## Midland

## Where’s That Town Again?

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Peter Vintila is former Convenor of the Friends of Midland University. Last year while working in this capacity, he was invited to address a forum organised by the Swan Chamber of Commerce on the positive social and economic impacts of a university presence on the old town centre of Midland.

In the article below, he begins to outline a larger discussion. He tries to show how the case for a more substantial university presence in Midland should be allied with a larger campaign involving a suite of integrated strategies for regional economic, social and cultural renewal. He begins with the future of the old town centre because major and irreversible decisions affecting the health of the old centre are about to be made? **Will an expanded Midland Gate become the new town centre by starving the old town completely of its daily bread in the form of retail trade? Or will some of this critical activity and the urban nourishment it provides be returned to the old centre which once proudly encompassed Perth’s busiest main street.**

Peter Vintila has spent the past 11 years engaged in teaching and research focussed on contemporary cities and regions. His interest in town centre development stems from this work. His interest in higher education policy stems both from his life as an urban studies teacher and from the increasingly common understanding that facilities for higher learning are now integral to all economic development and urban revival projects.

**Serious Decline**

In March, earlier this year, I attended a forum conducted by the Swan Chamber of Commerce. The forum, advertised as MIDLAND TOWN CENTRE: THE FUTURE IS ABOUT TO BEGIN, sought to discuss two issues: 1) the sad economic state of the old town centre and 2) strategies for its revival. Once comprising the busiest town centre in the whole of WA, Helena St and the Great Northern Highway were, despite considerable public investment and cosmetic attention over the last decade still in a depressed and often shabby state. Why was the old town so resistant to recovery and what could be done about it?

### Interconnected Fortunes

Much of the explanation for the town centre’s decline was provided in working notes distributed by the Chamber to forum participants:

Midland Gate drew retail from the town centre, but nothing replaced much of this retail – the town didn’t create a new focus.

Further points in the notes continued as follows:

People have gone to Midland Gate to shop and see no reason to come into the town centre…. Over the years, there has been less and less reason for accessing the town centre, as businesses relocated…. The service industries/banks etc have also relocated away from the town centre.

And further complaints heard not just at the forum but everywhere in Midland followed: empty and poorly maintained streets, vacant property, falling rents, neglected buildings, unsafe open space and so on.

Despite this clear understanding of old Midland’s decline, the Midland Gate expansion proposal is moving towards closure. The project has been approved by the City and only the imposition of last minute development controls can limit the further damage it is likely to inflict on the old town. These controls relate principally to the expansion of supermarket and department store facilities. Constraints here on Midland Gate would have the impact of directing some of these life-supporting commercial activities back to the old town centre.

It is important to understand that this form of decline is hardly unique to Midland. For the past four decades or so, enclosed malls, like Midland Gate, often taking advantage of cheaper out-of-town land have damaged traditional down town centres and main streets in cities and towns worldwide. These problems have been most severe in the US where malls and “power centres” have grown so large as to become “edge cities” and where even some big old city centres have experienced serious decline as a consequence. In Europe, with its stronger urban culture, the damage was less – although, in the UK, Margaret Thatcher’s deregulation frenzy led to an attack on urban planning controls which resulted in nationwide urban decline.

### New Urbanism

In the 1990s, however, things have begun to turn around - due principally to changes in planning philosophy often associated with so-called “new urbanism”. New urbanist principles now claim to be able address a large number of problems including excessive car dependence, urban depopulation, economic decline, and suburban isolation, apathy and unattractiveness. Some of these claims still need proper testing. But one no longer needs to travel far to see new urbanist principles at work in Perth as they bring attractive and busy streets to particular town centres on Midland’s scale.

The old and the new Subiaco town centre, Fremantle and, on a smaller scale, Bayview Terrace in Claremont, Napolean Street in Cottesloe and Oxford Street in Leederville. To the east, Beaufort St in Mt Lawley provides another example and further east in less affluent country, one can find modest success in Bayswater. Common to all these local examples is a closely woven mixed use urban fabric in which everyday retail activity sits cheek by jowl – never very far away - with expanding entertainment, cultural and other service-based land uses. Underpinning these developments in most places too is traffic calming, pedestrianisation, and the reclamation of aesthetically revitalised pulic open space.

Speaking in historical terms, the grand shopping mall has, in many world centres of postindustrial power, risen to the peak of its popularity and is now perhaps declining. It is again becoming clear that main streets must, in most circumstances, remain engaged in retail trading in order to keep their life and vigour. This activity, furthermore, must spill out of doors into open areas of the street so that urban public space is filled with a bustling, interested and friendly human presence as well.

**Midland wants more mall?**

Despite its own negative experience with mall development and with streets deprived of significant retailing activity, many small business propietors do not want to face up to the obvious. While the damage which malls can do are apparent to Midlanders, new urbanist principles seem not yet to have reached them. At the Chamber of Commerce forum, participants were almost unanimous in their support for more mall, for the huge proposed expansion of Midland Gate. And Midland Gate was there – its PR people invited as guest speakers. Despite the incisive notes distributed by the Chamber of Commerce at the meeting, only one lonely town centre property owner voiced any opposition.

The rest of those plying their marginal businesses in the old town (often in deteriorating building stock) refused to see any connection between their plight and the expanding presence of Midland Gate. But there is little doubt they are now supporting a development which may well further undermine their commercial positions and further damage the old town.

### A Portrait of Decline

Already the condition and uses of the old centre make this clear. At one end stands a complex of shiny new multi-storey offices accommodating government guest workers from nine to five – they provide trade for a few smarter lunchtime cafes and the Council Club. Otherwise they demonstrate how hard it is to replace local retailing as the main source of life in any smaller town centre or main street.

The rest of the old main street hosts less-than-chic real estate offices, accounting firms, solicitors rooms and professional medical suites. A local MP makes a symbolic show of loyalty and a few retailers of new and discounted wares are also toughing it out. (Even King Kong has left the old city centre and attached itself to Midland Gate’s more bounteous skirt.) The rest of the stayers include second hand and op shops, a security firm, money lenders, martial arts trainers, a petrol station, two sex shops, a brothel, a car hire joint and an older, smaller shopping mall - Centrepoint - opposite an uninspiring railway terminal and bus interchange. In any thriving town, many of these businesses provide backstreet land uses.

To complete the picture of urban decline here, the whole strip is frequently punctuated by the sorry display of permanently padlocked doors, blanked out shop fronts and uninviting arcades. There is more – or should I say there will soon be less. Just around corner from Helena St, Midland hosts a small twin theatre cinema complex – the Regent. The Regent is likely to collapse if Midland Gate develops its planned 8 theatre strong complex.

### New town centre at Midland Gate?

Whether intentionally or not, the proprietors of Midland Gate are creating a new town centre in their expanded mall – and Midland cannot support two centres. The expectation that the old town centre will *ultimately* be restored as a result of bridging developments along a good 600-700 metres of street front (The Crescent to the junction of Helena St) is likely to prove a vain hope. “*Ultimately”* can be a very long time and 600 metres is long distance to bridge with land uses and activities sufficiently exciting to make an integrated whole of two separate parts. It is also too far to walk! This is why the City has asked for a shuttle bus to connect the railway station and the expanded Midland Gate. With this service in place, not even train travellers will be required to walk or linger in any part of the old centre.

### What are the planners thinking?

One of the more disappointing aspects of these developments relates to the roles of Midland’s two planning agencies. Neither the City of Swan nor the Midland Redevelopment Authority (MRA) have raised any serious objections to the expansion of Midland Gate. Indeed the MRA has, since its work began in earnest, planned its town centre precinct project on the assumption that the expansion of Midland Gate was a settled matter. Alternatives were never seriously considered. Both in the City and in the MRA, we are dealing with people who, given their strategic objectives, should be thinking more carefully. All parties involved declare themselves committed to the revival of the old town centre but actual planning and development are contributing to its further stagnation if not ruin. Let’s be honest about this, at least.

##### An alternative proposal

The conduct of the City and the MRA are disappointing from a political as well as from as from a planning point of view. Both bodies have given only scant attention to an alternative plan which would see new retail capacity developed within the town centre – ie the proposed expansion of Centrepoint – and clustered around the railway station and bus terminal. Centrepoint, again, is the smaller shopping mall located within the old town centre and, significantly, it sits between the railway station and the old town’s major civic buildings.

Of course there are different ways in which this development can proceed – and room for much argument about key issues such as the connection of buildings to road, rail and pedestrian environments and the manner is which Centrepoint might bridge the old town with the Railway Workshops site.

But all of this aside, recognising the significance of the Centrepoint site is important just because it could bring a decent helping of retail activity back to the old city centre – not all of it, just a reasonable helping. Midland Gate will remain a profitable enterprise without expanding. Only proposed new capacity needs to be directed back to the old town centre. Another great advantage of such a strategy is that small businesses (those operating within larger centres) would cease to fall under the monopoly control of single centre managements. Any who believes in competition and free markets should believe this to be good thing.

### Conclusion

Although it may seem so, the expansion of Midland Gate is not merely a private or commercial development. It marks, rather, a critical turning point in Midland’s history: the old town centre is about to be decommissioned and a new, enclosed, “malled” one put in its place at Midland Gate. This is a matter of the utmost public importance and should really have called for some robust public discussion. It called, at the very least, for the careful consideration and critical evaluation of all feasible alternatives.

Perhaps, like Midland’s planners, Midland’s people do not really care deeply for the old town. If they do, however, if they are to have any say at all they must speak immediately. And the questions they must ask themselves are these: if the region needs expanded retail capacity, where should it be located? Concentrated further on the town’s edge in enclosed private space or brought back to the old, open and public town centre which still calls out for mending and which revival and charrette proposals galore have left in a pretty sorry state?

And the people of Midland must also ask themselves what kind of town they want - not just for themselves but for their children and grandparents as well. Do they want a town that is locked after 5pm and for many hours on weekends and other holidays when quality public space is in peak demand. Do they want a town in which streets are generally lifeless and safe only for those in cars. Or do they expect - as people all over the world are coming to expect - something more than this? Successful cities and towns have always offered more. Shopping malls never have - no matter how big, climate controlled or profitable.

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