

Trading Places

Research at the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre

“All the world is in this place.”

This exhibition is about the independent traders in the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre and how they are being affected by plans for its redevelopment.

The purpose of the exhibition is to share the traders' accounts of living through the regeneration process and highlight how local people and businesses are affected by the changes.

The exhibition explores the impact on traders' businesses, livelihoods, friendships and local relationships today and in the future; and what the Shopping Centre means to the traders, their customers and the wider local community.

Social Life, September, 2014.

www.social-life.co

We would like to thank the traders in the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre that took part in the research, the Coronet for hosting the exhibition, the Latin Elephant and the Elephant Amenity Network for their support and Errol Francis and Alessandra Mossa for their time and contributions.

Introduction

Regenerating Elephant & Castle

The regeneration of Elephant & Castle is one of the largest and most controversial redevelopment programmes underway in London. It involves the demolition of the Heygate Estate, the redevelopment of the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre and the creation of new housing, shopping and commercial spaces.

There is fierce local opposition to the regeneration of Elephant & Castle, in particular, anger and anxiety at the loss of affordable housing, and the relocation of many former residents of the Heygate Estate to other parts of London. Both Southwark Council and developers have received much criticism for their approach.

The social impact of regeneration schemes in London is a hotly debated topic. Regeneration projects have created new housing and amenities in parts of the city that were derelict former industrial sites, and improved some neighbourhoods that were in serious decline.

Yet, in many cases, regeneration is not seen as delivering positive social improvements for people living in low-income neighbourhoods, instead being associated with rising house prices, a shrinking stock of affordable and secure social housing, and displacement of residents and businesses from low-income communities: new, often more affluent households living in privately owned or rented housing replacing longstanding residents and high street chains replacing independent traders.

High and rising house prices, the lack of affordable housing, and increasing commercial rents have become major political issues for London.

New approaches to regeneration of neighbourhoods and struggling high streets are needed; models that recognise the wider social value to be found in London's neighbourhoods, and the impact on low income communities of regeneration schemes. We need to move beyond the narrow emphasis on the financial value to be captured from developing new, mixed communities in areas where land values are low.

Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre's traders describe the many ways they support the local economy and

local communities: as independent family businesses employing local people with long-established customers, as a diverse and supportive local business community, through informal support networks for local people that reach across the city and the globe.

For traders and customers, local and international, the Shopping Centre has social value that goes beyond its function as a retail space. It provides informal meeting space for different communities; a physical location for support networks; a space for people from many different backgrounds to come together; and affordable local shops for the local community, and affordable premises for independent businesses and traders.

This value can all be hard to quantify and measure. As a result they remain invisible to people and institutions with power. Regeneration and economic development policies tend to focus on tackling the visible, and quantifiable, deprivation of the area rather than building on the assets that already exist.

Talking with traders

The Social Life team spoke to 34 traders in the shopping centre in July and August 2014.

We approached the vast majority of traders inside the Shopping Centre and in the market. They were asked about their history in the Shopping Centre, its importance in their lives, and what they thought about the proposed redevelopment. Many people did not want to be interviewed.

The exhibition has been produced by Social Life and is part of the Unusual Suspects Festival, a festival about social change that is being organised by the Social Innovation Exchange.

Social Life is a social enterprise based in Elephant & Castle. We specialise in social research and practical projects with local authorities, developers and community groups in the UK and internationally. In our work we look at how places are affected by change and what local people value about their communities. We work with local residents, community groups and businesses to involve them in planning and development programmes.

For more information go to: www.social-life.co

The photographs were taken by Errol Francis.



Kaietuer Kitchen, Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre by Errol Francis

About the Elephant & Castle shopping centre and its traders

History

When it opened in March 1965, the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre was hailed as the largest self-contained shopping mall in Europe.

Designed by the modernist architects Boissevain & Osmond, it was intended to be the centrepiece for the redevelopment of the area, which had been heavily bombed during the Second World War. It was anticipated that it would become the new “Piccadilly Circus of the South”, a nickname it had acquired in the 1930s when the area prospered. When built, the Shopping Centre included 250,000 square foot of shops and restaurants, an underground car-park and Hannibal House, an 11-storey office block.

The Centre was partially occupied after opening as demand for units was overestimated. In 1991 it was given a make over, painted pink, and the moat area around the perimeter was transformed into a thriving street market.

The Shopping Centre has demonstrated its adaptability to different needs over time, and is now a rich mixed-use environment catering to diverse communities that add character and vibrancy to the area. Crossing the mall or walking through the stalls there is an extraordinary mix of languages, noises, people, and food and goods on sale.



Still taken from 'London' 1994, by Patrick Keiller.

Over the last 15 years several projects have envisaged the demolition or refurbishment of the Shopping Centre. In 1999 Southwark Council invited developers to submit proposals for the redevelopment of the area. In 2013 it was bought by Delancy and APG, with the intention of demolishing the Centre and replacing it with private housing and commercial and retail space. The future of the centre is still uncertain and with it, the future of hundreds of traders.

Items sold



The different types of items sold by the traders interviewed.

About the traders

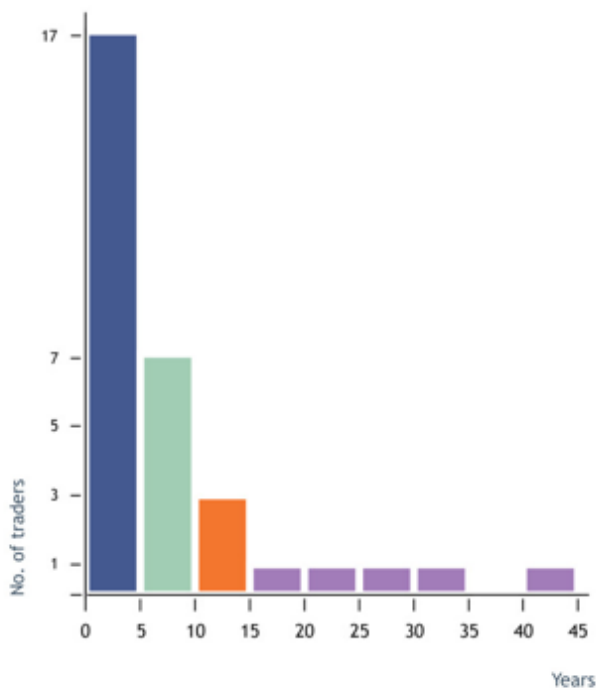
Social Life spoke to 34 traders, 11 were stalls in the market and 23 were stalls and units inside the Centre.

The majority of the traders we spoke to were relatively new businesses. Twelve have been in the Shopping Centre for less than two years. Eight between three and six years, eight between seven and 23 years. Four traders have been at the centre for over 24 years. More than three quarters of the traders shop in the Centre and over half lived within two miles of Elephant & Castle.

Ages of traders

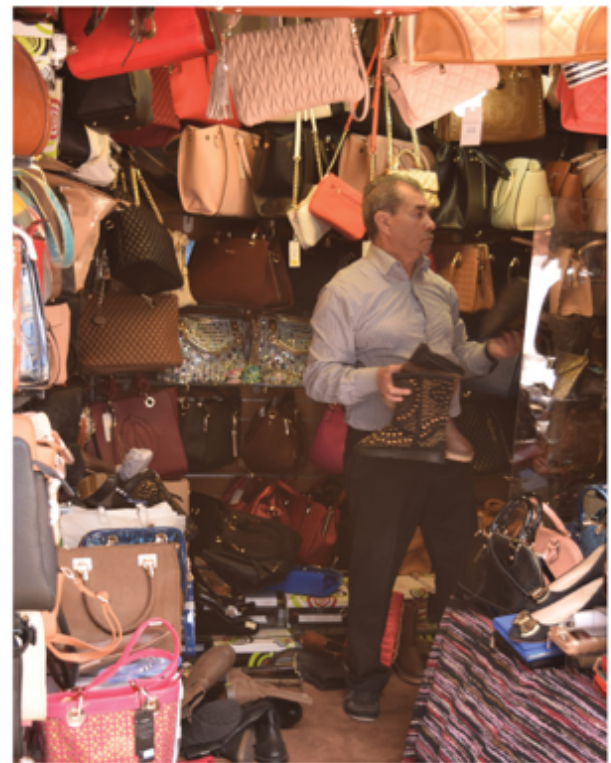


How long have you been in the shopping centre?



More than two thirds of the traders are family businesses, employing one or two people, but a small number support extensive family networks, up to 10 families in one case. Ten people said they obtained their shop or stall through family, friends or local contact.

Half of the traders are undecided about whether they will relocate their business. Eight told us they were planning to do so, eight told us they had decided not to.



Bag shop and trader by Errol Francis.

What the centre means to people

Diversity

The Shopping Centre supports dense networks of social relationships in the local area, across London and globally.

Many traders described the Shopping Centre as a place where people from all kinds of backgrounds and countries come together. It is local and global, and in this respect, it is typical of the super-diversity of London's inner city neighbourhoods. People come from Croydon, north and east London - and internationally from China, the Middle East, Latin America and Africa - looking for international products. Traders and their customers value the diversity of people, services and products at the Shopping Centre.

“ People from different backgrounds sit together. Lots of older people use this place as a centre for the community ”

More than three quarters of traders were born outside the UK. The traders spoke 26 different languages. Almost half of the traders spoke two languages, 11 spoke between three and six languages. English, Spanish, Arabic and Urdu are the languages most commonly spoken by traders. Languages most commonly spoken by customers are English, Spanish, Portuguese and Urdu.

How traders describe themselves



Languages spoken in the shopping centre



“ It’s not just about shops, it’s about community, saying hello ”

Community

The Shopping Centre is an important social space for traders, local people and regular customers and it plays a hugely important role in the social life of the local community.



Traders describe how the mix of market stalls and small independent businesses, and the cultural diversity of the traders, support very personal interactions among the traders and with their customers.

Most of the traders we interviewed said the Shopping Centre is very important to local people and means a lot to many different communities, in the immediate neighbourhood and across London. Most traders describe the Shopping Centre as a “community” or “family”: a friendly and supportive place with people from all walks of life and different backgrounds coming together. Many of the traders frequently talk to each other and their regular customers. Some traders have “regulars” who have been customers for 10 or 15 years.



Outdoor food trader by Errol Francis.

“ We have regular customers ... it is like a family. We look out for our customers. Some of them come at special times or on certain days, so if they’re not there then I ask about them ”



Traders describe how they “look out for their regulars”, who always visit at the same times. They spoke of how non-English speakers needing help or advice come to the Centre from across London, because they can always find someone among the global group of traders who can help.

Traders and customers, neighbours and visitors use the Shopping Centre as a meeting point. It is particularly

important for older people who come to sit and talk, and for the Latin American community in Southwark and across London who use the Shopping Centre as a meeting point. There are several Latin American shops in the Shopping Centre and many more around the periphery of the Centre, including many traders from Ecuador and Columbia.

Traders describe the Shopping Centre as “a good community”, “stallholders chat and help each other out”, “different races, good people who get on”, “they talk about common problems with landowners”.

A minority said that people from different ethnic groups stick together and don’t integrate.

“They appreciate it. They communicate. They come here to find a job, a place to live. It is the centre of the Spanish community ”



The effects of regeneration

Mixed feelings

Overall, traders are anxious and concerned about the redevelopment; many of the traders have mixed feelings about the plans. They recognize the Shopping Centre is run down and some say it is poorly managed and this affects trade. Many would like to see improvements but they would also like to stay when the Shopping Centre is redeveloped.

Three traders told us that improvements would increase their business by making the Centre more attractive. However, few are confident they will be offered new premises or that they will be able to afford it. Worries about rising rents and the arrival of high street chains are a consistent theme in the interviews.

“It will kill my business. I invested all my money here”

Many traders feel local people and independent businesses will be displaced as a result of the redevelopment fearing rents will rise, or units will not be made available for current traders.

The majority of traders are worried about the future of their businesses. They talk passionately about how they and their families are affected by the uncertainty over the future of the Shopping Centre. Traders used phrases like “it will kill my business” or “I will lose everything”. Some traders raised questions about whether they will be compensated for losing their business premises, most thought this would not be likely.

Awareness of regeneration process



Stairwell in the Elephant & Castle Shopping Centre by Errol Francis. Question asked: Have the council spoken to you about the regeneration?

Uncertainty

Of the traders interviewed, almost a third said they knew “very little” or “not much” about the proposed redevelopment.



“It is like living in limbo”

A similar number said they knew or had heard the Centre would be demolished at some point but they did not have a clear idea about the timetable. Two people said they knew nothing at all about the proposals. Two traders said they had seen some leaflets about meetings with the developer but the majority relied on inconsistent word of mouth reports. Some traders believed they would be able to stay for five years, others thought they would have to leave in 2016.

“Chains will arrive and it will become another shopping centre as you can find in the rest of London. They should try to preserve the difference, the multiple choices. This is an unique place.”

Several traders describe how, in the meantime, they feel in limbo, unable to make decisions about whether to renew their leases or try to move elsewhere. Some traders have already been asked to sign new leases at increased rents, and higher service charges. One trader said in the new lease his rent was going to go up from £8,000 to £20,000 and the service charge from £8,000 to £12,000. According to him, many traders provided very affordable goods and services for low-income residents in the area and so rents needed to reflect that.

Some traders said they feel “hopeless” or “powerless”, “angry” and “frustrated” but feel there is little they can do to influence what happens.

Feelings about regeneration



Ideas going forward

Make value visible & strengthen local economies

The value of the design and the aesthetics of the shopping centre is generally considered low. The value, economically and socially, is clear to the people who trade from and use the Centre, however, less visible to those who have decision-making power over the Centre's future.

Elephant & Castle is similar to many areas of inner London - Rye Lane in Peckham, Ridley Road market in Hackney, Stratford shopping centre - with highly diverse communities where residents have found ways of securing income, social support, and community identity through trading. These markets are thriving and energetic and are starkly different to the anonymity and homogeneity of the majority of London's high streets and new shopping centres.

We need to find a way of boosting the social and economic viability of areas like Elephant & Castle in a way that strengthens rather than undermines the economic prospects of local communities.

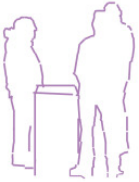
In London and other cities where commercial rents, house prices and land costs are high, any improvement in local areas will lead to increases in commercial rents and housing costs, which can be beyond the means of low-income residents and traders unless specific measures are put in place to protect local economic and social wellbeing. There is a need to find models that allow independent traders to continue their businesses in the neighbourhoods in which they were founded. This should become a specific aim of regeneration strategies from the outset.



La Bodeguita cafe, by Errol Francis

Practical strategies

INDEPENDENT TRADERS



Independent traders can work together to join local and UK networks and create traders associations that go beyond individual interests and focus on common issues. In this way information, solutions and practical action is shared and traders voices strengthened.

LOCAL COUNCILS



Local Councils should support traders associations, and enter into dialogue with independent retailers and local interest groups to jointly plan improvements to shopping areas and markets, recognising the value that they can bring to local areas. This should be reflected in local plans and economic development strategies and also in the setting of local business rates. Also the council can directly support local businesses through its procurement policy.

DEVELOPERS & CENTRE MANAGERS



Developers and shopping centre managers need to pilot new models of providing retail space in hyper diverse areas. This could include providing lower cost units for local businesses through reduced rents and service charges and by providing tailored support to enable very local businesses to grow and thrive.

RESEARCHERS & LOCAL GROUPS



Researchers and local interest groups can help bring into view the social, economic and cultural value that independent retailers often contribute to the local community.

LOCAL RESIDENTS



Local residents, visitors and other local businesses can support local trade by buying goods and services through local independent traders which in turn will strengthen the local economy.



*For more information about the Trading Places research project
contact: www.social-life.co*



