

CITY STREET: A STUDIO EXPLORATION OF 'HIGH STREET 2012'

A city street is a linear aggregation of diverse spaces, activities and people. In its most elementary form it is a line that connects people and places, and is a series of variegated spaces that align to compose an urban strip. The combination of economic, social and cultural worlds associated with an urban high street establishes the context for our studio exploration of 'High Street 2012'. The High Street 2012 project, launched in 2009 by key public agencies including the London Boroughs of Tower Hamlets and Newham and Transport for London, incorporates a six kilometre stretch of east London high street, connecting the City at Aldgate on its eastern threshold and extending to the Olympic Park in Stratford (see <http://www.highstreet2012.com/>).

This new name and the role of the high street in linking central London to the Olympic Park are but the latest in long history of ascribed meanings and purposes. The street forms part of an ancient route from London to the Eastern County of Essex, particularly the Roman-founded City of Colchester. Beginning at the eastern edge of the Roman wall to the City of London, the street passes through areas which urbanised beyond its control and which, at different stages and in different guises, represented some of the harshest, least regulated living and working conditions in London's economic and social life. Evidence of these may still be traced along the length of the street – from the residues of polluting, pungent industries which fuelled the national economy yet were run on poorly paid labour, to the tight urban grain of terraced houses and lofts once associated with the Whitechapel weavers or the institutional interventions of the nineteenth century such as the workhouse, the hospital and religious establishments developed to address effects of entrenched poverty. The street and its hinterlands are sites to which migrants of different kinds have come for centuries seeking opportunities in work – from the Huguenots, Irish, displaced rural 'commoners' of England, Jewish refugees from the pogroms of Eastern Europe to more recent Bangladeshi and Bengali settlers – as well as freedom, often, from oppression. Long-standing cultural diversity combined with the tough realities which many migrants actually faced are two important reasons why the street also bears traces of association with social movements and political activism – with the Mile End Waste, for example, being used as a site in 1890 for a mass meeting to protest against Jewish persecution in Russia and with Whitechapel continuing to provide a home for activist organisations such as the Freedom Press. This layered history and its ongoing manifestation in the life and fabric of the street raises the question of how the High Street 2012 project, geared as it is to enhancing the street's appearance for international spectators of the 2012 Olympic events and its specific role as a 'gateway' to the Games will either enhance or detract from its existing qualities and realities.

The purpose of our studio exploration is in the first instance, to question just what an urban high street is in London today: In what ways are our conventional understandings of 'high street' rattled when analysed from within a city whose economy, since the global crisis in 2008, is both volatile and fragile; whose populace is ethnically and culturally diverse, and whose uneven geographies are marked by a highly polarised urban landscape? Three further related questions follow: How do current regulatory and design frameworks make sense of the idea of 'high street'? What measures of value underpin the official markers of high street vitality, viability and 'success'? Do these authorised values differ from those who value the street through making, selling, shopping, waiting, meeting or passing through?

To *explore* the contemporary urban high street researchers must find ways of *travelling* across global, city and local scales, ways of *interpreting* the range of archival and census data, and ways of *walking* along and around streets to discover what individuals and groups do, say and make. This process of multi-layered exploration is at the core of our studio programme, where both analysis and intervention are regarded as mutually informing, imaginative pursuits. While space is central to our research-oriented design process, informed analysis allows us to expand the forms and modes of design to make connections between physical space, social space, culture, economy and politics. In their exploration of High Street 2012, our students selected eight sites along the street, each piece revealing particular contextual conditions and clues for intervention. Each project then reflects not only the highly variegated setting of High Street 2012, but also the differentiated possibilities for design intervention as displayed, from east to west, in the layout of our publication.

What does it the emerging regulatory setting mean for the design of high streets?

Over recent years, the future of high streets and small independent shops have been the subject of national debate across political and civic forums (see, for example, All Party Parliamentary Small Shops Group, 2006). The stakes of the public debate have been raised by the perceived accelerated decline of high streets across Britain. Organisations such as the New Economics Foundation point not only to the rapid demise of independent shops alongside the increasing dominance of large retail chains, but also the cultural homogenisation of high streets, encapsulated by NEF's reports on *Clone Street Britain* (2004), and *Ghost Town Britain* (2002; 2003). The measures of 'vitality' and 'viability' are very much on the agenda of national economic and planning policy clearly established in *Planning Policy Statement 4: Planning for Economic Growth* (2009). Like its predecessor PPS6 (2005), the document underscores a town-centre focus for economic regeneration, but advocates for Local Planning Authorities to proactively audit, plan and manage town centres. Questions arise as to what measures of value

will underpin the evidence base for understanding town centre growth or decline. How, for example, will culture and longevity fair against turnover?

Similarly the role of small shops and high streets has recently been recognised as a key planning and design concern for London, as highlighted in *The Mayor's draft replacement London Plan*, 2010. The draft states '[Policy] 4.6 The Mayor has signalled his intention to help protect London's high streets by securing affordable retail units for small shops through section 106 contribution'. The *High Street London* report (Gort Scott and UCL, 2010) commissioned by Design for London on behalf of the Mayor's Office reveals the multiple values of urban high streets as convenient linear aggregations of social and economic life. It reveals, for example, that two thirds of Londoners live within 500 metres of a high street, and that two thirds of the trips made to local high streets are to access services other than retail. The emphasis on the village-like form and local sociability of London's high streets echoes a national policy emphasis on 'community politics' within local territories as advocated in the Localism Bill, introduced for parliamentary consideration in December 2010. This leads to the complex question within the ethnically diverse and economically polarised landscape of High Street 2012: How do we recognise local forms of knowledge?

Finally, the image of the street that underpins much of the debates and policy around what constitutes a good high street is one frequently evoked by the village street or the upmarket street. It follows that the idea of street design is one that serves these images, where public space improvements are often shaped by the introduction of trees, benches, and reduced kerb heights. While these are all undoubtedly valid design components, they do little to recognise the changing economic and cultural dimensions of inner city high streets. Rapidly increasing property values and the regulated entry of large chains into high street strips are only two of the pronounced pressures on the high street. The increase in ethnic minority retail in highly concentrated often saturated markets (Barrett, Jones and McEvoy, 2001) most notably evident in London represents another dimension of independent high street potential, but one which historically has been poorly supported by regulation or design. What does the image of a more diverse, messier high street landscape encapsulated by High Street 2012, mean for design?

These are the range of issues and questions that have arisen during our studio exploration of High Street 2012. The eight design propositions that follow suggest that a diverse and messy 6 kilometre stretch of street is well served by a focused exploration on the particularities of space. Each design reveals crucial differentiations within the local landscape, and each has acquired a design language to attend to these particularities.

Some of the projects are plan-centric, others oriented by process, but all contain informed approaches to how culture, economy and social life make the design of city space a vivid project.

The proposition for 'Gateways to the Street' concentrates on addressing existing urban characteristics of fragmentation and 'flow' at Aldgate combined with the uncertain development future which has befallen this area since 2008 by using a day-lighting analysis to identify opportunities for the temporary activation of under-used spaces and to suggest a longer term strategy based on enhancing and protecting the qualities of the future public realm.

'The Mediating Street' is defined by exploring the dual role of the high street as conduit for movement and place of exchange and identifying a series of spaces that reveal tensions or conflicts between the different scales at which these roles function. The proposition builds on the principle that the high street and its hinterland of secondary streets and uses can be strengthened if these spaces are able to mediate between different scales and functions more effectively.

Next along, 'The Exchange Street' project focuses on the particular retail offer of the Whitechapel Market, recognising the distinction of this in relation to the typical London retail street or UK 'clone street' offer. The proposition seeks to leverage investment in the area through public transport improvements towards strengthening the social life and economy of the market through subtle, specific interventions in the fabric and governance of its territory.

The 'Stepping Stone Street' is so named for the high street's role in providing an important space for economic and social mobility through small-scale entrepreneurship for ethnic and newly migrant communities. The proposition builds on a set of alternative measures of value for the street that go beyond the economic and/or aesthetic measures typically applied to streets and involves the creation of a 'stewardship mechanism' designed to support small-scale businesses in a number of project phases, so supporting and gradually enhancing the street's capacities for social vitality.

'The Cultivated Street' seeks to address various kinds of fragmentation which have transformed the high street at Mile End into a species of void. The proposition begins from a question: how to create a street where there is only a road? Its authors set out to show how the 'mental map' of the street and its hinterlands could be redrawn through a few strategic spatial interventions that pragmatically leverage existing assets. The key intervention is an urban farm and community kitchen which would act as the focus of a local food production network.

For the authors of 'The Medium Street', the street at Mile End fails to conform to most available definitions of a high street. A better way of conceiving this street, they propose, is the 'medium street' given its greater characterisation by institutional than retail density. Rather than attempting to shoehorn the more commonly ascribed functions of a high street into Mile End, the project builds from careful consideration of the value of the street as it is and seeks to improve its functionality as an institutional high street through a series of strategic but light-touch interventions.

The 'Deep High Street' project takes on the challenge of re-imagining the declined high street at Bromley-by-Bow as a place 'where shopping is just one small part of a rich mix of activities including working, sharing, exchanging, playing and learning new skills' (New Economics Foundation, 2010). Its authors propose high-quality public realm interventions that promote a renewed array of activities that extend deep behind the façadism of the High Street 2012 project and so potentially impact more profoundly on local residents' everyday lives.

Last but not least, the 'Deconstructed High Street' project responds to the dual challenges of a low-density existing population – though one projected to increase substantially in the decades to come – and a section of high street transformed decades ago into a high-speed highway across an industrialised urban zone. In response to these challenges, its authors propose that the local waterways could become the sites of new 'alternative' high streets linking the Olympic site with new and projected development at its borders. They characterise the potentials of these by identifying key nodes or potential places of exchange and by defining a building line for future development that both protects and cultivates the ecology and public uses of the rivers.

As this brief resume suggests, the studio yielded eight definitions of the role of an urban high street, each extending standard definitions in different directions. As a collection, they reveal the variety of lived realities that may unfold in the context of subtle spatial modulations of the typology of the street and suggest the value of working between general and specific forms of analysis and interpretation.

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