The high street has to evolve or die

Evolve or die – an all too familiar phrase – and one that now needs to be applied to London's High Streets says Neil Bennett

Against a background of accelerating change, Farrells work with the GLA on 21st Century High Streets, across London, and most recently with London Borough of Sutton on Sutton High Street, has demonstrated the pressing need to re-consider the role of our High Streets. At a time of significant and rapid change high streets need to adapt and change with the changing world about them. The internet, smart city technologies and autonomous vehicles have and will dramatically change the way we live. Similar to many high streets across London, the course of our work in Sutton saw Toys R Us, Maplin and PoundWorld close. There are further threats to one of the adjacent Asda and Sainsburys food stores, if their planned merger is achieved.

A smaller high street also faces competition from the larger shopping centres where new retail investment is tending to get concentrated. In Sutton's case, this is both Kingston and Croydon, the latter with its forthcoming Westfield.

Today, with many physical attributes of retail becoming completely redundant, people are tending to go to a High Street environment to get a service-based or social experience they can't get at home:-

- To see/touch/try/test products - to go to a "show"-room
- To get human contact and advice
- To be stimulated and entertained – theatre, E-sports and VR gaming
- To buy something they can't get elsewhere – something unique
- For convenience shopping – to pick up something quickly, or something ordered online

The traditional High Street model is being re-imagined, with much more emphasis on inspiration, stimulation, and entertainment as part of a much wider experiential model, one in which eating, drinking, shopping and working are re-aligning.

All of this supports our long held view that a High Street should not be a shopping centre – a specialised mono-functional place for shopping only - but rather a multi-functional place of cultural, social and economic exchange – a place where you live, work, shop, eat and drink, and be social, civic and healthy.

A first consideration perhaps then is the underlying structure of the place.

For Sutton's High Street – over 1 km long, and a street I have described as having 'good bones' – an initial step toward defining its future was an understanding of its underlying historic structure of three linked places, each with a still discernible character. A 'Market town', with a street market, and smaller shops, 'Mid-town', with two large shopping centres, busily diversifying and introducing a mix of uses, and 'Up-town' around the station and the town's food and drink hub. Through recognising the shape of the place, and then revealing and reinforcing the hidden drivers, London's high streets are now beginning to re-shape and re-invent the identity and vitality of their high street.

Turning to achieving a mix of uses, and activity, a powerful driver is the need for housing, in Sutton's case a very substantial increase in the number of people living in the town centre. The influx of new customers will be a welcome boost for retailers. A new and diverse population will underpin demand and bring 24/7 life to the High Street but we must be wary of is the accompanying pressure on values and rents, and the implied and real pressure on that valuable commodity - daylight and sunlight.

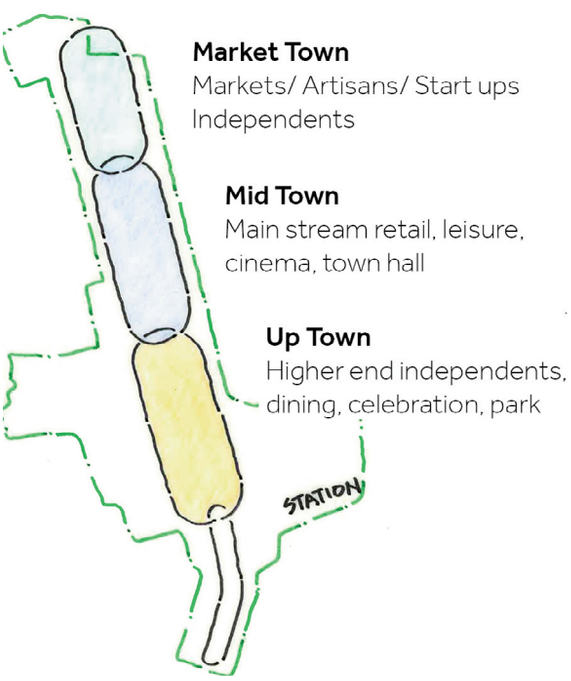
Work is another activity changing rapidly, with, in our analysis, the need for large corporate spaces in decline, and both demand for, and potential supply of smaller, flexible managed workspaces, ideally directly accessible and visible from the street, and from 6,000 to 25,000 sq. ft. *(SEE workspace diagram overpage)*

Health and well-being spaces are also beginning to inform this rich mix between workspace, social and retail spaces.

The typical high street mix of retail and food and drink is also rapidly evolving with more and more real data and insight about how people use and access the high street – for Sutton our project partners CBRE employed their Calibrate tool to analyse the digital footprint of mobile phone users. *(SEE overpage)*

This enabled the client and consultant team to visualise real flows on the high street, including the interaction between retail and food and beverage outlets and to accurately predict the impacts of change, such as adapting car park capacity. Calibrate also gave us an idea of the forward capacity of the high street and where natural footfalls are highest. Typically, we find in many high streets, from the east end of Oxford Street downwards in promi- >>>

RIGHT:
Moving forward the Masterplan





Neil Bennett is a partner with Farrells



RIGHT:
What type of managed workspace is required?

6 000 min to **20 000 sq ft - sweet spot** to **25 000 sq ft** workspace units

>>> nence a shortage of mid-scale space, from 2500 to 10,000 sq. ft, largely caused by the small size of shops possible in the grain of older buildings.

Beneath the surface, many high streets are well loved by its local shop owners and customers, and they are behind a small, but discernible, trend toward mixing up retail and food and drink into a more personal, unique experience, activity first, built form last.

Directly linked to this better understanding of how a high street actually works, is the growing understanding that, in a three way fluid partnership between land owner, occupier and council, a high street needs active curation and management. Another contention is that a High Street needs a frequent shot of adrenaline, to make it an interesting, relevant, entertaining, changing environment, where there is local identity and always something new. Our uniform and "anywheresville" high streets are quite frankly dull.

Learning from experience elsewhere, we think generic first steps are to:-

FAR RIGHT:
What types of retail space are required in today's market?

- Understand place and points of difference.
- Respond quickly to changes in lifestyles and demographics
- Experiment and be prepared to fail with new ideas, using temporary structures and empty spaces
- Deliver small - scale upgrades and quick wins as a continuous process
- Make the high street a festival place – place of local celebration
- Establish an 'Urban Room' as a hub for continuous two way communication about the change and regeneration process, a place for change leaders to meet

The aim is to provide a continuous spectrum of space and uses from one day to 5 year "pop up" events from food and drink, through to flexible workspaces. No more dividing lines of fixed tenancies and fixed uses.

The big picture is that to survive, London's high streets need to become unique and offer what you cannot get elsewhere or on-line. Local authorities, like the LB Sutton, have great influence and often land that, with initiative, proper management and a curatorial approach can bring about the much needed change on our high streets

High streets must adapt to regain their previous vitality, mix of uses, and by concentrating on the human experience. To do this, private and public initiators need to intervene and curate, to nurture and create different and unique high street experiences. We need to allow for organic unplanned, unplannable activity to grow, to thrive or to fail, all for our high streets to become interesting places – tempting destination places to leave home for.

BELOW:
Retail Footfall Heatmap – CBRE 'Calibrate' tool



