

The People in Placemaking

September 2019

As a placemaker I find I'm never really on holiday even when I am. I constantly find myself analysing the lay out of town centres, the number of empty shops, the diversity of the neighbourhood and whether or not there are things for people to 'do'.

When a last minute stay-cation to the Kent coast became viable this Summer, following some glorious late August Sunshine, I scoured town centres from Camber to Deal looking for a spot to stop for a family of five. As you can imagine everywhere on the top of the list was fully booked and with the greatest respect that's how I happened upon Ashford.

A town Centre with great connections (think Paris, London and the Sea all within easy reach), it was a reasonable journey from home and most definitely on the up, well from what the press was saying certainly. Having undergone a multimillion-pound regeneration thanks to Kent County Council it is said to be bucking the trend for Town Centre decline. We were staying in the brand new development Elwick Place. Just on the edge of the Town Centre it is a new complex between the International Train Station and the New Shopping Centre; County Square. The Elwick place development features a Travelodge Hotel, Picture House Cinema and a whole host of large restaurant spaces and some beautiful new public realm. The huge Debenhams across the road led the list of high Street tenants in the mall. I was intrigued. The area seemed to look new and fancy but the car park was empty, all the restaurants vacant and nervous pedestrians hovered at the new-fangled zebra style crossing not entirely sure whether they should chance their luck.

A serendipitous encounter with a couple of locals at the most complicated parking meter in the history of parking made for a very revealing conversation. It became quickly apparent that this was placemaking for future Ashford, not quite current Ashford and certainly not old Ashford.

Residents had been up in arms about the new picture house cinema claiming it wasn't needed, two years on and none of the restaurants had been let and the Debenhams is closing at Christmas. I felt sad.

The town is alive with developments of one and two bed luxury flats to which they hope to entice young professionals from London with the promise of a 36 minute fast train and a host of leisure opportunities built just for them and yet meanwhile the town is struggling to integrate a huge influx of immigrants as London Boroughs seek to find alternative accommodation for their most deprived residents at a fraction of the cost. The town centre was full of groups of young men, Somalian, Afghan and Eastern European none of whom mixed with each other or the locals. Rough sleepers and beggars were out most of the day and it was a far cry from the slick sanitised experience of the Designer Shopping outlet centre just a few minutes out of town.

It reminded me that regeneration is a dialogue. We need to listen as place makers. We have to hear the issues, understand the needs and create the solutions that help to make places better. This certainly felt like more of a monologue. Whilst the 'build it and they will come' mentality is bold it feels obvious to say that creating something together with the community creates natural buy in from the start and long-term success in the future. I really hope that the development will become a success. That the new places that open fill the gaps in the current offer and that the local authority will continue to invest in its old spaces as well as making new ones.

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