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

By Laura Vaughan

Space Syntax Lab, Bartlett School of Architecture, UCL

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

provided evidence for how local spatial centrality – namely, a distinctive 'compact and convex' shape, with a finer local grid – leads to intensified activities flowing around a centre (Hillier, 1999). He emphasises that this is a process that develops over time. This is exemplified by the architect Fiona Scott's analysis of high street diversity in her piece from 2015 (see Figure 1). And, in the case of successful smaller town centres I have demonstrated that two other factors come to the fore here: that they are characterised by a) the development of centrality at multiple scales (both local and wider-reaching); and b) the adaptability of the built fabric (Vaughan et al., 2010), which is dependent on a variety of building types and sizes (Törmä et al., 2017). The latter in fact strengthens Carmona's case for how shopping streets can ideally manage a combination of adaptability and change.

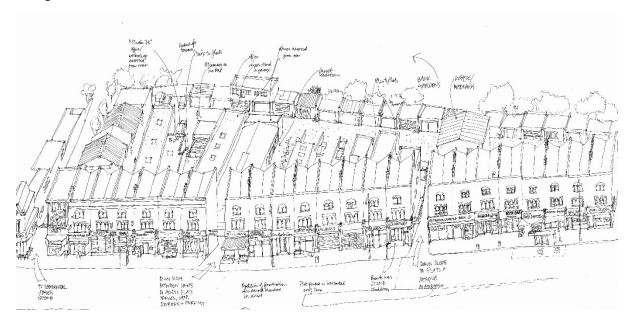


Figure 1. High street diversity: Hand sketch illustrating high street urban blocks on Roman Road (A1818) Redbridge, London: A spiritualist church, a tile wholesaler, Caribbean restaurant and Punjabi bakery amongst other uses. © Gort Scott Ltd, Image reproduced from Scott (2015).

Rather than being repurposed mainly for leisure, we can build on the embedded spatial potential of historically successful high streets, namely on their ability to forge connections through and between local centres. While we need to invest in online technology to support the future of retail, this is but one of the strategies required for overcoming the projected long-term decline of shopping. Carmona correctly recommends solutions such as creating places for co-working, and for manufacture. Indeed, we need to consider a wide range of land uses to ensure the sustainability of the high street. Looking to the past, the high street – as Frances Hollis has pointed out – had a significant number of buildings that combined live/work (Hollis, 2015). Looking at her recommendations it is clear that developments in 3D printing one of the many opportunities that an adaptable infrastructure, as well as a less restrictive use-class planning system, can help diversify local centre land uses. New developments for online shopping to be delivered to local shops, rather than to individuals' homes are not just a positive move for the environment, but another opportunity to increase the use of retail outlets beyond the traditional model. They also provide untapped potential for social, economic, and environmental sustainability.

Smaller enterprises are more likely to employ local people, particularly low-skilled workers who cannot afford to travel further, as well as highly skilled workers who, due to their family situation, need to work close to home. Such conditions further contribute to a location's environmental sustainability by reducing the number and length of car journeys, and social sustainability through

This is the accepted version of a short response to a paper by Matthew Carmona for the *Journal of Urban Design*. It is to be published in Autumn/Winter 2021. https://doi.org/10.1080/13574809.2022.1994772

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.

References

- Banham R, Barker P, Hall P and Price C. (1969) Non-Plan: an experiment in freedom. *New Society* 20: 435-443.
- Barker P (1999) Non-Plan Revisited: Or the Real Way Cities Grow: The Tenth Reyner Banham Memorial Lecture. *Journal of Design History* 12(2): 95-110.
- Barker P (2009) The Freedoms of Suburbia. London: Frances Lincoln.
- Carmona M (2015) London's local high streets: The problems, potential and complexities of mixed street corridors. *Progress in Planning* 100(August 2015): 1–84.
- Carmona M (2021) The existential crisis of traditional shopping streets: the sun model and the place attraction paradigm. *Journal of Urban Design*. DOI: 10.1080/13574809.2021.1951605. 1-35.
- Hillier B (1996) Cities as Movement Economies. URBAN DESIGN International 1(1): 49-60.
- Hillier B (1999) Centrality as a process: accounting for attraction inequalities in deformed grids. *URBAN DESIGN International* 4: 107-127.
- Hollis F (2015) Beyond Live/Work: The Architecture of Home-Based Work. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge.
- Richards JM and Ravilious E (1938) High Street. London: Country Life Books
- Törmä I, Griffiths S and Vaughan L (2017) High street changeability: the effect of urban form on demolition, modification and use change in two south London suburbs *Urban Morphology* 21(1): 5-28.
- Vaughan L, Jones CE, Griffiths S, Haklay M. (2010) The spatial signature of suburban town centres. Journal of Space Syntax 1(1): 77-91.
- Zukin S, Kasinitz P and Chen X (2015) *Global Cities, Local Streets : Everyday Diversity from New York to Shanghai.* London: Routledge.