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Shopping centres as urban renewal?
The case of Westfield Stratford by
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There has been plenty of speculation on the forces threatening the existence of the British high street, that bastion of traditional urban life in the UK. From out-of-town shopping centres and supermarkets, to the growth of on-line shopping, the cause of dwindling footfall on actual streets is probably due to an elaborate combination of circumstances, the cure for which would need to be equally complex. But whilst the debate continues and efforts are made by local neighbourhoods, boroughs and experts to halt the erosion, a new contender recently emerged seeking to attract our consumer appetites: a super slick, highly evolved, retail apparatus that seems to offer the best of both worlds: inner city high street and shopping centre, and it is one touted as an unlikely model of urban regeneration.

Westfield Stratford, opened at the end of 2011, is the second shopping centre in London from the eponymous Australian retail giant after the successful launch of its first venue in Shepherd's Bush, West London in 2008. But this incarnation is far bolder in its urban ambitions, the culmination of a series of aggressive business moves to take maximum advantage of its strategic location between the London 2012 Olympic Park and future Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, and Stratford's fast developing transport hub, with suburban and regional rail services and two tube lines augmented by improved Overground and extended DLR services, the Stratford International high speed link, and future Crossrail. The true nature of what Westfield had been concocting behind the scenes at Stratford

over several years became clear when the centre was officially opened with great fanfare, in the presence of celebrities, government representatives and the Mayor of London. What was revealed was a cacophony of boisterous commercial pastiche forming the main gateway to the Olympic Park and designed to shock and awe the general public, before, during and after the Olympic Games.

Of course London and the local borough of Newham only got what they bargained for, given the previous iteration of Westfield revealed at Shepherd's Bush; and bargaining with city and local authorities is one of the things that Westfield does best: witnessed by the hundreds of urban shopping centres it has built around the world.

The rise of Frank Lowy, Westfield's co-founder and Australia's richest man, from immigrant deli owner to global retail tycoon, reads as a textbook case study of shrewd entrepreneurship, and it's interesting to look at the elements of the company's business model that have made it so successful. The basic premise is no different from any other American-style shopping centre: secure a series of big name 'anchor' shops to ensure footfall and insert a number of smaller tenants in between to take advantage of the created synergy. The anchor shops are attracted by relatively low leases, whilst the smaller retailers pay for the privilege by being charged some of the highest rates in the world, the latter contributing most of the underlying profits of the company.

But Westfield has added to this formula by siting its centres at strategic urban locations, such as

Stratford, securing and consolidating large chunks of land ownership where high footfall is guaranteed. To add to this mix, what they develop is an enhanced version of the standard urban shopping centre scheme, adding entertainment-based uses to complement the shopping activities including restaurants, bowling alleys, hotels and casinos.

Over the past five decades, the in-house Westfield design team has been perfecting the translation of such a business model into a physically immersive, entertainment and retail 'city' experience, intended to overwhelm visitors with extravagant doses of commercial bedazzlement.

When crossing the bridge over Stratford station to reach the entrance of Westfield Stratford City, one is presented with two main options: to go into the enclosed curving gallery space where the main bulk of the shops are or to continue along a wide, straight, open-air corridor lined with a further smaller selection of shops. Most people naturally choose the first option given London's characteristic weather, few opting to stay out in an often cold, grey and wet environment when presented with a brightly-lit interior, stuffed with branding that also disappears enticingly around the corner. In any case, the open-air corridor has evident deficiencies: creating a wind tunnel at times that makes walking uncomfortable, never mind sitting or lingering. It is relatively sparse and uneventfully articulated at ground level, and is contained by equally tenuous buildings that attempt to create variety with a veneer of 'contemporary' façade clichés. This uninspiring space was the main route into the Olympic Park during the summer of 2012.

It was clearly an area where compromises have been made as part of the negotiation between the access requirements for the hordes of visitors during Games time, and its character as a piece of 'public realm'; one of the most abused buzzwords of the last decade within the world of urban design. As Rowan Moore put it in his review of the project for *The Observer* in September 2011, 'getting wet has somehow become a sign of the civic'. Just in case one is not sure what this shop-lined open-air corridor is supposed to be, a sign at the entrance welcomes visitors by indicating that it is called 'The Street' (as opposed to the galleries of 'Internal Mall').

This fake street is probably a remnant of the original masterplan for Stratford City, a new urban area of which the shopping centre was only a part. It presented a series of permeable streets as a continuous extension of the existing city fabric, at least as much as the bisection of a slew of rail lines allowed. These plans were drawn up before the bid for the Olympics was won in 2005, and it was in their reformulation afterwards that they began to follow the model of strategic land consolidation that Westfield so much prefers, a consolidation no doubt driven by the fact that they had by then become the main landowner. So the scheme of permeable city



blocks was gradually modified to one of very large, disconnected, privately owned, solid chunks of building, accessible only from controlled entrances.

Despite all its failures, this as a model of regeneration may not be completely wrong and in fact a lot can be learned from it. It is arguably a far better option than out-of-town shopping centres, and in many respects, it ticks many of the boxes of the previous Labour government's now defunct Urban Renaissance initiative: it makes use of urban brownfield sites, is located next to a transport hub, is (arguably) mixed use, high density and has relatively good environmental credentials.

The concept of a partially covered gallery as a continuation of the existing urban grain can be referenced back to numerous successful and inspiring examples of covered streets such as London's Leadenhall Market and Galleria Emmanuelle II in Milan; a model that hasn't been explored significantly in contemporary architecture. But there is no sign that these examples are being referenced here in the uninspired architecture lurking under the sheen of branding. For the problem is that city-making is not at the heart of projects like this, which is particularly harmful at Westfield Stratford, in that it constitutes a key component of London's largest regeneration project for more than a century.

In the early sixties, around the same time that Westfield was starting to export its model by moving from the domestic Australian market into New Zealand, Jane Jacobs in her 1961 book *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*, was writing about the difference between 'gradual money' and 'cataclysmic money', terms that she coined to illustrate the different ways of financing urban regeneration projects in American cities. 'Cataclysmic money', she explains, 'pours into an area in concentrated form, producing drastic changes. As an obverse of this behaviour, cataclysmic money sends relatively few trickles into localities not treated to cataclysm.' 'This is not a constructive way to nurture cities', she continues, 'for city building that has a solid footing produces continual and gradual change, building complex diversifications.'

Nearly five decades on, Jacobs would find that the same status quo she was critiquing is generally intact with local boroughs still being persuaded into accepting large plans drafted to suit the interests of the highest bidder and not the wider public. It is still early days to assess the impact that this model will have on the community in Stratford itself, including its local high streets. But the open-for-all city that those responsible for shaping the legacy of the Olympic Games are trying to create, looks like being substantially compromised if the future Queen Elizabeth Park with its new 'urban' districts ends up being walled off by a series of opportunistic and incongruous commercial developments. Nikolai Delvendahl and Eric Martin are architects and founded Delvendahl Martin Architects based in London.