

Welcome to
Collectively Speaking,
a series of discussions
about city making
brought to you by
members of the
London Collective.
This edition presents
a vision for the future
of our town centres
and a methodology
for achieving it.



we are city makers



High streets will bloom again. Image by Toby Denham

Town centres post-Coronavirus

Coronavirus presents us with a necessary 'pause' before the inevitable re-invention of our town centres and high streets. A time to reflect on what we seek from the arteries and life-blood of our central spaces, and an unusual opportunity to recalibrate. If we use this break wisely and work collectively, we will be able to transform the current morbidity into a blossoming of new life in our town centres and high streets.

Town centres were under enormous pressure before the pandemic, with footfall declining by as much as 20% over the last ten years and 25% of high street shops closing nationally.¹ Internet shopping is expected to account for 53% of retail sales in 10 years' time, up from 20% in 2019.² Now, Covid-19 is having a crippling impact on retailers and businesses, large and small. These problems have been exacerbated and there is a dire need to change to address a number of challenges, like online shopping and the increasing demand for immersive and experiential

activities. What Covid-19 has done is accelerate the demise of already stressed businesses. At the same time, we are witnessing people 'nipping out' to high streets as online retailers struggle to meet demand. If there is a silver lining to this crisis, it will be refreshed and reinvigorated town centres and a renewed interest in all things local.

The real challenge is what to do next. Town centres have never been static, they have adapted over time to an ever changing world. From the introduction of railways and cars to out of town shopping centres and mega supermarkets. The overarching trend has been towards homogenisation which has led to the creation of 'zombie zones' and identikit town centres. Yet, as with any crisis, reinvention comes from adversity and with the right curatorial approach, our high streets can become an intrinsic and well-loved part of our town centres once again.

Our vision for the future of town centres and the methodology for achieving it will enable local authorities, landowners and communities to accelerate change and plan proactively for the future.

Sources: 1. How to Save the High Street, Panorama, Saturday 18 January 2020 www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/m0009v7j 2. Half of UK retail sales will be online within 10 years, The Guardian, Tuesday 9 July 2019 <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2019/jul/09/half-of-uk-retail-sales-will-be-online-within-10-years-report-predicts> accessed 30 January 2020

1. Embrace trends

New trends in the way we use our high streets have been emerging for some time, with the shift towards town centres as destinations. During this lockdown period, the temporary stop to the drain of thousands of people commuting is likely to become a more permanent reality once the virus is overcome.

Larger corporate firms will be looking for more adaptable and flexible space, to meet the needs of an increasingly remote workforce where commuting into city centres may be reduced to 2 or 3 days of the week.

Perversely, this is good news for town centres. It allows residents to engage in their high streets in a way they may not have previously, prioritising experiences over transactions. A new wave of 'stay at homers' will not want to be confined to their home office or kitchen table. Part-time home workers will crave human contact, valuing physical and mental wellbeing and the need to strike a healthy balance between home and work life. Something the local high street can provide.

In Paris, the Mayor has made the "15-minute city" central to her re-election campaign.³ Each community should be self-sufficient, she says, providing shops, parks, sports facilities, cafes, schools, health centres and workplaces a walk or bike ride away. A similar approach was pioneered in Britain by the Garden City movement in the 19th Century and has had a renaissance with projects like NW Bicester and Tresham Garden Village, led by members of the London Collective.

Bottom-up and community-led transformation is making a come back, emerging as a positive model of regeneration that keeps gentrification at bay. This trend is led by artists and creatives as has been the case in many coastal towns. Kernels of entrepreneurship, often taking over dis-used buildings to create hubs for ideas, critical thinking

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Stockton's 'Public Outdoor Room' – town centres as destinations

and collective action characterises a rebellious streak that brings with it successful, locally-specific regeneration. Resilient communities like Morecambe have become visionary. Deal in Kent did the same years ago and is referred to locally as 'Soho-on-Sea'. Former full-time commuters are likely to shed their smart attire, abandon the tiresome commute and swell these creative and entrepreneurial destinations.

Stockton-on-Tees is a typical example of a declining town centre that has lost more than 100 shops and stores in the last five years, including M&S and Debenhams. The town council earned itself a reputation for taking a proactive approach to re-thinking the town, how it should look and what it should offer. In consultation with the local community they are investing in changing the profile of their high street.⁴ Richard McGuckin, the economic development officer, describes a 'large outdoor room' with places for sculptures, music, performers and sporting events throughout the year. Encouraging people to engage with their town centre in a new and exciting way.

The internet is generally viewed as the enemy of the high street but it can be used to future proof town centres by connecting with local and wider audiences, advertising events and opportunities and giving us repeated reasons to make the journey into town. Town centre apps and social media are connecting us in ways we could not have imagined 10 years ago. They can also be harnessed to help drive regeneration.

Sources: 3. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/feb/07/paris-mayor-unveils-15-minute-city-plan-in-re-election-campaign> **Sources: 4.** <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/business-51094109>



Memorable and 'experiential' – Salisbury Umbrella Festival

2. Go local, be distinctive

Consumerism as we knew it has been suspended and with less consumption comes more creativity. A time for re-purposing, sewing, painting, fixing and all those worldly pleasures we previously had little time for. Or rather, we didn't make time for. 'The pause' has forced a re-evaluation of what matters, what is important to us and why. It is highlighting interdependence as the key to our survival, reclaiming the collective community. A ground lost long ago to individualism and corporatisation.

In this time of scarcity and social distancing, we are rediscovering the ability to cultivate our own food. Noticing neighbours planting vegetable crops and hearing that seeds in local garden centres are in high demand, with many sold out. People are relearning lost skills in domestic food production, recalling a time when our grandparents thrived and survived through self-sustenance. Perhaps we will develop a greater awareness of nature and the seasons and an acceptance that strawberries shouldn't be available in the middle of winter. The local could once again be more dependable than the global. There is an opportunity for councils to encourage community food production and continue these efforts that have emerged during the period of lockdown. Regenerative agriculture, rewilding, and community resilience would benefit from this approach, planting edibles such as fruit and nut trees for everyone to pick from and enjoy whilst supporting local growers. 'Edible towns' can be part of a sustainable and resilient approach, where nutrition and public health are factored into the design of a place.



High streets are no longer the main source of goods and can no longer rely solely upon shopping to attract people. Purchasing of volume or universal products will be consigned to the virtual realm. Responding to this change presents a great opportunity for town centres to re-invent and overcome the blight of big brands and “same-as-ism”. The move away from large footprint stores due to changing shopping patterns allows an opportunity for other uses to flourish and re-inhabit our towns. Increasingly, experiential uses such as cinemas, gaming and the phenomenon of e-sports combined with on-demand health, flexible workspace, pop-ups, concept stores, co-located services and a broad range of food offers all have an important part to play in re-shaping our towns.

In our experience, the most successful high streets are not 'one-liners'. They have a rich palette of places and events that reflect and enhance the way we live.

The fragmentation of monocultural districts, blocks and buildings allows a reinvention of spaces and places with a human scale. Libraries are evolving to offer classes and workshops, many already have coffee shops and event spaces as the “hang out” culture emerges. In Gronigen, a new “hangout” library has been completed illustrating the emergence of a completely new typology.

In our experience, the most successful high streets are not ‘one-liners’. They have a rich palette of places and events that reflect and enhance the way we live. Without regard to the physical connections

of routes and spaces, segregation will predominate. By creating routes connecting to events off the high street, links to green spaces, places of activity, places for rest, markets, pop ups, maker places, independents and charity shops it is possible to create networks that will keep attracting us back to the high street for surprising experiences and human interaction.

Distinctive and unique high streets communicate a strong message that ‘this place is made and re-made by those who inhabit it’. It is about much more than business. It is a rich

layering of inhabitation by those who live, work, shop, visit and play. The people watchers, the artists and the collective networks that support them.

Frome is an old market town in Somerset with a town council that does things differently. ‘The Frome Independent’, an award-winning destination street market, reclaims the high street once a month to showcase craftspeople, designers, makers, food producers and vintage traders from across the South West of England. Attracting people from near and far. Marylebone High Street has flourished thanks to Howard de Walden’s careful curation of retail and leisure, making it a vibrant and attractive place for residents and visitors. These solutions are driven by the specificities of place, the uniqueness of local offerings and a strategic, long-term plan.

A soulful high street is one that thrives off a unique mix of local makers, producers, and creatives, disrupting and occasionally supplanting the larger chains. Homogeneity makes places replicas of one another with ubiquitous betting shops and coffee chains. A scenario that subverts this, protecting and promoting distinctive places instead of creating 'clone towns'. Diverse communities are open-minded, welcoming and humble celebrating cultural differences and strengthening shared humanity. They encourage people from disparate walks of life to find common ground and share their experiences. Diversity, in all its forms, must be a central tenet of the high street offering. A place where cooking ingredients from around the world can be bought, local bookshops promote authors with different stories to tell, hair salons cater for all hair types and alternative medicines can be found.

5. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/mar/11/dutch-mall-groningen-netherlands-forum-urban-hub> 6. <https://monocle.com/film/business/how-to-fix-your-high-street-from/> 7. <https://neweconomics.org/2007/06/clone-town-britain>



Frome Independent Street Market

3. Intervene with impact

It is not just places that are reinventing themselves. Start-ups and new collectives are rising to the challenge. From dis-used rooftops to empty basements, small but impactful interventions are making our towns centres healthy, wealthy and happy places again.

Skyroom, an award-winning urban development company, partners with landlords to create high quality, low-cost and eco-friendly homes for key workers on rooftops across London. Skyroom's white paper 'Rise Up' details the social, environmental and economic benefits of their model and their innovative approach to planning.⁸ Their target is to provide over 10,000 homes for key workers by 2030, homes that will collectively save over 15 million tonnes in CO2 emissions over their lifetime, the equivalent of taking all of London's vehicles off the roads for a year. At this epoch-defining moment it is ingenuity like this that must be championed and learned from.

Makerversity is another example of urban ingenuity. It began with four designers who took over the derelict basement at London's Somerset House. Within 9 months it had transformed into a vibrant home for over 60 creative businesses, combining co-working spaces with clean and messy workspaces complete with machinery and tools. Members work and play together and, importantly, inspire each other to engage with local communities. Makerversity run out-reach learning programmes for disenfranchised communities and disadvantaged young people. They host workshops that inspire the next generation of creative and practical minds, increasing diversity within the creative industries and helping fill the gap left by austerity in the wake of mass closing of youth centres. This model provides a golden thread that could knit many communities back together, weaving entrepreneurialism and creativity into the fabric of reimagined town centres and high streets.



Skyroom - key worker housing on rooftops

The re-birth of our town centres should bring different generations closer together, which would improve the wellbeing of young and old. Community assets can be places for meaningful engagement and interactions between the ages, promoting empathy and understanding, story-telling and sharing experiences of living through different times with drastically different forms of communication and access to knowledge. The healing process of this current pandemic has led to the coming together of diverse and disparate communities, offering mutual recognition and support to each other for the gargantuan task at hand. There has been widespread recognition that it is the NHS workers, delivery drivers, carers and teachers who are leading the fightback against coronavirus with the whole country coming out in applause on their doorsteps and balconies every Thursday. Lets hope it is the beginning of a reevaluation of the roles of key workers in our everyday lives.

We now know that the environment is benefiting from the pause in life as we knew it. Stanford University experts predict that with 'lockdown' and the reduction of worldwide flights, less industrial activity and limited movement, we will see fewer pollution-related deaths, strengthened ecosystems and direct benefits to air quality, an improvement that has been confirmed by recent NASA satellite imagery. These are significant and positive outcomes of the Covid-19 crisis which should be nurtured and embraced.

Sources: 8. UCL Institute Global Prosperity <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/igp/rise-case-and-benefits-providing-homes-key-urban-workers-londons-rooftops>

4. Design intelligently

We are understanding more about the impact of good and bad design on social mobility, educational opportunity, health and wellbeing and social cohesion. Social, economic and physical infrastructure all play their part in supporting thriving communities, along with public transport, broadband and a range of community amenities.

We are learning about and sharing guidance on how to design popular, inviting and inclusive places and getting better at communicating this to a wider audience. For example, Create Streets have synthesised their research 'Of Streets and Squares' into a plain English, 8-Step Guide 'How to Design Popular Places'. The Building Better,

Building Beautiful Commission is another example of this growing body of work which is influencing government policy.⁹ These examples illustrate a 'pull' in the same direction. Towards improved spaces and places that really work for the people who use them, turning our back on the soulless mistakes of dull places devoid of character and inspiration. The direction we are headed in shows that we are learning lessons, not just papering over the cracks or rigidly sticking to received wisdom and dogmatic design principles.

Many town centres are strangled by ring roads and awkward, clumsy road layouts. Fields of car-dependent homes outside the town centre become parasites to existing services, known as 'the doughnut phenomenon'. Low density housing outside the centre prioritises motorists and attracts retail parks with wind swept car parks. Typically, dual carriageways and ring roads come complete with pedestrian barriers, limited pedestrian crossings and heavy 'clutter' or signage. They are not only difficult to cross but create physical and mental barriers that affect the accessibility and desire to use the high street. We cannot remove all vehicles from town centres but we can address the priority of the pedestrian, re-open lost routes and introduce 'at grade' crossings to re-connect the town centre and high street with its hinterland.

Encouraging active travel with walking and cycling routes will help ride the post-coronavirus wave confidently. Building on the legacy of people jogging and cycling more during the lockdown.



Town centres should be happy and healthy places

Town centres have to be easily accessible by public transport. Preferably efficient and strategically astute solutions like electric buses or cycles for hire. Encouraging active travel with walking and cycling routes will help ride the post-coronavirus wave confidently and build on the legacy of people jogging and cycling more regularly during the lockdown. Mobilising side streets and having a creative approach to access can transform town centres into inhabited, lively places once again. The emergence of 'smart' street furniture such as bus stops, bike racks, information points, benches, bins and charging points reporting usage and identifying where savings can be made will enable places to quite literally be shaped by user demand.

Digital masterplanning and the use of big and small data sets will have an impact on our high streets. Not only in how they are designed and who participates in the decision-making process, but also enabling places to be more interactive. FutureCity, a member of the London Collective, have discussed this approach in a series of bulletins on #DigitalPlaceshaping.¹⁰

Sources: 9. <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/building-better-building-beautiful-commission> **Sources: 10.** <https://futurecity.co.uk/news/>

5. Lead collaboratively

We strive to explore and uncover a town's past, its geography and the history of its residents and visitors to discover the very essence of a place that is critical to defining its future. Central to this approach is the continuous collaboration of designer, developer, Local Authority and other stakeholders to create places that fit and uniquely respond to people, place and participation.



Design solutions that are not imposed from above, but carefully shaped and curated.

London Collective member Commonplace use online tools and social media to create a digital community engagement platform. This enables more meaningful engagement with different demographics and age groups.¹¹

The reinvention of our town centres and high streets has to be led by consortiums, with public-private-partnerships offering new platforms for the voices of local people. Councils are custodians of the public realm and a central player in town centre regeneration. Post Covid-19, they are ideally positioned to capitalise on government initiatives and well placed to kick-start regeneration. Local authorities often have under-utilised landholdings that can be put to good use, to improve the experience of the high streets and provide much needed new housing.

Housing-led, mixed-use development is not a comfortable mix for many developers, but local authorities, with the right development partner, can re-invigorate and re-vitalise the high street. Strategic investment with economic modelling, integrated and incremental development has to be the way forward. From our experience there are investors with funding for town centre projects who need support in where and when to invest. London Collective Member Foregrounds helps different stakeholders to understand how best to achieve social value at every stage, breaking down projects into impacts for planning and monitoring purposes.¹²

Urban rooms have been popping up throughout the country. Places where people can go to debate the future of their place and understand the past and present better.¹³

Public Practice, a social enterprise with a mission to improve the quality of everyday places, has been building the public sector's capacity for proactive planning in London and is looking to expand to regional centres. The much-celebrated RIBA Stirling Prize Winner 2019 'Goldsmith Street' designed by Mikhail Riches and developed by Norwich City Council is the largest Passivhaus scheme in the UK, signalling the re-positioning of councils leading innovation and housing provision. Camden Council have followed suit with Passivhaus projects coming forward under their Community Investment Programme.

Many local authorities moved away from the high street in the seventies and eighties into inefficient, single-use office space. They can lead the way themselves and re-inhabit high streets to help drive regeneration. Urban rooms have been popping up throughout the country. Places where people can go to debate the future of their place and understand the past and present better.¹³

Business Improvement Districts also have a role to play. Championing the collective business voice and seeking to improve the visitor experience, keeping streets busy with footfall. A collaborative approach to regeneration can identify overlooked opportunities and unlock potential, turning stakeholders into conductors and communities into orchestras. Making high streets places where the symphony of life is played out.

Sources: 11. <https://www.commonplace.is/> 12. <https://www.foregrounds.org/> Sources: 13. <https://urbanroomsnetwork.wordpress.com/>

6. Seize the opportunity

Thinking about town centres post-coronavirus, we have 'once in a lifetime' opportunity to re-set the clock in terms of social and economic values, consumer trends, climate change and social interaction. If we think creatively and act collectively, we can re-write the script and start afresh.

The London Collective are offering to extend their multi-disciplinary expertise through online surgeries, to help Local Authorities, landowners, developers and BIDs lead the successful reinvention of high streets and town centres post-coronavirus.



Contact enquiries@ldn-collective.com to book a design surgery or visit ldn-collective.com

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