

Re-Imagining our high streets

Summary of webinar discussion

Thank you all for contributing to a fascinatingly multi-layered discussion yesterday on our high streets and their future. Here are some of the discussion's key themes as we understood them. Please forgive us if we've omitted a point close to your heart!

1. **'Don't let the crisis go to waste.'** 2020 is a time of crisis – *'we face a trilemma of shifting shopping habits, the impact of the pandemic and the climate and ecological emergency'* - but it is also an opportunity for a more sustainable and humane way of living. *'If everyone lived the way the UK did, we would need three planets to support us'. 'Let's design places that make it easy for everyone to live sustainably'.*
2. **What might a day in a 2030 high street look like?** The 2030 high street (electric bike, repair shops, pocket parks, work from home days, affordable workspace, purpose-led business start-ups, volunteering one hour per month, allotments, library of things.) is a far cry from today's *'clone town'* model – and yet all the solutions already exist. Our high streets should permit us to live, work and shop more sustainably. *'It's time we preserve and reuse the resources that flow into our economy'.*
3. **Streets as places for people to be in, not just a conduit to pass through.** Let's look at streets on three levels: bird's eye view, human eye view, child's eye view. *'We have been structuring our towns around fashionable decisions, rather than fundamental natural ones'*. High streets are now places where people are subservient and cars are dominant. *'High streets full of people are great streets.'* We must design in a way that achieves this, including those with accessibility challenges.
4. **High streets (and town centres) need a purpose.** If you don't define purpose upfront, you will fail. COVID has reminded us of the importance of a sense of place; we must use ingredients already available. *'Move away from cold malls to areas where people can come together and congregate. Offer what people miss when they buy online - other people and experiences. This is how we can persuade them to come back.'*
5. **The vision must be for everyone.** Beware of 'middle class' visions - this approach can and must work in all areas, regardless of affluence levels, as everyone has a right to happier, healthier and more sustainable lifestyles. This is why we need co-design.
6. **Research, agree a vision, co-create.** Just as the Piece Hall did, the vision must be based on research, and shared. *'Identify the organisations you need to engage with and get them involved in developing that shared vision. To get a great outcome it cannot be (just) a top-down process'.*
7. **'There's a role for land assembly but it's not the same as master-planning'.** *'Fractured ownership of the high streets is a massive impediment to instigating change.'* Land assembly can and should be considered when necessary.
8. **High streets do need flexibility of use, but we also need to control the quality of place.** *'Changes in Permitted Development Rights on flexible use is probably one of the biggest changes to our planning approach to high streets in over a generation'*. This could be *'brilliant on many different levels and utterly disastrous on others.'* Getting this right will be a critical challenge for councils.

We hope this is a fair and useful summary. Thank you for your time, expertise and excellent questions. Do get in touch with the Bioregional and Create Streets team if you'd like to discuss any of these points or find out how to start putting some of them into action.

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