OPINION

John Lewis and 101 uses for dead store space

Think carefully about how excess retail space is put to alternative use as it could significantly affect what's already there

Published in 1981, *101 Uses for a Dead Cat* was an instant success as page after page revealed another humorous way in which a deceased feline could have utility beyond its demise.

Something of the kind can be seen in the attempts by retailers with overlarge stores to put excess space to alternative use. The stores weren't always too big, of course, it's just that the web has made a certain amount of high street space at best unwanted and, in a number of instances, unviable. So what can be done?

Retailers are currently coming up with a number of different options over and beyond the standard modus operandi, which is to rent unviable square metres to smaller retail operators.

Making space work harder

The latest wheeze comes from John Lewis where plans are being mulled to shed space in some of the older stores and create co-working spaces.

For those in the dark ages, in effect, co-working spaces are places where those with laptops and an unwillingness to work in an office spend much of their time.

Deals are struck, voices are loud and can be braying and if you're in an area where tech entrepreneurs are around you'll probably overhear details of who is offering their latest app to whom and how much money may be involved.

All of which sits pretty uncomfortably with the genteel beast that is John Lewis. Co-working may be good for some, but in a department store, the sight and sound of those with too tight trousers and unusual facial hair may be off-putting.

This is not, of course, to say that retailers should stick to hiving off space to non-competing retailers – on that way lies boredom and the kind of arcade mentality that bedevils almost every French hypermarket.

John Ryan
Stores editor
Retail Week

It's just a matter of looking at who your shoppers are and what they expect from you and not suddenly putting something in that may seem a mild mismatch – no matter how tempting the return may appear. There's nothing wrong with co-working, except that in a shop environment it has to be done sensitively.

Visiting a restaurant close to modish Old Street recently, complete with unhelpfully high prices, it was hard

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not to be put off by the nomadic office workers who sat just beyond the space afforded to diners.

I've no idea what they were actually doing, but laughter and an 'I'm a lot trendier/more important and in tune with the zeitgeist than you' vibe were the things that made their way to our table.

The in-store experience

Not perhaps such a glaring problem in John Lewis where people and movement are all part of the experience, but it's hard to see it sitting comfortably with much of the rest of the offer.

Co-shopping is something we all do, sharing the in-store space and experience with others unless you live in designer-land, where solo browsing is probably the norm. But as anyone involved in store layout will tell you, there are some things that go together and some that really don't.

Divide and conquer?

Perhaps the answer is to separate non-complementary activities with low-level walls.

The only problem with this is that it creates odd-looking spaces and removes the possibility of showing passersby that you also have alternatives to the simple business of viewing and buying merchandise.

Opposites, we are told, attract, but in truth retailers spend an awful lot of time working out what 'goes' with what and what does not. Suddenly placing wildly disparate things next to each other is likely to detract from both.

John Lewis may be in the 'early stages' of formulating plans for paid co-working spaces in its stores, but before it goes much further it should consider the effect of the plaid-shirted, skinny-jeaned brigade on others who might be in its stores.

Horses for courses and all that. **RW**