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Aviemore: Dude, where's my town centre?

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Abstract— This paper concerns the development of Aviemore, a village in the Highlands of Scotland, and the importance of considering a lost 'town centre'. Aviemore evolved rapidly as an all-year tourism destination in the 1960s and 1970s, mainly through the construction of a planned tourism 'Centre'. The Centre itself consisted of a collection of buildings including an ice rink, swimming pool, various retail outlets, restaurants and hotels, and became a major focus for Scottish tourism during the following 20 years. The 'Centre' was located to one side of the older village, and was planned so as to avoid heavy traffic, with Aviemore itself located on one of the main north to south traffic routes, including a railway station. During the 1980s, the 'Centre' suffered from an economic downturn, due in part to a growth in overseas tourism, and was partly demolished during the 1990s. Recent investment to Aviemore and the village has seen a return of tourist activity and revenue to the area, with a particular emphasis on skiing, hillwalking and other outward-bound activities. However, the village is perceived to lack an identifiable town centre or focal point. The research methodology involved a mixed methods approach, including interviews with members of the public and the local community council, and data collection in the field. The study concludes that the village lacks a recognised or recognisable 'town centre', and argues that establishing this in future developments will be a crucial next step in re-establishing Aviemore as a village, in addition to offering tourism opportunities.

Keywords- Town centres; public engagement; planning; Aviemore; placemaking

I. INTRODUCTION

This paper concerns the development of the village of Aviemore, which is located in the Highlands of Scotland. Prior to the 1960s, the village had already been a popular holiday destination, serviced by hotels located on the Main Street, and situated on a main railway route running north from Glasgow to the north. The old village had a linear layout, with activity located within the heart of the settlement.

The focus of the research was to consider the effects of development in the 1960s and 1970s which significantly moved the physical focus of the tourist industry to the west of the village, in a purpose built new 'Aviemore Centre', where the 'Centre' was accessed via a single access point from the main street (Grampian Road). In particular, the research sought to explore how perception of a 'town centre' stands nowadays, following a further phase of (re)development in the nearly 2000s, which concentrated on the now brownfield and partly derelict site of the original 60s initiative. Rather than taking a

cartographically-based approach to establishing a theoretical 'centre' of the village, the research addressed this question of 'centrality' through discussion with the local Community Council, and through the collection of qualitative on-site data from residents and visitors.

The work is important in that it regards the village of Aviemore as a town in which people live and work, as opposed to a destination which tourists will visit for short periods. This perspective, as is the case with many such tourism-dependent areas, demands that the village serve multiple purposes, whilst recognising that traditional approaches to the design of town layouts in Scotland (e.g. the 'Burgh') may not hold.

II. AVIEMORE - A SHORT HISTORY

A. Development during the 1960s

In the late 1950s, the village of Aviemore was described [1] by Mearns as

'an attractive little place with many nice houses, but it is spoiled by the railway line which obtrudes itself insistently on the eye and ear.'

Mearns [1] noted that the village contained two hotels and despite the *'roar of a passing train'* afforded views of and access to the surrounding countryside. Much later, in 2003, the surrounding area covering 4528km² was designated the Cairngorms National Park.

Following applications in 1964, planning permission was granted for the construction of a purpose built tourist 'Centre' to the west of the village. Much of the Centre was designed by architect John Poulson (whose subsequent exposure and conviction for bribery of officials, resulting in a prison term from 1974-1977, is perhaps worthy of a paper in itself), and included hotels and an ice rink. In 1972, planning permission was granted to further extend the Centre, to include additional contained attractions, alongside the construction of additional hotel and self-catering facilities.

The 1970s saw the Centre experience great popularity and find a place within the Scottish tourism industry. However, reports as to the actual economic success of the centre from the time are mixed, this being despite the heyday of the Centre predating the subsequent boom in overseas tourist destinations.

Nevertheless, evidence of the Centre's year-round popularity can be found in its use as a location for prominent TV broadcasts, suggesting perhaps that the Centre was regarded as serving a purpose as a destination unto itself, as opposed to being a base from which tourists could explore the surrounding area. Indeed, developments in the early 1970s (including "Santaland") had an ability to draw tourists even during the summer months (despite the attraction's name), and for activities which were unrelated to the sporting opportunities nearby.

Figure 1. Grampian Road (main street in Aviemore)



B. A current context

During the 1990s, the economic fortunes of the constructed Centre took a downturn, and the buildings and site were purchased by a new owner, Premier Land, in 1995. Reports from the time between purchase and redevelopment [2] suggest an air of optimism in the village, following a long period of decline. This led in turn to a £7.5Million redevelopment project, with much of the 1960s Centre (rink, pool, attractions) demolished in 1998. The redevelopment included the construction of a new retail and conference building, as well as the retaining and refurbishment of selected hotel premises is from the 1960s (such as the 'Strathspey Hotel', now remodelled by the Macdonald Group - figure 2).

Notable evidence of the emotional value which many past visitors attach to the old Centre can be found within the recent growth of interest in 'abandoned architecture'. That movement has typically, within Scotland at least, tended to focus on urban areas, and ex-industrial or other such functional buildings such as hospitals or schools. However, the old purpose-built Aviemore 'Centre' has featured in both online and television

explorations of abandoned sites, with a particular fondness exhibited for 'Santaland' [3, 4]. Perhaps in an unexpected way, then, one can argue that the tourism-focused developments and buildings represent an aspect of social heritage (if not architectural heritage), yet consideration of how to co-locate local housing and new developments equally requires recognition of the value afforded by the surrounding natural landscape (as noted in [5]).

As Aviemore moves beyond this phase of decline and rejuvenation, then, the subject of town centres, and the

performance in both economic and social terms, comes to the fore. Whilst the focus of many previous studies has tended to be larger cities, common effects have often be recognised at the micro scale, even in a settlement such as Aviemore. For example, the shift from a reliance on smaller local shops towards larger supermarkets (e.g. Tesco), as noted in the 1990s [6].

With regards to thinking about the 'health' of town centres, Ravenscroft [7] advocated an approach which could recognise a wider range of performance targets than property value, and take into account broader activities (e.g. leisure). Given that recent census statistics would suggest that Aviemore has a population with almost 30% of the residents under the age of 25, observations regarding the importance of town centres to 'afford' the opportunity for interaction and activity among adolescents [8] might point towards future design strategies.

Figure 2. The former 'Strathspey' Hotel, Aviemore



III. STAKEHOLDER AND PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT

A novel approach taken by the research was to involve stakeholders, a local community leader and a constituency drawn from users and occupants of Aviemore itself in the study. This was an alternative to an architecturally- or cartographically-led method, in that perception and local knowledge was used to generate valuable and informative understanding of the current context, and perception of where areas of social and architectural focus may lie. It was crucial to gauge an understanding of the perception held by the locals about their community. All parts of the study used an entirely qualitative approach to data analysis.

Set up within the context of the Local Government (Scotland) Act of 1973, the community council has a role in gathering, coordinating and subsequently expressing the views of local residents to public authorities in order that action can be taken to resolve issues and improve the facilities and amenities available to the local population.

Town centres are central components in the success of local place at the core of community life. One of the key questions or areas of interest within the context of the interviews with residents was, therefore, related to where the centre of Aviemore is today.

A. *The Community Council*

An interview was conducted with the Chairman of the Community Council¹, on the topic of how the town centre had evolved, and where the town centre lay today. In discussion about the current focus or activity in the town, and the location if any of a recognizable town centre, the Chairman commented that

“There’s really two centres in Aviemore, I suppose. There’s the old ‘Aviemore Centre’... but to me, the centre is at the moment... where Tesco is and the railway...”

This prompted the research design to focus on this issue of a recognisable ‘town centre’, when approaching other groups. In reference to the changing nature of tourism in Aviemore, the Chairman had an interesting observation about the manner in which the demographic of visitors to the village had changed markedly since the 1970s.

‘The ‘Aviemore Centre’ has changed a lot over the years. It used to have five discos and attract a riff-raff of sorts. We were actually across the front cover of the newspaper one year as, ‘SHABBYMORE!’. But after that the late hours catering license was stopped, and within 6 months the bars were taking it in turns to open. When the Macdonald Group took over the resort in the 90’s, they changed a lot and now it’s mainly families.’

¹ <http://www.visitaviemore.com/aviemore-community/aviemore-community-council/>

Again one is reminded of press reports from the early 2000s, and left to reflect on how the town perhaps now faces an architectural challenge, to reimagine the town layout following a rediscovery of tourism to the area.

B. Public survey

- Um... probably round about sort of that way... the police station
- I'd say along the high street here. There's the next lot up which has a lot of shops up the road and then it's just houses up that end (Figure 5)



Figure 3. Tesco

The interview was followed by a single-question survey, conducted with a random sample of members of the public, in Aviemore itself (the researchers stood in Grampian Road).

"Where is the centre of Aviemore?"

The survey received responses from 34 individuals, and key answers included comments on location, the meaning of what the question might mean, and comments about relationships between the old village and the constructed tourist 'centre'. Responses which are representative of the sample include:

- As in literal center where people hang out?
- The geographical centre?
- Tesco (Figure 3)
- What a weird question!
- Roughly about here: the toilets, you've got the car park, the police station (Figure 4), things that you know

- Now? Or where the centre used to be? The busiest place in Aviemore is between the toilets and the station (Figure 6)
- The geographical centre is at Blacks, the social centre is around Tesco
- Right now it might be Tesco, but it might end up here at the roundabout. Because we might be getting new stores – Marks and Spencer and a home store
- Well it used to be this sort of area. You know the ... Cairngorm Hotel?... is sort of the hub because we've now got the Macdonald Resort, that big huge Aviemore centre with that monstrosity of a hotel."
- It's certainly not where the Macdonald resort is.



Figure 4. A shop located on Grampian Road (Blacks)

Figure 6. Road junction on the main through route

Whilst these answers (the figures illustrate the diversity of locations referred to) suggest that there is some degree of accidental focus for some (that is, Tesco is a retail unit rather than a 'designed' social focus), they are also quite some distance from what urbanists might regard as nodes or landmarks (following Lynch [9]) or even walkable streets [10].

C. Interviews with selected respondents

Six further interviews were undertaken with local residents, aimed at exploring a broader range of issues within the town. This included a discussion of community and identity within Aviemore, a perceived lack of a clear 'town centre' and sizable physical distance between the residential areas and the main retail precinct.

Interviewees felt that there were some identifiable activities which pointed to there being a sense of community in the village, particularly among residents. It was recognised that there were numerous social events, some of which related to the tourist centre (e.g. a Harley weekend) with others relating more to local community life (e.g. voluntary flower planting, switching on of the Christmas lights). Interestingly, one interviewee commented that there were now a number of different communities' in Aviemore, but that these came together among such events, or around the likes of the children's playgroup. There was however no more consensus regarding the 'town centre' than with the wider group.

Regarding the provision of local services, there was interesting discussion of a perceived lack of facilities (e.g. no secondary schooling, a lack of housing for the elderly), although given the population (2836 in 2011, Highland Council). Unlike some areas in rural Scotland, one respondent had observed, that many people had left to study in the cities, but that most returned to Aviemore. This final point would be worth studying further, it is suggested. USP [11] suggest that the town has a notably mixed demographic, with 28% of the population holding a degree qualification, of higher.

The interviews also touched on discussion of new housing developments in the area, where respondents felt that there was a lack of balance between the number of houses and the pressure this put on facilities, amenities and a lack of affordable housing. A development at nearby An Camas Mor (1500 residential units) has been planned to mitigate some of these issues, including the provision of affordable housing and community facilities [12].

IV. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper concludes that whilst the village of Aviemore has changed very considerably over the past 50 years, and that this has been driven to a great extent by a series of architectural and tourism-driven interventions, there has not been a corresponding attention given to the development of a coherent town- or village- centre.

This arguably means that the village as it stands today can demonstrate economic benefits from both the constructed

facilities and its situation within the National Park. However, the village lacks a recognised or recognisable 'town centre', this evidenced by results from all three of the qualitative studies undertaken. Reference to those features or landmarks identified as signifying points or areas of focus for residents range from the functional and understandable (e.g. retail units, or the police station) to the mundane (the car park or public toilets).

The research argues that there is a need to position placemaking as a central part of future developments, and that this will be a crucial next step in re-establishing Aviemore as a village. Recognising the recent redevelopments in local tourism, including the provision of amenities for use by the local population (e.g. a swimming pool), there would appear to now be an opportunity to turn attention to the village itself, and to the establishment of clearer nodes and areas of activity. As noted, these need not follow Scottish precedent, but a deliberate and community-led could have positive results in terms of social as well as economic capital.

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