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## London's high streets: bringing back empty shops back into use: submission to the London Assembly's Economic Committee

### Report

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## **London's high streets: bringing back empty shops back into use**

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

**Dr Suzanne Hall, LSE Cities, 31 August 2012**

#### **Research background:**

A team at LSE Cities have been involved in two in-depth studies of two inner London streets, both of which are located in south London. Both streets - Walworth Road and Peckham Rye Lane - exhibit a relative economic and cultural vibrancy despite being located within areas with high indices of deprivation. A number of key lessons emerge from the close research of these streets that are more broadly applicable to a range of 'ordinary', rather than 'prestigious' high streets across London. Lessons relate as much to understanding the value of the particular retail innovations and adaptive strategies of small, ethnically diverse and non-affiliated independent retailers, as to the potential benefits of street stewardship. Questions of vacancy, innovative uses of empty shops, control, lessons from the Portas Review, and the use of BIDS are interpreted through real street settings, and through practical steps towards street vibrancy.

#### **1. Key lessons from the Walworth Road:**

##### **Thresholds of support, mix of uses and public realm improvements**

The detailed study of the Walworth Road was conducted over a two-year fieldwork period from 2006 to 2008, just including the early months of the global economic crisis. The focus of the Walworth Road study was the intersection of life and livelihoods on a multi-ethnic street, and explored the social and economic interactions between a diverse array of newcomers and the remnants of a working-class population. Key lessons learnt about the retail livelihood of this street include:

- The strong patterns of retail longevity and prosperity in part relate to the dense thresholds of support adjacent to the street. The street draws on a high numbers of residents within walking distance of the street and similarly benefits from the thoroughfare of an extremely busy sequence of bus route. **High thresholds of support are key to street-based retail, and density and public transport play a primary role in underpinning these thresholds.**
- Independent retail tends to thrive because of the personal, face-to-face nature of the retail service. In addition two further aspects add to a strong customer base: either the unique particularity of the product (often associated with ethnically-specific goods), or a capacity to sell a wide range of goods, while maintaining a capacity to reassess the balance of this array on a highly regular basis. **High streets benefit from a balance of unique stores and a broader range of general convenience stores that need to remain highly adaptable. Similarly, a rich mix of public services and social spaces adds value to the street's vitality.**
- **The investment into the public realm design, specifically the widening of the pavements and the increase of short term street loading and parking, has been valuable to the overall efficiency of the street.**
- From 2006 and continuing over the period of economic crisis in which much high street retail diminished, the vacancies on the Walworth Road remained below 10%. Notable areas of retail growth were in beauty products and services, reflecting not only a national trend, but also **the need for high street micro-economies**, where for example, chairs in hair and nail salons are let out per individual per week.

## 2. Key lessons from the Peckham Rye Lane:

### **Micro-economies, sub-letting, increases in independent retail**

Our second study, which commenced in January 2012 and is on-going over the course of 2012, is of Peckham Rye Lane.

- The economic vibrancy on this Peckham Rye Lane is extremely intense, **supported as above by a high residential density and good public transport links**. Vacancy patterns are below 10%.
- The **emergence of micro-economic retail practices and subletting of shop spaces** has allowed a number of business to ride out the recession, as well as permitting small retail operators access to well-located urban retail space. The return on retail rental for small spaces of between 2 and 4 square meters is extremely high – up to £500 per meter squared per month, making this the amongst the most expensive retail space in London, comparable with Knightsbridge. Sub-letting is not unlike ‘pop-up’ retail in that it permits comparatively spontaneous and adaptive practices to occupy space that is otherwise hard to let. Greater policy and/or managerial innovation is required to keep pace with these requirements, as well as to monitor their contribution to or relegation of street vitality.
- The growth of independent retail in London has substantially increased in recent years (Wrigley, Branson and Clarke’s (2009) paper, ‘Extending the Competition’s Commission’s findings on the entry and exit of small stores in Britain’s high streets’, for example, records a 78,5% increase in independent retail in London from 2000 to 2006). **In London this trend of an increase in independent retail certainly overlaps with migration patterns and the connections between thriving independent retail and immigration still need to be made.**

### 3. Further lessons:

#### Policy and planning

Both the ‘Portas Review’ and ‘PPS4: Planning for Sustainable Economic Growth’ call for the proactive planning of town centres and high streets, emphasising the significance of local particularities. Local planning and economic officers are often aware of broad retail trends in particular streets, but are similarly unaware of the specific and crucial retail dynamics. No detailed retail survey had been conducted on either the Walworth Road or Peckham Rye Lane, although both streets were undergoing

regeneration exercises. Because of the dynamic pace of retail, and numerous shifts away from more conventional models, **it is imperative that basic surveys of the retail composition and vitality of high streets undergoing planning or BID initiatives are conducted.** In our experience, a simple survey can be readily completed over a short time period, and is invaluable for understanding retail composition and complementary range of retail mix, retail duration and longevity patterns (as opposed to simply turnover), and adaptive responses to economic constraints as well as cultural needs and aspirations.

#### **4. Further lessons:**

##### **Street stewardship**

The Portas Review similarly emphasises the need for the agile management of high streets so as to maintain and update the crucial balance between large and small operators, permanent and temporary uses, and cultural and economic activities. **Our research 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, the following stewardship issues require consideration:

- How are small, independent and ethnically diverse proprietors given a voice, and what is the collective medium for discussion around the street's current and future vitality?
- How are small, independent retail assets balanced against larger, affiliated retail?
- How are outlets with comparatively small turnover but with high cultural value acknowledged?
- What public spaces, both formal and informal, assist street vitality?
- What are the range of programmes and events that can be operationalised across a year to advance the particular culture(s) of the street, and to increase thresholds of support?
- What is the appropriate mix of voice, accountability and authority between a coordinating structure, the local authority, local community groups, and local retailers, in relation to a particular street setting?

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

- 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>