

Briefing note, September 2014

Future of the high street

Implications for transport policy and planning



In some parts of the UK high streets are rapidly declining, while in other areas, high streets are thriving and new models are emerging. Understanding the dynamics and patterns behind these changes is crucial to inform the various actors involved and to develop policies to support high streets. This note summarises outputs from a high-level impact seminar organised by University College London (UCL) in collaboration with the Department for Transport (DfT), in September 2014. This seminar presented recent academic research on the topic and considered its relevance for current policy debates.

Main conclusions from discussions

- The traditional role of the high street is changing and needs to adapt to new patterns of consumption and new social needs.
- Planning policies should be bolder and focus on forward thinking place-making.
- National governments should support local authorities to implement progressive planning policies.
- Investment in walking and the public realm should be increased substantially.
- In many cities, such as London, many of the parking spaces along high streets are not essential and can generate unwanted vehicle traffic.

Key messages from the presentations

- A well connected pedestrian street network from the surrounding neighbourhood is key to ensure the survival of the high street, and this should be fully taken into account in developing planning policies.
- High streets should be designed to provide an attractive walking and street space environment, accessible to the whole community.
- High streets should be conceived as the diverse heart of the community, and no longer be exclusively centred on retail.
- London high streets are some of the most important spaces in the capital; they provide models of success and offer potential for growth.

Areas for further research

- Defining what the future role of the high street should be, in different urban contexts.
- Providing further evidence concerning the need for on-street parking spaces along high streets.
- Understanding the impact which new consumption trends – including shopping online and 3D printing – will have on shopping patterns and other high street activities.

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EPSRC

Engineering and Physical Sciences
 Research Council

Summary Presentations

“The future of the high street: mobility and accessibility” by Professor Laura Vaughan, Space Syntax Laboratory, UCL Bartlett School of Architecture

Prof. Vaughan presented results from a four-year study into the historical evolution of four outer London town centres. Key highlights included:

- The historical pattern of growth of a centre strongly influences how it emerges as a focus of activity.
- Local street networks shape flows of movement and activities over time.
- Diversity in the offer makes smaller centres resilient, and competitive with larger centres.
- A walkable, accessible centre encourages users to take part in multiple activities and increase spend.

- Parallels can be drawn between ecological and urban systems: the more varied ecological systems are, the more resilient they are.

Factors that will help to ensure the the long-term survival of our high streets include:

- The more and better connected the street network, is the more likely it will be a successful high street.
- Small centres should not be viewed solely as ‘attractors’, but also as important nodes within complex networks of movement.
- Policy makers and designers should work ‘with the grain’ of high street networks when considering changing patterns of connectivity.
- ‘Walkable’ involves creating local interfaces between multiple urban scales and different transportation modes.

“Walking – the way to prosperity” by Julian Dobson, Director, Urban Pollinators Ltd

Julian Dobson’s presentation examined the changing nature of town centres and argued that:

- More walkable town centres are likely to be more economically successful.
- The main measure of a successful centre should not be retail turnover anymore, but whether the high street is at the heart of the community.
- Parking is unlikely to be a key element to high street revival in most places.

He highlighted recent shopping trends and noticed an increase in:

- Concentration and polarisation of big brands in some high streets and withdrawal from others.

- Digitisation of retail spend, with 12% of all UK sales made online in 2013.

It was highlighted that:

- Over a period of time, pedestrians and bus users on average spend more than motorists.
- Walkable town centers encourage lingering, sociability and return visits.

Based on those comments, a series of recommendations were made:

- Local authorities should encourage a range of activities on to the high street (e.g. community theatres and activities in old cinemas etc.).
- Denser neighbourhoods with older buildings are more desirable, livelier and attract more people to visit local high streets.

“We want a city of high streets” by Professor Mark Brearley, Head of Cass Cities

Prof. Brearley presented data related to the 600 high streets that exist in London, and argued that London is following the right model to enhance its high streets. He noted that:

- Many of London’s high streets are along the most ancient roads in the capital. London is structured around these linear arteries with high footfall – it is where the life is in the city.
- London’s high streets account for just 3.6% of the road network, but represent some of the most important spaces in the city.

- Surveys tell us that over 90% of Londoners value their high street and want to see it improved.
- 47% of businesses outside Central London are on a high street.
- 1.45 million employees work on or within 200 metres of a high street.
- There is huge growth capacity: nearly half of London’s identified developable land is within 200m of a high street.

Finally Prof Brearley highlighted that there are opportunities to make a city of communities, with an extrovert civic and economic life built around our high streets.

Summary Presentations

Historical evolution of high streets



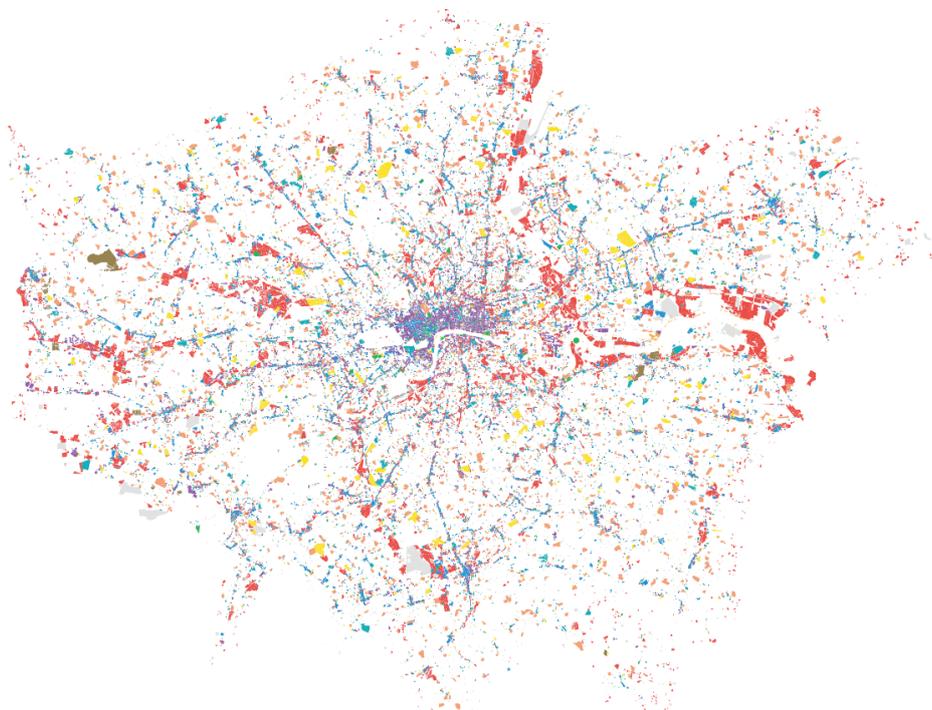
Victoria Road, Surbiton c. 1910 and today showing the long-term persistence and adaptability of London's high streets. Image copyright © UCL Adaptable Suburbs project (contemporary photograph by Ilkka Törmä).

Walking, sitting and spending



Is there a relationship between a town's walkability and its prosperity?

London's high streets



Summary of the discussion

Future of the high streets:

- High streets need to be multi-purpose, multi-use and adapted to the local context.
- High streets have to adapt to the way people are now consuming.
- Shopping online is at a point of transition, and is changing the traditional role of the high street.
- The concentration or aggregation of social, economic and cultural activity is key to ensure a successful high street in the future.

Improving planning policies:

- Bold and efficient planning policies are needed.
- National government should support local authorities to gain a better understanding of how urban places function, and improve forward thinking about place-making and investment decisions.
- Government officials should receive a budget to visit towns and cities around the UK, to gain first hand experience.
- Nurturing the existing assets of old high streets is important to provide a sense of identity and uniqueness.
- Traditional retail spaces on high streets should be reserved for non-residential purposes.

Implications for transport policy:

- Investment in walking should be increased substantially. One of the questions which needs to be asked is: Can we walk safely from A to B?
- Key network links connecting to high streets are key and should be preserved.
- More local authorities should establish strategic institutions such as Transport for London.
- 'Movement' and 'place' are separated in central government and should be joined-up.
- In a city like London, most high street users are public transport users, pedestrians or cyclists, therefore parking spaces are not as crucial.
- Congestion harms high streets – traffic searching for parking in cities is counter-productive.

Further research:

- There is a need to define what a high street is, including its nature and boundaries.
- Further evidence should be gathered to test the hypothesis that on-street parking spaces along high streets can be detrimental.
- A better understanding of how new consumption trends, including shopping online and 3D printing, affect and will affect the way people shop and their relationship with the high street, is key.

Background

This seminar is part of a programme of activities funded through an EPSRC 'Impact Acceleration Award'. The initiative aims to create bridges between senior researchers, key policy makers and practitioners working in transport, to ensure that significant research outputs are rapidly absorbed into policy making and practice, and have practical impact.

This seminar was an opportunity for key policy makers to hear about recent academics' findings and to discuss with the researchers concerned their relevance to policy making and practice.

The following institutions were represented:

- Department for Transport
- Department for Communities and Local Government
- Department for Business, Innovation & Skills
- House of Commons Transport Committee
- Local Government Association
- Transport for London
- London Councils
- Hackney Council
- Croydon Council
- Leeds city Council
- Living Streets
- Chartered Institution of Highways & Transportation
- Urban Movement
- London Metropolitan University
- Urban Pollinators Ltd
- Cass Cities
- Civil Environmental Geomatic Engineering, UCL
- UCL Transport Institute
- Space Syntax, Bartlett, UCL

References

Geddes I., and Vaughan L. (2014) *Why Do People Walk in the Suburbs? An Analysis of How Spatial Configuration and Land Use Diversity Contribute to Walkability*. Working Paper 1/2014 University College London, London

Bolton, T; Vaughan, LS; (2014) *The Past, Present and Futures of the High Street: report on the Closing Conference of the Adaptable Suburbs project*. The Bartlett School of Graduate Studies, UCL (University College London): London

Dobson, J. (to be published) *How to Save Our Town Centres: A Radical Agenda for the Future of High Streets*