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## High street adaptations: ethnicity, independent retail practices, and Localism in London's urban margins

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# High Street Adaptations:

## Ethnicity, independent retail practices and Localism in London's urban margins

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Suzanne M. Hall, re-submitted 18 May 2011

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### Abstract:

Two key forces are likely to impact on the retail profile of London's high streets. First, is the increasing expansion of London's retail sector across both affiliated and independent sectors, paralleled with economic volatility associated in part with the global crisis in 2008. The second is the political shift, both at national and city scale, towards the recognition of small independent shops and local high streets, as signalled in *The Mayor's draft replacement London Plan*, 2010. This brings us to a third consideration: the growth of ethnic retail, evidenced particularly in London where national levels of immigration and ethnic diversity are at their highest. The *High Street London* report (2010) commissioned by the Mayor's Office emphasises 'the local' role of London's high streets for a 'local' populous, reflecting a larger national policy emphasis on Localism as outlined in *The Localism Bill* (2010). This paper explores what forms of planning are best suited to recognise a rapidly evolving retail landscape together with the crucial differentiations inherent in the local landscape. The focus of this paper is explicitly contextual: it is London-centric in its scope, and relies on detailed survey and ethnographic data of a south London high street located within an area with a high Indices of Deprivation. The context sits in contrast to the notions of the village high street and the upmarket high street, which encapsulate cultural notations of vitality and viability that frame much of the literature and policy around the value of high streets. By analysing the adaptive practices of the ethnically diverse, independent retailers on the Walworth Road, socio-economic measures of high street values are explored. Further, the paper conceptualises adaptation as the strategic adjustments made by independent proprietors in recognition of large-scale economic forces, national regulatory frameworks and local cultural nuances. The paper reframes 'the local' as 'the particular' and emphasises the need for disaggregated, fine-grained research on retail practices in high streets that reflect crucial contextual differentiations. Finally it explores what a planning framework and stewardship mechanism for high streets in London's urban margins might comprise of.

### Introduction

Since late 2008, economic crises and legislated cuts have reverberated across Britain, impressing on a daily basis that we live and work in an austere and volatile present. Are small urban entrepreneurs and micro socio-economic networks able to adapt to the large-

scale impacts of economic change? I address this question through the context of a multi-ethnic high street in London's urban margins and focus on the small, independent shops along the Walworth Road. The idea of adaptation is pursued to explore connections between large-scale economic forces, regulatory frameworks and small-scale, *in situ* resolutions: between global economic restructuring and migration; planning and economic policy; and adaptive retail practices on a local high street.

Further, the paper considers not simply the economy of the small, but also the politics of the local and asks at what point the smallness, diversity and independence of individual shop proprietors translates into a diminutive position of being unable to exert influence on the future of their respective places on a changing street. The analysis of retail practices on a local high street provides a situated opportunity to reflect on recent policy shifts towards recognising small shops and high streets in London within the larger national policy emphasis on Localism (see Policy 4.6, *The Mayor's draft replacement London Plan*, London Assembly, 2010 and *The Localism Bill*, Department for Communities and Local Government, 2010). Where do urban high streets and small, independent retail sit in relation to the combined effects of economic volatility, and the proposition for devolved powers and responsibilities to local authorities and neighbourhood groups?

As a street located within the urban margins of London, the Walworth Road offers us a particular contextual lens with which to view adaptation. For analytic clarification, it is necessary to distinguish between an urban location that is marginal - either on the edge of the city, or lacking in some way and therefore regarded as minor - from one located in the urban margins of the city, in a space that may be physically near to the centre, but perceptually distant from it. The urban margin potentially incorporates cultures and

economies outside of the dominant frame of values, and as such the assets and activities within it may well be invisible to the outsider, often escaping professional, political or official forms of recognition. The analytic distinction of an urban margin is important in this paper for two reasons: it raises the questions of what variations of retail economies emerge within urban margins; and on what basis we measure or value their respective assets and constraints.

An exploration of the adaptive practices of ethnically diverse independent proprietors on a high street in London's urban margins is particularly important in responding to the literature on the demise of small, independent retail in Britain. Because of the 'marked' 'severe' and 'continued' decline of small independent shops across Britain (Coca-Stefaniak *et. al*, 2005) a prominent explanatory binary has emerged, in spite of crucial contextual variations: retail is either large, affiliated and growing; or small, independent and on the rapid demise (see for example *High Street Britain: 2015*, All Part Parliamentary Small Shops Group, 2006). Further, retail growth or demise is readily quantified through retail size, affiliation, turnover, and employment (for example Megicks, 2001) and while the importance of the relationship between economic viability and social vitality is often acknowledged, so too is its empirical under-exploration in urban studies discourse in Britain.

In the public sphere, the debate is captured by the decline of high streets across Britain, with organisations such as the New Economics Foundation (NEF), the Association of Convenience Stores (ACS) and the Save Our Small Shops Campaign, asserting the rapid disappearance of independent shops together with the dominance of developer-driven retail, visibly synonymous with what NEF articulates as *Clone Street Britain* (2004). NEF's

reports on *Ghost Town Britain* (2002; 2003) focus on the impact of economic globalisation on small-scale retail livelihoods, suggesting that in the five-year period between 1995 and 2000, approximately one-fifth or 30 000 local shops and services were lost across Britain.

In contrast Wrigley, Branson and Clarke (2009) provide regional evidence of a perspective other than that of rapid demise. In recounting the University of Southampton study of retail changes in relation to the entry of chain stores in British town centres and high streets during 2003 to 2005, they chart the entry and exit conditions of small stores across 1092 town centres and streets in the UK. The study, commissioned by Tesco, numerates the highly differentiated impact of these convenience chain stores, in terms of both regional location and retail type<sup>1</sup>. The purpose of this paper is neither to contradict the national decline of small independent shops across Britain, nor to reveal in any depth the associated contested debates in the political, regulatory and civic arenas. But by setting aside the paradigm of demise often represented flatly across the national landscape, an empirical exploration of adaptation opens up understandings of the situated short-term and long-term strategies adopted by independent proprietors, as well as the limits of small-scale adaptive capacity in the face of economic and regulatory change.

While the Walworth Road is a street from which one can hear the chimes of Big Ben, it remains culturally and economically distinct from the prestigious Southbank landscape only a mile and a half to its north. Three particular demographic and geographic considerations are important to this exploration of retail within the urban margin: first, the retail life of the Walworth Road is largely supported by a population of some 12 000 residents (many of whom live in the adjacent social housing estates) and 3 000 employees per square kilometre,

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<sup>1</sup> Notably in London during the period from 2000 to 2006, the study reports a 78.5% increase in non-affiliated independent convenience stores.

in walking distance of the street (CABE, 2007). The Walworth Road is also an A-grade bus route along which up to 80 buses per hour travel (Department for Transport, 2008) and the viability of its small retail economies is closely connected to a low to middle income population density combined with high levels of accessibility. The key point of London's local area geographies to local high streets warrants further explanation in light of imminent urban policy. The *High Street London* report (Gort Scott and UCL, 2010) recently commissioned by Design for London on behalf of the Mayor's Office, reveals that two thirds of Londoners live within 500 meters of a high street, and that two thirds of the trips to the local street are made to access forms of exchange and interaction other than retail.

The report signals an overdue political recognition of the role of urban high streets by evidencing their strategic value as accessible and convenient linear aggregations of economic, cultural and social life. Notwithstanding the useful spatial data generated in *High Street London*, its under-representation of London's increasingly unequal and ethnically variegated geography (Hamnett, 2003) tends towards an emphasis of the village-like form and sociability of the high street. This paper works with the understanding that because many local high streets in London aggregate diverse individuals and groups, they are potentially avenues for cross-cultural contact and related economic experimentation. The public significance of the social and economic dimensions of retail spaces is reiterated in the literature on the role of small shops as well as marketplaces in Britain. In Watson's (2009) study of 8 markets across the UK, she highlights not only the highly varied forms of social interaction in marketplaces, but also the mediation of differences across class and ethnicity, because of the amalgamations of work, convenience and leisure that allow for an ordinary but expansive sense of public space. The mutual dependencies of economic exchange and social interchange in ethnically diverse urban contexts will be expanded in this paper.

Second, ward area mapping reveals that Walworth is a comparatively poor neighbourhood ranking amongst the 10th percentile of the most deprived Boroughs in England (Southwark Analytic Hub, 2008). The spatial convergence of deprivation is represented on the Indices of Deprivation GIS 2007 maps at Borough Level (GLA, 2008) that incorporate three of London's largest housing estates - the Heygate, Aylesbury and Brandon Estates - directly adjacent to the Walworth Road. For those most vulnerable to the impacts of change, including the elderly, the young, the poor and the newcomer, local worlds are spaces where much is at stake, since these are the places in which the less mobile are often highly invested; socially, culturally and economically. The point here is to disaggregate the Walworth Road from a generalised "high street" notation to consider what forms of small, independent retail activities endure or indeed flourish on high streets in less affluent parts of London.

Finally, Southwark is an ethnically diverse borough with 48% of its residents listed - to use census terminology - as other than 'White British' (Office for National Statistics, 2001). Southwark's ethnic diversity reflects broader urban and national migration trends: *A Profile of Londoners by Country of Birth* (GLA, 2008) that draws on the Annual Population Survey of 2006 reveals: the *concentration* (40%) of the UK's migrant<sup>2</sup> population in London; the *variety* of its migrant population with ten migrant groups comprising 42% of its makeup<sup>3</sup>; and the *pace* of arrival, with more than half of London's current migrant population arriving after 1990 and a quarter arriving after 2000. Barrett, Jones and McEvoy (2001, page 245) indicate that the uneven and concentrated distribution of ethnic minorities across Britain,

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<sup>2</sup> 'Migrant' is defined as 'all those born outside of the UK'.

<sup>3</sup> These ten migrant groups include: India, Bangladesh, Ireland, Jamaica, Nigeria, Poland, Kenya, Sri Lanka, South Africa and Ghana.

‘are sufficiently large and dense to provide the market for a considerable number of ethnic minority businesses.’ There are therefore connections to be made between London’s increasing ethnic diversity and the retail life within high streets in its urban margins.

In a survey conducted in 2006 along the mile length of the Walworth Road, 128 proprietors of independent shops were recorded, and in interviews conducted with 93 of these, 20 different countries of origin were recorded amongst them, with no single country of origin having a numeric dominance (Hall, 2009). Unlike retail areas in London with a strong ethnic retail brand, such as China Town or Brick Lane (for example <http://www.chinatownlondon.org/> and <http://www.visitbricklane.org/>), the Walworth Road represents a linear aggregation of highly varied ethnic diversity. While the details of the survey will be expanded further in the paper, I raise the question as to whether there are particular resources and constraints that emerge out of the relationship between ethnically diverse street proprietors, independent retail practices and urban place.

This paper therefore analyses the local high street through the paradigm of adaptation as the embedded capacity of small independent proprietors in a particular location to respond to cultural, economic and regulatory change. Further, it asks whether a more fine-grained analysis of urban high streets and retail practices would broaden our understanding of the urban role of high streets, and thereby serve policy. The practices of small-scale entrepreneurial adaptations on the Walworth Road are explored through ethnographic observation, interviews and survey methods conducted within a two-year period of Ph.D. fieldwork from 2006 to 2008 (Hall, 2009). The adaptations articulated by proprietors on the street are developed in this paper through the two concepts of *diversity* and *duration*. Prior to introducing the empirical data, a brief sketch of key planning and economic regulation as



it pertains to retail is undertaken, with purpose of asking what form of regulation is best suited to recognise diverse, independent retail within urban margins.

### **What form of retail is most likely to adapt to regulatory change?**

It is debateable whether national legislation in Britain has served the independent retailer well, let alone the ethnic minority retailer. At the core of *Planning Policy Statement 6: Planning for Town Centres (PPS6)* of 2005, and beginning with *Planning Policy Guidance 6 (revised): Town Centres and Retail Development* of 1996, is a town-centre focus that effectively privileges retail development within town centres in the first instance, and out-of-town locations in the last. *PPS6* establishes a guiding principle that the scale and form of development should respond to the existing *grain* of urban fabric within the town centre. One purpose of the 1996 revision was to limit the increasing development of large-scale, out-of-town retail in recognition of its threat to finer-grained, independent retail that is synonymous with the notion of ‘traditional’ high streets in town centres across Britain.

The unintended consequences of the planning regulation was not simply the notable decline of out-of-town planning approval and hence big-box retail developments from the mid-1990s, but also the rapid and extensive adaptation of the dominant big-box retailers to smaller formats. Moreover it heralded their entry into town centre sites and high streets previously considered unsuitable within the large-format *modus operandi*. Research into the impacts of the *PPG6* regulation has yielded two (not unrelated) findings. First, the legislation, rather than protecting independent shops and traditional high streets, may have

accelerated their decline by allowing the entry of the powerful and rapidly expanding chains<sup>4</sup> into a spatial terrain in which they had previously been absent (Sadun, 2008).

Second, the significant economic, legal and political apparatus of the large retail firms, together with their innovative entrepreneurial/aggressive disposition has meant that for the most part the large retail firms in Britain have been highly adaptive to regulatory change, readily able to alter the scale, format, location and branding of their operations (see in particular Wrigley's account of Tesco's expansion across Britain during the 2000s, 2010). Markets surveys, detailed land value analyses, market data across local and national scales and legal expertise reflect the forms of knowledge and power available to large retail firms, allowing for agile adaptation to regulation. In ways that this paper explores, small independent shops often operate with a far more localised knowledge base, and their political representation at the scales of national and local scale is limited.

Similarly Barrett, Jones and McEvoy (2001) reveal how the repeal of the Shops Act in 1994<sup>5</sup> inadvertently promoted the entry of large chains into small, ethnic minority and specifically South Asian owned retail markets. Since 1950 the Act banned retail on a Sunday, other than the sale of perishable goods, a condition liberally interpreted by small convenience shops whose trade was difficult to monitor. But Barrett, Jones and McEvoy's assertion goes further: 'Public policy related to enterprise support and the regeneration of the urban fabric has been largely ineffective in the arena of ethnic minority business.' (2001, page 250). Their research findings raise broader implications for policy related to high street

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<sup>4</sup> Wrigley (2010, page 182) states, 'By 2007 it [the UK food retail industry] had reached a position where eight large chains accounted for 85 per cent of grocery sales totaling £110 billion per annum, and where the four largest firms (Tesco, Asda/Wal-Mart, Sainsbury and Morrisons) alone accounted for just over 65 per cent.'

<sup>5</sup> The Sunday Trading Act of 1994 permitted Sunday trade, allowing shops over 280 square metres to a maximum of 6 trading hours between 10am and 6pm.

retail in the urban margins, one of which is highlighted here: ethnic minority businesses (including retail) remain marginal, and as typically small enterprises that operate in saturated markets, their adaptive strategies are not necessarily best understood when measured against dominant societal or economic norms.

The assessment of retail 'vitality and 'viability' through economic norms brings me to the imperative of auditing, monitoring and managing town centre retail as underscored in *Planning Policy Statement 4: Planning for Economic Growth* (2009) and the accompanying *PPS4 Planning for Town Centres: Practice Guidance on need impact and the sequential approach* (2009). The documents retain a town-centre focus but promote the role of Regional Planning Bodies and Local Planning Authorities in proactively planning for town centres. Proactive planning entails: an audit of and evidence base for understanding the decline or growth of existing town centres together with their respective role in a wider network of centres; a strategic framework at local level for the management and growth of centres; a quantitative assessment of retail needs including turnover and floor space, alongside a qualitative assessment of needs such as gaps, choice and overtrading.

How will comparatively small, ethnically diverse, independent shops fair in these assessments? Will social interaction and the cultivation of longstanding relationships between proprietors and customers be incorporated into the measures of value? In short, how will culture and longevity fair against turnover and increased land value? Two recent reports provide one view of how value is measured with respect to the vitality and viability of London's high streets. *Paved with Gold: The Real Value of Good Street Design*, commissioned by the Council for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE, 2007) is

a comparative analysis of ten high streets across London<sup>6</sup>, and emphasises the impact of publicly-led improvements in public space. The report calculates the economic returns on public investment from good street design, focusing on the impact on property values. By ascertaining a link between improved street quality, and increases in retail and residential prices, the ultimate conclusion of the report states unequivocally, 'Better streets result in higher market prices' (2007, page 7). Public realm improvements, the report predicts, leads to a 5.2% increase in residential properties, as well as to a 4.9% increase in shop rents. The more complex question of whether higher market prices are good for the social and economic vitality of high streets in general and for the mix of proprietors and customers in less affluent locales like the Walworth Road in particular was not addressed. At this point, the paper turns to the retail practices of selected proprietors along the Walworth Road and analyses diversity and duration as two modes of adaptation.

## **Diversity**

*An urban high street is a linear aggregation of mixed uses and mixed users.*

In travelling past local high streets across London, it is not only small-scale entrepreneurial activity that is rendered visible by the varied shop front displays, but also the prominence of ethnic minority proprietors. This is, in part, a factor of global migration, a convergence of flows that includes both an imperial history of colonisation and the contemporary movements of people and goods across the planet. But as Barrett, Jones and McEvoy (1996) show, it is also a factor of global economic restructuring, one aspect of which is the reorganisation of work labour in the UK and US since the 1980s. Economic restructuring

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<sup>6</sup> The ten high streets include: High Road, North Finchley; High Street, Hampstead; Finchley Road, Swiss Cottage; High Road, Kilburn; The Broadway, West Ealing; High Road, Chiswick; Walworth Road, Southwark; High Road, Streatham; High Street, Tooting and High Street, Clapham.

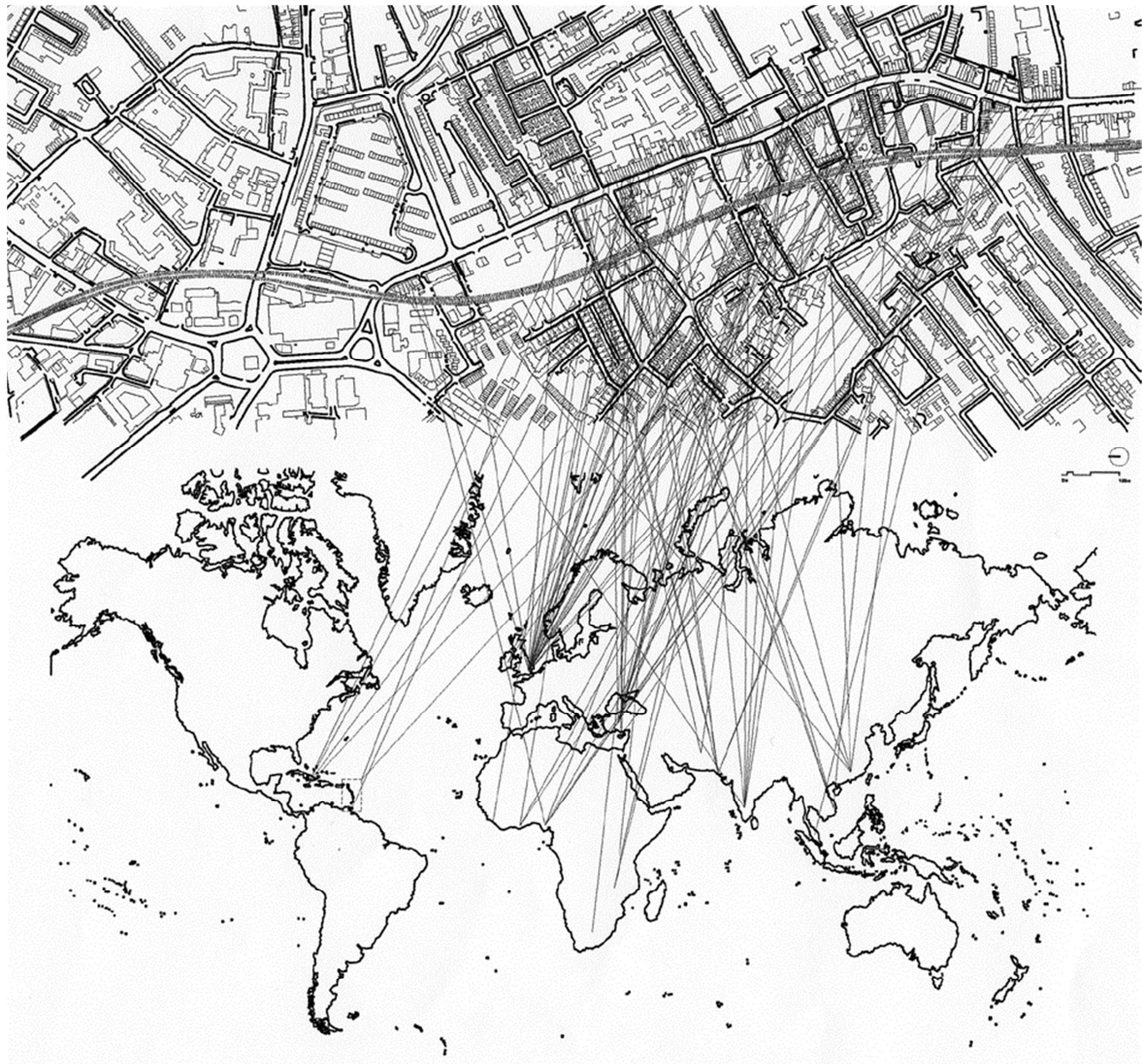
correlates with the dramatic increase in self-employment rates amongst ethnic minorities in the UK and US: 'Ethnic minority capitalism is now virtually a standard feature of advanced urban economies and that, notwithstanding the recession and economic crisis, it is waxing rather than waning' (1996, page 783).

While Barrett, Jones and McEvoy expand on the structural relationships between limited opportunities and why ethnic minorities and migrants pursue self-employment, my question is why ethnic minority retailers end up in certain locations in the city. To begin to address this question, I refer to a valuable historic data set, the *Post Office London Directory Surveys: Streets and Commercial* (Post Office, 1881 to 1950), an annual survey of every proprietor and his/her respective trade on every street in London from the late industrial to the post-war period. Tracing the Walworth Road records across this period, there is evidence of a densely occupied retail street activated by numerous small, independent shops. Records of tailors, cheesemongers and jellied-eel caterers are tabulated alongside proprietors who had emigrated from different places including Greece, Turkey, Italy, Ireland and Eastern Europe. Of broader significance is that with increased industrialisation and urbanisation, the quantity and diversity of cultures participating in the retail life of the Walworth Road increased.

In the absence of comparable, contemporary, street-based surveys of who the independent proprietors are of London's high streets are, a face-to-face survey of every independent shop along the Walworth Road was undertaken. In September 2006, the east and west sides of the mile stretch of street were surveyed, and the proprietors were asked three questions: 'How long has this shop been on the Walworth Road?'; 'Is the shop owned or rented?'; and 'What is the country that you were born in?'. The aim of the survey was part of a larger research

effort directed at understanding how ethnically diverse individuals and groups share space in the city (Hall, 2009; Hall, 2010; Hall and Datta, 2010). But the survey had other uses: it provided an overview of the activities of independent retail on the street and the respective durations over time.

Of the total 227 units along the street, including public services and franchise and chain-related retail, independent retail made up 128 units. Amongst the 93 proprietors included in the survey, there were 20 countries of origin between them. While there was no dominant majority of any single country of origin, England remained the highest (26%), followed by Turkey (11%), India (7.5%), Pakistan (7.5%), Ghana (5%), Jamaica (5%), Nigeria (5%) and Vietnam (5%). Afghanistan, China, Cyprus and Northern Cyprus, Iran, Ireland, Italy, Malawi, Malaysia, Sudan, Sierre Leone and Trinidad were the other countries of origin named. The range of these individuals, their respective ethnicities and countries of origin lends potential weight to the rejection by scholars of ethnic minority entrepreneurialism in advanced urban economies, that entrepreneurial behaviour is endemic to particular ethnicities. Rather, it points to the interplay between social and cultural networks, and economic and regulatory frameworks and its relationship with urban locale (see Kloosterman, van der Luen and Rath's *mixed embeddedness*, 1999).



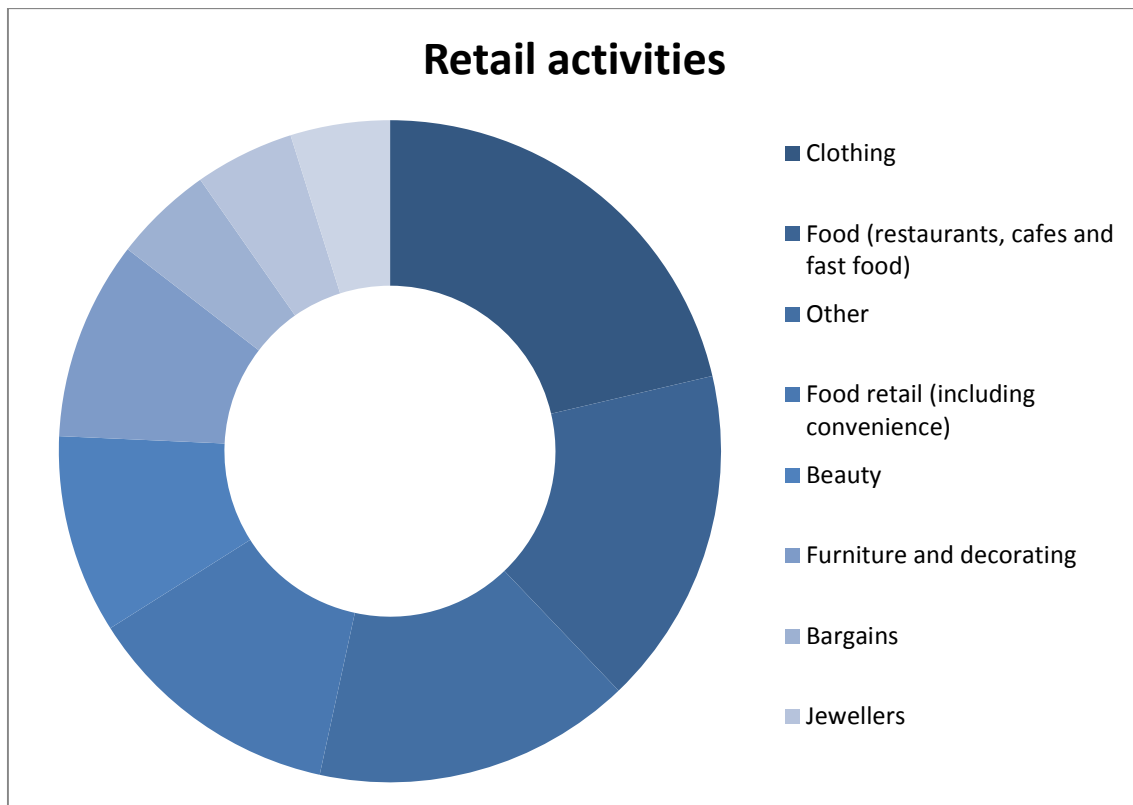
**Figure 1.** A survey map of the Walworth Road paralleled with a map of the world, indicating the origins of the independent shop proprietors in relation to their position on the street (Author's mapping, 2009, page 83).

A mapping of the Walworth Road juxtaposed with a map of the world (figure 1), provides a spatial articulation of the survey of the shop proprietors positions on the street relative to their respective countries of origin. The mapping suggests that the global and local are mutually constitutive: forces of migration and practices of settlement occur with respect to one another where more homogenous or bounded understandings of what it means to be local are altered. When viewed collectively, the countries of origin signify a number of overlapping geographies. The history of the former British Empire is evident, with so many

of the individuals coming from places that are part of the Commonwealth. Arguably, there is also a geography of the developing world: Africa, and Asia feature prominently on the map and South America would have too, had the survey extended north of the Walworth Road to include the Elephant and Castle, while Western Europe and America are absent from it. High streets in London's urban margins therefore provide a place for contemporary understandings of global economic forces in relation to diverse new retail practices and adaptive strategies that are refined within and transforming of a local context.

Reviews of emerging niche markets and ethnic minority business in Britain points to the emergence of the retail trade, specifically the restaurant and clothing trades (for example Barrett, Jones and McEvoy, 1996). This is corroborated by the Walworth Road survey, where clothing (21%), restaurants (17%) and food retail (13%) accounts for half of the retail activity on the street (figure 2). But in terms of high street retail in local areas it is questionable as to whether this is a new or ethnically specific phenomenon. Returning to the *Post Office London Directory* surveys (Post Office, 1881-1950), it is evident that food and clothing has, over extensive time periods been the primary merchandise of the street. However, historic references to hatters, clothiers, bootmakers and tailors as compared to contemporary clothing outlets on the street point to the change in the mode and locus of clothing production; from the historic London-based manufacturing in small scale shops and sweat shops up until the 1950s, to globally produced cheap clothes in sweat shops across the developing world.



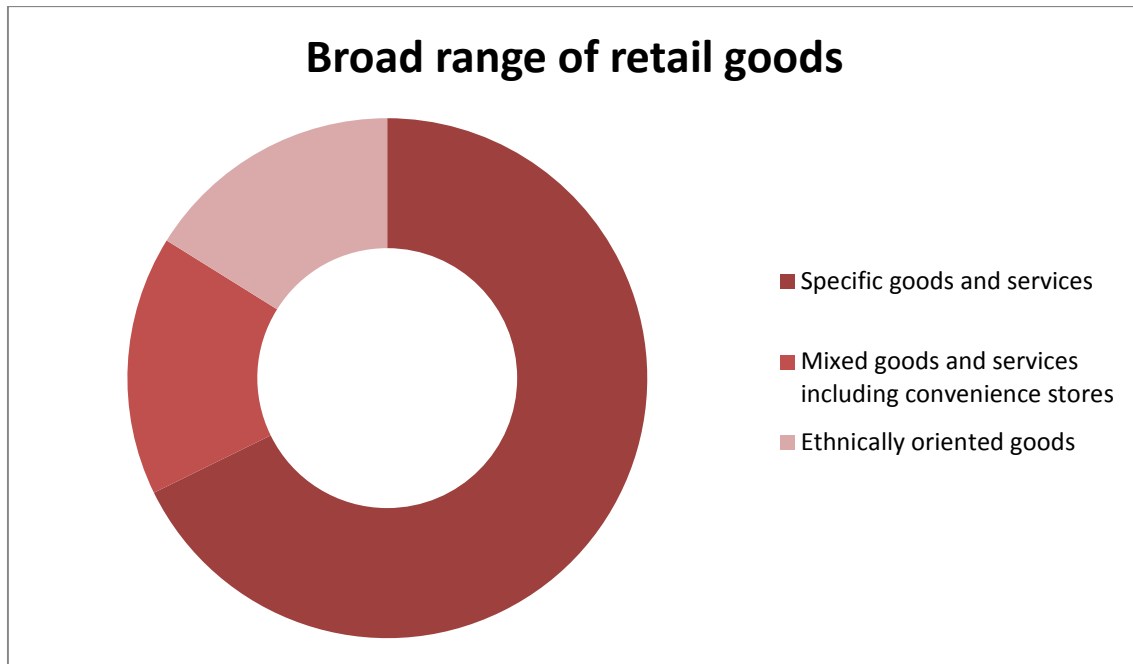


**Figure 2.** The range of retail activities on the Walworth Road amongst the independent shops. (Author's chart, 2011)

A further important aspect to the range of retail activities on the Walworth Road is the spread between and reinterpretation of general convenience goods and highly specialised goods including ethnically oriented goods, in particular food (figure 3). The survey suggests the prominence of specialised retail as part of a strategy to differentiate between shops on the street, as well as to secure the support of a discerning clientele. Specific goods and services, including furniture stores, pharmacies, jewellers, barbers, salons, health food shops and herbalists, accounted for 68% of the 93 independent shops. Ethnically-oriented goods, such as oriental 'supermarkets' and restaurants accounted for 16%. Aside from general convenience stores such as newsagents, there were a number of bargain stores, and 'pound stores' as well as charity shops, in response to the needs of a less affluent urban population.

Notably, distinctive combinations of retail were also apparent on the Walworth Road, for example 'Roze & Lawanson's Nigerian Market' where one could make a money transfer and buy a wedding garment, or 'Afro World Superstore' that sold 'foods, cosmetics, hair, wigs'. These tactics of combining a range of goods and services is a reinterpretation of the all-in-one convenience store, but one that is embedded in the particularities of the place and its populous. Embedded innovations also extended to a broader encompassing of ethnically-oriented shops that had expanded to incorporate a range of ethnicities in recognition of the diverse array of individuals who lived in proximity to the street, for example: 'Coskun Supermarket & Off Licence; Turkish, English, Caribbean, Mediterranean Food & Groceries.'

Also evident was a strategy of compartmentalisation within the shop space, where smaller territories were rented out. This took two spatial and economic forms: often a small front area with a portion of shop frontage was let out to an individual with a complementary service: a phone call and card kiosk at the front of a convenience store, or an alterations area at the front of a dry cleaner. In barber shops and hair and nails salons, the chairs themselves were often individually rented out on a week by week basis, thereby exposing the head lessee to less risk, and simultaneously providing economic access to the very small scale operator.



**Figure 3.** The broad differentiation between retail goods sold within the independent shops on the Walworth Road. (Author's chart, 2011)

If the local high street is a linear aggregation of mixed uses and mixed users, it is also an economic collection of diverse proprietors whose entrepreneurial practices are refined, in not all together conventional terms, within the particularities of a local context. The survey of the independent shop proprietors along the Walworth Road reveals that the process of being embedded in a local high street leads to practices of retail adaptation in ways that respond to the needs of a diverse clientele. *PPS4* (2009) makes explicit reference to understanding not simply 'qualitative needs', but 'locally specific needs', particularly in deprived areas. The understanding of qualitative needs should therefore broaden to include the needs of a local populous to access convenient, ethnically specific goods and services as part of the town centre/ high street compendium. Further, risk management strategies such as the microcosmic compartmentalisation within shop space, should be regarded as a crucial if irregular measure for small shop viability. In the following section I explore the extent to which retail strategies are socially oriented.

## **Duration**

*A local high street is an avenue for small-scale economic mobility that relies on social interactions.*

As established at the outset of this paper, the debate that sits at the forefront of the future of high streets across Britain is one oriented around the concern of demise. Such perceptions of demise have penetrated national debate, influenced policy formation, and generated research on the part of multinationals as to their impact of entry and exit levels of small shops on high streets and town centres. Crucially however, in each of these domains, the values ascribed to defining high street ‘success’, are markedly different. For NEF the measure is articulated as ‘vitality’, a value to which they ascribe the interdependency of economic prosperity and social liveliness. In their terms, vitality represents places that are not only integral to local economies, but also representative of ‘an economics of nearness and human-scale in which people have more control over their lives’ (NEF, 2002, page 6).

One measure of vitality put forward in *PPS4* is ‘turnover’. Set against this the understanding of duration or what endures over time, is key. If duration is a measure of adaptation over time rather than annual turnover it is difficult simply to quantify. Duration allows us to consider through the voices of the proprietors, what strategies are developed for sustaining longevity. The excerpts from selected proprietors on the Walworth Road that follow emerge from interviews conducted with 8 of the proprietors during 2006, 7 of whom had at that stage been on the Walworth Road for more than 10 years, and 4 of whom had had their shops in family ownership for 40 years or more. These excerpts indicate not only how retail practices change over time, but how these proprietors establish entrepreneurial longevity

closely connected to social relationships with a changing clientele over extensive time periods.

The website for the ‘Walworth Health Store’<sup>7</sup> claims that the shop is ‘London’s oldest established herbalist’ and ‘the UK’s leading herbalist and supplier of natural products and remedies’. Established in 1844, the grandfather of the current proprietor, ‘Alan’, took over from the originator for whom he had worked, and the shop has remained a family business for three successive generations. Alan talked about the shop identity as strongly tied to the place and product: ‘People associate us with the Walworth Road, or associate the Walworth Road with us. I think it’s because we are a bit unusual. Unique.’ I asked Alan what made his shop unique and he explained, ‘These days it’s the range of herbs, it’s probably the biggest retail range of herbs in Europe.’ The shop was also the original and once sole supplier of ‘Sarsaparilla’, a health drink made and sold exclusively from the shop premises. The drink is reputed to have permeated the smell of the shop, and the combined sensation of smell and taste featured prominently in interviews with local residents and their childhood memories of the Walworth Road. One adult reminisced, ‘We used to go to Walworth Health Store every Saturday morning after the pictures. Used to come out of the Elephant cinema, go around and have our Sarsaparilla and then go home.’

Alan travelled into Walworth from the south London suburbs each weekday, parked his car at the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre, and walked to his shop. He claimed to have little social connection to the street and drew strong contrasts with how he remembered the street as a child:

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<sup>7</sup> All shop names and proprietor names have been changed in keeping with an ethnographic practice of granting individual research participants anonymity.

I have clear memories of the street. My grandfather used to make me go off on errands. The whole street was shops, and you knew everybody. I really don't know many people here now. My grandfather knew everyone on the street. There was longevity. That's the difference now. (Fieldwork interview, 2006)

Alan's measure of longevity combines the endurance of his family's business enterprise with well-established relationships with other longstanding proprietors on the Walworth Road. Although Alan claimed to make little use of the street for shopping or socialising nowadays, he was clear about his shop's enduring association with the Walworth Road locality: 'We've been here a long time. We don't envisage moving.' He also emphasised the importance of maintaining local, personal connections in the shop, 'We try to recruit local people and remain part of the community. This helps to give us a local identity.'

Alan differentiated his customer base as local versus mail-order clientele. He described a strategy of running 'two businesses': the local shop trade and the mail order trade, which started in 1992 and now accounts for 60% of turnover:

I think it would be fair to say we have a mix of clientele. I dislike racial stereotyping but the West Indians could relate to what we sold, they were familiar with the herbs and roots we were selling. We've retained those people through the years. They're getting fairly old. Although we still get second and third generations, they're less – they're not quite so interested. The mail order customer base is far more diverse. But to develop the mail order we would need more space, and this location is too prime a location just for storage. (Fieldwork interview, 2006)

Further along the street is 'Walworth Electrical Store' whose elderly proprietor, 'Mr Joffe' asked to be named formally by surname. He opened his electrical store in the 1950s at site of the Elephant and Castle with his wife and one engineer, and moved to his current position on the Walworth Road in the 1980s. Although he still visited the shop a few days a week, the business was run by his sons. Mr Joffe has always lived in north London, but he selected

the Walworth Road as his preferred place of business, and confirmed that he expected the shop to remain in this location. He described how in the 1950s there were approximately 20 electrical stores between the Elephant and Castle and Camberwell, and claimed to be the only independent electrical store left in the vicinity. He attributed the longevity of the store to relations with customers:

Personal service, definitely. And it's nice that the customers know your first name, and they come in and ask for you by your first name... We have a large, local clientele and plenty of people from the outside who basically know our reputation. We're lucky enough to have grandchildren of original customers. It gives me great happiness that. (Fieldwork interview, 2006)

Like Alan, Mr Joffe described the store's duration in terms of its uniqueness, but emphasised that the shop's distinction rested on service above product: 'We are unique, we offer the lowest prices by purchasing from the biggest retailers in Europe, we offer sales and repairs, and we offer speedy delivery and immediate fitting'.

Another important strategy for forging the proprietor–customer relationship was understanding the cultural aspirations of the local population. 'Kid's Brand' is an upmarket clothing store for children, which was opened by the proprietor 'Sayeed' in 1993. His family, who originated from Malawi, had three different clothing shops on the Walworth Road. Sayeed's family had been trading in clothing retail on the Walworth Road since the late 1980s, but 'Kid's Brand' specialised in what Sayeed referred to as 'aspirational products'. 'Kid's Brand' supplied the upper end of children's clothes and stocked Armani Junior, DKNY kids and Baby Dior labels. Many of the clothes had prominent external labels, giving a clear indication of the related status and expense of the items.

Shahim who had worked in the store for 9 years broadly described the shop clientele by coupling a particular type of income acquisition and consumption: 'It's high disposable

income, no mortgage, no car payments, no private school fees. Sometimes it is black-market employment. We have high cash-to-credit ratios of around 65-to-35. In our other stores, this ratio is reversed.’ He also mentioned that the ‘lay-by’ scheme whereby customers made monthly pay-offs was well used. He estimated that between 40 and 50% of the shop’s customers probably had a low income, but placed high value on status items. Amongst their other stores, located in what would be regarded as more affluent areas, Shahim confirmed that the Walworth Road store had the highest turnover. Although the shop did approximately 12% of its trade from its website, Shahim stressed the local dimension of their customer base: ‘We have a client database of around 4,000 customers, and I would say that 65% are local’, referring to their south-east London base.

Within these 3 proprietors’ narratives, the common theme of the ‘local client’ is strongly associated with the ‘service-oriented’ proprietor. Beyond the encompassing identity of the local client, it was less easy to classify the Walworth Road customer or the Walworth Road product. High-end, luxury goods that one may have assumed to be out of place on the Walworth Road were apparent retail success stories. There were strong references to longevity primarily articulated as the relationships sustained between generations of proprietors and customers that cut across class, race and ethnicity, where a shared regard for service appeared to underpin the longevity of these relationships.

For some of the proprietors interviewed, the notion of local high street duration was challenged by large-scale economic and social impacts on local retail and consumer practices. Pete, who grew up in the area and had run ‘Walworth Uniforms’ for over 40 years, recalled: ‘There were lots of street like the Walworth Road, but they gradually disappeared, like the Old Kent Road. The Walworth Road and the Old Kent Road were



places to shop within walking distance of where people lived.’ Pete’s comment captures the change of economic production and distribution of retail goods and the impact on the scale of shops and streets. Pete referred explicitly to the shift in the pattern of local, small-scale retail on the Walworth Road, to the economic dominance of large retail chains like Asda, Currys, B&Q and Tesco on the Old Kent Road. Pete’s comments capture the impacts of an increase in car ownership and changes in the scale of production since the 1970s, from local patterns of urban manufacturing in London to the mass produced global brands:

We’ve had a lot of changes recently. There were lots of individual shops, now they’ve become all-in-ones [convenience stores]. We had a lot of made-to-measure tailors. From the sixties onwards this was a street for fashion, now you have it in a different way with Nike sports fashion. (Fieldwork interview, 2006)

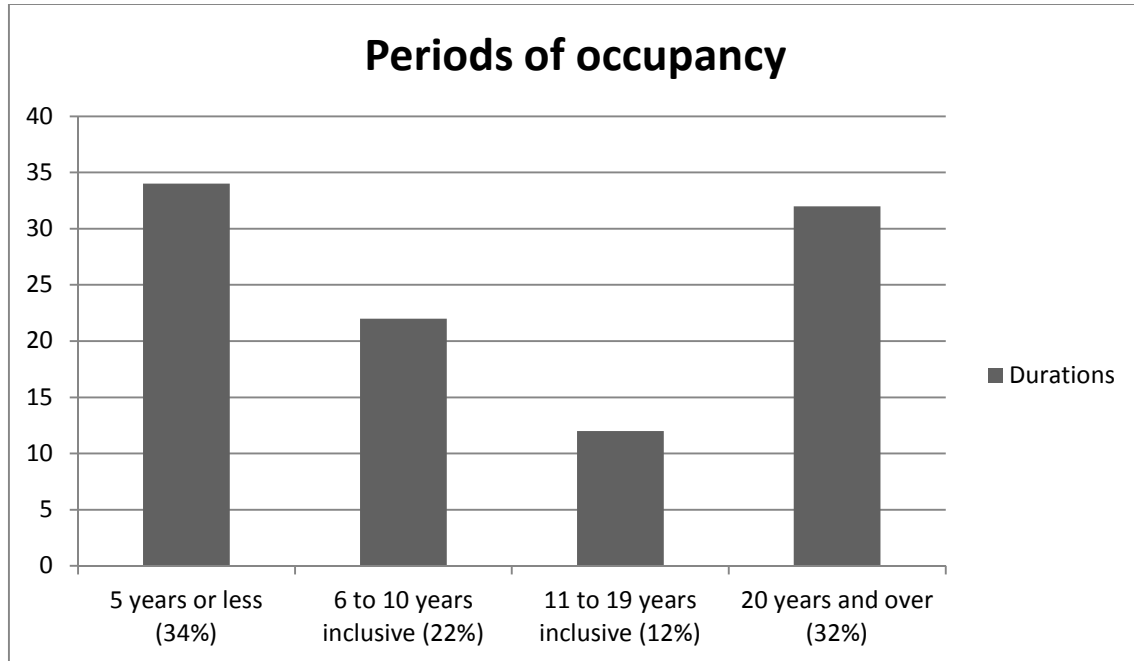
The 1950 *Post Office London Directory* corroborates Pete’s recollection: eight tailors were registered on the Walworth Road, together with 47 specialist clothing makers and distributors including hatters, costumiers, clothiers, corset makers, outfitters, hosiers and boot makers.

Many of the proprietors included in the Walworth Road survey raised the difficulties of paying high business rates and high rental costs. As one proprietor explained, rentals were not simply set by a factor of area profile, but by changing retail cultures:

The rents are set by the fast-food shops and what they pay per square foot. They have quick turnover and are open until eleven at night. So it’s difficult for the small guy to reign. Their review is always to do with rent... The new shops are up against it in the rent. Like in the barber shop, they rent the chairs out, that’s how they make it. (Fieldwork interview, 2006)

Within the dense accumulation of small, independent shops along the Walworth Road, individual stories range from adaptive strategies for duration, to the precarious reality of change as associated with higher rents and rates and increasing competition from the large-scale retailers. As far as possible, the small independent retailers adapt to large-scale

economic change, and amongst the 44% of the independent shops who had been on the Walworth Road for more than 10 years, the proprietor-customer relationship or the notion of ‘personal service’ was emphasised (figure 4).



**Figure 4.** The durations of the independent shops along the Walworth Road, based on 2006 survey data (Author’s chart, 2011)

Since the Walworth Road survey in 2006, small changes have occurred on the street. In January 2008, Holland and Barratt health store opened a branch, while a Tesco convenience store followed in December 2008, with an additional one in November 2010, readily adapting to the regulations set up by *PPG6* and *PPS6*. Also noticeable, was the emergence of a number of independent beauty-related shops: a further 5 barbers, salons and hair and cosmetic shops emerged after the economic crisis in November 2008 adding to the 12 already in place, and appearing to be the most noticeable retail growth area on the street.

The relative longevity of the retail life of the Walworth Road has arguably been sustained in part by its economically marginal location. There has been very little competition for A-

grade or chain-led retail space on the Walworth Road prior to 2008, and signs of gentrification, whether symbolised by the appearance of new local regeneration projects or high-street brand stores, has been largely absent. However, larger changes in the broader neighbourhood are imminent. A mixture of new private and social housing developments is being built in the area as part of the Elephant and Castle, Heygate Estate and Aylesbury Estate regeneration processes. Although the pace of regeneration has been held in check by the economic crisis, new, potentially more affluent residents, coupled with the dramatic growth in demand for retail space across London, is likely to challenge the Walworth Road's historic capacity for small-scale adaptation. Does this matter? Should high street adaptation respond in an unfettered manner, as it historically has, to market forces? Or is there room for less affluent, more diverse patterns of life and livelihoods on the street in the prospects of economic and urban change? The following section refers to new policy directions for high streets against the backdrop of the proposed Localism Bill.

### **Small shops, high streets and Localism in policy and planning terms**

#### *Whose local is local?*

The Localism Bill, introduced for parliamentary consideration in December 2010, is essentially a tripartite political proposal: for the decentralisation of power (but not resources) away from centralised authority; for participatory decision-making through local authorities and neighbourhood groups; and for alternative modes of service delivery outside of the state (Department for Communities and Local Government, 2011). The neo-liberal ambition for 'radical decentralisation' as articulated in the *Decentralisation and the Localism Bill* report (HM Government, 2010, page1) will have discernable implications for planning, not least because of the emphatic shift away from regional planning strategies in favour of neighbourhood planning. This will permit 'communities' to draw up

‘neighbourhood development plans’, build small developments and establish social enterprises and community groups to provide services.

The vehicles for the envisaged empowerment of local authorities, includes a ‘General Power of Competence’ that permits local authorities greater freedom to make decisions provided they act within the centralised framework of legality. In line with the localisation of authority, it is also a proposition for more directly elected mayors, and in the case of London, grants greater power to the Mayor over housing (especially over social housing tenancies), urban regeneration plans, and directions for economic growth. At the neighbourhood scale, the Bill seeks to allow local government more control over funding streams, ‘place-based’ or ‘community budgets’ and a reformed Community Infrastructure Levy allowing for funds for both capital and operational budgets. What is the relationship between the ‘community politics’ on which the Localism Bill is based, and the proactive role advocated for Local Planning Authorities in planning for Town Centres in *PPS4*?

From the contextual perspective of the Walworth Road as a multi-ethnic high street in London’s margins, four key challenges are raised:

- i) Can a decentralised, participatory local politics – ‘Localism’ – have any actual, scaled-up impact in the light of global economic forces and fundamental structural inequalities that are deeply evidenced in the polarised geography of London’s local places?
- ii) Is ‘the local’ a confined territorial entity where parochial concerns are legitimised over broader concerns, moreover one that belongs ‘more’ to those who reside in, rather than those who work in local areas?

- iii) How do we recognise local forms of knowledge and resource networks, such as the diverse retail practices, strategies and innovations that emerge out of a more marginal setting, outside of less culturally dominant value systems?
- iv) Do London's high streets require contextually specific analyses and stewardship mechanisms, in which the measures of vitality - social, economic and cultural exchange – are valued and recognised in planning and urban design terms?

*The policy implications of particularity*

If 'Localism' is to have political and economic significance for the diverse citizens who occupy and use London's diverse high streets, then a focus on particularity and its cultural, social and economic interrelationships, as a key way of comprehending 'the local' is necessary. The analysis of the particular requires a different knowledge base and in the policy conceptualisation of urban high streets or town centres would demand several shifts. First, contextually relevant measures of value defined through a much closer recognition of how different high streets and town centres are used and occupied differently, is needed. In terms of small, independent retail, this paper has suggested that a more nuanced recognition of actual retail practices will require getting down on to the street to conduct both quantitative and qualitative articulations of how small shops do or don't adapt to large-scale impacts of change.

Further, as suggested by Wrigley, Branson and Clarke (2009) we need to understand the complementary range of high street retail activities with respect to context. The notion of compatibility needs to extend to the crucial balance on high streets between public and private uses, public investment in the public realm and the crucial role of pedestrian and public transport accessibility in sustaining high street vitalities. While accessibility and the

role of transport is clearly acknowledged in *PPS4*, there is no reference to other forms of spatial accessibility, in particular in a case like the Walworth Road, the primary relationship between adjacent social housing estates and retail mix. Understanding the interdependencies in planning for town centres between big and small, high profile and ordinary, and the range of housing types, will require greater analytic depth of 'the local' as the intricate and complex socio-economic profile of an area. These considerations need to occur with a strong comprehension of the fragile urban geographies in which high streets in urban margins and/or deprived settings locate. In such locales it is therefore not so much the question of whether the compatibility of high street uses and public investments should be managed, but who should oversee it, and how.

New policy areas outlined in *The Mayor's draft replacement London Plan* (2010) clearly indicate that London's high streets and small shops are worthy of political recognition: '[Policy] 4.6 The Mayor has signalled his intention to help protect London's high streets by securing affordable retail units for small shops through section 106 contribution'. It is crucial to consider what form this protection will take, as well as what displacement will occur as a result of projects that generate section 106 contributions. In the on-going regeneration of the Elephant and Castle Shopping Centre and Heygate Estate, all social housing units within the Heygate have been closed and boarded up. The boarding went up in 2008 at the start of the economic crises, and as redevelopment at this scale is likely to be a costly and lengthy it will have long term effects on the retail life of both the centre and the street. Prior to the protection afforded by Section 106 in the Mayor's policy, is the analysis of correlations between retail viability and the surrounding densities that provide a critical mass of people, with both general and particular needs, within walking distance of these places.

### *Stewardship*

Protection could take the form of the overarching coordination of centres or streets as a whole, through a guiding framework and/or stewardship mechanism. As indicated in *PPS4*, the purpose of coordination is to understand the role of the town centre/ high street in its local area context and to protect and enhance the economic space of the street as a whole. But unless this coordination is mindful of the cultural role of the street, it is likely that economic measures of value will prevail over social ones, and more predictable store formats and brands may well be regarded as more viable than independent or ethnic shops. The idea of the coordination of the economic and cultural interrelationship of the street is well developed in affluent or upmarket streets through the privatised stewardship mechanism of property estate managers that seek to generate high profit yields, but also to promote the unique cultural space of the street closely tied to retail mix.

I turn briefly to the case of Marylebone High Street, because although it is an upmarket London high street, its management by the Howard de Walden Estate after a lengthy period of decline spanning from the 1970s to the mid-1990s<sup>8</sup>, has effectively orchestrated culture and economy, the predominance of independent retail, and the protection of shops whose rental yields are not high but whose offer is valuable. The revitalisation of Marylebone High Street as articulated by Simon Baynham, (<http://www.hdwe.co.uk/>, 2011) property director for the Howard de Walden Estate, is framed within the predilection for what Baynham describes as ‘the traditional values’ of a high street, as well as the creation of ‘an urban village’. Retail includes the Conran Shop, Waitrose and Patisserie Valerie – not quite the Walworth Road or an urban margin location. However, the stewardship strategy affected a

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<sup>8</sup> Simon Baynham states, ‘In 1995 a third of the shops were either vacant or occupied by temporary charity shops who paid no rent at all but were there to reduce the rates liability: a fairly desperate commercial situation.’

threefold increase in footfall since 1999 and 100% occupancy of shops fronts: selected lessons from this particular case have wider import.

The refurbishment of Marylebone High Street was conceptualised as a street integrally connected to its immediate area, and an improvement on the retail offering was closely pursued by improvements in commercial and residential offerings as well as schools and other community uses. Well-established, high-profile anchor stores were used to reassure and attract complementary retail. (On the Walworth Road, the anchor function is provided by East Street Market, where rents on the east side of the street, in proximity to the market are highest.) The Estate purchased retail space, expanding its control from 40% to 70%. This allowed not only for greater tenant selection, but also allowed for the expansion of the smaller Victorian shop units to be expanded from 100 square metres to 200 square metres. While the scale of purchasing is unlikely without private-sector stewardship, the respect for the 'grain' of the high street has tangible and practical dimensions, extending for example to the permissible frontage to be taken up by any single retailer including chain stores, as well as a commitment to activating a substantial percentage of the high street frontage.

More 'comfortable terms' of rent renewal were granted to shops with key cultural value but comparatively smaller turnover, and in some instances these shop types together with essential shops, were located on side streets where the niche streets were created. Public relations and marketing were actively pursued through regular activities such as community events, the annual 'Summer Fayre', and a farmers market on Sundays. Without underestimating the considerable private investment and expertise associated with this form of stewardship, there are a number of common sense examples of coordination, control and promotion that would presumably fall within the expertise of a local authority, specifically



one tasked with the ‘proactive’ planning of town centres as stipulated in *PPS4*. What then is a public model of stewardship for high streets? Stewardship is the coordination of expertise together with a view of the whole. It is potentially a vehicle for transmitting local knowledge alongside adherence to national policy, and if it resides within the local authority, it is legitimately local and accountable. Unlike a private model, it is not resourced through profit, and the use and allocation of scarce public resources would need to focus on the collective investment of managing the street as a whole.

Finally, this paper has brought together seemingly separate strands of urban discourse: from the role of retail on high streets; to the role of ethnic entrepreneurialism in shaping the economic life of local worlds in urban margins, to the policy focus on small shops and high streets and Localism. The purpose is to argue for more interdisciplinary research in understanding the economic life of local worlds in the context of global change, and particularly for more fine-grained understanding of the urban high street. The values of diversity and duration explored in this paper are intricacies that require political recognition and policy articulation in terms of the high street as a cultural and particular condition. A greater integration of spatial, social and economic understandings of urban high streets would further serve the evaluation, planning and day-to-day stewardship of high streets.

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