

Lancaster lunacy

The recent decision to build a shopping centre in Lancaster city centre ignores all the lessons of planning history. PTOLEMY DEAN hopes there is time to think again

I WOULD like to suggest that Britain has broadly two types of town. Firstly, 'liveable' towns, which have centres that still retain houses near local shops, schools and parks. These are the historic and attractive places in which we might choose to live.

The second group, the 'retail' towns, had their centres sacrificed in the 1960s and 1970s for modern shopping precincts and enveloping ring roads. In places like these, uniform plastic signs smother the old shop fronts to make one town much like another. And the severance of residential and commercial districts from each other by roads has condemned large areas of them to semi-desertion and demonised their atmosphere, particularly at night. They are culturally and socially depressing places. Do we really want to create any more of them?



The architects' drawing showing how the new development will sit in the existing townscape contrasts with how the area currently looks, captured by Ptolemy Dean

'The whole economic model for regenerating a town through the construction of shopping precincts has been discredited'

Apparently so. Lancaster, which has every ingredient necessary to make it a liveable town, has recently given consent for a large shopping centre that will obliterate a quarter of its old town. If Lancaster had a cathedral, we might think of it like York. Instead, it has a spectacular topography of rolling hills and distant sea views. A castle and church stand on a hill surrounded by rows of neatly constructed Georgian houses and cobbled streets. A 17th-century town hall looks over a large market place with a good mix of local and national shops. There is a converted Corn Exchange sell-

ing grungy clothes, and a busy delicatessen with fresh local food. There is also an Edwardian town hall bequeathed by a generous benefactor in a square that feels, for a moment, like Edinburgh.

The city is intimate and complete, and remains a down-to-earth county town at the heart of a rural community. If there's a drawback in Lancaster, then it must be its traffic. The A6 thunders through on a one-way racetrack, severing the town into two. The area beyond the ring road used to be a brewery, whose great stone buildings stand gaunt and tall, unloved and, inexplicably, unlisted. An old street called Stonewell is the gateway to this district. Its gentle curve of buildings forms a small irregularly shaped square with a drinking fountain at the centre. Beyond the brewery, a canal runs at high level, offering one of the

best skyline views of the town.

This is the setting for the new precinct, which will obliterate the views, the old streets and the brewery. A 'gateway bridge' will smash through the old houses on Stonewell in order to link it to the heart of the town. If it succeeds, the development will suck the lifeblood from the market square and the town will lose forever the chance to make itself a new living quarter for the town community as a whole. Large areas will be placed permanently beyond visual salvation. We know this as we have seen it all before. The developer's promises of 'jobs and investment' triumphed in all those 'retail' towns we now avoid.

There are two black ironies to this decision. The first is that there are countless examples of historic districts like this that have been renovated and refur-

bished with imagination and flair. It is perfectly credible, therefore, to suppose that the old buildings and the ancient street plan of this quarter could be successfully revived as a mixed residential and working quarter. The second is that the whole economic model for regenerating a town through the construction of shopping precincts has been discredited. In 2008, Lancaster is making the mistakes last made in the 1980s.

The tragedy of Lancaster is a national one. It demonstrates how councils and planning committees in some of our most beautiful towns still find the flawed and hopelessly outmoded vision of achieving urban salvation by building monolithic shopping precincts impossible to resist. Our only hope now is for the scheme to be 'called in' for public enquiry.