

OUTLET CENTRES

Price and environment are key to the continued success of outlet centres, as **John Ryan** reports



Why outlet centres remain relevant



Designer outlet centres are a thing of the past, aren't they? These are the places where you go to get remaindered lines that weren't wanted the first time around, and they're generally not that cheap. And aren't they all the same – a series of uniformly sized units with low-cost fit-outs?

These and questions like them are some of the prejudices that tend to be mentioned in the same breath as outlet centres – places generally located on the edge of town, where branded merchandise is sold for less than might be expected.

The problem these developments have faced over the past decade or so is that high street retail price deflation, in real terms at least, has turned what might once have seemed to be bargain central into destinations where low price might not always be the first thing that springs to mind.

Outlet centres still have a fair degree of value, however, even if the divide between high street and branded sheds on the urban periphery is not as stark as it might once have

been. Crowds still flock to them, perhaps because as well as being purveyors of discounted stock, they are destinations in their own right – places where you might actually want to go for an outing.

Few places in the UK show this more clearly than the Swindon Designer Outlet centre. This one has been around for years, but it still exerts sufficient pull for its owner McArthurGlen to have recently added 50,000 sq ft to the scheme in the form of the Long Shop, part of the Grade II-listed Great Western Railway works, out of which the Designer Outlet has been carved. It is also worth noting ►

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Swindon Outlet Centre uses its historical setting to entice shoppers to a destination that includes a museum and bijoux apartments, as well as opportunities for outlet shopping. Shoppers see a visit here as a day out



that this is the third enlargement of the centre since it opened almost 20 years ago and to judge by the numbers in the centre on a recent bank holiday, enthusiastic supporters of it as a concept show little sign of diminishing.

The question, however, is what makes this a location that shoppers want to frequent when there is so much on offer across UK malls and high streets, and does design have a part to play in this? The answer to the second part is yes. Swindon Designer Outlet is a retail vehicle that takes advantage of a historical setting and makes shopping just part of a total package that also includes a museum and a fair number of bijoux apartments that are currently being marketed heavily.

The first part is simple. Shoppers go to an outlet centre for a mix of discounted brands and a day out. For the most part they are located away from town centres, parking is free and once visitors have arrived, there is a sense of captive consumers. The fact that unbranded merchandise may be cheaper is not really the point. Outlet centre shoppers are fixated on the label.

And nowhere perhaps is this more the case than the big outlet centres found south of the Alps in Italy. Travel to Ancona, on the coast of Le Marche, head inland a few kilometres and there is the ultimate outlet centre. Italy is one of the spiritual homes of the designer label and in Il Castagno Brand Village there is a collection of branded shops that could pass for upscale stores in the great majority of locations. From Prada to Tod's, Hugo Boss to Marc Jacobs, there are standalone shops of the kind more usually found in upscale central shopping destinations.

The Tod's store stands as a good example of why this kind of shopping has an enduring appeal, in spite of the predations of high street

Swindon Designer Outlet makes shopping just part of the total package

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► retailers. Walk into this one and it feels like a shed, but a shed that has been fitted out in a manner that will appeal to those for whom store appearance matters as much as the merchandise. In the mid-shop, internally lit open-fronted wardrobes show the stock off to advantage and there is little sense of the shelves being crowded.

Then there are the low, circular tables where the iconic Tod's loafers are arranged in brightly coloured circles, in just the same manner as the brand's full-price shops and concessions around the world. Couple this with digital screens showing brand content and an art installation on the wall behind the counter, and this is a long way from what most people might associate with this form of retail.

Now enter the nearby Prada store and it's luxury from start to finish, as well as service that would not normally be found in any kind of discount operation. The latter includes headsets that allow the staff to check for sizes in the stockroom, while talking to customers – a features that is still only being slowly adopted by mainstream high street operators.

The fact of the matter is that nothing in this outlet centre is cheap – brands at this end of the market, even at a hefty discount, eschew the 'c' word. But this is the reason that people come to centres of this kind. Brands are on offer and for those to whom this matters, there are bargains to be had. All of this and a series of in-store environments that will make shoppers feel good about being there equates to a positive experience.

In Il Castagno Brand Village there is the additional positive of the weather. It's a fair bet that come summer, shoppers will be able to sit al fresco and sip a cappuccino – something that may be rather defying the odds in Swindon. Whichever country you happen to be in, however, the outlet centre formula remains one that seems to appeal to a broad range of shoppers and which continues to show an ability to reinvent itself in a way that will keep their customers thronging.

At a time when many non-regional shopping centres beyond London are finding it a mild challenge to maintain footfall, outlet centres provide numerous reasons for shoppers to take time to make a journey. Whether there is room for an expansion of this outpost of the retail universe is a moot point, but this remains an ebullient and fast-moving sector.



SWINDON DESIGNER OUTLET, Kemble Drive, Swindon, Wiltshire, SN2 2DY
Ambience mid-market branded day out



IL CASTAGNO BRAND VILLAGE, Via Bernardo della Valle, Sant'Elpidio a Mare, Italy
Ambience upscale through and through – a destination for the well-heeled



Il Castagno Brand Village in Ancona, Italy, offers outlet shopping Italian style: high-end designer goods can be found for sale in a sophisticated setting – and the weather's good, too

