

THE CENTRE CAN HOLD

Designer Wayne Hemingway is aiming to help revitalise our towns and cities, reports **Femke Colborne**. And that means much more than shopping

Wayne Hemingway is best known as the man behind the fashion brand Red or Dead, which he started in the 1980s with his wife Geraldine. But since selling it in 1998, he's tried his hand at everything from housebuilding and urban design to curating full-on arts festivals.

Hemingway's latest venture in Liverpool combines all the skills he's amassed. He's the creative director of Transatlantic 175, a seven-week festival to celebrate the 175th anniversary of the formation of the Cunard shipping line, which took the first commercial passengers from the UK to the shores of America.

The city centre festival, which began last month, includes music, fashion, art, design, food, film and more, culminating in a grand finale on 4-5 July, when the Queen Mary 2 will replicate the first Cunard transatlantic sailing.

The location of the festival is important, says Hemingway. "If you get people to come and spend money in a city or a town, it benefits the wider community more than just sticking them in a field and a private company making the money."

Hemingway has been involved with the revitalisation of town and city centres since he and his wife criticised what they called the "Wimpeyfication and Barrattification" of Britain in the early 2000s. Housing mogul George Wimpey challenged them to come up with something better – and they did.

The result was the Staiths South Bank, an 800-property mass-market housing project on Tyneside. Their company Hemingway Design has since been responsible for housing projects in areas including Dartford, Manchester, Maidenhead, Bournemouth, King's Lynn, Skelmersdale and Whitehaven.

On the events side, one of Hemingway

Design's most successful ventures has been the Vintage by the Sea festival in his hometown of Morecambe, which will take place for the third time in September.

"I've still got a great love for Morecambe and I've still got family around there," says 54-year-old Hemingway. "It was an amazing town to be a very young kid in – vibrant, full of life. It was a place full of people laughing and playing and beach life and fishing. And then it obviously had a very tough time from the 1980s onwards and gradually went into that spiral of decline, like so many seaside towns. But now it's starting to come back."

"Humans have always needed a place to get together, going back to Roman forums."

Hemingway Design is also involved in the Blackburn is Open project to revitalise the town's independent retail sector and boost its economy. The scheme includes discounted retail space for designer-makers and craftspeople, a temporary cinema, and festivals and markets.

Hemingway's family moved to Blackburn when he was seven. "When I was young, the town centre was really exciting in terms of things to do. You'd have David Bowie playing and premieres of cool films taking place in this amazing cinema, and loads of nightclubs – really good nightclubs. Now, you can't get a

coffee after 5pm. So we're encouraging life back into the town centre."

But he doesn't have such high hopes for other northern towns. "Blackpool has some pretty serious issues to deal with, because there are a lot more buildings in a mess in Blackpool, and you've got all the hen party stuff that's going on. It's quite hard if you've got a thousand screaming 19-year-old girls with wings on their backs wandering drunk down the prom. That's a harder issue to deal with."

Hemingway believes the regeneration of town centres is being hampered by an unnecessary focus on shopping. "Retail is fine – but a town, for me, isn't just about shopping. I want to do a lot more

than shop when I go into a town. Human beings have always needed a place to get together, going right back to the Roman forums. People want to be with other people, they want human discourse and relationships, or just to chat.

"You get all this Mary Portas stuff and it's all about retail, retail, retail. What's all that about? Buying new stuff all the time? Town centres started as places to meet, to discuss, to work out politics, to barter, to trade, to show off, to be entertained, but then people started to think it was all about shopping – 'The shops are empty, the traders are not doing very well.' Well, no wonder." ■

