

How will London's high streets bounce back?

The town and city centres that emerge could be very different from those we knew back in March thinks David Rudlin



Back in March I wrote in my BD column about a meeting that my filmmaker son Luca had with a group of bar owners on St. Patricks day. It was the week before lockdown when people had been told to stay away from bars but lockdown hadn't yet started. Those present were in despair, sitting in an empty bar on what should have been one of their busiest days of the year.

These were businesses who employed scores of people, had invested heavily in their premises and their stock levels and faced hefty rent and rates bills. None of those present thought they could survive for long. They were not alone, London's high streets are full of low margin, cashflow-dependent retail and leisure businesses such as these. The subsequently announced furlough scheme helped, as did various loans, grants and rates relief but still we don't know when lockdown is finally lifted out how many of these independent businesses will emerge blinking to the light and how many will have died.

At URBED we are researching high streets as part of our 1851 Built Environment Fellowship. Our aim is to tell the stories of high streets both in London and across the country in order to paint a slightly more complex and nuanced picture than the 'crisis on the high street' headlines suggest. Back in February the story was already pretty gloomy, with Covid-19 it may well have turned into a disaster movie.

Most of the discussion about the crisis on the high streets do not however tend to be about independent businesses. The headlines focus on the big-name retail failures; from Woolworths ten years ago, through the The Arcadia Group, House of Fraser

and Debenhams to Covid-19 casualties like Monsoon Accessorize and Laura Ashley. The headlines also relate to the collapse of the big landlords like Intu, owners of Lankside, and to the 30,000 shop units that closed in the two years pre Covid-19 or the retail jobs that were being lost at a rate of 2,750 a week (figures from the Centre for Retail Research).

All of this is called a crisis of the high street but it could just as accurately be called the a crisis of the shopping mall or out-of-town retail centre. Figures from Experian Goad that we have collected as part of our research shows that 82 per cent of shops in places like Camden and Rye Lane in Peckam are independents. This may be as expected, but it did surprise us that 80 per cent of shops in London's West End are also independents. The multiples may dominate the headlines but it is the independents who dominate the high street, especially in London.

Until Covid-19 these independents were the story's silver lining, particularly in the service sectors. To take one example, we hear a lot about pubs closing at a rate nearly 40 a week, many of them owned by big breweries. While this is terrible, it is rarely linked to the growth of independent bars and craft breweries. The pub chains are being supplanted by the independents, reversing the trend that goes back to the 1950s. There were lots of signs that the same was happening in other sectors on London's high street. Each vacancy created by the failure of a national retailer was being filled by an independent and the high street was much the better for it. All of this is threatened by the pandemic.

Of course its difficult making predictions from the eye of the



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storm and as part of the fellowship we are taking the long view of the high street's back story. In 1950 there were 120,000 independent butchers, bakers, greengrocers and fishmongers in England (figures on candlestick makers are not available). Today there are just 30,000 and the supermarkets have taken an astonishing 97 per cent of grocery sales (which in turn makes up half of all retail spending). The first crisis on the high street was the decimation of the independent retail sector that happened a long time ago in the 1970s and 80s.

The second crisis happened in the 1990s after Nicholas Ridley's disastrous brief tenure as Secretary of State for the Environment during which he overruled restrictions on out-of-town retail development. Retail parks and mega malls changed the retail landscape triggering the second crisis of the high street in the 1990s as traditional town centres struggled to compete.

Then in the relatively prosperous 2000s investment flooded into retailing and the large chains expanded both out-of-town and in-town. This further squeezed-out independent retailers and led to concerns about 'Clone Town Britain'. It was a different type of crisis and one that lies at the heart of our current problems. Many retailers over-extended themselves, became lazy and complacent leaving the UK with twice the retail floor area per head of population as in Germany.

The third crisis on the high street happened post the 2008 financial crisis when the retail bubble of the 2000s burst, prompting the Coalition Government to set up the Portas Review a few years later. The picture since then has been complex. For mainstream retailers the crisis has never really abated as the impact of

on-line retailing has taken its toll. However there was a significant recovery in retail spending between 2012 and 2019 and the independent sector grew as a result. The situation varied across the country but in London seemed as if high streets were being reinvented and reinvigorated. The leisure and hospitality sector had grown and even where there wasn't sufficient retail demand former retail units were being occupied for other uses (like architects offices).

This, at least, is the story of high streets in relatively affluent places (and from the perspective of a northern town this includes most of London). As Mark Davey writes in the recent *Urban Design Quarterly*, the middle classes are now 'buying cheese from cheese shops, fish from fish shops... individual shops offering unpacked produce and explained by people who know a lot about what they are selling'. Elsewhere in London, again in Davey's words, you can find 'Chinese grocers pumping out Asian techno.. markets offering and Africa and Asian focussed cultural cornucopia of fruit and veg, halal meat and fish, dispersed in climate denying blue plastic bags'. This is the real story of London's high streets whatever the travails of Laura Ashley and Monsoon.

The worry however is that Covid-19 will stop this process in its tracks. Many great businesses that were doing such valuable work to revive their high streets will not survive and the town and city centres that emerge could be very different from those we knew back in March. My hunch is that the strong centres will bounce back at some point, if not immediately. The weaker centres are a much more worrying prospect and we await with some trepidation what will happen as lockdown is lifted this month. ■

ABOVE:
Wood Street, and
LEFT:
Rye Lane

Sketches by the author