Kathryn Morrison’s task has been enormous: covering just about a thousand years of retail architecture, this work comprises a magnificent collection of visual material and concise history drawn from primary and secondary data. Kathryn Morrison is senior investigator at English Heritage and the value of English Shops and Shopping is reflected in its genesis as a survey of retail buildings begun by the former Royal Commission on the Historical Monuments of England in 1998 and continued since by English Heritage. Fieldwork was carried out by English Heritage photographers over several years, and research has been extensive, delving into the National Monument Records data, local record offices and firm and shop archives. The result is an impressive body of material, particularly the collection of illustrations which includes photographs of current retail outlets, of surviving shops and shop fronts from the medieval period onwards, historical photography of non-extant shops, aerial photography, plans, drawings, paintings and engravings. These form the body of the work, around which Morrison and her fellow researchers have provided well researched texts drawing on contemporary comment, and in most cases, current historiography. By their very nature retail outlets are ephemeral, constantly being updated, changed or torn down, and this book, therefore, provides a remarkable compilation of material relating to an architectural form which has very little surviving examples from a long and varied past. The work is rich in examples from the medieval and early-modern period as well as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, although, surprisingly, as Morrison reveals, in terms of shop front survival it is the ‘contemporary’ design from the 1920s and 30s and from the 50s and 60s that is now thinnest on the ground.

Morrison’s work is first and foremost an architectural history, but it is rare to find an architectural history that takes retail forms seriously. Previous works that have dealt with English retail architecture could be counted on the fingers of one hand, the most notable being Pevsner’s A History of Building Types which included a chapter on commercial buildings encompassing shops. The field of retail history has expanded significantly in recent years, with more detailed research being carried out on specific periods and geographical areas and from the perspectives of geography and cultural history, but Morrison’s book fills a gap in this literature with is specific focus on retail architecture and its spanning of centuries and regions. While early-modern retailing has received considerable research in recent years, Morrison contextualises this with her starting point in the early-medieval period, where scholarship is also growing. Such an approach is a significant contribution and will expand the perspectives of academics and popular readers alike.
To marshal the amount of illustrative material contained in the English Heritage survey and within this book is no mean feat, but Morrison has also dealt well with the difficult task of structuring an approach to the subject of shops and shopping. The catch-all categories of ‘retailing’, ‘shops’ and ‘shopping’ are deployed with alacrity in economic, social and cultural history, however, once probed, these categories can be found to encompass widely divergent types and varieties of forms and functions which do not fall neatly into manageable order. When dealing with the architecture of retail outlets, a method has to be found of breaking down the massive variety and overlapping and contradictory lines of development without losing a sense of richness and complexity. The structure Morrison chooses is to cut across the subject chronologically, but also by type, place and design. In addition to the chapters on broad chronological development, chapters on type cover bazaars, arcades, specialist traders, market halls, emporia and chains, and can therefore deal with their differing chronologies and trajectories. Varieties of site location cover the urban, high streets, out-of-town, precincts and malls, though the rural is sadly lacking. Sensibly, shop front design is hived off in a separate chapter freeing other chapters to concentrate on non-stylistic developments.

It is to Morrison’s credit that she eschews longstanding divisions built into the subject of retail history as it has developed until comparatively recently. Retail outlets have rarely been studied in their own right, and their history more often appears as an unexplored adjunct of studies of consumption, leisure or the economy. The result has been a frequent concentration on London rather than the provinces, on the large-scale and sometimes atypical, on well known chains and names, and the exclusion of food retailing, as well as an emphasis on the post-1850 period, all of which Morrison avoids. The book is refreshingly devoid of sentimentality and nostalgia, and Morrison is not trapped into searching for discreet beginnings or golden ages. The genesis of the department store, for example, is treated within the wider context of developments in warehouses and emporia from 1800 onwards, avoiding the totality of emphasis on this atypical retail form. Considering the traditions of architectural history, the willingness to include so much that is not architecturally ‘fine’ is admirable, just one example being the small town co-operative ‘bungalow’ store of the early twentieth century. It is also rare to find a work on retailing that is willing to treat the Georgian tobacconists and the ‘big box’ supermarket with the same level of attention, and one that does not allow the department store to dominate. Morrison resists the traditional progressionist approach and is sensitive to small-scale outlets in the modern period as well as large-scale (though there is a particular emphasis on post-war shopping centres which perhaps slight throws the balance). The inclusion of food retailing outlets is particularly valuable and creates a far more rounded impression of the field than often appears, and Morrison has extended her remit to include markets and market buildings as venues for shopping rather than confining herself rigidly to the category of ‘fixed shops’.

Attention is paid to interiors as much as exteriors: one of the most revealing effects of the extensive collection of photographs of interiors of both small and large shops, up market and down, is the tracking of the incredible persistence of conventional interior organisation with goods stored on shelving behind long counters. Department stores did little to change this long-standing arrangement, and change did not really arrive in most English shops until the wide spread use of self-service in the 1960s. The distinctions in internal arrangements between seventeenth-century shops and those of the mid twentieth century are a matter of detail rather than substance.

Morrison, with her researcher, Katherine d’Este Hoare, is particularly good on the medieval period, but less so on early-modern period, where there is now a more extensive historiography than the conventional starting point Morrison uses. The section on shopping for pleasure in the eighteenth century is heavily dependent on Adburgham’s Shopping in Style, which effectively restricts the phenomenon of leisure and pleasure shopping to the post-1750 period when it could have been taken back to the early-medieval period where Morrison begins her survey. Likewise Morrison suggests that prior to 1750 shop fronts were not easily or regularly updated, and the chapter on ‘Shopfront design’ covers only 1750 to the present when it could well have been pushed back.

Specialists of a particular period will find the social and economic background sometimes conventional, but
considering Morrison’s vast remit and architectural focus this is not surprising. Nevertheless Morrison does contextualise her subject, considering social and commercial practices, social, economic and cultural change and different market levels as well as architectural practices and building technology. The history of shopping, however, is not a well developed subject area and there is little for Morrison to draw on here, despite its prominence in the title.

Some primary information in the book is treated rather literally (for example Defoe’s account of the cost of fitting up a pastry cook’s in 1710), and there is sometimes a suggestion of a simple transference of ideas and influences (such as the assumption that pre-modern design trends spread outwards from London to the provinces). The index is not always as helpful as it should be (for example, Dyers’s draper’s shop of Ilminster can only be located under Ilminster) and illustration references in the index lead to the page number and not to the illustration number, even though there are often several illustrations on one page.

Regardless, this book is an excellent contribution to an under researched area and an excellent resource.

Notes


The author is happy to accept this review and does not wishes to comment further.

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