

**Jonathan Broderick
Neha Chatterjee
Savitri Lopez Negrete Torres
Ezra Moser**

**Mile End
STEPPING
STONE STREET**

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Our portion of High Street 2012 is situated along Mile End Road between the western edge of Queen Mary University and Whitechapel Tube station. The built form fronting the street is a mix of low-rise, historic and fine-grain typologies punctuated by large out-of-town retail developments and post-war council housing estates. While our high street is densely populated and home to diverse communities, it is also severely deprived and suffers from suppressed levels of economic activity.

Despite this deprivation, the street is a place of social vitality and economic opportunities. Concentrations of historic, fine-grain built form provide a seedbed for small and micro-scale businesses. These types of businesses have low barriers to entry and provide opportunities for flexible employment and self-employment, making them 'particularly attractive to migrants to the UK' (Gort Scott and UCL, 2010: 16). We conceptualise our high street as a stepping stone for diverse communities by facilitating small and micro-scale entrepreneurship.

Conventional methods of valuing high streets do so in terms of economic turnover and the price of real estate (CABE, 2007). These measures privilege more attractive streets in affluent areas and favour higher value business and investment. We developed alternative measures of value that incorporate social vitality and recognise the local particularities of our street.

To take a more holistic approach to the development of our high street, we propose the establishment of a stewardship framework incorporating alternative measures of value. This will serve as a strategic blueprint for the local authority to guide future development on our high street. The framework will take shape in the following three stages:

- Pre-Olympics: Co-ordinate pilot projects that catalyse confidence among small business owners.
- Olympics: Leverage London 2012 to strengthen networks between small business owners and community organisations.
- Long-term: Develop a formal stewardship framework incorporating our alternative measures of value.

Our analysis is based on multi-scalar research using a variety of methodological lenses. At the macro scale, our research was informed by local census data, historical maps and relevant planning policies. At a more fine-grained level, we spoke with local business owners, observed people on the street, and conducted interviews with experts at various community organisations. From September 2010 to February 2011, interviews were held with the Stepney Community Trust, Queen Mary University, East Thames Housing, and the East London Small Business Association. Our aim was to combine social and spatial lenses to understand the complexities of the high street and its role as a mediator of change.



Socio-Economic Profile

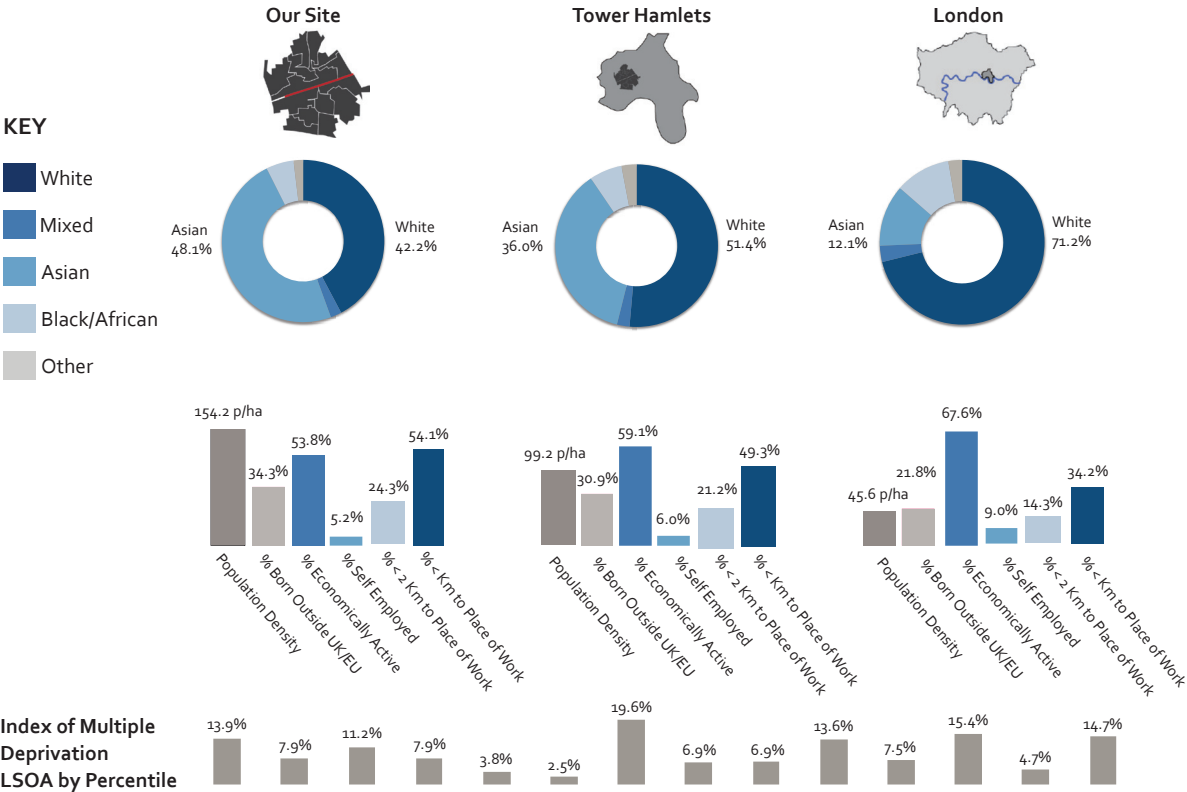
A statistical analysis of our high street reveals that it is densely populated, ethnically diverse, highly deprived, and suffering from comparatively suppressed levels of economic activity (see below). We gathered data from the fourteen Lower Super Output Areas (LSOAs) that surrounded our site—an area with 21,172 residents totalling 137 hectares. The average density for all fourteen LSOAs is 154.2 people per hectare; which exceeds the Tower Hamlets average by 150% and is more than three times that of Greater London as a whole. This level of density provides the required intensity to support a thriving high street.

Demographically, the area is split between Asian and White communities (accounting for 48.1% and 42.2% of the population respectively). It is also home to a new and growing Somali community whose numbers are not adequately reflected in the 2001 census. The neighbourhood has a comparatively high proportion of residents born outside the UK and the EU and historically has served as a point of entry for immigrant groups. The diversity of the neighbourhood is reflected by the variety of locally and ethnically-owned businesses found along the high street, which act as springboards for new arrivals to London. As noted earlier, the area is extremely deprived, with more than

half of its LSOAs below the bottom tenth percentile (and several below the fifth) for the aggregate Index of Multiple Deprivation. Levels of economic activity and self-employment—the latter of which is indicative of entrepreneurship—are considerably lower in this area than in Tower Hamlets and Greater London.

More than half of our site’s population lives within five kilometres of their place of work, and a quarter within two. This suggests that interventions geared towards bolstering economic vitality on our high street will have considerable benefits for the local community. However, many of the employees and shop owners who we interviewed during our research commute from other parts of East London, Essex and Wembley. Thus we sought to conceptualise our high street as a mediator of local, metropolitan and global flows.

The area surrounding our high street is densely populated, ethnically diverse, highly deprived, and suffers from comparatively low levels of economic activity. However, a relatively high percentage of its population work in the immediate or near vicinity, indicating that interventions geared towards bolstering economic vitality will have tangible benefits for the local community.
Source: Office for National Statistics and Communities and Local Government databases



CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Alternative measures of value

The High Street 2012 initiative explicitly outlines the need to 'build on the strengths of [our] street' in order to create a 'thriving,' 'vibrant' high street (LDA, 2009). To achieve these aims, it is imperative that our street's strengths are properly accounted for. The alternative measures are embodied in the street's diversity, adaptability, affordability, and longevity.

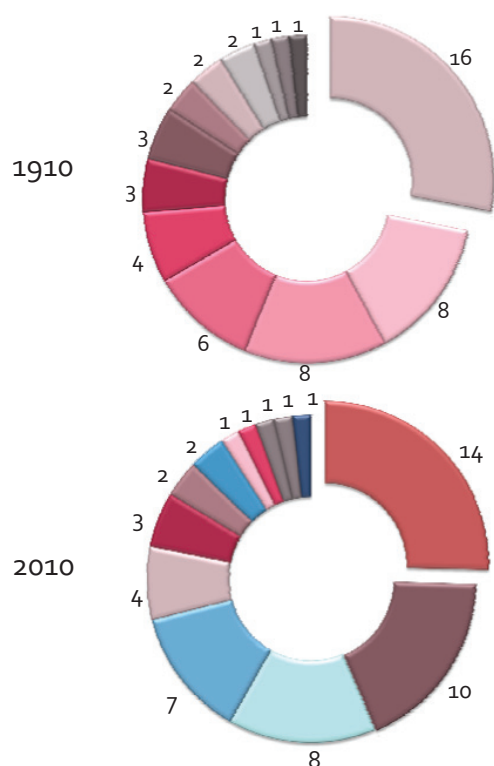
Diversity

The variety and proximity of small and micro-scale businesses on our street facilitate an intensity of social and economic exchanges. Diversity refers to the diversity of uses and trades that these spaces nurture (see below). Diversity also refers to the diversity of users for whom these economic spaces serve vital functions as places of social interaction and offer a range of employment opportunities available on the high street.

Diversity

From 1910 to 2010 there has been a shift from the manufacturing sector to the service sector, demonstrating how our street is tied to the national economy. The street has also shifted from having an abundance of garment and upholstery functions to filling the lower-end niche of food retail in the service sector.

Source: London Street Directory 1910 and 2010



Adaptability and affordability

Historical evidence suggests that small- and micro-scale shops have adapted to a variety of trades over time (see opposite page). This reflects how high streets are 'key drivers' of entrepreneurship and innovation, creating businesses that are 'small, lean, and able to adapt...to changing local circumstances,' (Gort Scott and UCL, 2010: p. 16). This adaptability is directly embedded in the fine grain of the high street's built form, which can be partitioned and subdivided to accommodate more entrepreneurs at lower rents.

Longevity

The low-rise, fine-grain, historic built form on our high street has accommodated successive waves of migrant entrepreneurs, allowing them to start small businesses and gain upward social mobility (see opposite page). This relationship is fundamental to the long-term viability of the high street as a stepping stone.

While these measures allow the street to function as a stepping stone, they are also under threat as the high street is redeveloped under a city-wide agenda promoting economic growth and transport hubs.

KEY

1910

Professional Services	Pubs
Household Provisions	Building Construction Suppliers
Clothing Manufacturers	Physician and Surgeons
Food Services	Food Services
Social Institutions	Department Store
Gambling, Auctioneers	Bank
Residences	

2010

Food Retail	Entertainment
Residences	Household Provisions
Supermarkets, Retail	Social Institutions
Business Services	Building Construction
Professional Services	Department Store
Gambling, Auctioneers	Hotel
Pubs	

Adaptability and affordability

Shop number 107 adapted to various trades over time showing the resilience of the fine grain to accommodate small businesses. These small shops have the flexibility to be subdivided allowing entrepreneurs to pay a lower rent.

1910 Image Source: Life in the Jewish East End, 2009, Madame Rind. [electronic print] Available at: <www.jewishmuseum.org.uk/life-in-the-jewish-east-end> [Accessed 3rd December 2010].

1988 Image Source: The Gentle Author, 2010 More East End Shopfronts of 1988.[electronic print] Available at: <spitalfieldslife.com/2010/07/21/more-east-end-shopfronts-of-1988/> [Accessed 3rd December 2010].



1910, Corset Maker



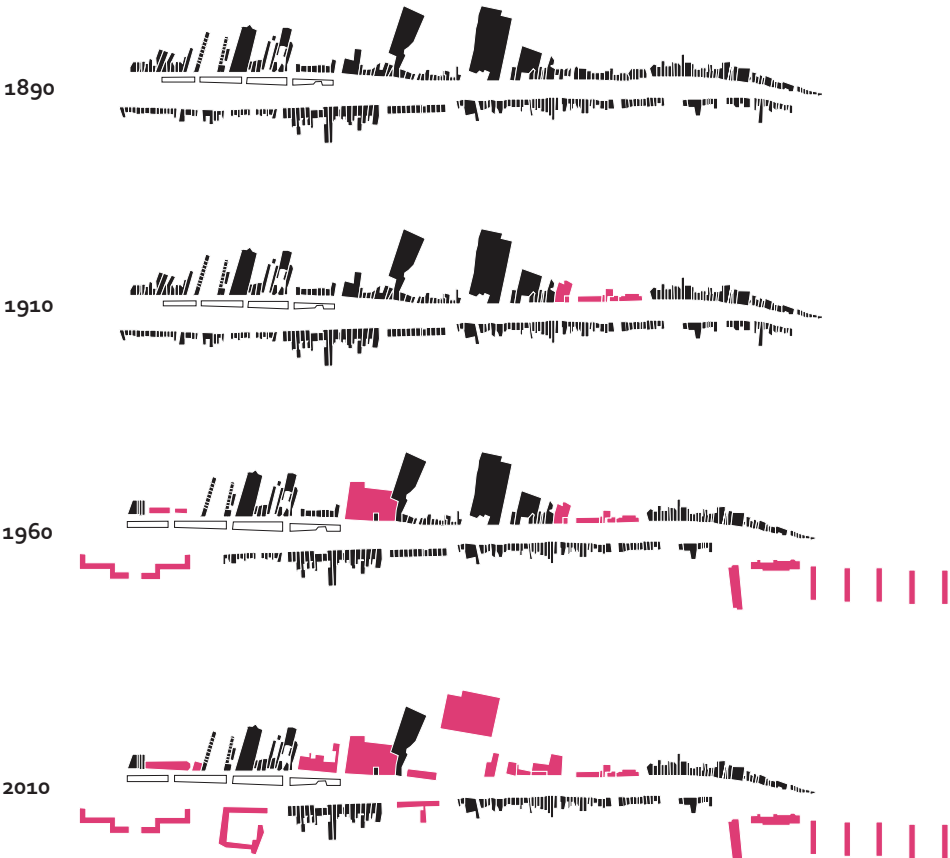
1988, Tailoring Shop



2010, Convenience Store

Longevity
Some fine grain has persisted over time despite various ruptures on the urban fabric by large out of town chain store and post-war council housing shown in pink.

Source: Edina Maps



SPATIAL PROBLEMS

In observing our street, we identified two overarching urban and spatial problems. First, the street’s social and economic vitality—key to its ability to function as a stepping stone—are fragile and under threat. Second, the policy framework concerning our street fails to adequately recognise the relationship between small and micro-scale businesses and social vitality.

Social and economic vitality on our high street are spatially rooted in the existence and preservation of the street’s fine grain, mixed-use urban fabric. As outlined earlier, a historic analysis of built form patterns along our high street reveal that the fine grain has shrunk considerably and gradually given way to large, mono-use plots occupied by council housing estates and, more recently, large-scale retail development. This contemporary pattern of growth threatens the high street’s role as a hub for civic and community life and as a springboard for new migrants into entrepreneurship and employment opportunities. Much of this threat appears to stem from the increasing presence of large chain stores overtaking the market share of micro- and small-scale businesses, a trend highlighted on the metropolitan and national scale by the New Economics Foundation (NEF, 2003).

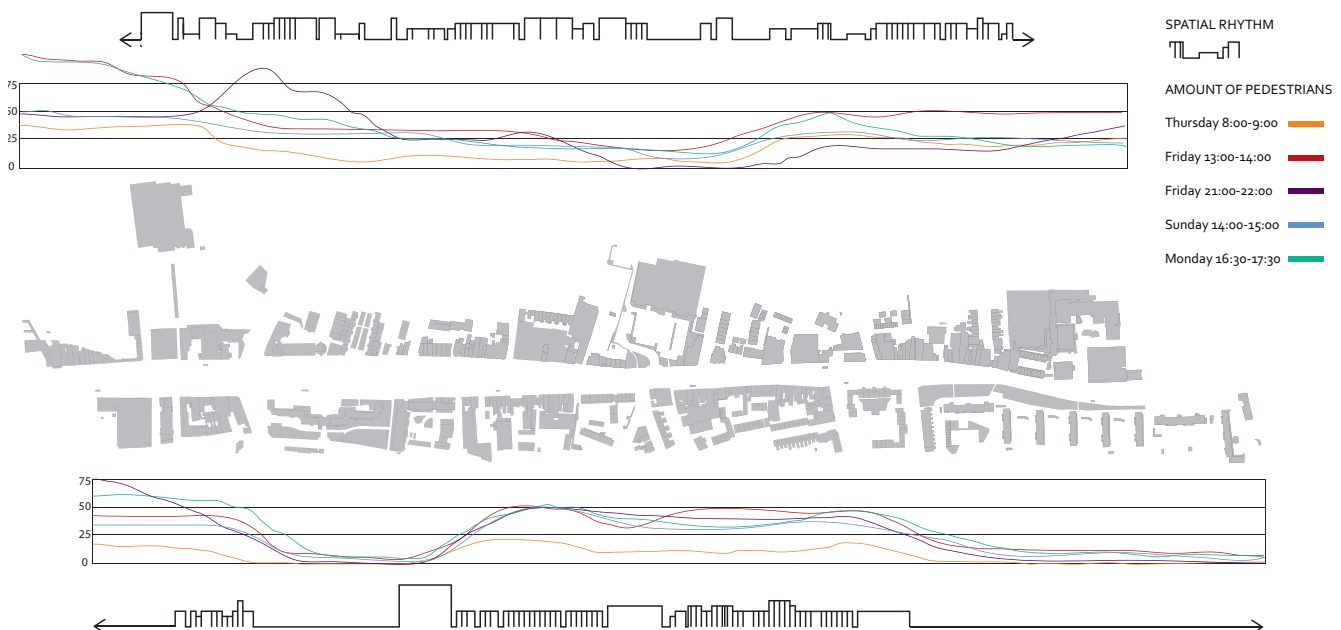


Above: Places of social vitality on Mile End Road
High pedestrian activity and social interaction at Whitechapel Market (left) and in front of independent micro businesses along the high street (right).



Above: Low pedestrian activity in front of mono-use plots on Mile End Road
Very low levels of pedestrian activity and social interaction were found in front of large mono-use plots such as the Ansell Council block (left) and the Anchor Retail Park (right).

Below: Social and spatial rhythms
The diagram shows levels of pedestrian activity during various days and times, and the corresponding spatial rhythm ranging from fine-grain to large plots along the high street.



These conditions raise an important challenge for our high street: what model of physical growth is needed to enhance the role of the high street as a stepping stone for mobility, especially one that engages the existing presence and growth of out-of-town retailers? Contrary to the NEF's assertions, Wrigley (2008) contends that chain retailers do not necessarily have an incompatible relationship with small- and micro-scale retail; in the context of London, this dynamic can prove beneficial to both parties. What is problematic on our high street, however, is where retail developments disrupt the fine grain by occupying large, mono-use plots or multiple store fronts.

Our studies quantifying the high street's social and spatial rhythms indicate that pedestrian flows and locally based social activities were higher along the fine-grain, low-rise fabric and virtually non-existent around larger, mono-use plots with fronts generally set back from the street (see opposite page). These findings indicate a clear correlation between social vitality and fine grain, mixed-use urban fabric. This has direct implications for maintaining the intensity of social and economic activity fundamental to sustaining the high street.

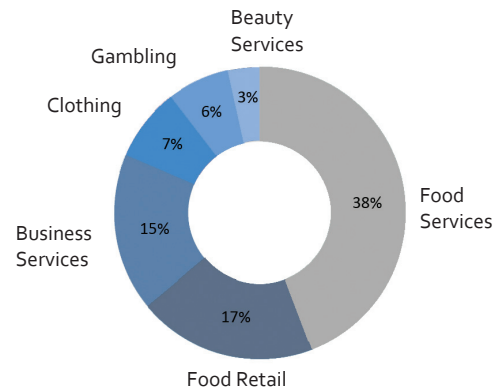
Even though many segments of our high street have retained their historic and adaptable fine grain, and serve as vital spaces for both social and economic exchanges, there has been a trend towards 'homogenisation' amongst businesses. More than 50% of stores on the street are either in food retail or food services, leading to instances of fried chicken stores opening directly next to one another. While this reflects the dominance of the low-end service sector, it also stems from the absence of a co-ordinating mechanism for businesses on our high street.

Above Right: Market share of independent businesses on Mile End Road

Food services are the highest on Mile End Road

Right: Diverse independent businesses on Mile End Road

Micro and small businesses thrive on Mile End Road supported by the high population density and the adaptability of low-rise, fine-grain built form. Businesses include international cuisine restaurants, which draw clients from all over London, to the typical local high street beauty parlours which cater to neighbourhood residents.



Food Services



38%

Food Retail



17%

Business Services



15%

Clothing and Dry Cleaners



7%

Gambling, Loans and Money Transfers



6%

Beauty Products and Services



3%

Policy Context: Overlooking vitality

It is clear that social and economic vitality on our high street are directly related to the presence of fine-grain built form and small and micro-scale independent retailers. It is also evident that this relationship is fragile. The two most relevant policy documents concerning our site overlook the importance of small and micro-scale businesses in favour of larger scale regeneration agendas.

High Street 2012

In 2010, Tower Hamlets council secured upwards of £8 million from external partners to begin delivering improvements on the A11/A12 as part of the High Street 2012 Project (see below). As a part of this regeneration programme, four clusters of 60 historic buildings are being restored to reveal the traditional shopfronts and period façades to preserve and showcase the area's historical legacy. Early in 2011, work began on a group of 21 Victorian terraces with shops at the ground floor. Tower Hamlets has also planned public realm improvements for Mile End Waste. The planned improvements will enhance street lighting, add street furniture and de-clutter the street (LDA, 2009). While the document is explicitly concerned with creating a 'thriving' and 'vibrant' high street, it aims to do so through primarily cosmetic improvements. More importantly, this strategy risks setting the stage for the type of large-scale commercial investment that already hinders social vitality on our high street.



Above: Shopfront refurbishments

Shopfront refurbishments are being undertaken on Mile End Road 'to celebrate the street's heritage and strengthen the character of the place'.



Above: Refurbished Shopfront, Hayfield Masala

Below: High Street 2012 projects, currently underway
Source: London Borough of Tower Hamlets



Town Centre Approach

The Tower Hamlets Core Strategy Development Plan divides Mile End Road into Whitechapel District Town Centre and Stepney Neighbourhood Centre (LBTH, 2010) (see below).

Whitechapel Tube station is slated to become a regional transport and economic hub for Crossrail and East London line extension programmes. As a newly designated City Fringe Activity Zone, the area has received planning permission for large-scale office development to maximise the value of the new transport infrastructure. A new business improvement zone at Whitechapel will attract private investment and refurbish the independent traders' market outside Whitechapel Tube station. The district centre will also reinforce its designated 'regional' role by providing 1500-2500 new housing units by 2025. The sites for this regeneration are not clearly defined and how regeneration of this scale will be delivered in the current economic climate remains in doubt.

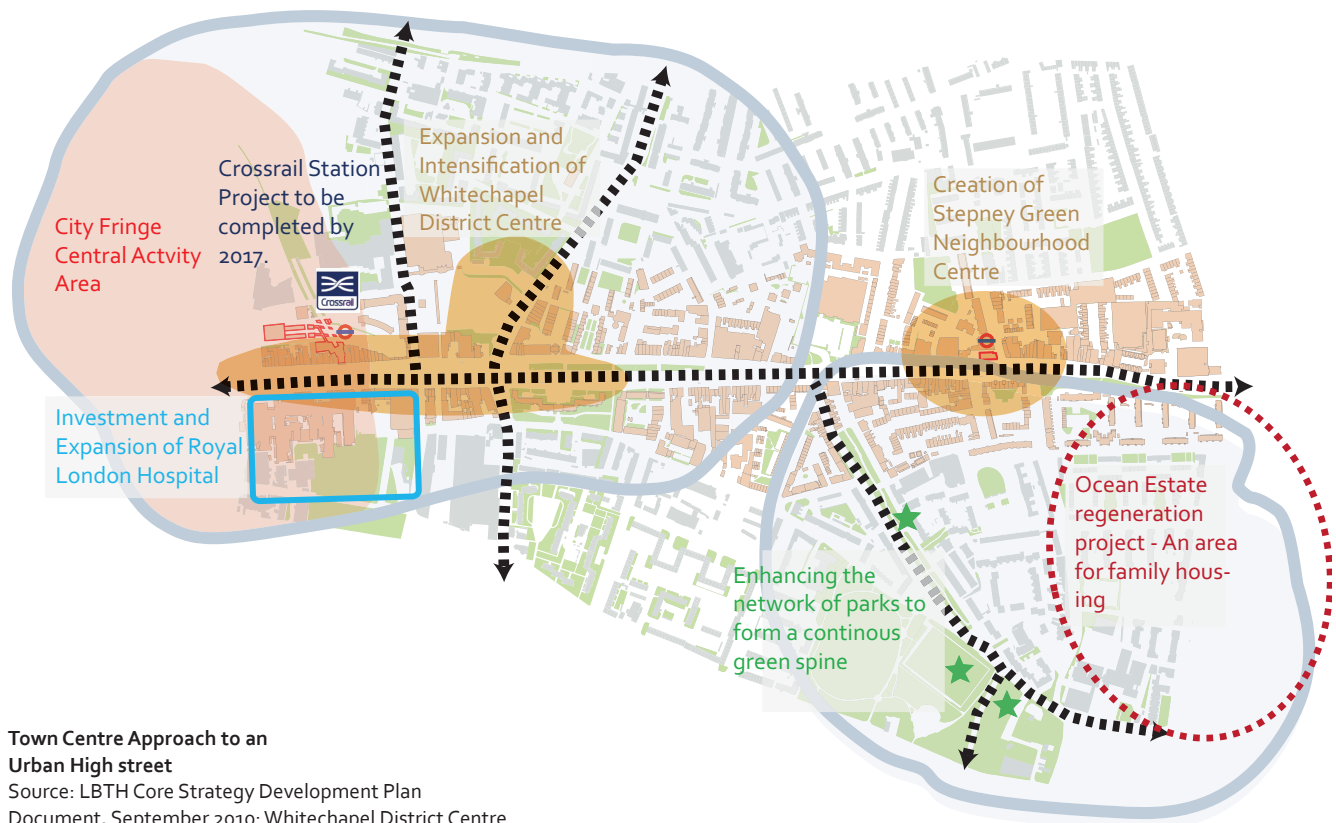
Stepney Green Neighbourhood Centre will be promoted as a suitable place for families, with housing typologies that offer dedicated amenity spaces and private gardens. The area will also receive improvements to public transit and green spaces. Furthermore, 1000 new housing units are slated for construction by 2025, with nearly 800 new flats as a part of the Ocean Estate regeneration scheme.

How do these town centre designations take into account the growth trends on the urban high street today? In actuality, they fail to address the fragility of the high streets at several levels:

- They do not have a policy to champion local employment, and local business.
- Those that live and work in the area—or will be affected by displacement associated with regeneration—are not taken into account.
- There is no distinct policy to balance large retail chains with local small and micro-scale businesses.

The London Plan

The revised 2009 London Plan outlines the need to support small enterprises and the provision of affordable shop units for independent retailers; however the plan devolves responsibility for meeting these aims to local authority planning frameworks (Mayor of London, 2009: 105-108). High Street 2012 and the Town Centre Development agendas are the most pertinent Tower Hamlets policy documents concerning our high street and would provide an ideal basis at the local authority level for supporting and providing for small and independent retailers. Their failure to address the interests of independent businesses is problematic and could potentially undermine our high street's role as a stepping stone. These failures pose the question of who can and should co-ordinate the social vitality and economic viability on our high street.



Town Centre Approach to an Urban High street

Source: LBTH Core Strategy Development Plan
Document, September 2010: Whitechapel District Centre

STRATEGIC INTERVENTION

In this policy scenario, we propose a stewardship mechanism for guiding development on the high street that makes the street more economically viable while retaining its social vitality. Key to this aim is encouraging a model of physical growth that can incrementally adapt to changing uses and users.

Procedural Framework

As a stewardship mechanism for the high street, we propose the establishment of the Stepping Stone Management Partnership (SSMP). A not-for-profit organisation, the SSMP will support small and micro-scale businesses on the high street while retaining and enhancing the street’s social vitality.

We have divided the development of the SSMP into three stages: Pre-Olympics, Olympics and Long-term.

Pre-Olympics: ‘Catalyse’

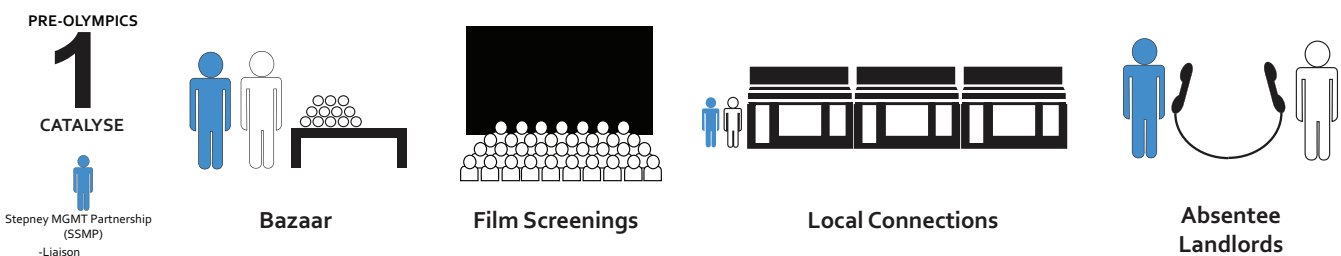
In the pre-Olympics stage, or the year leading up to Games, the SSMP will be led by a liaison officer funded by the local authority. At this stage, the liaison officer will catalyse support for the SSMP among business owners by activating the public realm through several pilot projects. It is critical that these projects are delivered quickly and inexpensively (see below).

In the pre-Olympics stage we propose a Chat Shop where the Tower Hamlets Liaison Officer will create the initial headquarters of the Stepping Stone Management Partnership (SSMP). The officer will first be responsible for giving out information on vendor licenses for a Community Bazaar. The Chat Shop will be located in front of the former Wickham’s department store, as an extension of Billy Bunter’s Snack Shack (see opposite page).

The pavement in front of the former Wickham’s department store already serves as a local gathering space because of its southern exposure and wide pavements (22 metres). Moreover Billy Bunter’s Snack Shack, situated in the centre of the pavement, attracts various user groups and acts as a non-political, civic hub. Stepney Community Trust is an existing organisation that provides support to unemployed people who often possess useful skills—such as tailoring or cooking—but are barred from formal employment due to a lack of vacancies or language skills. We propose a temporary Bazaar, located in front of Wickham’s, to provide entrepreneurial opportunities for unemployed groups (see opposite page). The liaison officer would also jump-start the transformation of the area into a small business district. Other pilot projects include night-time film screenings co-sponsored by Tesco and Genesis Cinema (see opposite page).

Pre-Olympics ‘Catalyse’

The first stage will include the formation of the Stepping Stone Management Partnership, headed by a Liaison Officer from the Borough of Tower Hamlets. The Officer will kick-start the interventions through a series of quick and inexpensive pilot projects.



Today



Pre-Olympics 'Catalyse' Stage: Chat Shop



Today



Pre-Olympics 'Catalyse' Stage: Bazaar

**Above Right: Chat Shop**

The Tower Hamlets liaison officer at the Chat Shop, giving out licensing information for bazaar stalls.

Above Center: Bazaar

The bazaar in operation in front of the former Wickham's department store, supporting local micro-scale enterprise.

Right: Movie screenings

Movie screenings projected onto an existing construction hoarding surrounding Wickham's. While displaying the culture of our neighbourhood's various ethnic communities through film, the screenings would activate the area's night-time economy.

Pre-Olympics 'Catalyse' Stage: Movie Screenings



Olympics: 'Network'

During the Olympics stage, in Summer 2012, the SSMP will expand to four people: the existing liaison officer, a business advisor, a community representative and a small business ambassador. At this stage the SSMP will strengthen networks with various groups on the high street (see below).

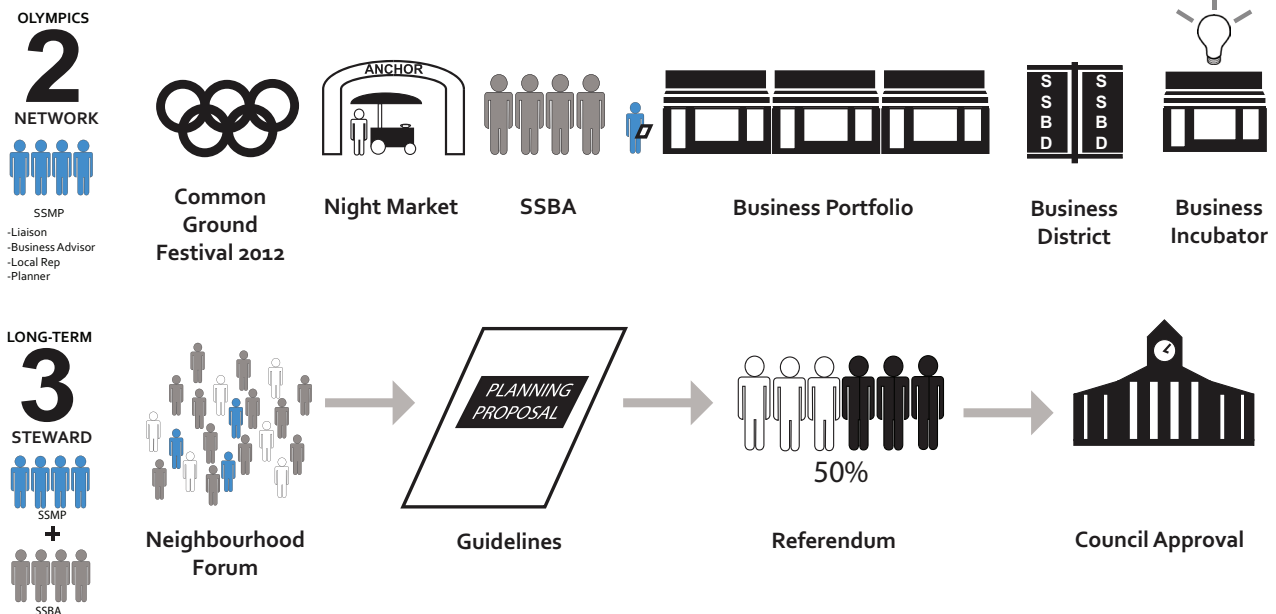
The business advisor will provide the SSMP with business acumen and, in particular, marketing experience. They will maintain a portfolio of businesses on the high street and oversee a neighbourhood branding strategy. The SSMP will offer advice on what types of businesses are doing well on the high street and how to develop business plans accordingly. Initially the advisor role will be filled by someone from the East London Small Business Association (ELSBA). The main ELSBA office is close to our site, and the organisation has operated in the area for more than thirty years. A community representative will provide the SSMP with local knowledge and connections. They will introduce the SSMP to other community organisations and aspiring entrepreneurs. The representative role will be filled by someone from the Stepney Community Trust—a community organisation with over twenty years' experience in the fields of social welfare, education and employment. A small business ambassador will help the SSMP maintain its relationship with local business owners.

The Olympic Games present a rare opportunity for London, Tower Hamlets, and our site. As part of its Cultural Olympiad, London 2012 will promote cultural festivals throughout the city (Cultural Olympiad, 2011). This is an opportunity to strengthen networks on the high street and generate wealth for local businesses. Partnering with the Cultural Olympiad Committee, the SSMP will co-ordinate Common Ground Festival 2012—a cultural festival exhibiting our neighbourhood's various cultures through food, dress, dance, and music (see below). The Festival will leverage the 2012 Games as a chance to generate increased footfall and business for our high street, and in particular small and micro-scale entrepreneurs.



Common Ground Festival 2012

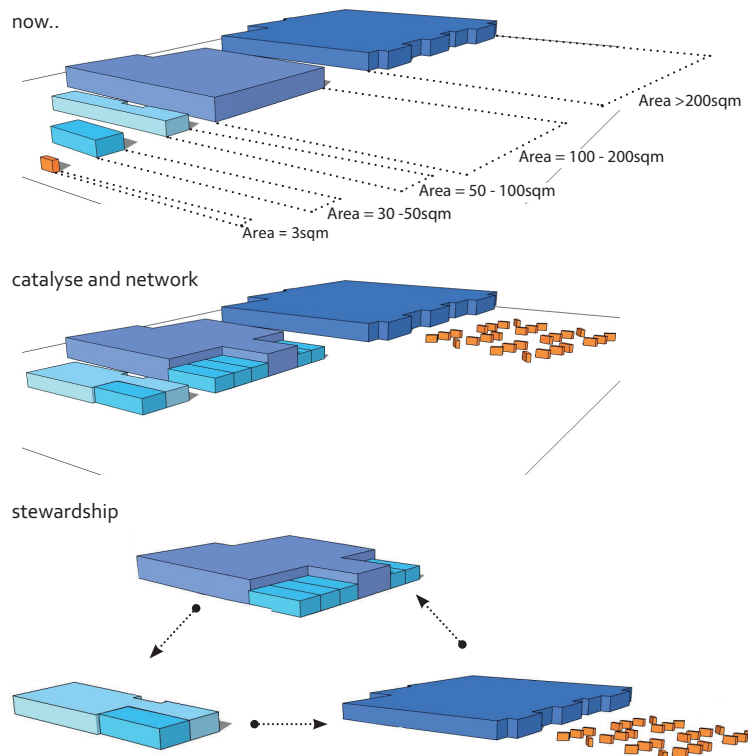
Through a partnership with the Cultural Olympiad Committee, the SSMP will launch the Common Ground Festival 2012, showcasing various neighbourhood cultures through food, dress, dance and music.



Long-Term: 'Steward'

Over the next five to ten years, the SSMP will create a stewardship mechanism for the entire high street (see opposite page). The Localism Bill, recently introduced for parliamentary consideration, presents an opportunity to recognise the particularities of our high street by devolving power over certain planning and decision-making processes to local authorities and neighborhood groups (CLG, 2011). Leveraging this participatory model, a community forum with members from the SSMP, the Stepney Small Business Association and the wider neighbourhood will develop a planning guideline incorporating our four alternative measures of value. The guideline document will be put to local referendum.

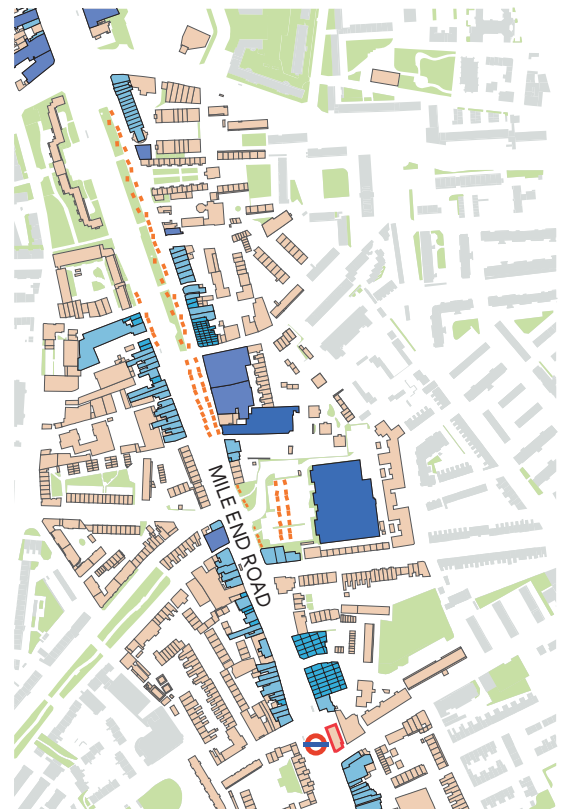
If adopted, these strategies will lay down a framework for the evolution of the high street that enhances its role as a stepping stone for social and economic mobility. These strategies are not intended to restrict development by means of controlled zoning, but rather to provide a framework by which the high street's stakeholders can guide its future development. As we look at how high streets in London can be saved from socially unsustainable growth our proposed long-term strategies—adaptability, affordability, diversity, and longevity—respond to the pressures of metropolitan development trends while retaining and growing small- and micro- businesses.



Strategy 1 – Adaptability

Unemployment in our area is high, and opportunities for internships, jobs or small and micro-business start-ups are limited. To address this situation, we propose a strategy for restructuring large chain storefronts, sidewalks and under-used car parks to accommodate new flexible, micro business start-ups. For any new chain store up to a maximum size of 200 square metres, the store frontage would be restricted to a maximum 5m continuous façade along Mile End Road. This would leave 2m wide gaps along the high street, and these left over spaces could be rented out to micro-scale businesses at a below market rate (see below). These policies are not intended to bar large-scale chain retailers from opening on the high street; they aim to activate large, under-utilised sections of the street and create new opportunities for small- and micro-scale business start-ups.

Cross-breeding shops of various sizes to enhance 'adaptable' nature of the urban high street. Cross-breeding different sizes of businesses will also provide more employment opportunities for the local population.



Strategy 2 – Affordability

In the pre-Olympics and Olympics stages, a pilot business incubator is proposed at the now empty shop at no.11 Mile End Waste (see below). If successful, then similar business incubators will be established in other borough-owned commercial properties along the high street. These business incubators and their network have the potential to become a chain of collaborative thinking and production (see below). By securing these networks over the long-term, our high street will evolve as a stepping stone for the incremental growth of knowledge and innovation provided by small business start-ups.

Vacant shop at no.11 Mile End Waste;

Proposed business incubator at no. 11 Mile End Waste

As another pilot project, the SSMP will contact absentee landlords from vacant shops along the high street and negotiate a business incubator model where multiple entrepreneurs can divide the rent and share a common work space.



Below : Elevation of the northern side of our high street



KEY

- Existing Commercial Uses
- Proposed 12 metre-wide mixed use zone
- Proposed Business Incubators
- Proposed Affordable Commercial spaces

Strategy 2 – Affordability



Strategy 3 – Diversity

We propose that a 12m wide zone along the high street is secured for mixed-use business start-ups. There are three council housing estates along our street slated for redevelopment, and each of these sites has a provision for mixed-use space. By zoning these sites for business start-ups, they will provide fine-grained space for small- and micro-scale businesses rather than more of the large-scale office space already found in City fringe sites, which does little to promote local entrepreneurship. This policy will generate more local jobs and promote a more resilient local economy.

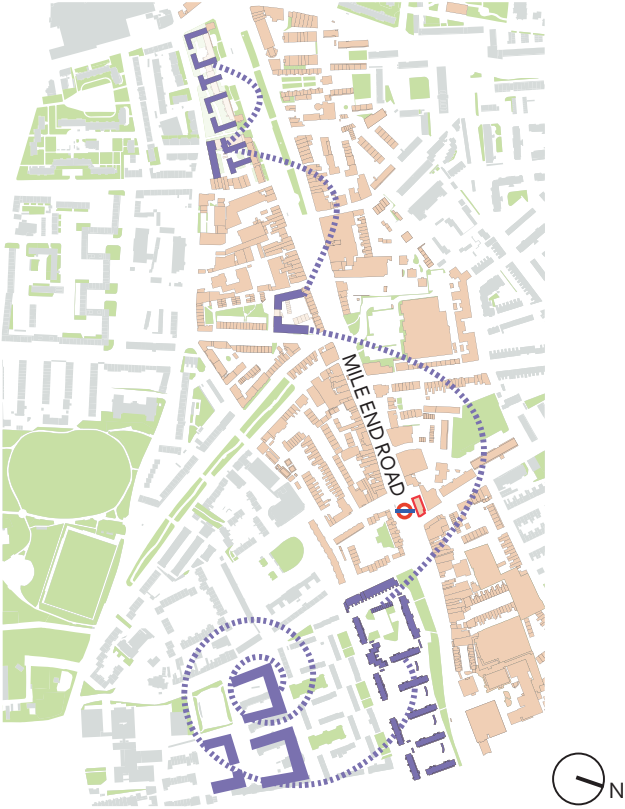
Strategy 4 – Longevity

In March 2010, planning approval was given for 819 new homes on the Ocean Estate (half of which will be affordable), the refurbishment of nearly 800 council homes, and 400 square metres of ground-level retail space. To complete the works, East Thames Consortium will work closely with the residents of the Ocean Estate. Through its planning guideline, the Stepping Stone Management partnership will secure these premises for management, subdivide them, and rent them to small- and micro-scale businesses at a subsidised rate. If delivered successfully, this pilot project on Ocean Estate could act as a model for affordable retail spaces in other council housing estates along the high street.

Strategy 3 – Diversity



Strategy 4 – Longevity



Phased Development of Mile End Waste and south side of Mile End Road

Mile End Waste, as it exists today, activated with a thrift market, during Common Ground festival and a café with a business incubator space on the upper levels. Southern end with small shops, as it exists today, and activated with branding strategy for the specialised food retail shops. Additional seating and storage for mobile vendor carts along the south end of Mile End Road will also be developed to create strong links between local businesses and the public realm.



Phased Development Anchor Retail Car Park

As it exists today, the car park at Anchor retail store is a highly under-utilised space abutting the high street at any time of the day. During the catalyse and networking phase, a night market will be established at the car park, during the store's closed hours every Sunday evening. If the pilot project is successful and the retail park management and SSMP are able to sustain a working partnership, then SSMP would rent a small area of the car parking space of 75 cars and run a weekly day market as well.



CONCLUSION

To conceptualise a high street in a less affluent, changing part of the city, we conclude that the following components are paramount:

1. Recognition of the 'local'. One of the greatest potentials of the new Localism Bill is to duly recognise the particularities and complexities of local worlds.
2. The need to establish alternative measures of value that recognise social vitality and its inextricable importance in supporting economic viability.
3. A conceptual and policy approach that is economic, social and spatial.
4. A strategic framework for the coherent orchestration and management of the high street. This framework must utilise local knowledge but also needs key actors with the business acumen, capacity or expertise to steward social and economic vitality along the high street.
5. The need for quick and early interventions that can be accomplished without massive investment and serve to change the habits, possibilities and potentials of the high street.

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