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The changing face of the 'Mall'

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The pace of change on Ireland's retail scene has never been more dramatic. But, as HEALY HYNES explains, current trends may - ironically - lead back to the future

MUCH has been made of the new round of shopping centre developments now taking place in Ireland. From the Dundrum Centre to the extensions mooted at Tallaght and to developments in Athlone, Galway and Portlaoise, the retail sector - always the darling of investors - looks set to continue in this vein for many years to come.



Shopping, however, is changing. Ireland has largely by-passed the American model of huge out of town centres leading to the 'doughnut effect' whereby city centres fall into dereliction.

While pressure is being exerted to facilitate the development of retail warehouse parks, these differ substantially from what has been experienced in Britain and the US. This is because they seek not to replace the high street, but to complement it with a range of stores that cannot be catered for in a high street situation.

As such, the stores do not materially affect high street trade, or urban vibrancy.

Following years during which retailing has moved farther and farther from town centres across the Atlantic (typified by places such as Detroit), a new paradigm is beginning to emerge. Mega Mall The 'Mega Mall' model has been superseded by what in the USA is being called the 'Main Street' approach to revitalisation. The move has been mirrored here by the plethora of projects coming to market.

Projects are now being badged as "town centres" rather than "shopping centres" to mark this transition.

The new philosophy aims to integrate the traditional shopping centre back into the environment it was once intended to replace.

Years of experience in the United States has shown that shopping centres insulated and detached from their environment end up being antiseptic and anodyne in the long run. In fact, this realisation began when the Mega Malls of the 70s and 80s began to integrate not only creche facilities, but also theme park rides and even schools to create a more rounded, vibrant experience.

Another key to this change is a greater awareness of environmental sustainability. 'Edge Of Town' Or 'Out Of Town' centres by their nature rely heavily on cars. Principally developed off major motorways intended initially to ease congestion, these developments are now seen as feeding car dependency and exacerbating urban pollution. In fact, retailers and developers are now seeing the traffic as an obstacle to attracting shoppers. Carbon Taxes With carbon taxes now becoming a hot button issue throughout the world, not to mention the ever increasing price of oil, the sustainability of town centres and the drive to stitch new retail infrastructure to them has become more relevant. The success of the Luas project, and the drive to introduce more public transport into new developments has meant that acres of free parking alone will not attract shoppers.

Town centres - with their community facilities, libraries, surgeries and pubs - are the social and physical heart of neighbourhoods. They round out the retail experience and add value to those looking to attract the current generation who see shopping as a leisure pursuit.

The integration of these schemes not only helps the regeneration of urban centres, but also provides employment on the high street. Many schemes such as the Athlone town centre seek to integrate shopping with new housing, again adding to sustainability and reducing car dependency.

So where is this taking us? As with many aspects of life, if we wish to look into the crystal ball we need only peer across the Atlantic where, in fact, an 800-acre 'Retail City' is now on the drawing board in New York. The scheme is intended to include thousands of shops plus restaurants, theatres, hotels, a high-tech research park, and a sprawling, climate-controlled biosphere for recreation. Recreation If we are to believe that Ireland is 10 - 15 years behind the US in retailing trends, then it appears as if the future of retailing is also our past. What else do you call shops, restaurants, theatres, hotels, a business park and recreation area: a town centre maybe?

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