Retail resurrection How ailing French town saved its high street and its soul

Angelique Chrisafis
Mulhouse

I n a lane in what was once considered eastern France's grimmest town, a street artist is up a ladder finishing a mural, the independent bookshop has a queue at the till, the organic cooperative is full of customers and Séverine Liebold's arty independent tea shop is doing a brisk trade.

When Liebold opened Tilvist in Mulhouse three years ago, in a space that had been vacant for years, friends tried to persuade her against it. "They said: 'Not Mulhouse, look elsewhere,'" she recalls. "But I stuck with my instinct, and I was right."

Just over a decade ago, Mulhouse, a town of 110,000 people near the German and Swiss borders, was a symbol of the death of the European high street. One of the poorest towns of its size in France, this former hub of the textile industry had long ago been clobbered by factory closures and industrial decline. It had high rates of poverty and youth unemployment, a shrinking population, and more than 100 shops empty or boarded up. The centre had become associated with gangs. "We had every possible cliche thrown at us: grey, grim, austere and unsafe," one local official says.

Today, Mulhouse is known for the staggering transformation of its thriving centre, bucking the national trend for high street closures.

In the past eight years, more than 470 shops and businesses have opened here. Mulhouse is unique in that 75% of new openings are independents, from comic book stores to microbreweries and organic grocers. It is one of the only places in France with as many independents as franchises. And it is one of very few places in France where more shops are opening than closing.

The town's blue-collar history, its old factory buildings, the 136 nationalities living here and its young population are now seen as desirable. Once overshadowed by its more famous Alsace neighbours, the city of Strasbourg or chocolate-box pretty Colmar, Mulhouse is now sought after by brands seeking retail premises. "People say, 'Wow, this place has changed,'" says Sabine Muck, a high school teacher. "The independents make the place a joy, culture is booming."

French political powers woke up late to the problem of dying town centres. Outside the Paris region, an average of 11% of high street premises lie empty, similar to the UK. But France, which has a powerful hypermarket industry and lobby, has for decades hastened town centre decline by allowing out-of-town superstores to mushroom over kilometres of dull grey hangars on the outskirts of towns.

Leaders only recently turned to the issue, fearing boarded up shopfronts and vanishing services could help usher in Donald Trump-style populists. Polls showed that in small French towns, the fewer the services on offer - notably post offices - the higher the vote for the far right.

Mulhouse, under its former rightwing mayor Jean Rottner, decided boarded up shops were just

Séverine Liebold at Tilvist, her tea shop

the most visible symptom of deeper-rooted problems. The city's €36m (£31.5m) investment plan, over six years, tackled several issues at once, including housing. Town centre residents were among the poorest as higher earners moved to houses on the outskirts, leaving properties vacant and rundown.

Mulhouse set out to rebalance the housing mix. Generous subsidies for the renovation of building fronts expedited a facelift of more than 170 buildings. Security and community policing were stepped up. Transport was key - with a new tram system, bike schemes, shuttle buses and cheap parking.

But making the town's public spaces attractive was just as important, with wider pavements, dozens of benches, and what officials deemed a "colossal budget" for tree planting and maintenance, gardening and green space. Local associations, community groups and residents' committees were crucial to the efforts. A town centre manager was appointed to support independents and high street franchises setting up.

Geography played a key role. While the town itself was poor, the surrounding area, close to Switzerland and Germany, had cross-border workers on an income far higher than the French average. Offering original shops that didn't

> 'Everyone rolls up their sleeves to work for it. It's a young town. That's good for the arts scene'
>
> Charlotte Nass
> *Cafe owner*

exist elsewhere was seen as a way of drawing them in.

This was when local independents such as Liebold and her tea shop came along. Having worked in the supermarket business, Liebold understood that people wanted a smaller-scale experience rather than "walking for kilometres with a trolley in a hangar where you didn't see a single leaf on a tree". She says: "The idea was to create somewhere where people feel good, to reappropriate our town centre as a kind of agora, the place where everyone can meet."

Marie Zeugmann, a former teacher, opened her independent clothes shop, Confidence(s), in Mulhouse last month, stocking designers prominent on Instagram and not normally found outside Paris or the Côte d'Azur. Like all

Mulhouse independents, her shop is as much about providing a social space as it is about retail. Zeugmann is turning the second floor into a champagne bar for independent producers. "It's about offering something different that you can't find anywhere else," she says.

Charlotte Nass and Sophie Erhart opened Le Nid, an urban cafe with a village feel on a cobbled street, last month. They had already opened a fashion franchise. "Everyone just rolls up their sleeves to work for it," Nass says. "It's a very young town. That's good for dynamism and for the new arts scene."

In her town hall office, the mayor, Michèle Lutz, who once ran a hair salon in Mulhouse, says she feels greenery and nature are central "to making people feel good and at ease in the town". Mulhouse was once known as a "little Manchester" because of the canals used by the textile industry, but many were later concreted over. Lutz is leading a drive to renovate neglected canalsides that run through various neighbourhoods.

The town must now move into a second phase where the vibrancy of the centre extends to the surrounding districts, she adds. "We can't just concentrate on the small central perimeter, nor simply on shops - there has to be a vision of the town as a whole."