

## Butcher, baker, candlestick-maker and... healthcare centre?

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The death of the high street was being foretold as early as 1938, with fears being expressed about the personal and local character of shops disappearing (Richards and Ravilious, 1938). In the following I will argue that such forecasts are premature, but, that we need to recognise the essential spatiality of the UK shopping street, if we are to manage future challenges to its success. I will also demonstrate that while (at least in the UK), the terms *high street* and *shopping street* are used interchangeably, it is important to remember that high streets as places have always had a much wider role to play: as places of production, and as social, communal, and leisure settings – and always have done, to some extent or another.

Carmona's exploration of the apparent crisis in traditional shopping streets is a timely analysis of current problems with the UK's high streets (Carmona, 2021). A combination of planning decisions over the past half century with various economic changes, including recent shifts to online shopping has led, he astutely argues, to a possible future for high streets that is akin to that of the UK's canal network, "having largely lost its original purpose," so resorting to being mostly reliant on leisure boating to sustain its future. He also shows that retail is only one part of the total mix of activities that constitute the UK high street. Carmona's sun model of shopping choices that defines the various factors that influence the success of local centres works well to frame his proposal: that the way to secure the future of shopping streets is by ensuring they maintain a physical customer-base via a series of light-touch interventions. These interventions are required in order to shape the retail experience: by managing a sustainable mix of land uses that collectively provide a reason to visit shops in person, supported by a well-managed online presence. One of his key arguments is the need to create an environment that provides a social and leisure experience rather than simply relying on footfall.

Carmona has previously shown how the success of shopping streets has been due to the presence of a thick crust of mixed-use development that is comprised of buildings fronting the street that are robust and long-lasting, with messier buildings lying behind it (Carmona, 2015). The latter, significantly, create the conditions for land uses to adapt and change over time. His research is supported by Sharon Zukin's essential argument that the local shopping system forms an ecosystem of a compact physical space that draws together the "networks of social, economic and cultural exchange, created everyday by store owners, their employees, shoppers and local residents" (Zukin et al., 2015, cited in Carmona, 2021). Despite the power of Zukin's argument, I would argue that it needs to be developed further: the physical space of the local centre is not merely a passive container for these networks of exchange; we have to recognise how the spatial configuration of local centres – their pattern of spatial connections within the wider street network – shapes the potential to make and sustain socio-economic networks. This is explained in the following section.

Carmona correctly describes Hillier and colleagues' theory of the movement economy, that suggests that natural movement flows through the street network will, all things being equal, result in a logical distribution of land uses: those that need high rates of footfall will migrate to streets that are well connected and vice versa (Hillier, 1996). However, we should also note an important development to Hillier's theories. In a later paper regarding how local centres evolve, Hillier



the ability of community activities to take place in conveniently situated local buildings such as pubs, converted church halls and cinemas and through the everyday interactions that a mixing of different sorts of people in and around a local centre engender. There are indeed opportunities that are emerging with increasing homeworking, which, provided there is an accessible network, can also assist in intensifying local activities. Besides using cafes for business meetings, other land uses will continue to demand in-person presence on the shopping street: you cannot download a tattoo, or a haircut for that matter.

The famous series of “non-plan” arguments first laid out in a special issue of *New Society* in 1969, have argued for a reduction in planning interventions to allow for the natural evolution of prosaic high streets such as Kenton, north London (Banham et al., 1969; Barker, 1999). While their provocative recommendations have been mostly put aside, Barker’s latter day push for limiting planning to “modest and precise” interventions is apposite for this discussion (Barker, 2009). Indeed, Carmona’s argument for a mixed model is an appropriate riposte, recommending ways to constrain some of the recent unfettered transformations of retail and offices to residential uses, ensuring that the centre of the centre is conserved. We need however to recognise the power of the street network in making these recommendations work. By working with the grain of existing streets and ensuring the adaptability of the building morphology, planning frameworks can support the shaping of a harmonious combination of land uses. Equally important is to consider integrating other non-retail focused land uses, such as health centres, especially with an ageing population.

We have indeed moved beyond considering shopping streets as part of a movement economy, yet our research into centrality as a process demonstrates that place quality is not enough, it must have the supportive street network armature with multi-scale connectivity. Making a place attractive only works if there are people around in the first place.

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