

Case study: Regenerating a historic town centre site

18 September 2019 by Josephine Smit

When the anchor supermarket moved out of the centre of a Sussex town it triggered a transition to leisure, which had to be carefully handled, finds Josephine Smit.



Hotel, cafes and a pleasant thoroughfare at Piries Place

Over the past month the government has announced funding allocations for a string of local authorities across England to help them generate plans to revive historic town centres and high streets. The need for intervention continues to be acute, as the latest research by consultants PwC and the Local Data Company shows. This found that in the first half of 2019 there was a net decline of 1,234 stores on Britain's top 500 high streets, with the biggest net declines being among fashion retailers, restaurants, estate agents and pubs.

Lisa Hooker, consumer markets leader at PwC says of the latest findings, "While retailers need to keep investing to make sure their stores and propositions are relevant to today's consumers, it's also critical that all stakeholders find ways to ease the burden on operators, keep investing in the high street, and encourage new and different types of operators to fill vacant space."

That can mean thinking very differently about the town centre and its proposition, even in historic locations. And that's what the development team behind the recently completed Piries Place regeneration has done in the traditional market town of Horsham, west Sussex.

Challenges

Piries Place used to be a magnet for Horsham supermarket shoppers, sitting conveniently between the town's historic heart, the Carfax, with its conservation area and East Street's vibrant restaurants and retailers. But when Waitrose moved to a new store on the edge of town it left this central site without its anchor, which had a negative impact on neighbouring small premises.

The site's owners, British Airways Pension Trustees and developer Reef Group, planned to replace retail with a leisure led development, comprising a 92 bedroom Premier Inn hotel, Everyman three-screen cinema, restaurants, cafes and office space, all clustered round a revitalised and inviting public realm.

The building formerly occupied by Waitrose had only been developed in the 1990s. "The scheme had kept the medieval street pattern and its scale was sympathetic," says Mike Hoehenwarter, associate with project architect Holder Mathias. "The client thought it would be possible to effectively insert the cinema into the profile of the supermarket building." This had to be achieved, however, while respecting the sensitive setting and protecting key views, notably across Carfax.

Solution

The final design provides some 8,600 square metres of space, with just over half of that provided through light or heavy refurbishment. The cinema occupies two thirds of the former supermarket (shown below), although it now looks completely different on the outside and boasts a first floor terrace. "The building was stripped back to its steel columns, and its roofline and cladding have been changed," says Hoehenwarter.



The hotel occupies the remaining third of the supermarket site and its former accompanying service yard. "The supermarket floorplate couldn't be used for the hotel, so that was demolished," adds Hoehenwarter. The four storey hotel sits above ground floor restaurants and cafes. Two further buildings have been refurbished, providing further café and restaurant space at ground level, with office space above.

The design grew out of dialogue with the community and Horsham District Council, as well as technical analysis and the input of a heritage consultant. "We originally planned for the hotel to be a storey higher, but the context and community engagement informed the design, prompted us to rethink and we reconfigured the hotel to accommodate the rooms required at the lower height," explains Hoehenwarter. "The context was very challenging, but it was also an opportunity to understand the town and community." The architect used 3D modelling to show the context, both before and after development, to ensure key views would be retained and that the ridge line of the existing supermarket building would not be exceeded by the cinema.

Initial thoughts of creating a wholly contemporary design went through a similar evolution. "When we started engaging with the local authority about style, modern was seen as positive," says Max Poole, partner with Holder Mathias. "But through discussions we agreed as a group that a 'contemporary traditional' design would be preferable in this context." The scheme's dominant facing materials are a buff brick and a local dark stock brick – to match existing brickwork on the site. Buildings are roofed in clay tile, including the cinema, which marks a departure from the standard cinema box and fits the context. Throughout the scheme, visual interest is added by subtle massing, stepped brickwork detailing and bronze coloured metalwork for details such as cornices and architraves. Attention to detail and quality extends to oriel windows and even false windows, which have been added to hotel elevations for a well-proportioned, harmonious aesthetic. "It is a contemporary interpretation of the local vernacular," sums up Hoehenwarter.

Construction started in 2017 and has completed in phases over the summer. Nearby, the council will soon complete a multi-storey car park, which has a complementary brick finish and a living wall. Tenants are moving into Piries Place and the central area of the square has a magnolia tree, benches and zones for temporary market stalls, while a locally loved sculpture has been put back in place. "There has been very positive feedback from the people we spoke to three years ago about the scheme. It contributes to the town," says Hoehenwarter. "Achieving this has not been about a one-stop solution. It is the result of a tailored approach."