy and the risk of failure is high. Hemingway says that shouldn't matter. "Most people fail, but you learn a lot by failing."

Caught in the web

The web provides a safety net for new retailers, with no bricks-and-mortar costs or lengthy leases. While he understands the attraction, Hemingway sees greater value in the face-to-face interaction of town centres than the emailed and transactional nature of online shopping – both for the entrepreneur and the local community.

"You only really learn when you get in front of people – when you see the whites of the eyes," he says. "The internet is a great way of getting in front of people in a certain way, but you don't get to see what's in their eyes or what they are thinking. You can't learn and written feedback is not the same [as face-to-face]."

Unsurprisingly, he believes more should be done to give today's young entrepreneurs the chance to "have a go". "I don't think they need inspiring, they just need to know there is an opportunity for them. Give them an opportunity and they will have a go. People do break through but what they learn by having a go is the important thing," he says.

TALKING SHOP

Wayne Hemingway is just one of a number of high-profile speakers presenting at the two-day **Shop** event this November. Others include Philip Bier, UK managing director of Tiger; Peter Ruis, chief executive of Jigsaw; Andy Latham, head of location, space and intervention planning for Boots; and Neil Kinlay, group space and format director for WHSmith.

As well as overview presentations, the conference will break down into structured sessions, including Property & Space Management and Store Design & Build. There will be plenty of time for Q&As after every session and networking opportunities that also include VIP dinners and breakfast masterclasses.

The conference programme is further complemented by a *Retail Week* London store tour highlighting the stores to watch, led by *Retail Week* stores editor John Ryan.

Successful town centres are about rediscovering the varied elements that bring life into a centre. And inspiration from places that are already doing that can come from the most unlikely of places.

Hemingway cites Margate as an upcoming town as Londoners migrate there for a better life and bring new ideas and 'have a go' attitudes with them. In turn, the much-maligned seaside town is being transformed into something that's "truly exciting".

"Real regeneration is bottom up. It's happening in Margate and nothing is going to stop it now. A lot of planners would go there and wouldn't look at what was staring them in the face, but it is happening," he says.

The high street may be dead according to Hemingway, but successful town centres, where retail is accompanied by a mix of complementary offerings, can still be lively. Restoring that town centre heartbeat could take some retail locations off the critical list.



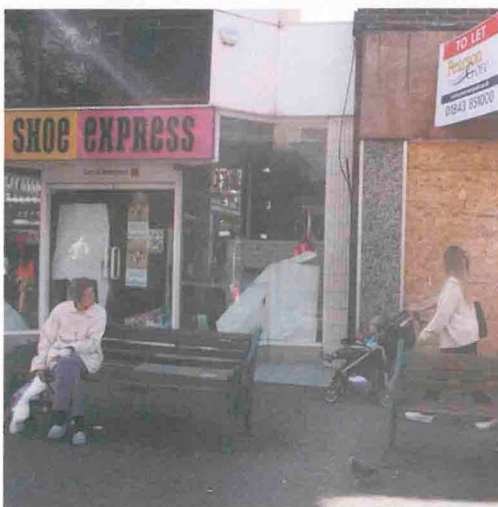
"REAL REGENERATION IS BOTTOM UP. IT'S HAPPENING IN MARGATE AND NOTHING IS GOING TO STOP IT"

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RetailWeek 2014 SHOP.

Retail Week Shop is the essential event for stakeholders investing in, building, designing and operating retail spaces in the UK. The two-day event, which drills deep into the entire store lifecycle, will enable the design and property community to rethink physical retail presence in new creative and strategic ways under one roof. For further information and to book online visit retailweekshop.com

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Clockwise from top left: Wayne Hemingway in his 1980s market stallholder days with wife and partner Gerardine; the pair now; a view of Margate you won't find on the postcards; and a welcome sign of regeneration in the town