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## Future of London's town centres: submission to the London Assembly's Planning Committee

### Report

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## **Future of London's town centres**

### **Submission to the London Assembly's Planning Committee**

**Dr Suzanne Hall, LSE Cities, 10 January 2013**

#### **Research background: a different kind of centre?**

A team at LSE Cities have been involved in two in-depth studies of two inner London streets and how they fit within their respective urban centres. The Walworth Road links to the Elephant and Castle, while Rye Lane is a primary element in Peckham's town centre. What is instructive about these streets in the context of the London Assembly's review of London's town centres, is that they are comparatively 'ordinary': they fall outside of London's prestigious landscape. Also of importance, is that these streets exhibit a relative economic and cultural vibrancy despite being located within areas with high indices of deprivation. Yet in planning terms, neither of these streets are officially recognised for their economic and cultural vibrancy; their value is not necessarily legible to the lens of power. We would therefore like to raise the realities of increases in ethnic and cultural diversity and how these urban trends have a role to play in the reshaping and planning of some of London's town centres.

#### **1. What new ideas and existing best practise could help re-imagine and develop London's high streets and town centres of the future?**

Part of the task of imagining London's high streets and town centres of the future, is to understand how its ordinary as well as prestigious urban landscapes are changing. Similarly, it is crucial to recognise key differences within London's retail geographies, as well as how these vary from national ones<sup>1</sup>. For example, while small independent shops have substantially

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<sup>1</sup> For a recent overview of varied national trends see the presentations from the 'Expert Scoping Panel Workshop', 25-26 September, 2012, <http://www.highstreetfutures.co.uk/events/>

declined across the UK, quite the opposite is true for London<sup>2</sup>: there has been a 78,5% increase in independent retail in London from 2000 to 2006, a trend that has not been curtailed by the economic crisis. A primary consideration in the re-imagination of London's high street and town centres is therefore to develop a disaggregated view informed by the particular cultural and economic practices that are distinctive to place.

Across these distinctive streets and centres, a broadly adopted maxim is that the social and cultural dimensions of high streets and town centres are key to their economic vitality (NEF<sup>3</sup>, Portas<sup>4</sup>). It is crucial within this maxim to adopt the best practice of 'particularity': to understand the failures and successes that are key to urban locality, as well as the new trends associated with changing economies. The requirement for local authorities to actively engage in the planning of town centres outlined in *Planning Policy Statement 4*<sup>5</sup> includes both the need to audit decline or growth of existing town centres and to develop a strategic framework for the management and growth of centres. However, measures of 'vitality' and 'viability' are frequently based on economic norms, and in our research experience, the emerging cultures and economies on Peckham Rye Lane and Walworth Road that grow out of diverse ethnic enterprise, tend to remain poorly understood in the official assessments of these areas. How audits are conducted, and by whom, and how changing trends are recognised by appropriate measures of value, is therefore key to the understanding of particularity and ultimately to the support, planning and renewal of London's high streets and town centres.

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<sup>2</sup> Neil Wrigley, Julia Branson, Andrew Murdoch and Graham Clarke (2009) 'Extending the Competition Commission's Findings on Entry and Exit of Small Stores in Britain's High Streets: Implications for Competition and Planning Policy', *Environment and Planning A*, 41: 2063-85.

<sup>3</sup> New Economics Foundation (2002) *Ghost Town Britain: The threat from economic globalisation to livelihoods, liberty and local economic freedom*, London: NEF.

<sup>4</sup> Mary Portas (2011) *The Portas Review: An independent review into the future of our high streets*, <https://www.gov.uk/.../11-1434-portas-review-future-of-high-streets>

<sup>5</sup> DCLG, Department for Communities and Local Government, London:

2009a *Planning Policy Statement 4: Planning for sustainable economic growth*.

2009b *Planning for Town Centres: Practice Guidance on need, Impact, and the sequential approach*.

**2. How can town centres compete in the new age of consumerism and succeed alongside out-of-town retail?**

High streets and town centres in ‘ordinary’ urban settings are often activated by patterns of convenience – places to buy milk, post a letter and top up an oyster card. These elements of convenience and day-to-day utilities are essential to their vitality and should not be underestimated, while complementary activities like GP and dentist surgeries, libraries and schools all add to the social value. Vibrant and convenient town centres are also able to attract a number of complementary business activities. The *High Street London*<sup>6</sup> report, for example, recorded 2100 businesses in Peckham Town Centre, and 13,400 employees. By way of comparison, Westfield Stratford has 300 retail units and 8500 permanent jobs<sup>7</sup>.

A significant advantage that out-of-town retail centres have is ‘a view of the whole’. Ownership and management is not often fragmented, and unlike inner city high streets and town centres, out-of-town retail centres are able to benefit from orchestrated planning and management strategies. ‘A view of the whole’ needs to be re-established in the planning and management of high streets and town centres, without necessarily undermining the smaller scale and varied patterns of ownership and individual endeavour that make for rich and adaptive urban environments.

**3. How can town centres become more accessible and increase footfall to local shops? What is the role of innovative transport and parking schemes in this respect?**

Urban high streets and town centres in inner London depend on high thresholds of footfall, largely from people who have not arrived by car. Convenience of access is therefore paramount, as is a density of bus routes with a frequency of stops and the ease of pedestrian passage. The

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<sup>6</sup> Gort Scott and UCL (2010) *High Street London*, Great London Authority, London.

<sup>7</sup> <http://www.guardian.co.uk/money/2011/may/21/westfield-stratford-city>

combination of high levels of road-based public transport together with a convenient and pleasant street environment is in part an urban design concern, and pragmatic but attractive projects that increase sidewalks, allow for bus movement to be prioritised over cars, and that allow for designated loading and quick drop offs, all add to the physical ‘usability’ of streets.

The success of a basic design reconfiguration of the street profile is well evidenced in the ‘Walworth Project’,<sup>8</sup> where sidewalks widths were increased, seating amenities were added, and bus lanes were privileged, all within an attractive streetscape design. Rather than explicitly branding the street experience, investment was put into maximising the pragmatic and social space of the street. If these design measures increase physical accessibility, perceptual accessibility could be enhanced through using transport infrastructure at bus stops, tube stops and stations, for a street or centre ‘notice boards’, in either electronic or standard form, and incorporating basic orienting information, news about the street/centre and social media platform information including website addresses, twitter hash tags, and app download information, all increasing e-information about the street/centre.

#### **4. What strategies for regeneration of town centres and high streets would best encourage growth and prosperity in a time of austerity? How can they unlock the potential of key development sites in town centres?**

In comparatively ordinary streets and centres where investor confidence is not necessarily high, other means of raising the profile and vitality of streets and centres needs consideration. *The Portas Review*<sup>9</sup> highlights the potentially of ‘pop-up’ shops and generally the ambit of interim use could certainly be further pursued. Part of the project of interim use is to make value – social, cultural, and economic – tangible to existing and prospective users. More standard practices in

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<sup>8</sup> The ‘Walworth Project’ saw an increase in bus patronage and a decrease in parking ticketing. The project won the ‘Living Streets’ award: <http://www.nsl.co.uk/case-studies/transformation-of-walworth-road>

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

interim use involve markets, pop-up shops, festivals and events of various sorts. But given London's immense cultural and institutional wealth and capacity, prospects for innovative partnerships could be more fully explored and developed: art colleges and business schools, for example, could 'adopt a shop', linking local initiatives and innovations into a wider framework of testing and promoting the role of London's streets and centres.

**5. How effective are existing planning policies to promote the vitality and viability of town centres? How can Londoners be encouraged to live in and populate town centres?**

A further, crucial means to increasing footfall and thresholds of support to streets and centres is to increase residential density within easy walking distances of centres. In Walworth, for example, the Walworth Road is located within a high density residential area and has approximately 15,000 people within walking distance or square kilometre of the street, thereby helping to sustain its retail life (CABE)<sup>10</sup>: in comparative London terms, the Walworth Road is surrounded by a less affluent population, but because of the population density in proximity to it, the total weekly expenditure estimated for the street was £4.3 million compared with £4.8 million on High Street Hampstead.

High streets and centres are also potentially concentrations of public assets such as clinics and libraries, as well as spaces to meet up. The *High Street London*<sup>11</sup> report 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 shopping. In planning terms, this highlights how both residential and cultural densities are required to sustain the vitality of high streets and town centres.

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<sup>10</sup> CABE (2007) *Paved with Gold: The real value of good street design*.

<sup>11</sup> *ibid*.

**6. What are the powers and mechanisms available to local planning authorities to revitalise their town centres and stimulate development activity?**

The *Association of Town Centres Manifesto*<sup>12</sup> and the *Portas Review* both highlight the need for the agile management of high streets and town centres to maintain and update the crucial balance between large and small operators, permanent and temporary uses, and cultural and economic activities. As reported to the London Assembly's Economy Committee<sup>13</sup> our research at LSE Cities strongly suggests the need for stewardship. However, a variety of coordination mechanisms need consideration, as the BID mechanism, while valuable in certain contexts, is not universally suitable. In ordinary high streets, a range of stewardship issues require consideration, most explicitly, how proprietors are given a voice, and what role these individuals, who are economically and intellectually invested in these streets, have in collective discussions around their street's current and future vitality. The role of high street and town centre associations, and their relationship to local authorities, requires further consideration.

**7. How can Mayoral planning policy, the London Plan and the emerging Town Centres SPG, best support town centres?**

In summary, this report has outlined three areas for planning consideration in the support of high streets and town centres:

- i) Physical: public transport, including ease of pedestrian access is key to sustaining the convenient aspect of urban streets and centres. In addition, a density of residential stock within walking distance of high streets and centres adds to the thresholds of local support.
- ii) Cultural: as significant as residential density is to the day-to-day activation of streets and centres, so too is a 'cultural density', including hard components like public institutions, and soft or interim components like events and festivals. A more concerted interim use programme twinned to cultural and educational institutions could be initiated to focus public interest and imagination more positively on the role of London's high streets and town centres.

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<sup>12</sup> ATCM (2012) *Association of Town Centre Management Manifesto*, ATCM, London.

<sup>13</sup> Suzanne Hall (2012) *London's High streets: Bringing empty shops back into use*, LSE Cities, submitted by invitation to the London Authorities Economy Committee.

iii) Managerial: a range of managerial options that have ‘a view of the whole’ need to be explored, and in particular, the role of local interest groups and proprietors needs to be considered, including an involvement in the auditing, imagining and management of ordinary streets and centres.

### **LSE Cities current research on London’s ‘Ordinary Streets’:**

<http://lsecities.net/objects/research-projects/ordinary-streets>

The Ordinary Streets project is an ethnographic and visual exploration of the spaces, economies and cultures of ‘street’. It engages with the policy and planning of town centres and high streets, and with issues of ethnic and cultural diversity in the context of global cities. The primary case study is Peckham Rye Lane, a multi-ethnic street in south London

### **Publications resulting from this research can found at:**

Hall Suzanne (2012) *London’s High Streets: Bringing empty shops back into use*, report to the Economy Committee, London Assembly, 31 August 2012. London Assembly Summary published:

[http://www.london.gov.uk/who-runs-london/the-london-assembly/assembly\\_investigation/empty-shops](http://www.london.gov.uk/who-runs-london/the-london-assembly/assembly_investigation/empty-shops)

Hall, Suzanne, 2012 *City, Street and Citizen: The measure of the ordinary*, London: Routledge.

<http://www.routledge.com/books/details/9780415688659/>

Hall, Suzanne, 2012 ‘For the future good of our high streets we need a better understanding of the social and economic life of local worlds in the context of global change’, *British Politics and Policy at LSE* (14 Feb 2012) Blog Entry.

<http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/politicsandpolicy/2012/02/14/localism-high-street/>

Hall, Suzanne, 2011 ‘High Street Adaptations: Ethnicity, independent retail practices and Localism in London’s urban margins’, in *Environment and Planning A* vol. 43, no. 11, pp. 2571-2588 <http://www.envplan.com/abstract.cgi?id=a4494>